

SEJ Journal

The Quarterly Publication of the Society of Environmental Journalists

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'Not a blade of grass grew' An account of a 1948 environmental disaster

By MICHAEL MANSUR

It already had been a big year for Selwyn Pepper, a young reporter at *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. It was 1948.

Earlier in the year, Pepper had worked for weeks as a member of a team of reporters covering the aftermath of a 1947 coal mine disaster in Centralia, Ill. That mine in southern Illinois supplied thriving St. Louis with its soft-coal for fuel. That coal also polluted the after-

noon air in downtown St. Louis with soot so thick that drivers needed headlights.

In early November, an editor in the *Post-Dispatch* newsroom pounded out a note. "Suggest staff coverage at Donora....Little vegetation in hills," the note stated. "...Hillside back of mill partly barren...Why wasn't mill shut down until yesterday (Nov. 1) in view of previous deaths?"

And so Pepper was dispatched to the

tiny Pennsylvania mill town known then to Pepper only as the home of St. Louis Cardinals' hero Stan Musial.

In late-October 1948, a killer fog settled over the town of 14,000 people on the Monongahela River in Pennsylvania. By the time Pepper arrived, 20 deaths had already been reported.

Pepper, now 89 and retired in St. Louis after a distinguished career in which he shared in three Pulitzer prizes, was about to cover a landmark public health disaster—an environmental catastrophe that preceded Rachel Carson, her monumental book, "Silent Spring," and the birth of an environmental movement.

The deadly smog today is credited with setting in motion national concern over air pollution in America.

Donora also plays a key role in stirring early environmental toxicologists to explore the complex science of how low levels of airborne toxins affect human

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Photo courtesy of BASIC BOOKS



The Donora wire mill in 1910

The February Topic:

Are we fooling ourselves?

If you haven't been monitoring SEJ-TALK, the SEJ listserv, you recently missed a remarkable exchange of ideas and thoughts on journalism, the role of an environmental journalist and objectivity. Can it be achieved? Here's a selection of some of the postings, edited for length, and reprinted with the permission of the SEJ members. Enjoy.

SEJ-Talk: Fooling Ourselves?

From: Brian Hodel

Editor, TheNaturalResources.org

The journalist's role in a democracy is to provide the facts

needed by citizens to make informed choices. What then is the point of environmental journalism in a society where the citizen has been replaced by the consumer—where economic interests outweigh and even replace civic responsibility?

As the editor of an environmental information web site, I make a daily scan of environmental stories in the national media—as, no doubt, do most environmental journalists. I see two general trends: 1) Science, reported in media, has already made a strong case for dramatic course corrections in our environmental policies; 2) The public isn't paying attention.

I suggest two reasons for that: 1) The aforementioned shift from a society of citizens to one of consumers—which makes

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Keeping Thoreau-ly warm in the SEJ pigpen

By DAN FAGIN

The other day I had an argument with a friend about the usefulness of groups like SEJ. Journalism, she said, is a profession best practiced alone.

My friend is into Henry David Thoreau, an “environmental journalist” long before anyone had conceived of the term. She thinks the Recluse of Walden Pond, who died in 1862, wouldn’t think much of an organization such as SEJ. Clearly, Thoreau wasn’t big on fraternization. He once wrote in his journal: “What men call social virtues, good fellowship, is commonly but the virtue of pigs in a litter, which lie close together to keep each other warm.”

OK, I’ll be the first to concede that it’s comfortably toasty here in the SEJ pigpen. There’s a nice feeling of security, even warmth, in spending time around people who share your inside jokes and outsized frustrations.

I was thinking about that recently as I participated in one of those tedious conference call news briefings that agencies and environmental groups like to hold. In this one, I was listening to the disembodied voices of government scientists who were doing all they could to make important research results sound tentative and obscure.

Then it was time for the question-and-answer portion of the briefing, and it was clear from the questions that many of the reporters were feeling my pain. I asked a question, and then listened to queries from many of my SEJ friends around the country, including Marla Cone of the *Los Angeles Times*, Randy Loftis of the *Dallas Morning News*, Jane Kay of the *San Francisco Chronicle* and Tom Meersman of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*.

By the end of the hour-long conference call, we reporters had made only limited headway in persuading the government scientists to face up to the implications of their findings. But at least we had taken the frustrating journey together. In other words, if you’re going to be in the pigpen, you might as well try to keep warm.

SEJ is like that. Many of the conversations I’ve had with colleagues at our annual conferences have felt a lot like group therapy. So have many of the postings I’ve read or written on the SEJ-talk listserv. (See, for example, excerpts from a recent listserv discussion on journalism, the role of an environmental journalist and objectivity, beginning on page one.) It’s always nice to learn that you’re not alone.

But what about my friend, the one who prefers Thoreau-style solitude? Is SEJ only about “good fellowship”? If all we’re looking for is a sympathetic voice, couldn’t we just save the dues and travel money and call the Psychic Friends Network instead?

There must be something else going on here, because I happen to know that we have many creative loners and confirmed non-conformists who are happy members of the SEJ family. They’re not in it for the shared body heat.

So why are they members? It must be for reasons that go well beyond the provision of emotional support for extroverts. I think it’s because SEJ also offers a series of practical tools that can make you a better environmental journalist and because our organization is working hard to improve the conditions in which we all work.

Building a community, it turns out, is about a lot more than just glad-handing at conferences or finding consolation on the listserv. It’s also about finding as many ways as possible to share what we know with each other: stories, tips, advice, information and even sources (well, maybe not that really great source you want to keep to yourself). And it’s also about finding the right opportunities to work together to fight for common aims, including preserving access to public documents, raising the quality of environmental reportage and spreading the word about the continued relevance of our beat, even in a time of war.

Everything we’ve done and everything we hope to do at SEJ

is about building that community, and fighting for those common aims. So if you have ideas that serve those goals, your board and the SEJ staff would love to hear them. In the meantime, don’t let anyone tell you that SEJ and similar journalism groups are only about group therapy. Sure, that’s part of it, but only a small part.

In fact, I’d like to believe that even the solitude-loving Thoreau would have enjoyed being a member of SEJ. True, I can’t quite picture him sending in his daily journal entries to *EJToday*, or submitting a favorite essay to compete in the “in-depth reporting” category of the annual contest. He’d make an amazing mentor to a less experienced

reporter, but I’m sure someone would have to talk him into signing up for that program.

On the other hand, Thoreau liked to read the work of his peers, so I can picture him lurking on the listserv and in *EJToday* to find out what Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller have been working on lately. He’d check out *TipSheet* to look for environmental angles on the (Civil) war news. He might even contribute an occasional story to the literary journal you’re reading right now which, by happy coincidence, has been focusing lately on the early history of environmental reporting. And I’m sure that Thoreau, who was vehement in his distrust of all politicians, would appreciate the work of the SEJ First Amendment Task Force in fighting government efforts to restrict access to information that ought to remain public.

I even think that Thoreau would come to the annual conferences, though he’d probably pretend not to enjoy the crowded plenaries and the network lunch (too popular). The laid-back Sunday morning sessions would be more his style, and also some of the day tours, especially ones that involved a nice long walk.

He might even secretly appreciate the Bourbon Street location of the hotel that will host our next conference, Sept. 10-14 in New Orleans. After all, Thoreau is the guy who wrote: “In wildness is the preservation of the world.” ❖

Report from the Society’s President

By
Dan
Fagin



SEJ Journal

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The Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ) is a non-profit, tax exempt, 501(c)3 organization. The mission of the organization is to advance public understanding of environmental issues by improving the quality, accuracy and visibility of environmental reporting. We envision an informed society through excellence in environmental journalism. As a network of journalists and academics, SEJ offers national and regional conferences, publications and online services. SEJ's membership of more than 1,200 includes journalists working for print and electronic media, educators, and students. Non-members are welcome to attend SEJ's national conferences and to subscribe to the quarterly *SEJournal*.

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SEJournal submission deadlines

Summer '03	May 1, 2003
Fall '03	August 1, 2003
Winter '03	November 1, 2003
Spring '04	February 1, 2004

Watchdog Tipsheet uncovers growing secrecy

By VINCE PATTON

When a foot-wide gap formed in a dam upstream of Missoula, Mont., federal officials kept it secret. The information, they believed, might be fodder for terrorists. Their definition of “national security” outweighed disclosing the dam-safety risk to thousands of people downstream.

The dam’s flaws affected key environmental policy decisions, not to mention how taxpayer dollars would be spent. Withholding the information from the public also would help a major corporation avoid publicity of contamination of the water held behind the dam. The company was lobbying the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for a less extensive and less costly cleanup of the site.

The story of the dam topped SEJ’s newest offering, Watchdog Tipsheet, which debuted on SEJ’s web site this month. The new tipsheet’s focus is distinct: to track the unprecedented number of government actions restricting public access to the public’s information. The goal is to help you confront those challenges, share resources, and with luck, find new avenues to open what’s been accessible in the past. Watchdog Tipsheet is the most visible work of SEJ’s Freedom of Information committee, compiled and written by Joseph Davis.

The first edition of Watchdog Tipsheet featured 25 stories, web resources, “Must Read” advice essays and a calendar to help track FOI meetings. You’ll learn how President Bush gave a top secret RCRA exemption to “Area 51,” that the Patriot Act II would black out chemical Risk Data, how the DEA prosecuted a worker for “theft” who leaked government documents to a reporter and that the federal inventory of dams has quietly returned to the web.

Watchdog Tipsheet also reported on the Bush administration’s attempt to expand the Patriot Act and gut the Freedom of Information Act at the same time. According to the article, “The ability of the press to get information about how a leak or explosion could harm people in communities around chemical plants would be virtually eliminated,” under the proposal leaked on Capitol Hill. The language is broad and far reaching, and once again relies on “national security” as justification. “One provision

in the draft bill (Sec. 202) would almost completely end press and public access to federal “worst case scenario” information about risks to the public from chemical facilities, sewage and drinking water plants, ammonia refrigeration plants, fertilizer plants, and other facilities. It would not prevent states from giving access to state-collected data.”

It’ll be tough to keep up with the constant stream of assaults on the public’s access to government. Our goal is to highlight key case studies, provide links to even more information provided by news reports, participants or the government’s own postings. We’ll also provide tips on how to fight for access if you hit a brick wall in your community. For instance, Jack Nelson’s paper on handling classified leaks will open some eyes, especially now that the EPA has the power to brand information as “secret.” Find it in our “Must Read” section.

Watchdog Tipsheet is a pilot program; we’re actively seeking funding to keep this alive long-term. With our limited resources, we’re focusing on access to information from federal agencies. If you find your own troubles at the state and local levels, please alert an SEJ First Amendment task force member; we’re reachable through SEJ’s web site, www.sej.org.

This month, a member informed us about a bill in West Virginia designed to seal records and close public meetings in the name of “Homeland Security.” According to an Associated Press story on the broadly worded bill, “those records would include any containing specific ‘vulnerability assessments’ or response plans as well as ‘inventories of potentially dangerous or remedial goods or materials.’”

The assaults on open government come more often than ever. We welcome your input, your examples and your solutions for the next edition of Watchdog Tipsheet. Please send them to Watchdog Tipsheet Editor Joseph Davis at jdavis@sej.org or liaison Vince Patton at vpatt@kgw.com.

Vince Patton is environmental reporter at KGW-TV in Portland, Ore.

Baltimore conference tops all in attendance

SEJ’S 12th annual conference last October attracted the highest attendance of any SEJ conference. Hosted by the University System of Maryland, a whopping 846 attendees braved sniper fire and heavy rain to join their peers in Baltimore.

The number included 119 poster presenters, 150 single session speakers, about 40 registered exhibitors, 25 fellowship winners and about 15 international attendees. This year’s 322 member (and non-member journalist) attendees, however, was not the highest ever. That distinction still belongs to Boston and MIT, way back in 1995, when the International Federation of Environmental Journalists convened its annual meeting at our event and inflated our numbers by bringing in about 100 journalists from across the globe.

SEJ received 54 evaluation forms that were returned from attendees this year, including 49 (15.2 percent) of SEJ members

who attended.

Interestingly, 41 of the 54 respondents said this was the only journalism conference they attended in 2002, perhaps reflecting the cuts in newsroom budgets and the importance of SEJ’s event to environmental reporters.

While “excellent” was the regular reply on the basic evaluation, one insightful response pretty much summed up this, and every, SEJ conference: “The good panel discussions were too short, the bad ones too long.”

We always get a bunch of totally contradictory responses every year. Here are a few samples from this year: —This from the Hold the Mustard tour: “Excellent. Wish we could have had more time because of so many good sources.” And: “Too long, too much material.”

