

SEJournal

The Quarterly Publication of the Society of Environmental Journalists

Vol. 13 No. 1

The beat's basics

A primer on taking over the environment beat

Editor's Note: In this issue, the SEJournal has assembled some of the nation's great environment reporters for stories on reporting, writing, interviewing and the basics of analyzing data with spreadsheets. Also, the Great Book List will set many environment writers on a search through their local bookstacks. The lessons begin with this story by Jim Detjen, SEJ's founding president.

By JIM DETJEN

For years you've been hoping to write about the environment as a full-time beat. Now, finally your editor has given you the chance. But you've had little or no training in this field.

Where do you begin?

As a starting point, I suggest you join the Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ). Through the organization's quarterly *SEJournal*, the organization's web site (www.sej.org), its tip sheets, its listserv and other activities, you'll quickly become immersed in the culture of environmental reporting. You might also sign up for SEJ's mentoring program and become linked with a veteran reporter in the field.

It would also be helpful to track down former reporters at your paper or news organization who have previously covered these issues. Chances are they will be extremely helpful in discussing environmental issues and controversies in your area, giving you the names of key sources and organizations and helping you

become familiar with the history of ongoing issues.

Visit your news organization's librarian and ask to get copies of previous articles written by other reporters about air and water pollution, land-use controversies and other issues. From these articles you'll identify key sources, government agencies, environmental groups, experts at local universities and others who are familiar with the environmental issues in your area.

Then, begin making the rounds. Call up these sources and introduce yourself. Make appointments to meet with them and when you do, ask them to put you on their mailing lists to receive press releases, reports and other newsworthy material.

Begin compiling files on current issues and develop a Rolodex of key sources (including their home numbers since you may have to call them at nights or weekends). Also, develop a calendar of upcoming meetings, hearings, conferences and other potentially newsworthy events.

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Inside story

Newspaper's lead probe yields fast results

By MIKE DUNNE

An investigation by *The Free Press* in Detroit found that the nation has a bumbling, bureaucratic strategy to remove poisonous lead from the homes and protect children whose future may be threatened by the toxin. The series ran from Jan. 21-25, 2003.

The newspaper said an estimated 300,000 U.S. children — including 22,000 in Michigan — face lives of lower intelligence because of lead poisoning. "Government efforts to eliminate lead hazards have reached just a fraction of the 1.1 million Michigan homes at high risk. Detroit, Wayne County and the state have fixed 1,500 homes combined since 1994," the newspaper said.

While the nation's lead cleanup strategy focuses on paint,

lead-contaminated soil is virtually ignored. Testing conducted by *The Free Press* found heavily contaminated soil throughout the metropolitan area of Detroit.

It's the legacy of factories and leaded gasoline. Consider: Between 1950 and 1984, cars and trucks spewed an estimated 182,000 metric tons of lead across Michigan, the newspaper said.

Day one brought the reader into lead-contaminated homes, highlighting the problem and outlining the bureaucracy that hampers efficient clean up of the contamination. It includes a map locating each lead-poisoned child the newspaper could identify. While the problem covers the Wayne County, around Detroit, \$3 million in abatement money went unspent for two years.

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Taking Yogi's advice, securing SEJ's future

By DAN FAGIN

"If you come to a fork in the road, take it!" Yogi Berra supposedly said. He didn't say which direction to go, but there's some wisdom in this famously screwy piece of advice. When you have to choose between two diverging paths, each extending farther into the distance than you can see, the toughest thing is to take that first step in one direction or the other. But you can't stand still forever.

The leadership of SEJ has been at a fork in the road for more than four years now, ever since several board members first suggested that our organization's finances, while currently healthy, are not sustainable over the long term. By now I hope that all of you have read the letters and listserv postings and know that, after years of consideration, we're taking Yogi's advice. We're moving ahead on a campaign to build a significant endowment fund, and we need your advice and your energy as we take our first steps.

Here's why your board thinks we need to take action. Few SEJers, I suspect, realize how dependent our organization is on a few of our key supporters in the foundation world. Grants from five foundations funded about 47 percent of our \$762,000 operating budget for 2002, with smaller foundation grants supplying another 2 percent.

In reality, though, foundation support is even more important than those figures suggest. Our second-largest source of revenue is the annual conference – we raised about \$242,000 last year from exhibitor and registration fees and from our host, the University System of Maryland – but more than 80 percent of what we raised was used to offset direct conference expenses, not counting any staff time. Member dues brought in just \$38,000 last year, and mailing list rentals another \$20,000. We generated an additional \$83,000 from other sources, but more than half was from a special Columbia University grant for our diversity programs.

So it's obvious that without foundation support, SEJ in its current form simply could not exist. We wouldn't have an expanded website, an awards program, a daily *EJToday*, biweekly *TipSheet* or quarterly *SEJournal*. We'd even have to scale back our annual conference, since we tap foundation funds to help pay our employees for the huge amounts of time they spend working on the conference each year. We might not even be able to retain most of the office staff we need to handle core operations such as membership inquiries and listserv maintenance.

In short, we would be a bare-bones organization that puts on a scaled-down annual conference but does little else.

We're very grateful to our foundation supporters, who understand what SEJ is all about and embrace our mission to improve the quality, accuracy and visibility of environmental reporting without trying to tell us how to fulfill that mission. But our heavy reliance on them is a fairly troubling situation, especially when you consider what's happening to some of SEJ's peer

groups. Recently, I was in Chicago for a meeting of the Council of National Journalism Organizations, and I listened to leaders of other journalism groups talking about the budget crises they're facing because of cutbacks from their major funders, especially journalism foundations. Some groups must scale back their programs, while others are trying to fill their budget gaps by broadening their membership criteria or accepting grants from corporations, government agencies or advocacy groups. (SEJ doesn't seek or accept grants or gifts from any of those sources, and I hope we never will.)

Fortunately, SEJ is not facing a similar crisis – not yet, anyway. Our first and only executive director, Beth Parke, is one of the most skilled and experienced fund-raisers in the world of journalism non-profit groups. She's managed to keep foundation funds flowing in, year after year, without compromising our values or altering the character of a group that has always charted its own course free of any outside influence.

The question is, how long will SEJ's good fortune last? Beth has worked hard to try to diversify our sources of foundation funding and to secure more grants from media companies. But it's been tough going, thanks to a rough economy and a disturbing refusal by many media corporations to fund professional development for journalists.

Of course there are other ways we could raise a lot of money for SEJ. But, frankly, many of them aren't even worth considering. We could drastically hike member dues and fees, but the increase would have to be huge to have a major

impact on our budget and, more importantly, it would be a self-defeating strategy for a group whose very purpose is to reach as many journalists as possible with our programs. (In all, dues and fees from SEJ members covered only about 10 percent of our operating costs last year.) An even worse option, in my opinion, would be to follow some of our sister groups by broadening our membership criteria or fund-raising rules. I think that would be a big mistake, and would threaten our identity as an organization of, by and for journalists, educators and students.

There's another, much more palatable choice: We could build an endowment that would be big enough to slough off sufficient annual income to fund our core operations. Sounds great, doesn't it? The difficulty, of course, is that such a fund would need a *lot* of money. To reliably generate just \$150,000 per year, for example, we'd need about \$3 million. How can an organization composed of working journalists raise that kind of money?

We've been trying. For the last couple of years the SEJ board has worked hard to build up our 21st Century endowment fund by seeking contributions from our own members and from our friends in the journalism community. Many of you have responded wonderfully. Last year, we raised \$13,000 – including a \$10,000 transfer by the board from SEJ's operating funds

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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*.

