

Authors' dinner session

Dinner

FOR A MORE LIVABLE PLANET

by

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What is happening to the environment is becoming a major concern of conservationists. It should be a concern of us all, but most people are unaware of what they are doing to the environment because they don't know what it contains. And furthermore they don't care. They think only about immediate convenience; posterity will have to look after itself. They believe that somehow nature will repair any damage they do - that it will only be temporary. To a degree they are right about nature, but they might be surprised and frightened by nature's remedies. Nature is not committed to man. Man is just one more animal - one more failure, perhaps - in the long list of animals that have been discarded over the eons for being ill-adapted to living with their fellow creatures on the planet.

The ignorance of the common man about the environment is not surprising in view of the acknowledged ignorance of ecologists and biologists who are the recognized experts on the inter-relationships of living things. These specialists freely admit a lack of knowledge. But, they warn us, relationships are so complicated that almost any change we produce in the environment could have ^{results} ~~effects~~ more far reaching than our imaginations could forecast. But in spite of these warnings organizations and individuals go blindly ahead working on short-sighted programs for gain or for political advantage with no thought for long term ~~the future~~ effects or even for possible superficial consequences.

~~The ecology of our surroundings is an almost unknown~~
Consider for instance the way we have been using

innovations introduced by the technological revolution which has taken place since the end of World War II. In the field of chemicals the invention of insecticides was received as a panacea, and before we even knew how they acted, what insects they killed, or whether they produced unwanted effects on other forms of life, we were spraying them all over the landscape. It has taken us more than 20 years to wake up to the damage we did and are still doing - to environmental changes which if progressive would jeopardize human survival.

The most familiar of these insecticides is DDT. It was first used to control mosquitoes, but it was soon discovered to be active against many orders of insects, and belatedly discovered to kill crustaceans, fish, and birds. Appalling numbers of these higher animals have been destroyed inadvertently by the inappropriate use of DDT. The insecticide has been applied in such enormous quantities to the land that it is finally beginning to appear in the oceans where it is causing serious harm to marine life. Not only is it becoming a hazard to commercial fish it is poisoning the microscopic flora of the surface waters, the phytoplankton, which through photosynthesis provides nearly fifty percent of the oxygen replenishment of the atmosphere. Should the phytoplankton be destroyed the world would be faced with an irreversible depletion of oxygen which will end in the suffocation of man together with most of the world fauna.

This is just one aspect of the peril we are bringing upon ourselves with our rampant technology. According to some admirers of man's innovative ingenuity progress must be given free reign, and if as technology advances large pieces of the

environment are destroyed, large areas of wildness wiped out, this is merely the cost we should accept for the improvements and comforts that technology brings us. These progress-at-any-cost people give little thought to the possible adverse effects of their progress. The comforts may turn out to be great discomforts. Their acceptance without question of man's ability to order nature for his own use and advantage, endlessly, is not a thesis supported by man's past experience with exploitation. Men have produced deserts and dust bowls before; they could well be on the road to creating a desert on a worldwide scale today.

Maybe man has the power to alter consciously the course of evolution. Undoubtedly he does possess the power of life and death over many species of plants and animals, but whether ~~has~~^{he} has the wisdom to decide these fates to his advantage is in serious question. Evolution draws on diversity of species and the genetic reservoir they carry. Simplification of life reduces the possibilities for a replacement to develop to fill the empty niches that man produces. They may go unoccupied indefinitely to the chagrin of a wiser descendant. The stability of ecological systems rests on their complexity; as they are simplified they become more and more unstable, and subject to an irreversible degradation which could be brought on by an unanticipated natural or man made disaster.

The greatest good which could come from the space program is not man's setting foot on the Moon or Mars; it is rather the perspective he may gain of his small vulnerable, lonely home planet. The appearance of our mottled, blue and white sphere from thousands of miles out should make him conscious of

the exceptional conditions under which the phenomenon we call life - the only one of which we have any knowledge - originated. He should be impressed by the beauty and fragility of the dynamic balance which has been preserved for so many hundreds of millions of years during which life has persisted on earth. He should especially appreciate the shortness of his tenure on earth and use the powers he has so recently assumed to perpetuate, not destroy, the balance.

The direction which seems to promise the greatest rewards, the surest fulfillment of the hopes and aspirations of man's troubled and inquiring spirit, and of a distant and ultimate happiness, is a course of least arrogance towards his living companions; a course even less negative than the absence of superiority - a course of humble respect for life; a sympathy which sustains a recognition of the essential interdependence of all living things.