(Continued on page 6)





SEJ Annual Conference

The Big Easy will be a big time in September

By MARK SCHLEIFSTEIN

Air and water pollution, wetlands eroding at a rate of two acres a minute, environmental justice, an invasive termite that's eating its way through one of the nation's oldest cities. Those topics and more are in store for those attending the 2003 Society of Environmental Journalists annual conference in New Orleans this September.

While we're going to give our members an opportunity to get polluted—the Astor Crowne Plaza, our flagship hotel, sits at the corner of Bourbon and Canal streets on the edge of the French Quarter—our aim is to fill the notebooks of conference goers with dozens of story ideas.

We'll explore by bus and in panels the plans by federal and Louisiana officials to re-plumb the state's wetlands, an engineering feat that will require rerouting as much as a third of the water and sediment traveling in the Mississippi River south of Baton Rouge. The plan is estimated to cost \$14 billion today, but will clearly outstrip Boston's Big Dig in dollars, complexity and controversy.

There's a tour along the Chemical Corridor to learn whether its "Cancer Alley" moniker is fact or hype, and how chemical companies and their neighbors are dealing with continuing threats of air and water pollution and catastrophic accidents.

Find out how freshwater diversions aimed at increasing oyster harvests and reducing wetlands loss may end up bankrupting Louisiana's treasury because of unexpected damage lawsuits, and the efforts being made to protect oyster consumers from diseases like *Vibrio Vulnificus*.

Study the love-hate relationship between south Louisiana villages and the oil and gas industry—the legacy of pollution, the boom-bust economy and the threat faced by the industry and villagers from natural disasters.

Travel to the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain, New Orleans' backyard, to learn how nutrient pollution from dairy farms has affected scenic bayous and how dramatic suburbanization is destroying wetlands and exacerbating flood problems. And there'll be time to spot the threatened red-cockaded woodpecker swooping between slash pines in one of the nation's newest national wildlife refuges.

Canoe through one of the state's few officially designated scenic rivers, Bayou Trepagnier, where the scenery includes alligators, nutria, blue herons ... and hazardous waste from a nearby oil refinery that rises to the surface with every paddle stroke.

Conference-goers also will have an opportunity to explore the controversial role of showcase zoos in using in vitro fertilization to propagate rare and endangered species during a visit to the Audubon Center for Research in Endangered Species.

Find out where West Nile Virus and Norwalk Virus will strike next and what other emerging diseases may be arriving at a port near you. Learn who's pushing for the Bush administration to



Photos courtesy of THE TIMES-PICAYUNE



New Orleans fauna: good critters, like this furry frequenter of the Saturn bar (above), and bad critters, like Termites caught between window panes clouding the view of a carriage in the French Quarter. Formosan termites, an invasive species that's actually from both southern China and Taiwan, are estimated to cause \$300 million in damage a year in the New Orleans area.

immediately adopt a carbon release inventory, and why the administration believes its Clear Skies program will work without it.

There also will be a focus on the Bush administration's other dramatic environmental agenda changes, journalists' concerns about the disappearance of environmental information from public view, and steps journalists can take to protect themselves when covering chemical plant explosions or bioterrorism.

Discover the cool welcome given to genetically-modified crops in Europe and developing nations, and their future in this country.

The agenda also includes plenty of opportunities for sampling New Orleans. We're going to experiment with Beat Dinners, arranging for those interested in discussing various subjects to do so over dinner at a variety of New Orleans restaurants.

And there will be a taste of Carnival, too, with our Saturday night bash at Mardi Gras World, where the world's most outrageous parade floats are built, complete with beads, parade and, of course, food and drink.

Watch your mailbox for more information and check out SEJ's Web site at www.sej.org for updates on the conference. Rooms at the Astor and a less expensive, alternative hotel will fill quickly, as will tour bus seats, so start making plans to join us now.

Mark Schleifstein, staff writer at The Times-Picayune in New Orleans, is conference co-chair, and an SEJ Board member.



Baltimore...(from page 4)

—This one from Do Critters Have Rights? panel: “Best session of the meeting, outstanding.” And “Speakers were long-winded and off-topic.”

—And these from the Voting Green: Politics and Environmental Policy plenary session: “A fun and lively debate.” “The Congressman from Massachusetts was a stitch.” “Great panelists and interesting discussion.” “Fascinating and well done.” “Wonderful, a reminder of how critical our work is to public life, in all aspects.” And compare to: “Didn’t grab me.” “Too many panelists, too few questions from the audience.” “Kinda boring.” “Sorry, but just political ping pong at its worst. I’d opt for a single keynoter.” “Dragged on too long.” “Please cut off those speakers, enforce the time limits given. We got railroaded.”

Many respondents complained about the pricey venue and pricey cash-bar drinks. And numerous respondents complained about the lack of vegetarian food and the hotel’s general lack of accommodating guests’ needs. We simply won’t have these problems at this year’s conference in New Orleans. Our conference hotel is top-notch and inexpensive options are nearby.

The Thursday tours remain very popular, but “too much rain” was a constant refrain. We, er, ah, guarantee no rain in New Orleans.

The opening plenary, “Blind Spots: Uncovering the Taboos of Environmental Reporting,” had a large attendance (around 400), and garnered much better reviews than most past plenary sessions.

It seems that any time we have environmental luminaries of any sort, anywhere on the program, they are always popular.

Concurrent sessions receiving the most praise include: Climate Change: Sea-Level Rise and Carbon Sinks; Pharm Pollution: Hormones and Healthcare Products; Ethnobotany Update: New Links Among Plants, Cultures and Conservation; Invading Frankenfish and the West Nile Virus: What’s Next?; Understanding Cancer Clusters: On the Verge of a Breakthrough, or Just Spinning Our Wheels?; IQ Test for Smart Growth: Is It Working?; Think Globally, Report Locally: Strategies for Teaching Environmental Journalism; and Fossils, Old Maps and Faded Photographs.

Concurrent sessions that attracted the highest attendance include: Climate Change: Sea-Level Rise and Carbon Sinks; Insecurity About Homeland Security: Bioterrorism and Energy Threats; Pfiesteria: The Before, During and After of a Major (and Ongoing) Environmental Science Controversy; Big 10 Since 9/11: An Insider’s Look at the Big Ten Environmental Groups; and Alternatives to the Newsroom: Can You Make a Living Writing Environmental Books?

SEJ’s unique network meals and similar sessions, such as the now-annual roundtable discussion with U.S. EPA PAOs, all continue to be very popular. We’ve added a few new networking additions this year, including the Beat Dinner, which will match themes with restaurants to take members around town to some of

(Continued next page)

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EPA debates the ethics of human testing for chemicals

By **BETTE HILEMAN** and **CHERYL HOGUE**

Debates over human cloning and embryonic stem cell research grab headlines. Another scientific ethical question getting scrutiny—but receiving a lot less attention in the media—is one of direct concern to environmental journalists: Should researchers deliberately test pesticides and industrial chemicals on human volunteers?

Such human testing has begun overseas as pesticide makers try to convince the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to allow greater exposure to their products.

In 1998, EPA said it would not accept data from studies in which people were deliberately exposed to pesticides.

In March 2002 pesticide makers, led by their trade association CropLife America, filed suit against EPA in federal district court because of this policy. EPA is deciding whether to change its policy. At the agency's request, the National Research Council is examining the issue of human testing of pesticides and industrial chemicals and expects to issue a report by December 2003.

Those in favor of human testing say such studies are the same as the initial human drug testing—called Phase I clinical trials. In these trials, a pharmaceutical is given to 20 to 80 healthy paid volunteers to see if it is too toxic for use as a medicine and to establish safe dose levels. About three out of five drugs are found to be too toxic. The trials may benefit society, but do not benefit the volunteers personally.

Proponents of human testing of pesticides also claim that it provides valuable information not available in other ways. Sometimes, they say, humans turn out to be far more sensitive to the chemical than anyone would have predicted from tests on animals. It is irresponsible, they say, not to use the available human data to assess the risk from pesticide exposure.

Meanwhile, critics of human testing claim that often the volunteers are deceived or ill-informed. Volunteers are sometimes led to believe that the test substance is a drug rather than a pesticide, they contend. Critics also claim that the data from such studies often are misinterpreted, and that tests with small groups of volunteers cannot possibly detect effects that could occur in a small percentage of a large population.

A law passed in 1996 is the major source of this debate. That statute, the Food Quality Protection Act, changed the way EPA regulates pesticides. It affects how the agency decides whether to

reregister older pesticides and how much residue of a particular pesticide, or group of pesticides, can be left on food.

The law requires EPA to add in a special “safety factor” to protect children when the agency considers data from tests on laboratory animals. EPA determines the highest dose of a chemical that does not make an animal sick—called a no-observable adverse effect level or NOEL—and extrapolates it to people. NOELs are usually given in the weight (mass) of a chemical per unit of body weight, such as milligrams per kilogram. The safety factor required in the act means the agency must divide the NOEL number it previously calculated for humans by 10.

The bottom line on the safety factors is that EPA's regulatory decisions are based on a premise that pesticides are 10 times more toxic than animal tests show. Put another way, the 10-fold safety factor means tougher regulation of pesticides.

But there is an exception to the safety factor in the Food Quality Protection Act.

EPA is allowed to lower or drop the safety factor if there is strong scientific evidence that the 10-fold calculation change is inappropriate. Thus, pesticide makers want to give human testing data to EPA so their products will face less stringent regulation.

Lynn Goldman, a professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and an EPA official during the Clinton administration, points out that tests where people swallow measured doses of pesticides are different from most research on human pesticide exposure, studies of field workers, for example. The purpose of oral tests is to establish acute toxicity thresholds in human subjects. Society “must consider the repercussions and the uses to which the studies will be put,” she says.

Bette Hileman and Cheryl Hogue are senior editors at Chemical & Engineering News.

Baltimore...(from page 6)

New Orleans' finest eateries for small roundtable discussions on topical issues.

Similar to other cool, off-site facilities we've visited in the past, attendees loved the reception and tours at the National Aquarium. The common response was “wonderful,” and “fantastic.” The sea dragons were an eye-opening favorite, and the behind-the-scenes private tours much appreciated.

Attendees also generally loved the privately-hosted hospitality suites, though complained that they were hard to find, because they were all over the hotel. We've fixed that problem for New Orleans by arranging the suites to be right next to each other at the plush Astor Crowne Plaza.

And there will be lots of fun surprises there, so don't forget to register early for this year's conference in New Orleans, Sept. 10-14, because hotel room will fill up fast. See you in “Nawlins.”

Jay Letto is a founding member of SEJ and the group's annual conference manager.



References:

CropLife America: <http://www.croplifeamerica.org>
Environmental Working Group—produced a report on human trials with pesticides called “The English Patients”: www.ewg.org
Information on the Food Quality Protection Act from EPA: www.epa.gov/oppfead1/fqpa/backgrnd.htm
Natural Resources Defense Council opposes human testing: www.nrdc.org/media/pressreleases/011128a.asp

Looking deep into data on water polluters pays off

By LISE OLSEN

Thirty years after the Clean Water Act was passed, it seemed at first that what we at the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* wanted to do would be easy to accomplish:

- Tell people just how many pounds of pollutants went into the Puget Sound each year.
- Show how many different companies and governments were licensed to dump their waste, and who was putting out the worst stuff.
- Figure out who was most often violating their pollution permits.

It seemed like a list that anyone should be able to compile for any body of water anywhere, given the fact that the United States has had such a supposedly strong federal law for three decades.

But after rifling through more than 10 different state and federal government databases (six involving National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System monitoring data, the EPA's TRI inventory, Superfund site lists, fish catch inventories and a state database of fines levied against polluters), we ended up with two out of three. Well, Meat Loaf always claimed that "two out of three ain't bad," if I remember my song lyrics right.

Some of the things we unearthed about polluters and who was violating their permits surprised just about everyone. Huge amounts of heavy metals and other nasty chemicals were being dumped by more than 800 permittees. And the state still even permitted a few polluters to discharge PCBs, including small quantities from the U.S. Navy Shipyard in Bremerton, which discharges into an inlet that is already contaminated from historical PCB dumping by—guess who?—the Navy. (Later, the Navy and others with PCBs in their permits argued that even the new discharges came from historical use of PCBs.)

Given that PCBs are banned and are commonly found in orca whales—among other mammals and fish—it seemed amazing that any more of the pollutant could be legally discharged, for whatever reason.