SEJournal on the World Wide Web at <http://www.sej.org>

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SEJournal submission deadlines

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

September in New Orleans with SEJ

The \$14-billion proposal to rebuild Louisiana's coastline, what media miss in reporting on natural disasters and a debate on President Bush's environmental agenda will highlight the 13th annual conference of the Society of Environmental Journalists when it comes to New Orleans Sept. 10 to 14.

An early schedule will open the conference on Wednesday afternoon with the CEOs of several major energy companies discussing air emissions and the "Clear Sky Initiative" followed later in the evening with SEJ's annual Environmental Journalism awards.

On Thursday, board buses for day-long and half-day tours to explore a variety of environmental stories throughout Louisiana, including:

- An in-depth look at how federal and state agencies will divert the Mississippi River to restore coastal marshes and swamps, with experts aboard to explain how commercial fisheries, oil and gas production, and coastal communities are being affected by the erosion of 25 square miles of wetlands each year.
- A trip along the Mississippi River to explore part of the chemical corridor, where more than 150 chemical plants are located in the midst of low-income African-American and white communities.
- A tour of the Audubon Center for Research of Endangered Species will include a discussion of how in vitro fertilization, using surrogate animals, is restoring endangered species to the wilds, and whether that is an acceptable alternative to habitat protection.

The conference provides reporters and editors with information on access to the latest environmental issues. Participants will be able to develop stories directly from tours and conference sessions, as well as use them for background for future reporting.

A computer-assisted-reporting workshop will help develop database and geographic information system skills necessary for today's environmental stories.

On Friday and Saturday, a series of classroom-style panels will follow a variety of tracks, including the Coast, the City, the Land, Environmental Health and the Globe. Subjects covered

will include vehicle fuel efficiency, urban lead and metal poisoning trends, invasive species and hormone-mimicking pollutants.

Others panels will explore the role of population growth in shaping local environmental problems, global environmental issues that most media have missed and the state of chemical-plant safety 20 years after Bhopal.

Craft panels will look at explaining risk to readers, using graphics in environmental reporting, how radio reporters can use sound to bring listeners to their stories and problems faced by television reporters in tackling complicated epidemiological stories.

SEJ leaders also will present the latest news about how security concerns are affecting access to public records and a survey of environmental journalism trends among media.

Saturday afternoon mini-tours will include walking tours of the French Quarter to explain how invasive Formosan termites are being fought with newly developed insecticides and get a look at the Quarter's use of environmental architecture. Other short tours will explore the city's construction of new streetcars, the struggle that the nation's largest urban national wildlife refuge is facing with litter and trash, and a look at the levees and pumping stations that protect the city from hurricanes and floods.

On Sunday, return to the Audubon Center for more critter viewing and a session on the history of the Mississippi River with nationally recognized authors.

Participants wanting a more in-depth view of Louisiana's coastal problems can go on the post-conference tour, which includes an overnight stay at the Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium laboratory in Cocodrie on the edge of the Gulf of Mexico. This tour includes a trip to an archipelago of rapidly eroding barrier islands and a visit to a leading offshore-oil service port, as well as discussions with scientists leading research into the "dead zone," a huge area along the Gulf Coast that experiences low oxygen each spring and summer as a result of

(Continued on page 18)



Wanted: Candidates for SEJ board election

Eligible SEJ members in the active category have until July 1 to file as candidates for the Sept. 12 board election at the annual conference in New Orleans. The 2003 active-member election will fill six, three-year terms now held by James Bruggers, Kevin Carmody, Dan Fagin, Christy George, Peter Lord and Natalie Pawelski. Another seat also will be filled to complete the remaining year of Margaret Kriz's three-year term.

Elections for associate and academic board representatives are held every three years. The next election for these categories will be held at the annual meeting in Pittsburgh, Pa., Oct. 13-17, 2004.

Board members give substantial amounts of time and energy to help SEJ remain a vital tool for reporters. They attend quarterly meetings, serve on at least one committee and assist SEJ staff in planning and executing programs.

To file for candidacy, submit a one-page (8-1/2 x 11) state-

ment outlining your qualifications and objectives for holding office. Mail it to Election Coordinator, SEJ, P.O. Box 2492, Jenkintown, PA, 19046, or include the letter in a print-ready e-mail attachment and forward to crigel@sej.org. Letters must be postmarked or transmitted by July 1, 2003.

To run or to vote, your annual dues must be current as of July 14, 2003, and your employment must meet SEJ's membership eligibility requirements.

Candidate statements will be copied and mailed to all members, with absentee ballots included in eligible active members' envelopes, no later than Aug. 11. Each candidate will also have an opportunity to make a two-minute statement at the annual meeting, just prior to the balloting.

For questions about election procedures, please contact Chris Rigel, election coordinator, at (215) 884-8177, or Paul MacClennan, elections committee chair, at (716) 837-2298.



SEJ Mentor Program is growing strong

By DAWN STOVER

I recently received an email message from a promising young writer named Patrick Barry who is making the transition to freelancing and has some questions about protocol. Patrick had just finished reading several how-to books on freelance journalism. He told me that the authors didn't seem to agree on whether it's a good idea to send the same query to more than one publication simultaneously. "Any advice on this?" he asked.

Patrick also wanted to know how long he should expect to wait for a response to his query and what publications might be most interested in a news story about aquatic ecosystems.

Although Patrick lives in Barcelona and I work out of a log cabin in the Pacific Northwest (as an editor for *Popular Science* magazine), we have a lot in common. For one thing, we're both interested in environmental journalism—specifically, science writing for magazines and websites. That's why we teamed up under the auspices of SEJ's Mentor Program, which pairs veteran environmental journalists with members who are newer to the beat. Patrick and I met in person at the annual conference in Baltimore last October, and since then we've been exchanging email messages.

As an SEJ mentor, I've agreed to answer Patrick's questions about everything from contract negotiation to writing techniques. In return, I get a lot of satisfaction out of helping someone who is relatively new to our business. It makes me remember why I chose this work and forces me to examine (and maybe improve) my methods for doing things. Plus, if I ever get to Barcelona, I'll have an inside track on the best places to eat.

The Mentor Program, which started with a pilot project in October 2001 and formally kicked off last June, now has 21 mentors and 28 "mentees" (for lack of a better word) signed up. To date, 17 mentors have been matched with mentees. Matches are made on the basis of factors such as geography, medium and special interests—and all matches are approved by both partners.

Mentoring doesn't require a big time commitment. Mentors agree to be contacted by their mentees four times during the one-year partnership and anything beyond that is optional. Mentors should be willing to field questions, critique stories and offer career advice via e-mail, the telephone, or in person.

The program is primarily aimed at helping professional journalists but also accepts applications from college and graduate students who have demonstrated a serious interest in environmental journalism. The coordinators try to arrange matches for everyone who wants a mentor or mentee, but that depends on the availability of volunteers. To make the best matches, the program needs a large pool of participants.

At the moment, for example, the program has mentors available to share their expertise on topics such as fisheries, forests, PCBs, First Nations and scientific data analysis. Meanwhile, unmatched mentees are seeking advice on subjects including investigative reporting, Georgia's water wars and the environmental issues surrounding golf. And of course, many mentees are simply looking for basic advice about reporting, writing and

career advancement. "In other words, I want some really hot clips!" wrote one applicant.