When we looked at the most-frequent violators of clean water permits, the reigning champ turned out to be the operators of a primitive treatment plant at a pristine, nearly uninhabited island that is a state park in the middle of Puget Sound itself. Yet the park, like many other government-owned plants, got away with its violations with only a small fine. Nearly all other violators were never fined at all.

The series' findings surprised even scientists who dealt with the same data every day. They had only general ideas about who were the most frequent violators or just how many types of polluters were out there.

Among other things, we produced a map that showed locations of frequent violators and another color-coded map showing what types of pollutants were being discharged at hundreds of state-sanctioned sites. We also produced maps of waste dumps, most of which were not being cleaned up.

But finding out who was dumping and violating their permits around the Puget Sound was much easier than figuring out the actual quantity of waste being dumped.

What we couldn't uncover became another one of our findings. No one really knows how many pounds of toxic waste and chemicals are legally dumped into the Puget Sound each

year because the official data is incomplete and unreliable. And no one here, unlike in other bodies of water across the country, has ever tried to calculate just how much of this waste the sound can handle.

Along the way, we had a lot of other nasty surprises as we analyzed our data. Most of it came from NPDES monitoring data that was collected by the Washington Department of Ecology.

One of the first, and most basic problems, came when we tried to assemble a list of the Puget Sound polluters. The state didn't have one.

To create it, we had to analyze data from three different enforcement agencies within the ecology department—two different regions and an industrial enforcement section. We compiled the list by using a field in some of the tables that indicated the watershed of all the sound tributaries.

That meant that just to figure out who had Puget Sound discharge permits, we analyzed six tables in all; three with address information and three with monitoring data. Luckily the address tables included both the watershed and gave latitude and longitude information, which was handy for importing the data into a mapping program.

When we initially created the Puget Sound polluters list, we noticed that some of the biggest players were missing. Amazingly, the state somehow forgot to give us the data from its industrial section. As usual, it pays to review your work early. It would have been quite embarrassing to leave out all of the state's paper mills and refineries. "Whoops, we just forgot" probably wouldn't have cut it with readers, though that's what the ecology department told us.

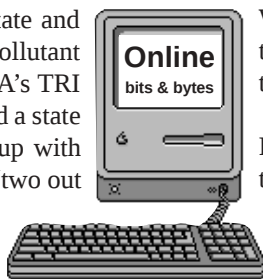
In addition to the NPDES data, which is available in different forms in all states, we also pulled information from the EPA's Toxic Release Inventory. Amazingly, though, we found that few polluters in the sound basin met the TRI requirements. Many major polluters avoided reporting. But the NPDES data gave us our only information on the quantity of pollutants being dumped by some large treatment plants.

For some polluters, though, it was impossible to determine how much they were dumping into the sound because Washington regulators did not have total flow information for all of its permitted polluters. Without that, it was impossible to calculate pounds of pollutants, since all of the limits are based on concentrations, rather than exact quantities.

Reaction to our series and our maps was strong. And with similar data available in all states for dischargers everywhere, it's an effort that is almost guaranteed to generate good stories just about anywhere you live.

Go fish.

Lise Olsen is an investigative reporter at the Seattle Post-Intelligencer.



"Whoops, we just forgot."

Wash. Dept. of Ecology

Ocean commissions offer chance for salty reporting

By DAVID HELVARG

Marine life has collapsed from overfishing. Nutrient runoff pollutes offshore waters. Coastal sprawl devastates habitat. And fossil-fueled climate change fuels intensified storms. The only way the ocean isn't being exploited is as a major source of news.

It's been more than 30 years since the last far-reaching review of how America governs and interacts with its seas. Now two new ocean commissions, one privately funded and the other presidentially appointed, are about to report to the nation on the state of America's blue frontier.

The last such report, the 1969 Stratton Commission's "Our Nation and the Sea," helped inspire a suite of reforms including the Clean Water Act, Coastal Zone Management, Marine Mammal Protection and Marine Sanctuaries Act. Unfortunately its main proposal for an independent oceans agency was scuttled for political reasons. On the same day that President Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency he sank the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in the Department of Commerce, then being run by his campaign fund-raiser and future Watergate bagman Maurice Stans.

Since then responsibility for overseeing our nation's greatest natural treasure has spread out among half the White House cabinet, 15 federal agencies and more than 45 committees and subcommittees of Congress. Some operations, like the federal fisheries councils that are exempted from conflict-of-interest laws, are industry-dominated. Others, like the Mineral Management Service, take their cues from the offshore industries they're supposed to regulate. When I asked the environmental chief of MMS why it had never cancelled an offshore lease based on its own scientists' oil-spill risk assessments his response was, "It's hard to make or break something as big as a lease on one issue."

In the face of growing threats to America's frontier waters, Senator Ernest Hollings (D.-S.C.), began to lobby for the creation of a new ocean commission. But 1997, '98 and '99 saw Congress refuse to pass his "American Oceans Act." The American Petroleum Institute, not wanting to jeopardize its position of power in Washington, lobbied hard against the measure on Capitol Hill, while Navy officials, worried about new environmental players interfering in their national security projects, also let it be known they didn't much like the idea.

Finally in 2000 the Pew Charitable Trusts, in part frustrated by federal inaction, established an independent commission. The 18-member Pew Oceans Commission includes fishermen, marine scientists, two governors, a mayor, environmentalists and, as its chair, former White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta.

The creation of the Pew Commission, which some politicians like then-Senate Majority leader Trent Lott, perceived as "too green" (too blue?) helped spur Congress to finally pass the Oceans Act. In the summer of 2001 President Bush named his own 16 member federal panel including representatives from the offshore oil industry, the Navy, academics and the shipping and ports industry. The U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy is headed by former Chief of Naval Operations and Secretary of Energy

Admiral Jim Watkins.

The Pew Commission's mandate is to look at the state of America's living seas. Its final report will be issued in April. The federal commission has a wider focus that includes shipping, trade and national defense. It will present its final recommendations in June. Both have been holding public hearings around the country, including in the Midwest, the source of agricultural runoff that has created a massive seasonal dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico.

The Pew Commission has released seven reports to date on ocean issues including the ecological impacts of fishing, coastal sprawl and marine pollution.

The government commission put out a mid-term report that acknowledged the oceans are in trouble due to a range of human impacts including climate change.

The final Pew report will recommend the creation of an independent federal ocean agency (some are calling it "an EPA for the seas") along with regional councils to begin efforts to conserve, protect and restore sustainable seas.

The federal commission will call for a more modest National Ocean Council headed up by an assistant to the president for oceans plus regional coordinating bodies organized around coastal watersheds.

In discussions with members of both commissions I found real concern over the political timing of these reports and fear that in the midst of potential war, terrorism and a faltering economy, the state of our blue frontier could get short shrift.

Much of course will depend on how the media and the public respond to these critical reports, and if journalists see them as an opportunity to begin exploring underreported stories about the failing health of America's ocean frontier.

The three-year bicentennial celebration of the Lewis and Clarke expedition began in January with major coverage on the origins of America's western frontier and the environmental state of those lands 200 years later (a concern being pushed by environmental groups like the Sierra Club).

But little note's been taken of the 20th anniversary of America's second great physical frontier. On March 10, 1983, Ronald Reagan declared a 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) stretching out from America's shores. This vast marine wilderness is six times the size of the Louisiana Purchase, a new frontier that presents opportunities and challenges for, among others, environmental reporters. The ocean commission reports could be a point of entry into this wet and salty part of America.

David Helvarg is the author of Blue Frontier—Saving America's Living Seas. (Henry Holt, paper 2002.) After 30 years in journalism, he's established the nonprofit Blue Frontier Campaign to expand the popular base for ocean protection.



In the midst of potential war, terrorism and a faltering economy, our blue frontier could get short shrift.

Issue in the News

White House policies on NEPA raise concerns

By MARGARET KRIZ

In mid-December, the Bush administration announced plans to vastly increase thinning of the national forests, while at the same time cutting short the time allowed for environmental impact analyses and public comment.

It was one of a recent series of Bush Administration policies that are focusing new concern on whether the White House is attempting to erode the 1970 National Environmental Policy Act, one of the first pillars of environmental law passed by Congress.

Regarding the December announcement, administration officials argued that the aggressive timber cutting projects must be speeded up to prevent another summer of brutal forest fires. Last year, more than 7 million acres of forest lands burned as a result of overgrown forests and a severe regional drought.

But environmentalists contended the forest-cutting initiative is part of a broader administration plan to allow commercial interests to exploit public lands.

NEPA is a disarmingly simple law that required regulators to examine the potential environmental impacts of major government actions or projects funded with taxpayer dollars. It also gives the public the right to legally challenge the environmental assessments.

During his first two years in office, however, Bush has been short-circuiting NEPA. Administration officials have laid the groundwork to speed up and, in some cases, eliminate the need to investigate the environmental impact of their actions. And they've made it far more difficult for the public to challenge such things as logging, mining, ranching, oil and gas extraction, and highway construction.

Bush's handling of NEPA is resulting in some of the most dramatic changes in environmental laws since the 1970s—and doing so in a piecemeal fashion that remains under the American public's radar screen, environmentalists contend.

"The Bush administration views NEPA as an obstacle, not a tool," said Sharon Buccino, a senior attorney at Natural Resources Defense Council. "To the extent that they're removing these activities, like logging projects, from the NEPA process, they're cutting the public out of the process."

The law's supporters fear that the environmental values that NEPA was created to protect could be lost in the rush to speed up or eliminate the environmental assessment process and to curtail the public ability to challenge those studies. "If you don't have judicial review, you have no guarantee that the BLM or any other

agency will comply with the laws," said David Alberswerth with the Wilderness Society.

But opponents of NEPA say the time has come to rein in the law. Industry officials contend that environmentalists have abused the law by filing thousands of lawsuits aimed at blocking government projects that they philosophically oppose. "A lot of challenges being raised are part of a larger strategy to oppose energy development in this country," said Lee Fuller, vice president for government relations at the Independent Petroleum Association of America.

Under NEPA, all government agencies—from the Interior Department to the Navy to the Small Business Administration—must examine the environmental impacts of their major projects. Private companies that receive government money or use federal lands also fall under the NEPA umbrella. More detailed environmental impact statements are required for projects that have a greater potential environmental impact.

NEPA is a "full disclosure" law, which forces regulators to share the assessments with the public but doesn't block projects that would harm the environment. As a result, environmental groups often use NEPA in conjunction with the other environmental laws to stop an environmentally damaging project.

The growing controversy over NEPA focuses on a series of Bush administration actions, including:

- A National Forest Service proposal that would allow federal regulators to rewrite National Forest Management Plans without having to conduct extensive new environmental assessments on those changes. Those plans act as the blueprints for commercial development, recreation and land preservation on the nation's 191 million acres of national forests and grasslands.

- President Bush's forest legislation, dubbed the "healthy forest initiative," which would exempt 10 million acres of national forest lands from NEPA to speed up thinning projects in those forests. The plan also seeks to allow commercial logging companies to remove some large, healthy trees to help underwrite the costly thinning projects. During the 107th Congress, the Democratic-controlled Senate blocked Bush's proposal, but it's certain to be resurrected this year.

- The administration's unsuccessful attempt to exempt most of the U.S.-controlled oceans from NEPA. In October, a U.S. District Court rejected a Justice Department claim that the environmental law did not apply beyond the U.S.'s territorial borders, which extend three miles off shore. The court ruled that NEPA was valid within the nation's 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zone. That case centered on Navy sonar tests, which environmentalists say have been the cause of whale beachings and permanent damage to whales and other sea mammals in nearby waters.

- A September executive order requiring federal regulators to speed up environmental assessments on transportation construction projects. Transportation Department officials say the administration is also considering legislation to change the law's impact on highway and other transportation projects. Meanwhile, conservative lawmakers want to create a separate, less rigorous envi-

(Continued on page 13)

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Research News Roundup

Exploring the media's impact on public attention

By JAN KNIGHT

At a recent national conference, journalism educators milled around an exposition hall filled with research "posters," examining the research, chatting and expressing frustration. They wanted to know: "How do we get the research to those whose work much of it is designed to assist—journalists?"

This column aims to help in that effort by providing summaries of academic research relevant to environmental journalism. Its overall aim is to assist environmental news coverage. But it should also provoke thought and lead you to other information and ideas that help you improve—or discover new paths in—environmental reporting.

Like the formal environmental beat, academic study of environmental journalism is relatively new, largely dating from the 1960s. Communication researchers follow rigorous guidelines, and each of these summaries comes from a study published in a peer-reviewed academic journal or an article published in a book written and/or edited by well-respected researchers. Citations are included in case you would like to read the full study or article.

Future columns will attempt to highlight some of the most recent studies and articles. This one looks at some studies that are a few years old, but should still be useful.

*Public's experience influences
news media's influence
on environmental opinion*

A landmark study relating to environmental journalism suggests that media influence depends on how much personal experience people have with an issue.

"People today live in two worlds: a real world and a media world," wrote the study's author, Harold Gene Zucker of the University of California-Irvine. When people directly experience an issue, such as rising prices at the gas pump, this is "real-world" experience. But when they have no direct experience with an issue, such as pollution, he wrote, "media-world experience must suffice."

Rising prices at the gas pump immediately hit the pocketbook and affect the monthly budget. But issues such as pollution or an energy crisis don't usually intrude on most people's lives in ways they can see. Zucker theorized that when the news media provide major coverage of such "unobtrusive" concerns, they become major issues. When the media provide little or no coverage, they might disappear from public opinion radar screens altogether.

Zucker tested his theory by studying national television news coverage and comparing it to answers to the Gallup opinion poll question, "What is the most important problem facing the country today?"

Among other things, he found that when network news programs addressed the topic of environmental pollution, the public then ranked it highly in the Gallup poll. However, he also found that network influence decreased over time, which he attributed to theories about the public's limited attention span for issues that don't affect them directly.

Nonetheless, he concluded that "coverage changes [cause]

opinion changes." Individuals' "real world" is bounded by the direct experience of an individual and his or her acquaintances, he wrote, while the "media world" is "bounded only by the decisions of news reporters and editors."

For more information, see "The variable nature of news media influence" by Harold Gene Zucker in *Communication Yearbook 2*, 1978, pp. 225-240.

*News footage often unattributed,
may mislead public, study finds*

In a study of network television news coverage of environmental catastrophes, a University of Wyoming researcher found that the source of visual footage was most often not given, in contrast to professional and network ethical codes. As a result, the audience was misled about environmental conditions in some cases.

Conrad Smith examined visuals used in 500 network evening television news stories about the Love Canal toxic waste dump near Buffalo, N.Y.; medical wastes appearing on beaches in the Northeast; the Exxon Valdez oil spill; the chemical plant leak in Bhopal, India; and the spotted owl controversy in the Pacific Northwest. He examined more than 2,000 still frames, looking for source attribution.

He found that the networks labeled footage provided by advocacy groups only 9 percent of the time; that they usually did not label file footage, and they often used unlabeled file footage in ways that could mislead viewers about conditions at the time the stories aired.

"The results here raise various degrees of ethical concern," Smith wrote. "In some stories, the unidentified file video is only a few days or a few weeks old, which may not substantially mislead viewers. In others, the misleading images represent a reality that has not existed for as long as four years."

In interviews with network journalists, Smith found varying reasons for the lack of attribution, including difficulty in knowing the origin of footage once it is in the network library and that footage identification clutters graphics and interrupts narrative flow.

For more information, see "Visual evidence in environmental catastrophe TV stories" by Conrad Smith, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Volume 13, Number 4 (1998), pp. 247 – 257.

Assistance in explaining science

Some academic research focuses on the ways that environmental news is reported and how these approaches don't serve audiences very well. Sometimes, suggested solutions include providing more space for environmental stories and giving more time to environmental reporters to write their stories.

Katherine E. Rowan, now of George Mason University, offers a different approach. She aims at "myths" about news stories based on scientific findings, revising them to offer new ways of thinking about science stories. She then offers journalists solutions that are perhaps more immediately doable than finding more

(Continued on page 13)

In an Asian gold mine for environmental stories

By ERIC FREEDMAN

Uzbekistan is home to the dying Aral Sea, home to one of the world's highest rates of respiratory-related deaths in Karakalpakstan, home to the spreading desert of the Urgench region and home to leftover Soviet-era biological weapons wastes. Its massive irrigation system leaks prodigious amounts of water in a country where water is in short supply. Habitats are at risk of destruction. The country and its Central Asian neighbors quarrel over energy and water supplies.

And it is here, in the delta of the Amur Darya river, that the Turan tiger was hunted into extinction in the 1970s. The last known survivor, the endling of its species, is now stuffed and mounted in a museum in the remote, dusty city of Nukus.

In other words, Uzbekistan is a gold mine of potential environmental stories—stories of national and international import—but environmental journalism is virtually non-existent. What stories do appear in print or on the air tend to be shallow, unbalanced and reflect an authoritarian government's view of the world. The exceptions come primarily in articles distributed on the Web sites of media affiliated with nongovernmental organizations, such as Eurasianet.org (www.eurasianet.org), the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (www.iwpr.net) and the United Nations-sponsored Integrated Regional Information Networks (www.irin-news.org), all of which post analytical and in-depth reporting by independent Central Asian journalists.

In that setting, I undertook to design and offer the country's first journalism school EJ course. At the time, I was a Fulbright senior lecturer at the Uzbek State World Languages University's Faculty of International Journalism, brought in to help impart Western professional standards to this former corner of the USSR. World Languages University is the country's top-ranked journalism school, but its teaching methods—top-down lecturing, few practical assignments and sparse resources such as computers and textbooks—still reflect a Soviet-era approach to education as well

as inadequate funding and the historic lack of press freedom.

In addition, the government-controlled curriculum for journalism students includes no environment or health-related courses, either required or elective.

I collaborated with a University of Maine-educated part-time colleague, Dilnora Azimova, to design "Introduction to Environmental and Science Reporting" in the spring of 2002. It was planned as a five-week, once-a-week course that we extended due to student interest. I taught a section in English to about 60 third-year students—juniors, in American terms—while Azimova taught similar material in Uzbek to about 40 students.

We started with the basics—what environmental and science reporting is, what makes such stories newsworthy and what impact such reporting can have on public policy. We emphasized that stories are as close as their trashcans and as distant as outer space.

From there, we discussed contemporary environmental issues in Central Asia including energy supplies, the effects of mining and agriculture, water shortages, public health problems such as anemia, HIV and respiratory disease, pesticide and fertilizer contamination and nuclear wastes.

One class focused on where journalists can find stories—from small communities to issues without borders—including how to localize national stories and to expand the scope of local ones. Another session discussed sourcing, as well as techniques for interviewing scientists and experts and for using the Internet, which many Uzbek journalists have little or no access to.

In the rest of the course, we focused on writing techniques to explain science and technology to the public. In a country with a low level of science-related education, it's especially challenging to translate scientific concepts and technical language.

I was fortunate to have one of Uzbekistan's pioneering ecologists, Bekdijan Tashmukhamedov, of the Academy of Sciences, speak to my class. I distributed many handouts in Russian and English, including news articles in English and sometimes Russian by independent journalists—although I'm not sure how many students read them—and compiled a list of relevant Web sites.

Their major assignment was to report and write a short environmental, science or health article on a newsworthy topic. Remember, many of these students had never done any reporting or interviewing of strangers despite their third-year status in the nation's most prestigious journalism school. The end result was mixed but some did well with articles on topics such as air pollution, rats, water supplies and medical services.

In a questionnaire at the end of the course, I asked students to identify the most important things they learned. Answers included the need to write clearly and accurately, the importance of journalistic independence, the extent of ecological problems in their country, the need to do research and meet deadlines, the need for a variety of sources and the obligation of journalists to find newsworthy problems to report about. I also asked what they found most difficult. Aside from understanding my lectures in English, the answers included Internet research, a lack of knowledge about environmental matters, staying objective and, as one

(Continued next page)



With Nespipay Aristanbaev in front of the fishing boat Karakalpakiya, part of the Aral Sea's ghost fleet now abandoned in the sandy wastes at Muynak. Aristanbaev had served on the crew.

NEPA...(from page 10)

ronmental assessment process for transportation projects.

At the same time, the White House Council on Environmental Quality, which has jurisdiction over NEPA, has created an interagency task force focused on updating the NEPA process. James Connaughton, who heads the council, said the task force is looking for ways to “modernize” the way federal regulators conduct their environmental reviews, for example, by increasing the use of computers and web-based tools. Some departments, he said, “are using the pony express when we could be using the electron to facilitate all kinds of interagency and external communications.”

But environmentalists are suspicious of the task force’s good government claims.

“This administration has already taken significant destructive actions related to NEPA before they had even begun the task force,” Buccino said.

Bush’s critics contend that the White House’s efforts to “streamline” the NEPA process are part of a sweeping campaign to grant corporations relief from the environmental protection laws by easing pollution controls on coal-fired power plants and scuttling a Clinton-era rule to preserve roadless regions of the national forests. “They’re saying, ‘Trust us,’ but we have no reason to trust them,” said the Wilderness Society’s Alberswerth.

Margaret Kriz is an environment and energy correspondent for the National Journal.

Media’s impact...(from page 11)

space or time. Here is a sampling:

The myth: Science is a collection of facts that scientists spot and journalists convey.

Revision: Science is a puzzle-solving process designed to produce better explanations of reality.

Reporting suggestions: Help audiences participate in puzzle-solving by reporting some of the reasoning that supports or questions the findings. “Readers need evidence if they are to make their own judgments, and they need writers to teach them how to evaluate the evidence.”

To do this, find out and report:

- What evidence, reasoning or testing supports a finding?
- What “bugs,” frustrates or impresses scientists about their finding?
- What parts of the puzzle remain unsolved?
- What are the best objections from other respected sources?
- What has to happen before the finding is viewed as established knowledge?
- What can people do to learn more?

The myth: Conflicting scientific findings can be reported the same way that disagreement is generally reported.

Revision: Scientific puzzle-solving works by testing claims and building consensual support for one explanation over others.

Reporting suggestions: Frame your story as a puzzle. Research shows that presenting conflicting findings as an

Asian gold mine...(from page 12)

student put it, finding “facts and information.”

These students still have far to travel professionally to be able to understand and report effectively on the political, social and economic implications of water maldistribution in Central Asia, the absence of sustainable development policies or exploitation of rivers to irrigate rice and cotton crops.

It’s also unclear whether Uzbekistan’s journalism departments are willing to make environmental reporting a permanent part of their curricula. If they’re to develop those analytical and professional skills, the Uzbek Ministry of Higher and Secondary Education, which determines the curriculum for all of the nation’s journalism programs, should commit to permanently incorporate environmental reporting into the curriculum. The programs, then, will also need to make a commitment to recruit instructors with practical experience in environmental journalism and with an ability to teach it effectively.



Eric Freedman at the Palace of Moon and Stars, built by he last Emir of Bukhara before he fled into exile after the Bolshevik Revolution.

Eric Freedman teaches journalism at the Michigan State University School of Journalism in East Lansing, Mich.

unsolved puzzle with more than one possible answer—and providing information about the strengths and weaknesses of each—improved audiences’ ability to reason about science news.

Rowan suggests that journalists:

- Learn whether a claim is widely supported by scientists.
- Find out whether the scientists being interviewed endorse this consensus.
- Ask whether there are important variations on the consensus view.
- Frame conflicting findings as puzzles, noting the strengths and weaknesses of key puzzle-solving efforts.

For more information, see “Effective explanation of uncertain and complex science” by Katherine E. Rowan in *Communicating Uncertainty: Media Coverage of New and Controversial Science*, Sharon M. Friedman, Sharon Dunwoody, and Carol L. Rogers, editors (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999), pp. 201-224.

Jan Knight, a former magazine editor and daily newspaper reporter, is a doctoral candidate at Ohio University’s E.W. Scripps School of Journalism, where she is concentrating on environmental studies and international communication with a specific interest in environmental journalism. She can be reached at jknight213@aol.com.

Thinking about the E-beat's future

By MICHAEL MANSUR

Environmental journalists live and work in difficult times. The real question now: How will the future play out for the beat?

These thoughts and questions came to the forefront as I read the recent Nieman Reports' special section "Environment Reporting: Exploring the Beat."

I should say that the beat's current condition and future had been on my own mind, especially over the last year. After a decade covering the environment, my newspaper had asked me to leave the beat full-time in 2002. And since my departure, the newsroom hasn't had the go-ahead to fill my job, although editors say it's essential to have full-time coverage of the environment.

I also knew I was not alone. Colleagues have reported similar transfers and difficulties recently as newsrooms have shrunk with the economy.

So I read the Nieman Reports with great interest.

First, I noted that Paul Rogers of the *San Jose Mercury News* reported that recent surveys of environment writers in the Mountain West and New England areas had yet to detect that

the weakening economy had posed any problems for the beat.

But those surveys were conducted in 2000 and 2001, before the giant bubble burst. And I suspect that the study's overseer—JoAnn Valenti, the noted Brigham Young University professor emeritus of communications—will soon turn up this trend. She hopes to complete surveys of all of the nation's environment writers by 2004.