Since the beginning of the program, mentors who are successful freelance writers have been in high demand. So if you have good answers to Patrick's questions about freelance querying, please consider volunteering for the Mentor Program! (For the record, I believe simultaneous queries are a bad idea, and that freelance writers shouldn't wait more than a week before calling or emailing an editor to follow up on a query.)

The Mentor Program also has a need for mentors who are familiar with environmental journalism in Africa. Three African SEJ members have applied to be matched with mentors who can help them become better reporters.

If you're interested in participating in the SEJ Mentor Program, either as a mentor or mentee, please visit the Member Area of www.sej.org and fill out an online application. (You'll need your SEJ member password for this. If you've forgotten it, contact the SEJ office at sej@sej.org).

After filling out an online application, which takes only a few minutes, you'll get an e-mail message confirming receipt. Finding a good match sometimes takes only a few days, depending on how many mentors are available at the time. Currently, there are not enough mentors for everyone who would like one.

If you have any questions about the Mentor Program, or any ideas for improving or expanding it, please send them to mentor@sej.org, where they will be read by me and Oregon-based freelance journalist Orna Izakson. We are currently serving as the volunteer coordinators of the Mentor Program.

Orna and I have already received some excellent suggestions from a group of 17 members that met at a breakfast roundtable at the Baltimore annual conference. Among the ideas raised at that meeting:

- Create an SEJ web page offering basic advice about becoming an environmental journalist.
- Recruit volunteers to be on call to answer questions from people who'd like to get started in this field.
- Sponsor an SEJ chat room with a guest of the month who would field questions on a range of topics.
- Invite writers to submit work for online writing critiques, where experienced editors would post suggestions that could be viewed by other members.
- Create a bulletin board that provides craft advice.
- Organize a job fair at an SEJ conference.

Because the Mentor Program is receiving a lot of inquiries from students who are interested in our field but not yet committed to a career in environmental journalism, our first priority will likely be to create a "so you want to be an environmental journalist" compilation of FAQs. If you'd like to help with that effort, please contact mentor@sej.org.

Dawn Stover is an editor for Popular Science magazine.



Michael A. Rivlin: A death in the SEJ family

By KATHRIN DAY LASSILA

I met Michael Rivlin in 1997, but when I remember him, it's not in years but in stories. His first story for *OnEarth* (then *The Amicus Journal*) was on GE and the Hudson River. That was when I encountered the trademark Rivlin lede, with its beguiling narrative setup: "If you are a journalist and you work on the Hudson River-PCB contamination story for just a couple of days, you will feel the tendrils of General Electric's excellent public relations machine drawing you by the heels to Hudson Falls, New York." The article explicates and demolishes GE's claim that Hudson Falls remains the only active source of PCBs in the river.

Later, Michael persuaded me to let him profile Ward Stone, the environmentally minded New York State wildlife pathologist. It was one of the best profiles I'd ever been privileged to publish, containing the best quote I may ever publish. Michael told Stone that the state administrators in Albany (who paid Stone's salary) considered him a loose cannon, and Stone protested, "I'm not a loose cannon. I know exactly where I'm firing, and usually it's at *them*!"

When an environmentalist told me that the Automobile Association of America was deeply enmeshed in the pro-asphalt lobby, I asked Michael to write the story, even though it was based in D.C. and he wasn't. His reporting zeal and his ability to dog his quarry through boxes of documents and mazes of policy made him perfect for it. After the story came out, it was picked up by *Harper's* and dozens of other alternative and progressive publications. Almost three years later, it still comes up when you Google *Amicus*.

Michael and I spent hours on the phone together whenever he was working on a story for us. Most of it was planning strategy or negotiating wording ("Kathrin, Kathrin," he would say, in a tone of patient, generous wisdom, when trying to talk me into or out of

something), but plenty of it—especially late at night, when we were both tired and worn out by bioaccumulation or sprawl statistics—was just the two of us shooting the breeze. When at ease, he was a voluble and entertaining talker with great stories. He was also irascible; in the time I knew him I also knew of a number of people who were feuding with him or had feuded with him. But when Michael liked and respected people, he liked and respected them unconditionally, with such a warmth of praise that there are a few individuals I have never met or talked to but will always admire, simply because of the way Michael spoke about them.

Michael was proud and kept many things private. No one I've talked to since his death had any idea he had diabetes. The charm he was capable of came out best in his writing. I'll always remember a passage in the last story he wrote for *OnEarth*, describing a Latino super-market in South Carolina:

The first thing that hits me is a volatile sweet, spicy, exotic aroma. There are stacks of freshly baked tortillas, Mexican canned goods, the smell of cumin and chilies. There's a parrot sitting in a large cage, bottles of hot sauce on the counter, a huge Plexiglas box filled with gigantic pieces of fried pork rind, and, in the center of the store, a shrine with a statue of the Virgin Mary, cheap plastic flowers and a pool of water at her feet, and I'm enchanted.

How I will miss that voice.

Kathrin Day Lassila, formerly editor of OnEarth, is now editor of the Yale Alumni Magazine.



Michael Rivlin, d. May 31, 2003

Elegance, fearlessness, intellectual integrity and substance over glitz

By DAN FAGIN

Anyone who has ever known Michael Rivlin knows what an extraordinary person he was. His journalism was both elegant and fearless. Everything Michael did was of the highest quality and integrity.

Michael was more than just a superb journalist. He came to journalism in mid-career, after spending some time in advertising, and grew to believe deeply in the cause of improving environmental journalism by building a network of committed environmental journalists. Anyone who has paid even the slightest attention to the sej-talk listserv over the last few years has benefited from his frequent postings. Michael knew a lot about a lot of different things, and he was always generous about sharing what he knew, especially with younger journalists who he sensed could especially benefit from his help. Michael could also be prickly when he felt someone's rights were being trampled in our community, and many of us learned to appreciate that quality as well.

Two years ago, Michael came up to me at an SEJ conference and said he wanted to organize a major regional SEJ conference in the New York area. Skeptically, I asked him if he knew what he was in for. He just smiled and said, "If I did, I wouldn't be suggesting it." The result was the extraordinary two-day "Boston-to-Baltimore Briefing" at Rutgers University. That conference, which included more than 20 panels and field trips and attracted more than 200 people, was a Rivlin tour de force. It reflected everything Michael believed: intellectual integrity, substance over glitz, a passion for environmental issues and a commitment to sharing information among environmental journalists. He richly deserved the 2002 David Stolberg Award, which SEJ bestows annually to its most outstanding volunteer.

Now Michael is gone. For those of us who knew him, it is a real loss. For those of you who didn't know Michael, take my word for it, it's a loss for you too. We'll keep you posted about any plans for a memorial service or for charitable contributions in Michael's memory.



From the Arctic to ocean reefs, academia to awards

By **ELIZABETH MCCARTHY**

Marla Cone headed back south to the *Los Angeles Times* to cover environmental health issues after many months on the northern tip of the globe. She spent the last two years on a fellowship, researching environmental contaminants and their effects on wildlife and human population in the Arctic. Her book on the subject will come out next year.

She said one of the most amazing aspects was learning about the locals' survival skills. "I have come away with a respect for the simple elegance of the people's traditions in the Far North," she added.

Osha Gray Davidson co-wrote the recently released IMAX documentary, "Coral Reef Adventure," which shows far more than footage of brilliant coral reefs.

It also includes scenes of reefs being choked by heavy sediment from distant logging operations and reefs impacted by over fishing and the destruction of mangroves. On the print front, an update on her book, "Fire in the Turtle House: The Green Sea Turtle and the Fate of the Ocean," comes out this fall.