In turn, I wasn't surprised to see in the same piece Rogers' quote of Bud Ward on the dwindling cachet of the environment beat.

Rogers wrote:

"There is not the glamour around this beat or the energy that it had a decade

"There is not the glamour around this beat or the energy that it had a decade ago. But it will come back. I hate to say it, but it will probably take another big disaster like an oil spill or a nuclear accident."

Bud Ward, editor
Environment Writer

ago," says Bud Ward, editor of *Environment Writer*, a newsletter for journalists, published by the University of Rhode Island. "But it will come back. I hate to say it, but it will probably take another big disaster like an oil spill or a nuclear accident."

There have been some signs of renewed interest in the environment. *The Oregonian* in Portland has maintained a large team of environment writers, after identifying the environment as a key issue for its area.

More recently, the early days of the Bush Administration had signaled a renewed interest in the environment. For a time during the Clinton years, the nation's leading newspapers had cut back on staff dedicated to covering the environment. With the pro-

environment Clinton administration, the issue must not have held enough conflict.

But Bush and the perception that he would dismantle the nation's environmental protections had appeared to renew interest in the beat.

Another dip in coverage, though, came with the Sept. 11 attacks. *The New York Times* lead environment writer, Douglas Jehl, quickly found himself back in the Middle East and Pakistan, filing stories on the developments in the nation's war on terrorism. Jehl has since returned to the beat and in February won sizable Sunday Page One presence on the Bush Administration's environmental record.

The Sept. 11 attacks' impact on the nation's economy may be more profound. Newsrooms, generally speaking, are not beefing up coverage. They are trying to hold the line or cope with cutbacks.

Yet, the environmental problems that for so long have made reporting on them so challenging and intriguing will not go away. The Dead Zone in the Gulf of Mexico won't be healed overnight; and the impacts of global climate change won't be clear in the coming year. The increasing concern about the health risks posed by low levels of toxins in our environment won't pass over the next month, dismissed out of hand or confirmed as a national tragedy.

These issues on the environment beat will continue to ooze, as they say.

Bud Ward, in his own piece in the Nieman Reports' section on the environment beat, explained that the beat has many ups and downs since the 1960s. The 1990s were definitely a low.

"Perhaps burned by too many chemical-of-the-month scare stories and by a feeling—understandable though ultimately flawed—that much of the media was duped on the Alar scare, many editors seemed willing, if not eager, to back away from an always controversial, always complex beat," Ward wrote. "After all, environmental coverage often angered bottom-line publishers. Competing pressures at many news organizations—from 'dumbing down' the news to creating smaller news holes, to devoting fewer resources to enterprise reporting—have made this type of reporting tougher to do."

Indeed, I've learned since moving to my new beat, covering local government, that writing about the environment was more difficult than I actually realized. It requires the skills of a great investigative reporter and the writing flair of a great feature or narrative writer. Never did the corpse have a bullet hole in it.

To get readers, reporters almost had to resort to gimmicks (although some might properly praise it as innovative). This was especially true for issues like population or consumerism, which require Americans to face themselves and call for a change in their own behavior. The book "A Civil Action" wasn't a literary and financial success because it delved deeply into the TCE-tainted wells of a Massachusetts town. It was a hit because it told a fascinating story about a lawyer who nearly destroyed himself. The backdrop was the Woburn, Mass., contamination.

But I am certain the interest in the environmental issues will be restored. And I don't think it will manifest itself in more reporters being hired by TV stations and newspapers to cover the environment.

(Continued on page 19)

Donora... (from page 1)

health, according to scientist Devra Davis, a scientist and author of the recent book, “When Smoke Ran Like Water.” (See review, page 17.)

Mary Amdur was a noted Harvard scientist who had grown up in the Monongahela Valley and had watched her father die at 40 of lung cancer. She would attempt to unravel what happened in Donora in studies published in 1952.

Working with Phillip Drinker, who had invented the iron lung, Amdur showed that the age of animals exposed to toxins determined the toxicity of certain concentrations. The scientists replicated the sulfuric acid mists of Donora and exposed guinea pigs to the pollution. Young guinea pigs succumbed at doses one-third less than what it took to kill the older animals.

What’s more, Donora was Devra Davis’ hometown.

Davis, a leading epidemiologist and breast cancer researcher, would open her book, “When Smoke Ran Like Water,” with a recounting of Donora. She was only a toddler in 1948, but the experience of living with the pollution was formative.

After her family had moved to Pittsburgh, Davis recalled discussing life in Donora with her mother. How cars used their headlights in the afternoon. How housewives preferred Venetian blinds to drapes; they were easier to clean. And how no one really talked about the pollution.

“Look, today they might call it pollution,” Davis recalled her mother saying. “Back then, it was just a living.”

Oct. 26, 1948, brought a massive blanket of cold air over the town and the entire Monongahela Valley, Davis reported. And the air blanket trapped the gases from Donora’s mills and furnaces.

Even so, the town’s Halloween parade went off as scheduled. The high school football team practiced for and played their great rival, the Monongahela Wildcats.

But within days, dozens of the town’s residents were beginning to fall ill.

One of the town’s doctors, Bill Rongaus, advised his patients and friends to leave town. Firefighters went door to door with oxygen tanks. Soon, though, Donora was becoming the town with the killer fog.

“The small, hard-working steel town of Donora, Pennsylvania, is in mourning tonight, as they recover from a catastrophe,” the nation’s voice, Walter Winchell, reported. “People dropped dead from a thick killer fog that sickened much of the town. Folks are investigating what has hit the area.”

On Nov. 2, 1948, the day that the *Post-Dispatch* editor suggested sending a reporter to Donora, funeral services for Donora victims began.

Donora Zinc Works, the town’s mill, also was restarting production, as the weather had cleared.

“But I was one of the few reporters there,” Pepper recalled.

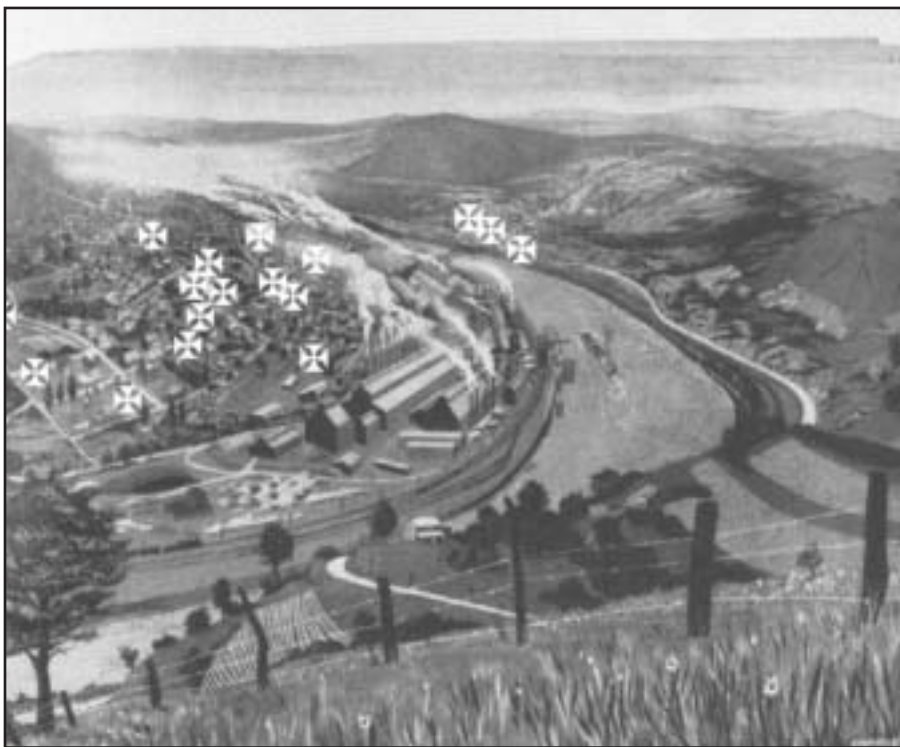


Photo courtesy of BASIC BOOKS

A sketch of Donora made by Charles Shinn for the U.S. Public Health Service in 1949. The crosses indicate the locations of deaths that occurred during the killer smog. The zinc plant is just inside the horseshoe bend in the Monongahela River.

“It didn’t sink in on the entire country until the death totals got so high.”

Working at the *Post-Dispatch* under editor Joseph Pulitzer was a thrilling experience, especially for a young reporter. The newspaper would win five Pulitzers in 10 years and reporters were dispatched in teams to investigate issues of local and national import. Mine disasters. Vote fraud. And IRS corruption.

“It was a great time to be on the staff,” Pepper said.

The Donora story was of special interest because the *Post-Dispatch* had won one of its prizes for editorials addressing the “smoke” problems in St. Louis. And one of the city’s smoke commissioners had risen to become mayor. Donora was St. Louis’ nightmare come true.

“We knew it was bad, but we didn’t know how bad it was,” Pepper said of Donora. “Doctors there were distressed.”

Deaths continued after Pepper arrived. And he began to talk to town leaders, the local newspaper editor, victims’ families and doctors.

Pepper recalled that not everyone in the town was willing to talk. But he used the Stan Musial connection—the Donora boy made famous in St. Louis—to open most conversations.

Some of the town’s people were defensive, as one might expect, Pepper said. “But others were willing to admit that this was a critical problem. Anything that can kill 20 and injure 500 people, well that’s a big story....”

“We helped to put Donora on the map.”

(Continued next page)

Pepper produced a three-part series on Donora that began Nov. 20. The series, as well as some of the materials that Pepper gathered while researching his story, are kept at the University of Missouri-St. Louis' Western Historical Manuscript Collection.

A listing of the Selwyn Pepper collection can be found on the Internet at <http://www.umsi.edu/~whmc/guides/whm0488.htm>

The writing in Pepper's stories was clear and leavened with telling detail from individuals and the scene he found.

The lede of his first installment:

"For 30 years, people living in highly industrialized Donora—known for its production of steel and athletes like Stan Musial of the St. Louis Cardinals—watched the steady destruction of all vegetation in the north end of town and on many farms on both sides of the Monongahela river. Finally, in large areas not a blade of grass grew."

The story captured how the townspeople feared to complain about the plant's pollution. The well-paying plant might leave town, if they did. He also told of how the local newspaper editor had courageously suggested that maybe something should be done about this "smoke problem."

He explained how Donora had become a "smoke bowl" and how the fumes had built in late October, when Dr. Rongaus' patients began to complain that they could not breathe. Those who died, Pepper reported, had had previous histories of heart trouble or asthma.

He quoted Dr. Rongaus saying the victims had been "murdered."

Pepper, of course, also quoted spokesmen for the plant. "We don't know exactly what happened. But we feel that nothing from the zinc works caused this situation. The health authorities indicated the fumes came down the river from other mills."

The company's position, however, was in the last paragraph of Pepper's first story.

In his second-day story, Pepper reported in more detail on how residents feared for their health and how many wanted to move. In the final installment, he reported that health authorities were investigating to prevent a reoccurrence of the disaster. But, officially, federal officials couldn't pinpoint the culprit in the deaths.

He quoted other experts on how the killer smog could develop elsewhere and noted that a similarly deadly situation had occurred in 1930 in the Meuse valley in Belgium.

He quoted Clarence Mills, a University of Cincinnati professor who had studied air pollution and had visited Donora. Mills stated, "The disaster might just as well have hit any one of many other cities."

Today, Donora no longer is the industrial town it once was. It continues to produce great athletes, including Ken Griffey Jr. But the inefficient old steel mills are shuttered. The town erected a monument, nearly 50 years later, near the former steel mill.

Fifty people also died in the months following the smog. But they were never officially listed as victims of the "killer fog." And the government never issued an official proclamation on the cause of any deaths from late-October and early-November 1948.

In a *Science* magazine article two years later, Clarence Mills, the University of Cincinnati scientist whom Pepper quoted, criticized the government's efforts to pinpoint a cause of the deaths in Donora. The government had failed to calculate the poison levels

in the smog. Mills calculated them at four times higher than the safety limit.

"Let us hope," Mills wrote, "that the Donora tragedy may prove such an object lesson in air pollution dangers that no industrial plant will feel safe in the future in pouring aloft dangerous amounts of poisonous materials."

At the time, Pepper said, he was interested in the Donora story as a great community disaster. Back then, no one used the word, "environmental." And few realized then the true significance of Donora.

"I know now," Pepper said, "that it was the start of the clean-air movement."

Michael Mansur is a reporter for The Kansas City Star and editor of SEJournal.