A desire for a new challenge coupled with the opportunity to affect how the most important story on the planet is covered

motivated Michigan journalist **Dave Poulson** to move to academia. In January, he became the assistant director of the Knight Center for Environmental Journalism at Michigan State University. Before his move, he worked as an environmental reporter for a dozen years at the capital bureau of Booth Newspapers in Michigan.

Greenwire/Environment & Energy Daily's **Darren Samuelsohn** was recently bumped up from reporter to senior reporter. Was the promotion a result of surviving the energy crisis in California and the west? "Thankfully, it had little to do with

the crisis," he said, adding that was covered by his colleagues. Samuelsohn's new responsibilities include brainstorming and being the editor/writer of important and breaking news for a reporting staff of 12.

Media on the move

After entering into his third decade of radio broadcasting, **Dale Willman** moved into the production arena. He recently formed a non-profit production company, Field Notes Production, which will focus on producing radio pieces about biodiversity issues around the world. It will broadcast nationally and internationally.

In-depth coverage of a big stink over local and state hog regulations in South Carolina for the *Morning News* in Florence landed **McNelly Torres** an award from the South Carolina Press Association. Torres discovered that state environmental officials had helped pig farmers exploit a loophole in the law and that requisite public notice was not being followed.

Although it was hard stepping away from the battle over the hog farming, Torres switched jobs. Last July, she became part of the education team at the *San Antonio Express-News* and hopes eventually to move to an environmental beat.

Independent radio producer, composer and musician **Barbara Bernstein** won the 2003 Castle Heritage Award for her nationally syndicated radio documentary covering the historic and ongoing changes to the Columbia and Colorado rivers. Her piece "Rivers That Were" was singled out for its critical and comprehensive examination of the river basin.

The *Washington Monthly* awarded **Michael Hawthorne** its May award for his coverage of an unregulated chemical DuPont uses to make Teflon and other like products. In the *Columbus Dispatch*, Hawthorne reported how the toxic chemical, known as C8 or PFOA, which builds up in the human bloodstream, may cause liver damage, cancer and birth defects and other health problems. He also uncovered contamination of public water supplies. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has since launched an extensive investigation of the substance.

On a personal note, Hawthorne's findings caused him to question his own use of nonstick pots and he is strongly considering jettisoning them. He doubts, however, that he'll be able to part with his "beloved Gore-Tex (stretched Teflon) jacket."

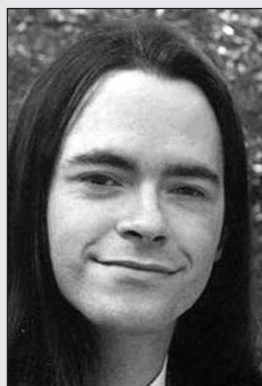
SEJ member James Walker killed in traffic accident

James Walker, reporter at *The (Jackson, Miss.) Clarion-Ledger*, died April 9 when his car was struck broadside as he attempted to pull onto the highway. He had been a member of SEJ for just over a year. In that time he had become known as an extremely talented and dedicated reporter and an energetic volunteer and participant in the work of SEJ.

In a letter to James' editor at the *C-L*, board member Mark Schleifstein expressed SEJ sympathies and wrote: "He was the first person to sign up for the mentoring program, and I quickly found that he needed very little coaching — he was actually giving me story ideas with the published stories he was having me review. James also had volunteered to help with our upcoming annual conference in New Orleans in September, and his help will certainly be missed."

In an article about James Walker that appeared in the *Clarion-Ledger* on April 10, he is described as "a passionate environmental reporter" who "helped raise the level of storytelling at this paper, and he took pride in doing the best work possible, no matter what the constraints."

Walker, 26, is survived by his wife, Kelyn, and parents, James W. and Katrina Walker. ♦



James V. Walker

If you've made a move, won an award or have other ch-changes you want on the record, contact Elizabeth McCarthy at e2mccarthy@cs.com or fax the career news to (510) 849-4412.

Using spreadsheets

It's not that hard and the payoff is huge

By RUSS CLEMINGS

First installment of two parts

Computers can seem mysterious, and at times they are, even to those who have spent years working with them. At the same time, though, it's entirely possible to accomplish useful work with a minimum of study by using some simple computer tools.

In this Bits & Bytes installment, we'll look at how one widely used program, the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, can help you find trends in a mass of data. Specifically, we will do some simple exercises with California air pollution data. The data we will use can be downloaded at <http://www.sej.org/airdata> on the SEJ website. The instructions that follow are for Windows users with Excel 2000; Excel is also available in other versions and for Macs, but some of the following details may vary.

The data consists of two tables, "dlygas10.dbf" and "location10.dbf." The latter is a list of air pollution monitors in Fresno County, Calif., and the former is a file of daily air pollution readings from 1980 to 2000 for 22 different parameters. You can open both at the same time in Excel by clicking on "File," then "Open," then choosing "dBase files (*.dbf)" from the "Files of type:" drop-down list and, finally, navigating to the files, highlighting them and clicking "Open."

We won't be doing any serious analysis with the location10.dbf file, but let's look at it. First, if some columns are too narrow to show their contents, you can expand them by highlighting the entire sheet (Ctrl-A) then clicking on "Format," "Column" and "AutoFit Selection." (Here's another Excel hint: If you make a mistake, you can backtrack by clicking on "Edit," then "Undo" or just "Ctrl-Z.")

Once you've fixed the column width, you can see that each line of this sheet contains detailed information about an individual monitor, including its location by street address and latitude/longitude. The latter would be handy if we wanted to map this data, but that's a subject for another issue. For now, just note the first column, which contains a location code.

Make a special note of the third from the bottom, no. 3026, which is the World's Single Most Important Air Pollution Monitor, mainly because it is located about two miles from the modest but comfortable Clemings estate.

Now let's switch over to the dlygas10.dbf file (click on "Window," then on the file name, which should be at the bottom of the menu if you didn't accidentally close the file.) Format the columns in the same manner as the other table: Ctrl-A, then Format/Column/AutoFit Selection.

The second column contains the location codes that we just saw in the location10.dbf file. Let's extract just the data for location 3026. First, we will have to sort so that all of the data for that monitor is in one place. To do that, just click on "Data," followed by sort, and select "Loc_code" in the "Sort by" box. Then click OK.

Now, click on the letter "B" at the top of the second column, then click on "Edit" and "Find," type 3026 in the "Find what:" box and click on "Find next." The cursor should go to row 36607 in the spreadsheet.

Close the find box and click on the row number (36607) at

the far left of the screen. The entire row will be highlighted. Then hold down the "Shift" key and hit the "Page Down" key repeatedly until you have highlighted all of the rows for location 3026. This will take a while; there are almost 4,000 of them, but when you're done, your cursor should be on row 40373.

Now let's mark that data by clicking "Edit" and "Copy" or just "Ctrl-C." A flickering border will appear around the data. We can then copy the data to a new sheet by clicking on "Insert," followed by "Worksheet." Put the cursor on the first cell in the second row of the new sheet and click "Edit" and "Paste" or "Ctrl-V" and our data will appear on the new sheet.

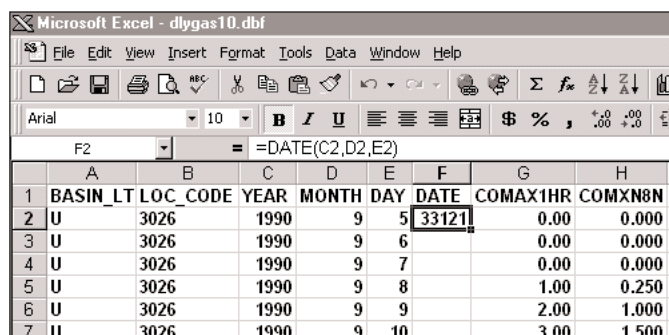
There's just one problem — there are no column headings. But we can copy them from the other sheet. Just click on the tab labeled "dlygas10.dbf" at the bottom of the screen to go back to our original worksheet. Then hit "Ctrl-Home" to go to the top of the worksheet. Click on the number "1" at the left to highlight the row with the column headings, then hit "Ctrl-C," use the tabs to return to the new worksheet (called "Sheet1"), put the cursor at the top left, in cell A1, and hit "Ctrl-V."

Now look at the third through fifth columns of data, columns C through E. These contain a date for each reading, with the year, month and day in separate columns. For some of our analysis, we will need to have the date in a single column. We can create a new column that will contain the date, and in doing so, we can introduce a key Excel feature — formulas.

First, place the cursor anywhere in column F and click on Insert, then Columns. That will create a new blank column F, shifting all of the remaining columns to the right by one space. Give this new column a label by typing "DATE" in cell F1.

Then, type this string in cell F2 and hit the enter key: =DATE(C2,D2,E2)

(Explanation: The "equal" sign tells Excel that this is a formula. DATE() is an Excel function that calculates the data when



	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
1	BASIN_LT	LOC_CODE	YEAR	MONTH	DAY	DATE	COMAX1HR	COMXN8N
2	U	3026	1990	9	5	33121	0.00	0.000
3	U	3026	1990	9	6		0.00	0.000
4	U	3026	1990	9	7		0.00	0.000
5	U	3026	1990	9	8		1.00	0.250
6	U	3026	1990	9	9		2.00	1.000
7	U	3026	1990	9	10		3.00	1.500

The date() function yields a number that can be reformatted into a date.

it is given, in order, the year, month and day, which are in cells C2, D2 and E2 respectively.)

That was easy, but the result doesn't look right. It's a number — 33121 — instead of the date that we want. That's because

(Continued on page 24)

Mutagens and kids

EPA finds cells more sensitive, risk analysis trickier with children

By PAT PHIBBS

In March, many media outlets reported that according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, infants are 10 times more likely to get cancer from exposure to certain chemicals than are adults. Meanwhile, these reports said, children ages 2 to 15 have three times adults' risk of developing cancer when exposed to gene-mutating substances.

These conclusions are true — sort of. An important nuance to the EPA's draft document was glossed over in many reports.

The EPA's document, officially called the *Draft Supplemental Guidance for Assessing Cancer from Early-Life Exposure to Carcinogens*, offers guidance to regulators on assessing the risks of gene-mutating agents, which include radiation as well as chemicals. X-rays are probably the best-known DNA-damaging agent. Some chemicals also act this way, including benzo(a)pyrene, diethylnitrosamine and vinyl chloride. The chemicals are products of combustion, a gasoline additive and a component of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plastic, respectively.

The EPA was not saying that a baby who gets a lot of x-rays, for example, is 10 times more likely to get cancer than an adult exposed to the same amount of radiation. The mom who is taking care of this sick baby need not be frightened her youngster will develop brain cancer or some other type of tumor while growing up. The EPA's draft guidance doesn't deal with cancers that occur during childhood.

But, the agency is saying that young cells may be more readily damaged by gene-mutators than adult cells. That exposed baby would have a greater chance of getting cancer, at some point in life, than would an adult exposed to the same X-rays.

The new guidance would acknowledge the extra vulnerability of young cells by assuming any exposure before age 2 to a gene-mutating chemical or other agent could increase the risk of getting cancer 10 times. What's more, exposures to gene-mutating agents between ages 2 and 15 could increase risk three times.

These proposed "adjustment factors" would provide the agency a better way to account for the increased risk caused by short-term exposures to mutating agents during childhood. They also are tools that regulators can use to adjust information from laboratory animal studies, which typically involve adult animals, to account for the possibility that younger cells may be more vulnerable to DNA damage.

When analysts adjust their estimates to account for this extra risk, it won't

make a big difference in a person's chance of developing cancer sometime in life. Someone exposed to a gene-mutating agent during childhood has less than double the risk of getting cancer during his or her lifetime than does a person exposed to the agent as an adult. However, the new calculations make it clear that a person's risk depends on the time of life during which an exposure occurred.

It's not yet clear what impact this new approach to analyzing cancer risks will have on environmental regulations. A lot depends on whether a panel of outside experts convened by the EPA endorses the approach. The panel is reviewing the draft recommendations.

If the experts back the new cancer risk document, the result could be a call for more stringent cleanup standards at Superfund sites. There aren't that many gene-mutating chemicals around, but waste dumps are likely places to have them.

When the agency looks at other exposures to mutagenic chemicals, public health advocates are likely to push for tougher standards that protect children. Should industry object to tighter cleanup standards, it will be under pressure to provide scientific evidence to support its position.

A copy of the EPA's draft guidance and related information is available at <http://cfpub.epa.gov/ncea/cfm/recordisplay.cfm?deid=55446> on the World Wide Web.

Pat Phibbs covers risk assessment and the EPA's regulation of chemicals for BNA's Daily Environment Report in Washington, D.C.



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Tips on interviewing from some of the best

By **ROBERT MCCLURE**

Interviewing is neither the first thing nor the last thing reporters do. But it's arguably the most important. We asked four journalists from varied backgrounds for tips. This is not a comprehensive guide to interviewing; books have been written on the subject.

But these four journalists offer a wide range of basic and inventive suggestions about how to polish an essential skill: the art of the interview.

Eric Nalder, investigative reporter, *San Jose Mercury News*:

Inner interviewing: As a warm-up (maybe during your morning shower), imagine a successful interview. Reporters who don't believe they will get the interview or the information usually fail. As far as I'm concerned, no one should ever refuse to talk to me. It works. When you approach the subject, appear innocent, friendly, unafraid and curious – not as a hard-boiled, cynical reporter (even if you are one).

Play like you know: Ask the official *why* he fired the whistle-blower rather than asking *whether* he did. The question presumes you already know, even if you don't have it confirmed. They'll start explaining rather than denying.

Slow motion: When people reach the important part of a story, slow them down so you can get it in Technicolor. Ask where they were standing, what they were doing, what they were wearing, what was the temperature and what were the noises around them.

Liars: If you know someone is lying, allow the liar to spin the yarn. Don't interrupt except to ask for more detail. Listen and take good notes. When the lie has been fully constructed, go back and logically de-construct it. Don't be impatient. The fabricator is now in a corner. Keep him there until he breaks.

Use your ears: We talk too much during interviews. Let the other person do the talking. Listen with an open mind.

Christy George, documentary producer, Oregon Public Broadcasting, and former print reporter and editor:

Before you do your first interview, create a "focus statement" that incorporates the point of your story, suggesting who the characters are, what we're going to see in the story, where the conflict is, the why behind the story and why it's important. This will probably change as you go forward, but it helps as you frame questions.

Ask open-ended, simple questions such as "Why?" Then wait. Just wait and listen.

Ask, "How did you feel?" It's a dreaded question, but I find myself asking it all the time in a nice, respectful, public-radio kind of way.

The best answers are always in the first question and the last question. The first question is when the subject spits out everything he or she has rehearsed. The last question is important because I keep going until I get something that really pleases me.