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Noted scientist explores the politics of science and pollution

WHEN SMOKE RAN LIKE WATER

By Devra Davis

Basic Books, \$26.00

Every environment writer should become familiar with the most noteworthy environmental book in recent months—"When Smoke Ran Like Water: Tales of Environmental Deception and the Battle Against Pollution" by Devra Davis, the noted and, to some, controversial epidemiologist.

One good reason, of course, is that Davis' book has won recognition. It was a finalist for the National Book Award for non-fiction. But there's much more value in Davis' book for environment writers and the followers of such key issues as the evolution of the battle against air pollution and the roles of environmental pollutants in causing breast cancer and in disrupting sexual reproduction.

The greatest value of "When Smoke Ran Like Water," though, is not to bring you up to speed on those environmental controversies. It's the inside view of how controversial and difficult science can be, especially for those scientists who run head-on into industrial lobbying or government bureaucracy.

Davis' book is filled with a variety of examples of this, but the most memorable may be in the very first paragraphs of the book's preface, when Davis recounts how as a young scientist in the 1980s she set out to quickly answer an important environmental health question: Why did people get sick on long airplane trips?

Davis—unaware then of why it would require four years of study to answer this question—climbed aboard a flight to Paris, carrying a metal box that could measure the weight of airborne particles. Today, of course, Davis would have never made it through the first metal detector.

But on the flight, Davis, then at the National Academy of Sciences, discovered that the levels of particles in the air were as high in the non-smoking section as in the smoking section.

"When I got back to Washington I eagerly told my boss at the academy the good news. 'We don't need to do a study for the senator!'"

U.S. Sen. Daniel K. Inouye had raised this question, finding a half million dollars for the study.

Davis' boss, though, was incredulous. His young scientist hadn't followed the rules. No one had approved her methods.

What about peer review?

Four years—and a half million dollars later—the study was completed. The conclusion: Just what Davis found on her first flight.

Even so, the results were worthwhile. Within a year of the report's release, smoking bans on airplanes were initiated. Similar restrictions on smoking in public places soon were to follow.

Throughout "When Smoke Ran Like Water," Davis details the difficulties faced by scientists, including herself, who are concerned about the human impacts of environmental pollutants. One of the most telling was the story of Herbert Needleman and his efforts to remove lead particles from the nation's environment. Davis details industry's attacks against Needleman, including accusations of scientific misconduct.

Needleman, of course, succeeded in his quest to decrease the exposure, especially of children. Lead, of course, is especially dangerous for children, as it can cause developmental disorders at even minute amounts of exposure.

In 1992, Needleman reflected on the battle and its toll.

"If my case illuminates anything, it shows that the federal investigative process can be rather easily exploited by commercial interests to cloud the consensus about a toxicant's dangers, can slow the regulatory pace, can damage an investigator's credibility, and can keep him tied up almost to the exclusion of any scientific output for long stretches of time, while defending himself."

Davis might have learned this lesson in her hometown, the industrial Donora, Pa., if she hadn't been but a toddler.

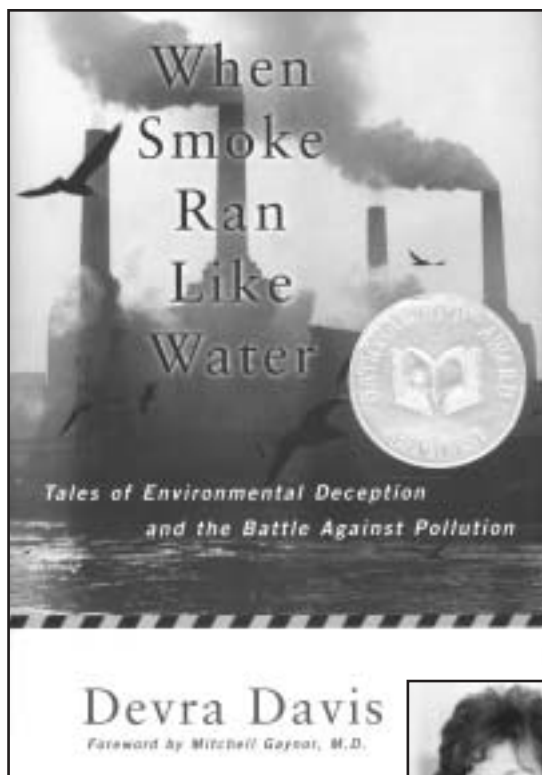
In what may be the most riveting portion of her book—in part because it is the most personal but also because of the story's historic significance and mystery—Davis investigates the 1948 "killer fog" in Donora. Officially, 20 people's deaths were attributed to the fog. But no cause was ever announced by the steel mill, the town's leaders or the U.S. Public Health Service.

A local physician, though, advised his patients to get out of town, at least to higher ground. He could see what was happening and why.

Years later the lessons of Donora and the lethal air pollution in London in 1952 (which Davis also delves into to uncover that even more deaths were likely attributable to that incident than has been acknowledged) have become clear, Davis writes.

Life, death, climate, even sex all once were thought to be something of a higher being, not of human doing. But, now, she writes, we understand that even such complex aspects of our life are subject to more human influences than ever imagined.

—Michael Mansur



DOWNHILL SLIDE: WHY THE SKI INDUSTRY IS BAD FOR SKIING, SKI TOWNS, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Hal Clifford

Sierra Club Books, 2002, \$24.95 list

Throughout the West, as Californians cash in their inflated real estate and buy McMansions in rural Edens, locals often complain that their area is being "Californicated." But in Mammoth Lakes, a ski town on the east side of the Sierra Nevada, residents decry what they call the "Coloradoization of California."

Mammoth is a seven-hour drive up US395 from Los Angeles, where most of its customers live: it's hard to justify a visit unless you have more than a three-day weekend. But there are plans to expand the Mammoth-Yosemite Airport to accommodate 737s and 757s, potentially doubling the number of visitors.

This might seem like good news for Mammoth, with its high unemployment rate. But the kind of people who'll hop a jet from LA or Dallas or Chicago will expect the kind of amenities they'd find at Vail, Aspen, or Park City. As prices go up along with the demand for labor, Mammoth's waitresses and ski instructors will increasingly be priced out of town.

And the worst thing is that the destruction of what is still a reasonably unpretentious ski town may not even enrich resort owners. The number of Americans who ski regularly is dropping. Resort owners find they have to fight for every discretionary dollar, leaving a legacy of ruined small business, more of those vertical clearcuts the industry calls "ski runs," groundwater depleted to run snow-making machinery, and whole abandoned gated neighborhoods for the rich which, come to think of it, is not all that different from the prognosis for Mammoth if the resort plans succeed wonderfully.

This bleak vision is detailed in Hal Clifford's new book "Downhill Slide; Why the Ski Industry is Bad for Skiing, Ski Towns, and the Environment."

A writer on Western environmental issues for publications such as *High Country News* and *Outside*, Clifford is the journalistic equivalent of a ski bum, as he's edited both *SKI* magazine and the *Aspen Daily News*. He knows the industry inside and out. Clifford's love for skiing (in which category he includes snowboarding) even colors his interviews with the executives of resort corporations more interested in cutting deals with chocolate shop franchisees for their resorts' "villages" than in cutting tight turns in day-old powder. Clifford is nicer to these guys than they probably deserve.

But he can be unsparing too. "Downhill Slide" is at its best in describing ski-related threats to wildlife. Early on in the book, a searing passage describing roadkill of desperate, starving elk by resort traffic on Interstate 70 makes it clear where the author's real sympathies lie.

Vail Resorts planned to expand operations into some of the "last, best" Canada lynx habitat in Colorado. Though a proposed listing of the lynx as an endangered species threatened to kill the expansion, Fish and Wildlife official Richard Hannum overrode the objections of his staff scientists and allowed the project to proceed. "There is no smoking gun," writes Clifford, "but money buys access, and access buys influence, and Vail Resorts certainly knows that. Vail officers give generously to Colorado's congressional delegation, and ski industry officials are no strangers

to Washington's corridors of power."

A suit to block the expansion was dismissed in October 1998. A few days later, seven separate fires destroyed buildings on the site. The Earth Liberation Front claimed responsibility, but locals felt the work was too precise to have been the work of outsiders. Howls of outrage were heard across the nation, except among citizens of Vail, who formally denounced the arson while snickering into their sleeves.

Oddly, Clifford devotes just one paragraph of his book to the arson. A survey of locals about the fires would have made for an interesting read. Still, it's not like Clifford pulls punches. Calling Vail's conduct "egregious" and "offensive," he laments that "political machinations cost the lynx its last, best chance in central Colorado, and very likely cost it a foothold in the entire Southern Rockies, from central Colorado to northern New Mexico. In this political game, the lynx was the loser. The winner? Vail Resorts."

Clifford sees potential for the industry to redeem itself. Idaho's Bogus Basin cut its lift ticket price by more than half, attracting locals who'd all but given up the sport for its high cost. Vermonters passed laws requiring the Sugarbush resort plan its operations according to community standards, rather than the other way around. Not long after, the owners sold the resort to locals, who now operate it as a community-based enterprise, turning a profit and generating tax revenue while keeping the flavor of their town intact. A new resort near Silverton, Colorado plans to charge expert skiers \$25 a day to traverse avalanche chutes and ungroomed trails, with minimal accommodations at the bottom of the hill. It may be that there's a way after all to play in the snow without displacing townspeople or destroying the planet.

—Chris Clarke



SOLAR SYSTEM

by Nigel Hey

Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., New York, 2002

272 pages, hardback, \$29.95 (U.S.), \$46.95 (Canada)

Will stardust finally reveal how our solar system began? Will planet-probing spacecraft and the convergence of science and technology, especially computer science, assuage the school boards in Kansas?

Former Sandia PIO and ex-British journalist Nigel Hey presents what the publisher describes as a reader-friendly beginner on all things promising in solar research in his new book, "Solar System," first published in England and now available in the U.S. The outstanding photos make this a near coffee-table offering, but the text is more like candy for Hawkins lovers or NASA fans.

I've met Hey at professional meetings, and he's an interesting guy with impressive book titles to his credit: "The Mysterious Sun," "How We Will Explore the Outer Planets," "How Will We Feed the Hungry Billions?," and "The Science Book."

His latest offering could prove very timely, especially for western writers. The BLM in Utah recently squelched a request by a group of space enthusiasts who wanted to drop bowling balls onto the Salt Flats to simulate the impact of meteorites or

(Continued on page 22)

Fooling ourselves...(from page 1)

for a public suspicious and uneasy about anything that might waken it from comfortable somnambulant state; 2) Present day environmental journalists are wary of subjectivity. Perhaps because they are so involved with technical issues, they emulate scientific objectivity. So, with great integrity and diligence, environmental writers are producing a white-coat journalism that interests only the cognoscenti, eliciting yawns from everyone else.

If so, what to do?

No one ever accused H.L. Mencken of an overabundance of objectivity, or of being boring or irrelevant. Walter Cronkite, one of our great newsmen, wasn't squeamish about sharing his opinions on camera. They made an impact because they refused to be ordinary. Maybe it's time for environmental writers to emulate those who by inclination and training know best how to be provocative—artists. Any ideas?

Question But Don't Discount Environmental Movement

FROM: Paul Rogers

San Jose Mercury News

Resources and Environment Writer

H.L. Mencken was an opinion columnist. Most of the journalists in SEJ are not paid to write opinions and commentaries,

like Mencken was, but are paid to provide the public with objective news coverage. That means quoting all sides, putting the arguments in context, providing history and background, and letting the public make up its own mind.

Most of these folks, especially those who have done it for a while, will tell you that the environment beat is not black and white, but full of shades of gray. Environmentalists lie, obfuscate and mislead as much as government sources and industry PR people. Nobody has a monopoly on truth. And nobody has a monopoly on knowing the best ways to solve environmental problems.

Enviros are often quite wrong. Ralph Nader's supporters told us, for example, that there was no difference between Gore and Bush on the environment. Stanford Professor Paul Ehrlich told us in the late 1960s that there would be mass famine in the United States because of population growth. Neither was true. Were journalists shirking their duties to democracy to quote people challenging Nader or Ehrlich? Or were they shirking their duties when they didn't quote people challenging them?

The journalists in SEJ are not paid to be public relations people for the Sierra Club. There are already plenty of those.

We're paid to do our best to be objective and fair, just like reporters who cover courts, police, politics or any other beat. And rather than us writing slanted stories, that objectivity may ironically be the best thing for continuing the environmental progress that the United States has undergone in the past 30 years.