Remember that even extremely nervous interviewees will get over their nervousness if you go on long enough.

When you walk out of an interview, make a mental checklist about the best answers, the ones you remember the best. This will provide a guide for you once you start logging the tape or going through notes.

Tom Meersman, environment reporter, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*:

Get extra names. Ask each interviewee for suggestions about who else is knowledgeable about the topic. Even if you don't have time to call all of them, the names may be useful in the future. On a recent update story about the lynx in northern Minnesota, I found that many sources from my original story three years earlier had moved on. No problem. I had lots of extra names of other sources. Some turned out to be excellent sources for the update.

Get paper. During an interview, always ask about letters, e-mails, reports, lawsuits or anything else in the paper trail. An interview may be incomplete, especially if the subject is nervous or intentionally wants to downplay something. Documents may provide more damning evidence or clearer statements of what's at stake.

Follow through. Some interviewees provide lots of facts and history, including the pros and cons of an issue. That's great for a reporter who's trying to get up to speed quickly. But don't let it end there. Ask questions such as: "Well what do you think about that?" or "How do you interpret that?"

Push yourself to get one more interview than you think you need, particularly on short-turnaround pieces. Make an extra call or two. It may turn out to be your best interview. It may change the story considerably.

Len Ackland, director, Center for Environmental Journalism, University of Colorado:

Interviewing, document research, and observation are the three legs of the reporting stool. Good interviewing involves both of the other legs.

Always conduct significant interviews in person. A subject's body language and work environment can't be gauged over the phone or via e-mail. Nor can the subject slip you a revealing document during a phone call.

Do your homework. Research the person and topic. Prepare a list of questions before you call to set up an interview. Be prepared to do an on-the-spot phone interview in case your subject is about to leave for a long trip.

Tape-record your interviews. When you listen to the interview you will often be amazed, particularly with complex topics, at leads you missed.

Take notes. Not only is this a backup for technical failure, it also can help you avert a subject's filibuster.

(Continued on page 24)



Looking for more interviewing tips?

See Eric Nalder's "Loosening Lips: The Art of the Interview" at <http://home.earthlink.net/~cassidynty/naldertip.htm>

Research News Roundup

Air-quality coverage, natural disasters and weed control

By JAN KNIGHT

Emissions coverage impacted by deregulation, air quality, reporter expertise, study shows

A recent study of daily newspaper coverage suggests that a political climate favoring deregulation is linked to economic coverage of environmental rules, specifically the costs and benefits associated with government efforts to reduce motor vehicle emissions.

Additionally, the study shows that coverage of emissions reduction regulations is effected by the air quality of a newspaper's city and a reporter's expertise.

The findings generally rebut claims that environmental coverage is too "event-oriented" and fails to provide a "picture of reality."

Researchers from the University of Nevada, Reno and Michigan State University investigated how extensively the metropolitan daily press reported on the costs and benefits of emissions reduction regulations. They also explored whether this coverage varied by newspaper and type of reporter, and whether there was a correlation between coverage and air quality in the six newspapers' cities.

They conducted a one-year study of emissions regulation coverage in the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Atlanta Constitution*, *Chicago Tribune* and *Dallas Morning News*. They selected these newspapers because of their circulation size and resources, and the six cities represented by these papers possessed a common trait: In 1995, they each experienced unhealthy levels of air quality as defined by the Environmental Protection Agency Pollutant Standards Index.

The researchers analyzed 281 news stories, features and news analyses about the emissions regulations appearing in the six newspapers during the year under study. They found that each newspaper provided specific, complex information about the costs and benefits of regulating motor vehicle emissions, rebutting the claim that environmental reporting is too "event-oriented."

Most coverage was unbalanced in terms of story and word counts, with the costs of regulation receiving more coverage than the benefits. *The New York Times* ran twice as many stories about costs as those about benefits and averaged "a staggering" 245 percent more words about costs than about benefits. The *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune* and *Dallas Morning News* published at least twice as many words about costs as benefits, while the *Atlanta Constitution* was more balanced, with 22 stories about costs and 20 about benefits.

Story topics ranged from the formation of emissions regulations and alternatives to the internal combustion engine to emissions testing and car pooling. Each type of story averaged two to three times more words about economic costs than economic benefits, except for stories about alternatives to the combustion engine, where word counts for costs and benefits were about equal.

General assignment reporters wrote 147 of the 281 stories, while specialty reporters – those from the environmental, science, business or automotive beats – wrote 93. The authors of 41 stories could not be classified. Overall, specialty reporters provided more balanced coverage than general assignment reporters.

As air quality declined, news coverage of emissions regulations increased in five of the six papers. "The implication is that

in five of the cities air quality was helping to drive news coverage of the environment," the researchers wrote, rebutting criticism that the press doesn't do a good job of providing a picture of reality. The exception was Atlanta, where the city ranked second for poor air quality and the newspaper ranked lowest in coverage of emissions restrictions.

The researchers concluded that "journalists consider the costs of environmental controls to be highly newsworthy in an era of deregulation," that air quality drives environmental coverage, and "expertise accumulated on a beat results in more balanced coverage."

For more information, see "Newspaper economic coverage of motor vehicle emissions standards" by David C. Coulson and Stephen Lacy, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, Volume 75, Number 1 (Spring 1998), pp. 154 – 166.

Number killed is biggest influence on U.S. coverage of natural disasters in other countries, researcher finds

Many communication researchers have tried to determine what influences U.S. news media coverage of international events. Various theories suggest that it is simply a matter of "gate-keeping" – news editors selecting information for publication based on their assessment of audience interest and other considerations – or that it is more complex than that, with geographical distance and economic factors playing a role.

Nonetheless, researchers agree that understanding this aspect of the news media is crucial. News attention influences immediate, worldwide responses to natural disasters, as well as the formation of disaster preparedness and prevention policies. And money plays a role too; according to one study, every *New York Times* article on a foreign disaster correlates with about \$1.2 million in U.S. disaster aid.

Because of this, an assistant political science professor at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania recently focused on U.S. news coverage of natural disasters in other countries. He collected data on both minor and major natural disasters that occurred abroad between 1964 and 1996 and compared them to coverage in *The New York Times*. He also compared the data to network television news coverage of foreign disasters between 1977 and 1996, the years for which TV news archives were available.

For both media, he found that the number of people killed in natural disasters abroad was the only factor invariably correlated with U.S. media coverage of those disasters, despite previous research that had demonstrated the influence of other factors in addition to mortality rates.

Factors that did not influence coverage in this study included the geographical distance between the disaster and the United States, the country's major language, the country's wealth as meas-

According to one study, every *New York Times* article on a foreign disaster correlates with about \$1.2 million in U.S. disaster aid.

(Continued on page 18)

The coming environmental stories in Iraq are many

By **CARL PRINE**

Now that I'm no longer getting shot at, it's time to talk environment. Iraq's environment, to be specific.

Of the 500 or so American reporters "embedded" with coalition forces in the latest Persian Gulf war, I was probably the only

Hussein regime spurred an even greater exodus by draining the waters that naturally fed the swamps, displacing them with irrigation projects farther north.

Not only had the Hussein regime committed environmental genocide against the Marsh Arabs, but a number of endangered or threatened species also dwindled due to the loss of habitat, including the rare Bandicoot Rat.

Another related idea: Malaria. It's still endemic in the south. What are the coalition minders doing to eradicate or treat one of the world's worst scourges?

Bad water: Iraq should be one of the wealthiest countries in the Middle East because it's rich in the two commodities that really matter there – oil and water.

But before the war 40 percent of the Iraqis drank unsafe water, much of it a floating morass of human waste, agricultural runoff and industrial flushings.

Indeed, 500,000 cubic meters of raw sewage spills into Iraq's rivers every day in Baghdad alone. Coalition forces have pledged to remedy that. But in Baghdad today, much of the electrical grid, not to mention the sewage treatment and water purification plants, aren't working. Follow up on that. Track the diseases. Hold the coalition engineers to the fire, but remember that nearly half of Iraq's sewage plants never worked before the first bullet left an American rifle.

Another related idea: Water politics. Turkey, Syria and Iraq have squabbled over water before. Does the latest Middle East realignment change that? As an Iraqi government takes hold, who will get the water? Farmers? Industry? City dwellers?

And another related idea: The U.S. Navy reportedly used specially trained dolphins and sea lions to swim alongside destroyers, nosing for mines. While animals have long been militarized (horses pulled chariots, and dogs continue to snap at snipers), what about the new role for aquatic warriors? What are the dangers of a mine-finding dolphin escaping into the wild? What do you do with Sgt. Sea Lion once he's done with combat?

Oil wells: In the 1991 Gulf War, Iraqi troops ignited more than 700 wells, slicking the Kuwaiti air with an acrid sheen of smoking petroleum. It was a grievous ecological disaster, although one snuffed out relatively quickly.

This time around, I saw only a few dozen or so wells flam-

(Continued next page)

Photo courtesy of PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW



Me, caked white in road dust, looking something like a sallow clown.

SEJ member. When I took the assignment to cover the battles, riding alongside the U.S. Marine Corps' Combat Engineer Battalion – the grunts who blow things up – I had an eye on the environmental beat, too.

I'd planned to scribble countless stories on the radioactive and chemical fallout from exploded Iraqi bunkers. Maybe a few dispatches about the thousands of flaming Iraqi oil wells. Perhaps a few sidebars on flooding caused by busted dams.

There wasn't much of any of that. I did write about a Marine and Army team that thinks they've discovered weapon-grade plutonium at the infamous Al Tuwaitha atomic plant, but it isn't resolved. More tests are needed, and the Pentagon has a bad track record on this issue.

But I did see stories to follow up on when I go back. And it seems smart for your embedded reporters, now that they're streaming back, to talk to the environmental and science reporters about some future environment stories that can be done in Iraq.

Here are a few ideas:

Environmental genocide: Fifteen years ago, more than 250,000 Shiite Moslems lived in a vast green wetland in southern Iraq formed at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Today, there are fewer than 40,000 "Marsh Arabs" in the stretch between Basra and Nasiriya, what was once 20,000 square kilometers of largely undisturbed swamp.

Many of these impoverished farmers were killed in Baathist pogroms. Others fled to Iraq's interior or to Iran. The Saddam

ing, most of them in the far south. How quickly can the coalition contractors put them out? What has been the damage, both economically and environmentally? And what will be the other environmental consequences of what's expected to be a new age of expedited Iraqi petroleum exploration and pumping? Who will benefit from that? A gaggle of Baghdad flunkies? Multinational oil companies? Or the impoverished villagers and herders who live next to the rigs?

Uranium: There are two stories here. One involves the 25 pounds or so of uranium kept at the Al Tuwaitha site about 18 miles south of Baghdad. Looters got to the stores before the Marines arrived, and they broke seals put in place by International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors. That led to villagers sifting through the barrels of yellow cake to find air conditioners, desks and other objects of plunder. Some villagers were seen toting water with barrels that once held uranium. Where did the yellow cake go? What will be the health consequences of the Al Tuwaitha looting? Moreover, what have been the environmental consequences of Iraq's nuclear, biological and chemical weapons production?

A related idea: Write about spent coalition uranium shell cases and tankskins. Although the scientific literature on the subject hasn't determined whether this is, truly, a major health issue, you can check out Iraqi claims yourself.

According to a United Nations report, some 290 tons of the weak radioactive substance was deposited in Iraq and Kuwait in 1991, much of it pulverized into dust.

Caveat: Some Iraqi scientists, wishing to avoid war crimes charges, have been less than up front about their nation's role in building or procuring weapons of mass destruction. One was quoted recently on *Al Jazeera* saying the Iraqis never tried to make an atomic bomb. Rather, they were simply engaging in radioactive experiments for Iraqi medicine. A good book to read before you go is *Saddam's Bombmaker*, written by, well, Saddam's bombmaker, Khidhir Hamza.

An Iraqi EPA: The environment was never a big concern of the Baathist regime in Baghdad. The nation's eco-systems suf-

fered from government policies in much the same way as those in the former Soviet republics. Sanctions didn't help. Neither did the 2003 war.

I went into a building the Marines later closed off as a toxic waste nightmare. Workers had been toiling in a warehouse filled with sewage gas, raw industrial chemicals, fertilizer components and a couple of cluster bombs. As the nascent Iraqi government



Photo courtesy of PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

A burning oil field near Basra on the first day of the ground war.

takes hold, will it make the environment a bigger priority? Will there be an Iraqi EPA? Will it have the power to take on industry or agriculture?

Pittsburgh Tribune-Review reporter Carl Prine was embedded with the Combat Engineer Battalion of the U.S. Marine Corps in Iraq. He now has a russet tan and remains devilishly handsome, despite lice, a stench from six weeks without bathing, and a dirt-sparkled ear canal.

What's really in the Geneva Conventions? SPJ tells all.

To help journalists search and learn more quickly what's in the texts of the Geneva Conventions, the Society of Professional Journalists has created a new guide.

Called "Reference Guide to the Geneva Conventions," the publication offers an easy-to-use alphabetical reference guide to the Geneva Conventions, as well as the full texts of the conventions themselves. The guide entries are cross-linked to the relevant portions of the conventions, providing an easy way to look up hundreds of topics such as "orphans," "war crimes," and "wounded prisoners of war."

The guide was funded by a grant from the Sigma Delta Chi Foundation, the work was authored by Maria Trombly, a freelance journalist, former war correspondent and now the chair of SPJ's International Journalism Committee. It was edited by former committee chair John Hopkins of the *Miami Herald*.

Patterned after the AP Stylebook, the "Reference Guide to the Geneva Conventions" can be found online at no charge at www.genevaconventions.org. Printed copies are available from the Society of Professional Journalists by calling 317/927-8000. Paperback edi-

tions are available for \$12; special waterproof editions are available for \$25. Shipping is \$6.

The Society of Professional Journalists works to improve and protect journalism. SPJ is dedicated to encouraging the free practice of journalism and stimulating high standards of ethical behavior. Founded in 1909 as Sigma Delta Chi, and based in Indianapolis, SPJ promotes the free flow of information vital to a well-informed public; works to inspire and educate the next generation of journalists; and protects First Amendment guarantees of freedom of speech and press. ♦

Crackdown in Cuba

By KATHIE DURBIN

Imagine that the Bush administration rounded up 75 prominent U. S. journalists and dissidents who were critical of its policies, charged them with conspiring to overthrow the government, tried and convicted them in closed, one-day proceedings and sentenced them to prison terms ranging from seven to 28 years — all in about three weeks' time.

Then imagine that state-run newspapers and broadcasts were

truth. And as a journalist, knowing what I now know, I have been forced to rethink my Cuban adventure.

It's possible to set aside politics and succumb to Cuba's charms and its fascinating history: its four centuries as a Spanish colony, the independence movement of the late 19th century, the era of U.S. domination, when Havana was a Mafia playground, the romance of the 1959 "triumph of the Revolution" and the early years under Castro.