Why? Because presenting balanced, hard-hitting journalism to editors about complex topics increases the chances that they will air, broadcast and publish those stories prominently, rather than simply discounting and burying them because they think reporters working the environment beat are stenographers for tree huggers rather than serious journalists like the rest of their colleagues.

Finally, I don't agree that the public isn't paying attention. In polls, more than 80 percent of Americans describe themselves as environmentalists. Blue "Adopt A Highway" signs line U.S. roads, bearing the names of mainstream organizations, like the Lions Club and Kiwanis Club. The top environmental groups have huge staffs, budgets in the tens of millions of dollars and teams of lobbyists. In the United States, because of public pressure, there has been steady progress reducing air pollution, water pollution, auto emis-

(Continued next page)

E-beat's future...(from page 14)

The trigger, as Ward predicted, may be a major environmental disaster. Or, as I believe, it may be the slow erosion of environmental resources, a creeping problem that finally becomes clear to a public that faces the consequences every day.

Higher gasoline prices. Or a new hydrogen economy.

New concerns about the environmental causes of breast cancer. Or diabetes or MS.

Water rationing.

The beat, as I've always tried to keep in mind, isn't about complex problems. Sure, explaining the current understanding of these issues may be complex. But, in reality, the beat is about the most basic of human needs.

Food.

Water.

The air we breathe.

And, soon, as those basic needs are threatened, environmental coverage will ooze beyond a beat. It will become a key component of nearly every story, an issue that must be addressed in every story. It will truly become the equal of the economy—as basic as "following the money."

I can't say when. But I see it happening on my local govern-

ment beat. Recycling. Privatizing the water system. A decrepit sewer system that pollutes and will cost billions to replace.

The environment already has begun to ooze into all beats. It's only a matter of time before the environment becomes an essential part of every traditional beat. No longer would editors' eyes roll about the complex nature of the issue. The issue will be too important not to address at length or in detail—as important to the nation or the globe as the issue has become in the Great Northwest.

A key question is how will the Society of Environmental Journalists take advantage and foster that spread of the issue across traditional beats, from business to local government to the statehouse? I'm sure that answer also will become clear in time, as the recognition of these issues and their significance becomes as clear to the public and editors as the economy became to a campaigning Clinton.

It may take a little time. But keep this thought in mind: That's quite a future.

Michael Mansur writes for The Kansas City Star and edits SEJournal.

sions and toxic emissions since the 1970s.

The environmental movement has been one of the most successful social movements of the past half century. Is everything fixed? Of course not. But most of the nations where the environment is collapsing are developing nations with little or no “consumer culture” at all. Poverty, population growth and local political corruption do more harm to the world’s tropical rainforests, for example, than Americans at shopping malls.

The best environmental journalism puts a microphone on the marketplace of ideas—all ideas. Not just Helen Caldicott’s or Jeremy Rifkin’s.

Let’s Explore Fair and Balanced

From: Brian J. Back

Editor, Sustainable Industries Journal
www.sijournal.com

All legitimate points. Thank you for this discussion. For the sake of continuing it, I have a few questions: Why does balanced, so-called “objective” news coverage typically entail a he-said, she-said scenario that ultimately dilutes otherwise severe issues?

In other words, does “balanced” mean pitting the conclusions of the world’s leading scientists about global warming against a well-paid industry spokesperson’s conclusion about global warming? Does this industry spokesperson, with rather predictable interests, deserve 50 percent of the podium? Most mainstream newsrooms seem to think so, and I would go so far as to say that in some cases advertising interests do a good job of perpetuating this formula.

You have to play the game to keep your newsroom job, because 20 people are lined up to do it if you won’t. It creeps in while seeming justified because one way of poo-pooing the pervasive problem is to say, “Let industry give its viewpoint, and let the reader decide if the industry spokesperson is full of it.”

But 50 percent of the podium? In the end, the issue is watered down and the public feels less compelled to act because of uncertainty. The alternative doesn’t mean becoming a mouthpiece for environmental groups, but it does require seeking a deeper understanding of the issue.

Many journalists, especially those in cash-strapped newsrooms, have little time to devote to long-term research jobs in the

field. Some have trouble remembering some of the articles they wrote two months ago. The balancing-act formula does in fact lead some reporters into deadline situations where they overtly seek out a quote from someone who will simply oppose the main idea of the article. This is what editors often advise, and this is what leads publications to smugly tout a “fair and balanced” approach.

One thing I fear is that the 50-percent of the dialogue from a scientist paid by ExxonMobil under the guise of think tank just might help justify someone’s decision to go ahead and buy that Chevy Suburban rather than grow concerned about global warming (even if they are among the 80 percent of “environmentalists”).

It’s not a journalist’s job to tell anyone what to do, of course, and most people know how ineffective it is to even try. But it’s also important to explore just what we mean when we say “balanced” and how fair and balanced journalism is often interpreted on the ground. Is journalism’s status quo effectively mitigating ongoing and systematic environmental destruction? Can it? I enjoy seeing journalists take calculated risks.

FROM: Paul Rogers

San Jose Mercury News

Resources and Environment Writer

I did mention the importance of “context” in good environmental news coverage. And luckily, although early global warming reporting did give 50 percent to science and 50 percent to Fred Singer and Industry (see Ross Gelbspan’s fine book “The Heat is On”), climate change reporting now in most papers from the *New York Times* on down usually contains a line like “Most scientists agree that the earth’s temperature has warmed one degree in the past century, most likely because of the build up of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases from factories, cars and other sources.” Or some such. That line has, as the late California Senator S.I. Hiyakawa once said “the added benefit of being true.”

But the climate change issue offers a great example of a robust debate and how enviros, industry and government, along with academia, should all be represented in coverage. What are the pluses and minus of Kyoto? Cap and trade? Lifeboats for New Orleans?

Let’s Talk About ‘Objectivity’

From: Ken Ward Jr.

The Charleston (W.Va.) Gazette

With all due respect to Paul, who often makes great points about environmental journalists not being PR people for the Sierra Club, I take issue with the continued fallback on the term “objective” as a requirement for environmental or other journalists—or at least for those of us who write on the news, and not editorial, pages.

And, at the great risk of quoting Hunter S. Thompson, “Objective journalism is a pompous contradiction in terms.”

I think the fairness that Paul also mentioned is what we should strive for. Fairness and accuracy. Objectivity is a silly and unobtainable standard, which suggests that none of us have bias or even feelings about the issues we cover. We ought not strive to not care about the issues we cover. (I’m sure that’s not what Paul meant, but it is far too often the direction that weak editors or weaker publishers take “objectivity.”)

I prefer the model described in a great new book, “Muckraking: The Journalism that Changed America,” by William and Judith Serrin. In describing the many wonderful journalists whose pieces fill their book, they say—and I’m paraphrasing here—that these folks were great journalists because they had an agenda. (not because they did PR for the Sierra Club).

In any event, it’s a great book, and has a wonderful chapter of environmental reporting.

Editors May Still Insist on Equal Time

From: Peter Rebhahn

Environment Reporter

Green Bay Press-Gazette

I think the very best example of how this thinking leads us down the wrong path is the whole evolution vs. creationism debate, which usually seems to rear its head in brouhahas over textbooks. I’ve never had the occasion to do such a story, but the topic interests me. Why should we be compelled to give equal time to nonsense like creationism, which is not science at all no matter how it’s dressed up (“creation science” or “intelligent design.”)

Based on the way my newsroom operates I know that, were I ever doing such a story, I would probably be required to give equal time to both sides. How does giving equal time to the bronze-age beliefs of religious sects advance the public good?

Here, here, Ken

From: Ray Ring

Editor in the field

High Country News

(branch office in Bozeman, Montana)

Just a quick note of agreement with Ken Ward's framing of effective journalism. The goal of "objectivity," taught in colleges and conferences, often looks like a hideout. Our role is to help the public figure it out, and that means not merely serving up platters of misinformation with quote marks around it.

Paul's Advice Is Sound

From: Jay Gourley

Reporter

Natural Resources News Service

I don't think Paul Rogers was inflammatory or divisive; and I don't think he meant objectivity in an extreme or abstract sense. I reread his posting after considering subsequent criticism. I still agree with most of what Rogers said even though I am strongly opinionated about protecting the environment, conserving resources, and preserving habitat. Maybe my definition of objectivity is tepid or convenient, but I don't think Rogers was scolding me or anyone about holding strong opinions.

He was just saying that we have to be able to step away from our personal views to understand and fairly report other views that we may not agree with. That's good advice for journalism and for life in general. I agree with one of his critics that objectivity should not cause us to overlook the convenience or even dishonesty behind some views, but I didn't see a contrary suggestion in what Rogers posted.

Fairness? Balance? Objectivity? Whoa

From: Orna Izakson

Freelance journalist

I love this discussion. What is fairness? What is balance? What is objectivity? Is it attainable? Is there a higher standard, is there greater scrutiny of "objectivity" or "fairness" or "balance" for the environment beat?

When I was casting about, wondering what to do with my life, this discussion lured me into environmental journalism, and look what it's done to me. I know that I can go on endlessly about this, given the right group of colleagues. In fact, I did so at an editorial meeting just yesterday.

But with all due respect to the folks who have joined this fray with similar zeal,

I think this discussion has missed what to me is the more interesting and important point of Brian Hodel's statement opening this thread: We environmental journalists are doing a great job of presenting true and dire facts, but the public doesn't care. (I paraphrase.) So what do we do?

Brian suggests one cause and one solution. First, he suggests, citizens have become consumers, with all the implications he cites below. Second, he says, we are doing a lousy job (again, I paraphrase) of presenting the news in a way that gets the public to care. His suggestion is to infuse our writing generally with more subjectivity. That's where this discussion diverged into the objectivity argument.

I personally think there are lots of causes, and lots of opportunities for coming up with solutions.

On causes, I think that while many folks in this country strongly believe that environmental policy should be based on "good" science (which has a number of different meanings), something in our culture or our educational system makes people think they don't like science. We all know this from our own experience in newsrooms, or with most editors anywhere. Environmental journalists are the geeks of the newsroom, especially if the computer folks are off somewhere else and there's no designated science reporter. How many of us were liberal arts majors? When was the last time many of us took a science class? A perfect example of this was one of my old editors, who was very supportive of environmental coverage. She would scream as if being attacked by cockroaches when I showed her the equations in the population assessments of various threatened or endangered species. (I'll admit it, I did it on purpose. It was fun.) She's not a member of SEJ, by the way.

As for solutions, this is where the topic gets really juicy, and where SEJ members thinking in this kind of forum can really make a difference. How do we tell environmental stories in a way that folks will eagerly read (or listen, or view) them, and ask us for more? The easy solution is to personify the issue. Find a person, write an anecdotal lede, and hope that folks stay for the meat of the story.

This leads to all sorts of dramatic reporting (think children at Love Canal), sometimes sensationalist. People love those stories. But they're not always the best way to tell the story. How do you

explain the plight of an endangered species using a person? It's easy to tell the story of folks who believe that endangered species are harming their income or their property rights. But the story of the field biologist doesn't get told nearly as often, and often seems boring or is actually kind of peripheral to the story of the species itself.

At the Baltimore conference this year, Marla Cone told us that her upcoming book on the Arctic will take the form of a mystery, which I think is a wonderful and novel form for telling an environmental story. So to get back to Brian Hodel's question, who else has ideas about how to make our stories more compelling to the kind of society that is our audience?

Journalists Without Blinders

From: Michael Wright

Staff writer

The Facts

When exactly did objective come to mean neutral? If something is bad, it's bad and as objective observers it's our job to say it's bad. It's a rare case when the issues are so obvious that we can safely put that in a story, but if that's the case that's our job. Whether people care or not is a different issue.

Just because we write for a living doesn't mean we have to put on blinders. As long as we do the research, look at all sides and give everybody a chance to be heard, we've done our jobs. We don't have to pretend the jury is still out on DDT do we?

Maybe 'objective' isn't the word

From: Seth Borenstein

National Correspondent

Knight Ridder Newspapers

To add in those defending my friend and colleague Paul Rogers, who was absolutely correct... The enviros aren't always white hats and industry is not always a black hat. If we take that opinion, we only devalue ourselves and our profession. Those of us who work for mainstream newspapers, TV and radio have to be as objective as possible. But maybe objective isn't the word as much as being *above* the issue. Let's give the readers an accurate sense of what's happening and be fair to all sides. We can't do that if we take one side. Remember, as the SEJ t-shirt says, we are not environmentalist journalists; we are reporters who cover the environment.

While we give both sides, we can put an issue in context by giving proper weight and documentation. I think the global warming reporting is a place where the majority of us do a good job. We do report the science, give more space to scientists who say there is a problem, quote a skeptic and note that the skeptic is in the overwhelming minority of scientific opinion, and finally point out that of the last 10 years, eight (or whatever it is) are in the 10 hottest years on record. We can do this elsewhere. And not to blow my own horn, but you can use context and good old fashioned digging to show an overall environmental truth and be fair to both sides. Here is a story I did on the Bush environmental record after two years that I think achieved both the larger truth and balance: <http://www.bayarea.com/mld/mercurynews/news/4977668.htm>

Maybe We Are Fooling Ourselves

From: Bill Kelly

California Environment Report

I've just got to chime in on this most interesting discussion.

Here's some fodder. The front page of today's *Los Angeles Times* had a prominent story on GM's new Hy-Wire car with a callout quote from GM VP Elizabeth Lowery: "We have actual products here already and a commitment to the future vision of fuel cells."

In the body of the story, that quote is preceded by another: "Mandates don't work." A story above the jump on page C-5 notes that GM is contesting the Bush Administration's proposal to increase the CAFE standard for trucks by 1.5 miles to the gallon, saying it will require a weight reduction, which will make SUV's, pickups, and vans more dangerous to their passengers. Another story on page C-2 discusses skyrocketing gasoline prices, in the face of "war talk."

How does the reader put all this spot news together? What are the relationships and the context for these developments: impending war, rising gasoline prices, an ongoing parade of "show cars" pushed to the press while companies vigorously work to beat back regulation in Washington and Sacramento? And seldom is the growing problem of the world's energy-environment nexus reported in the A section, even though there is conflict in most of the major oil bearing regions of

the world, from Venezuela to Nigeria and Indonesia to the Middle East. Are we fooling ourselves?

Follow Your Gut, Change the World

From: Christy George

Producer

Oregon Public Broadcasting

The framers gave us the First Amendment to change the world—selling soap is just how we finance it, although sometimes it seems like selling soap has become our sole mission. And we can change the world without sacrificing the principles of good journalism.

You could not find two more ideologically different people than Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, but they had absolutely no problem going out on about the most dangerous limb any reporters have ever climbed in my lifetime. In the process, they exposed treasonous corruption in the White House. *That's* good journalism—fair and accurate, cold hard facts. And it changed the world.

Imagine how people in 2042 might look back at us environmental journalists if the icecaps melt enough to bring glaciers back to Europe and the northeastern U.S.? Or we've lost a hundred thousand species?

"Solar System" ...from page 18

some such scheme. I had a hard time understanding the request...and the denial. Racing vehicles at super human speeds on the Flats occurs regularly, apparently with no harm to the environment, but there will be no bowling balls from Star Trekkers. Hey should have been an expert consultant on the project, for either side.

Recent news about a fossilized Martian cell found on a meteorite in India, or the discovery of yet another planet way out there, or the newly sighted star that some planet spit out all make more sense after reading Hey's book. At least the significance is not lost on those who absorb the basics in "Solar System."

Critics may disapprove of Hey's cheerleading (another word for advocacy). He clearly excels in and loves space exploration and astronomy. The book is not an outsider's report. I'm not sure a less than Pulitzer level science writer could tackle the subject with Hey's accuracy. His first hand experience and access to the science and scientists add to the book's

Or there is widespread famine because GM crops mutated, or because we failed to use GM technology for fear of mutations? Would they think we provided enough "balance" to our coverage?

Let's be honest—the most subjective editorial decisions are *what* to cover, *where* the story is placed and how much time or space it gets. Use your gut and your heart to decide *what* stories to pitch, then report them according to the principles of good journalism.

You've Missed This Key Point

From: Brian Hodel

Editor

TheNaturalResources.org

It's been stimulating to read the responses to my question, "Are we fooling ourselves?" But my main point has been overlooked. Even if we were to assume that all articles written by environmental journalists are "fair" in their treatment of the subject matter - and I think the standards in the print media are pretty high in that regard—the "pile-on-the-data" approach speaks to only a few.

Even the best-written pieces—those which combine story-telling to lure the
(Continued next page)

credibility. The glossary alone is worth the investment.

Still, even after Hey's lengthy, detailed narration, I'm not sure why Earthlings are so determined to claim Mars other than that's what these scientists do, and it's out there.

Space seems to be trafficked by floating debris, chunks of comets and asteroids. Just as polluted as the air surrounding us, and seemingly more inhospitable than I-80 on a black ice night.

However, lost in space may take on new meaning after you see the NASA photos, many not available on any Web site. Voyager and Galileo fans will devour every page. Hey predicts, "We will discover at least one other potentially life-friendly planet in the next quarter century, orbiting some other star."

He also writes, "Humans will establish a base on Mars sometime in the next fifty years, barring some global catastrophe." That's more the stuff of our stories, the catastrophes here on Earth.

—JoAnn Valenti

general reader's interest, with solid research—are no longer effective. They may have been in 1950, when many Americans still took their political heritage—participatory democracy—seriously. But since then we have become a different creature entirely. I am suggesting we need new tactics (new journalistic styles) for a new situation.

News reporters in the print media especially are prone to overlook this. “Thousands/millions buy the paper, my editor prints my stories, I won an award last year, so they must be reading me.” But who and how many? I think those paying attention to environmental news stories are the few who still care about civic responsibility, plus those involved in the policy debate: writers, politicians, corporate PR directors, members of think tanks, etc. As influential a group as that may seem to be, they have little to do with the feelings and opinions (or lack of same) of the mass of Americans. My point is, whatever your take on an environmental issue, even if it is “Cut down every tree in the land!”—creativity, often including shock tactics (for lack of a better word), is necessary to break through the torpor of consumer consciousness.

Examples:

“Be the first one on your block to have your son come home in a box.” (song by Country Joe McDonald, protesting the Vietnam War)

“Would you buy a car from this man?” (Caption to a photo of Richard M. Nixon)

The art of Keith Haring—especially his chalk drawings in the New York City subway system in the 1980s. (Do as many people ride the A Train daily as read the *New York Times*?)

And one we’ve all heard: “It is a newspaper’s duty to print the news and raise hell.” (Thomas Jefferson)

I’ve fleshed-out these ideas a bit more in an editorial on our site (“Fare Thee Well, Titanic”): <http://www.thenaturalresource.org/commenta.html>

From: Paul Rogers
Resources and Environment Writer
San Jose Mercury News

It was Wilbur F. Storey, editor of the *Chicago Times*, (not Jefferson) who said in 1861: “It is a newspaper’s duty to print the news and raise hell.”

But Storey’s pronouncements aside, there seems in some quarters here a fundamental misunderstanding about the role of journalism and SEJ.

SEJ members can and do raise hell by asking hard questions and demanding accountability from the government, corporations and environmental groups. Environmental stories won 10 Pulitzer Prizes in the 1990s, for example—compared with just nine in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s combined. But those of us who work at mainstream media outlets or who freelance for them are not paid to write advocacy pieces for the news columns. Those of us who want to do that can go to work for *Earth First Journal* or *Mining Voice*. Rather, staff journalists and freelancers working for news outlets are paid to provide all sides of public policy debates as honestly as we can, in a timely manner, along with history and context, so the public can make up its mind. We are not part of any “movement.” We are not charged with “breaking through the torpor of consumer consciousness.” We are not members of environmental groups or environmentalists. Let me say that again: We are not members of environmental groups or environmentalists.

If members of the public want advocacy, they can buy *Earth First Journal* or *Mining Voice* (would that be overly consumerist?) or read your Web site. It’s a free country. But when they purchase news publications, they have an expectation of reasonable objectivity. We harm our credibility and our craft when we assume all environmental issues are black and white and that we must use news columns to proselytize for one side or another. This is J-101 stuff.

Finally, SEJ’s mission accurately reflects this. It is: “The mission of the Society of Environmental Journalists is to advance public understanding of environmental issues by improving the quality, accuracy, and visibility of environmental reporting.” No mention, thankfully, of Country Joe McDonald. And as a Bay Area resident, I can tell you Country Joe is plenty busy these days in Berkeley without us.

A Business Writer Can Be a Capitalist, So...

From: Peter Thomson
Independent Radio Producer

With all due respect to my good friend from Santa Cruz—and we get into this dust-up a couple of times a year—SEJ is a big tent, and there’s room under our banner for all kinds of journalists who do all kinds of work.

We want that work to be good and constantly improving, we hope it’s fair and accurate and we try to provide the resources and programs to enhance those values. We want it to advance public understanding of environmental issues and of the way they infuse all of life around us. But we don’t preach a particular creed of journalism, or require our members to measure up to a particular standard of performance, and we certainly don’t tell our members what to believe or call themselves or do with the rest of their lives.

Paul does some of the finest environmental reporting around, and people on all sides of the issues he covers will tell you so, along with most of his colleagues. But he’s not a fine journalist because he doesn’t consider himself an environmentalist. He’s a fine journalist because he’s curious and thorough and unflinching and tenacious and skeptical and, finally, independent—that is he’s not bound to a rigid way of seeing the world and his stories and subjects. But to suggest that one can not have these qualities, and so can’t be a good journalist, if one also considers him or herself an “environmentalist” is nonsense.

I’ve used these examples a thousand times: must a business writer declare that he or she is not a capitalist in order to have credibility? Should a political reporter purport to have no opinion on the virtues of democracy as opposed to dictatorship? Must a crime reporter strive not to care about right and wrong? For someone aspiring to work one of these beats to even suggest that they’re indifferent or hostile to the basic concerns of the endeavor would guarantee that they don’t get the job. And yet on our beat, we are constantly under pressure, even from within our ranks, to disavow any concern or values associated with what we cover. What’s going on here?

Of course the answer to that question could fill a book, and probably has done so. The basic point is that for a host of reasons, our beat is often seen, and judged, differently than just about all others. Which I believe is unfair, misguided and ultimately damaging to the pursuit of meaningful coverage of environmental

Cover Story

issues. (Sometimes, although certainly not in Paul's case, I think that's actually the point of the argument.)

An environmentalist, in my book, is someone who believes that the environment is important, and that we should take it into account and to one degree or another try to minimize our impact on it when making decisions in our lives, societies and economies. It's not automatically someone with rigid beliefs, or blind faith in or hostility toward various sectors of society. Some are, and they probably shouldn't be journalists, or at least shouldn't be covering environmental issues, because they wouldn't be good journalists—if there's one bottom line in journalism, it's that its practitioners should be more interested in truth than dogma.

Being a good journalist doesn't mean that you must abandon interest in or even deep concern for the things you cover. (In fact, I'd argue that it's just the opposite—one has to care deeply about one's subject in order to really excel at covering it.) Being a good journalist means putting certain practices and values into place in your work, the kind of practices and values that Paul, and I believe most other SEJ members, bring to their work every day—curiosity, thoroughness and thoughtfulness,

fairness, tenacity, skepticism, independence, an open mind and a commitment to seeking and telling something that's as close to the truth as can be found. This is the stuff of the only "ism" that matters to me in this context, and to the SEJ that I believe in and work for every day—Journalism. If you practice these things, you're probably going to be a good journalist, whether you're also an environmentalist or an objectivist or a capitalist or a socialist or a Dadaist. If you don't, it doesn't matter what you believe or call yourself. Your journalism's gonna suck.

Being a good journalist also doesn't mean practicing only one particular kind of journalism. American journalism always has, and hopefully always will, run the gamut from dispassionate to crusading, from having no discernible point of view to having a clear and forceful agenda. One isn't necessarily any better than another, or more virtuous or valid. It's how well you practice the craft, and put those basic values to work. Fairness. Thoroughness. Skepticism. A quest for the truth. All can be encompassed by the most "objective" and the most "activist" journalism.

There's room in SEJ for all kinds of journalists. The organization isn't here to

pass judgment on the intent of its members' work or how they position themselves. It's also not here to tell its members what they should or shouldn't do with the rest of their lives—whether or not they should be activists as well as journalists, whether or not they should belong to other organizations or take public positions, whether they should buy SUV's or bikes, or even vote. Those are decisions that newsroom managers and individual journalists themselves have to make.

What SEJ is here for is to help its members do better journalism. To help them do their jobs as well as possible, to get closer to the truth and to make it matter. And, of course, to provide a forum for our members to argue amongst ourselves about what good journalism is, and how journalists should think, act and conduct themselves.

I'm an environmental journalist. I'm a member of the SEJ board. And I'm also an environmentalist. I see no conflict between my profession and my values, and in 15 years on the beat no source or colleague or listener has ever told me they see a conflict either. If SEJ members do, they're free to vote me off the board. I'm up for reelection in 2004.

Paul, Back to You!



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