It's tempting to lose yourself in the crumbling grandeur of Havana, the rum and sunshine, the sight of 1950s vintage American automobiles that give Cuba the feel of a country frozen in time, the sizzling salsa, rumba and cha-cha-cha.

It's impossible not to feel affection for the Cuban people, who endure shortages of food, housing, medicine and toilet paper with dignity — shortages caused largely by the four-decade-old U.S. trade embargo. Cubans welcomed us with genuine friendship, curiosity and open hearts.

But the trip's aftermath left me pondering whether by traveling to Cuba and spending U.S.



Jose Marti, revered 19th-century Cuban revolutionary, presides at Havana's Plaza de la Revolucion, where Fidel Castro addresses the masses. (Photos by Kathie Durbin.)

the only source of news for most U.S. citizens — and that those media said nothing about the crackdown while it was under way.

In case the Iraq war distracted you from recent developments in Cuba, that is what President Fidel Castro has been up to over the past two months. And in an accident of timing, I was in Cuba, largely unaware of the drama while it was unfolding.

My group of 18 traveled under a license granted by the U.S. Treasury Department to the nonprofit organization Global Exchange. We spent the week of March 22-29 in Cuba as the first arrests were taking place. We met with doctors, educators, journalists and minor government officials. We drank mojitos in the Plaza de la Catedral, attended a spellbinding performance by an Afro Cuban dance company in Havana, hiked through the beautiful valley of Vinales in the western province of Pinar del Rio.

During our visit, no one mentioned that Castro regime was in the process of unleashing the most severe crackdown on dissent in decades. The state-run newspaper Granma was silent. CNN, available in some of our hotels, was busy tracking Operation Iraqi Freedom 24/seven.

Only after our return to the United States did we learn the

dollars there, I was (a) reaching out to the Cuban people; (b) helping to shore up the Castro regime, or (c) indulging myself by drinking mojitos on the deck of the Titanic. It's a debate I'm still having with myself.

When I learned last fall about the opportunity to visit Cuba with a group sponsored locally by the First Unitarian Church in Portland, Ore., I jumped at the chance to see the island nation before the U.S. trade and travel bans fell, as seemed likely then, and Havana became another Cancun.

I hoped to sell some freelance stories about "Green Cuba" — the growth of organic agriculture (a necessity after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and Cuba lost its source of cheap oil and fertilizers), the diversity of Cuba's ecological reserves, the effects of tourism development on the island's beaches and coral reefs.

But events overtook this plan, and my "Cuba Reality Tour" became a lesson in *realpolitik* instead.

We departed two days after the Iraq war began and three days after Castro gave a speech accusing James Cason, the diplomat who heads the U.S. Interest Section in Havana, of meeting

(Continued next page)

Photos courtesy of KATHIE DURBIN

with dissidents and offering them support in an effort to “foment the internal counterrevolution.” *The Associated Press* reported the story, but it was buried in most U.S. newspapers as war fever gripped the nation.

Global Exchange, a leftist San Francisco-based nonprofit, has sponsored its Cuba tours for 10 years. They are part of its campaign to get Congress to lift the trade embargo and the ban on travel to Cuba by American tourists. But Global Exchange tours can’t really present all sides of Cuba’s complex reality because it contracts with Cuba’s state-run tourism agency for hotels, air-conditioned buses and tour guides.

The Cubans we met were well-educated, literate — and loyal to Fidel. They stuck to the party line, arguing that as long as the United States works to overthrow Castro, Cuba cannot afford American-style democracy, with its competing political parties, free elections and independent press. We had no meetings with Cubans who advocate loosening Castro’s iron grip.

“If Cuba lived in a normal world, maybe someday we can talk about two, three or four parties,” said Ernesto Ray Pino, a provincial government official in Havana.

“To think that Fidel Castro doesn’t do what is best for all of the Cuban people is a mistake,” said Oremy Rodrigues Alonso, 25, who works for the Cuba Friendship Institute, our host organization. “Why do people follow him? Why, when he goes to the square, do people go to hear him? They are not forced to do it.”

The community of political dissidents and the small independent press in Cuba, now silenced, are widely regarded by most Cubans as tools of the U.S. government.

“If you want to fight against Fidel, you can do what Fidel did,” said our guide, Jesus, who studied history in Cuba’s free university system. “Fidel went to the mountains and he told the peasants and the farmers that he had a program to help them. He didn’t give them money to fight.”

Yet not every Cuban defends Castro’s rule. More than 11,000 registered voters risked reprisals by signing a petition circulated by the Varela Project. The petition, presented to the Cuban National Assembly in May 2001, called for open elections, the right to freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, freedom of the press and amnesty for most political prisoners. Oswaldo Paya Sardinias, who led the Varela Project, was among those arrested in March. Raul Rivero, who founded the independent news service *CubaPress*, was another. Rivero abandoned official Cuba journalism in 1991, dismissing it as “a fiction about a country that does not exist.”

He had recently helped to start a magazine, *De Cuba*, that

reported honestly on political, social and economic conditions in Cuba.

Back home, the sense that things in Cuba were spinning out of control intensified. On April 11, after summary trials, three Cuban hijackers were executed at dawn by firing squad for commandeering a ferry with 50 passengers aboard on April 2 and setting sail for the United States. The hijacked ferry was the same one in which some of our group had crossed Havana Bay just two weeks earlier.

Although Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Reporters Without Borders have denounced Castro’s actions,

Global Exchange was curiously silent about the Cuban meltdown. Ana Perez, Cuba program director, said Global Exchange does not defend the trials of dissidents or the executions of hijackers. “We are a human rights organization,” she said. “We don’t support capital punishment here or abroad.”

The Treasury Department informed Global Exchange during our visit that its license to take U.S. citizens to Cuba would not be renewed when it expires at the end of the year. The new policy also applies to scores of other organizations, large and small, that conduct “educational exchange” tours to Cuba.

Momentum had been building in Congress to lift the trade embargo and the travel ban. No one believes that is now going to happen anytime soon. In the wake of the crackdown, the Bush State Department says it plans to introduce measures that will further isolate Cuba.

But ending most legal travel by Americans won’t improve Cuba’s human rights record, Perez argued. In fact, many Cuba experts believe that the crackdown is part of a strategy by Castro to chill U.S.-Cuba relations and shield Cubans from the dangerous ideas that American visitors bring to the island along with their wads of U.S. dollars. If that’s true, then eliminating such contacts plays right into Castro’s hands.

“We want people to have a realistic picture of Cuba,” Perez said. “No matter whether they come back loving Cuba or hating Cuba, they should have a right to travel there and judge for themselves.”

Would I return to Cuba? In a heartbeat. But next time I would want to travel independently and speak freely to ordinary Cubans. I would want to visit those organic farms and coral reefs too, and write about the stunning beauty of the Cuban countryside. Unfortunately, the window of opportunity for that kind of access is closing fast.



Cuban children show off an icon of American capitalism near the 16th-century Castillo de la Real Fuerza in Old Havana, the second-oldest fort in the Americas.

Kathie Durbin is a special projects writer for The Columbian in Vancouver, Wash.

OK, so you can't write. That shouldn't stop you.

By MICHAEL MANSUR

You've reported the basics of a great story. So you plop in front of a computer, ready to write something. And this question pops into your head: What now?

Sure, most reporters know how crucial it is to write well. But many seldom take the time necessary to study it. They don't *think* well enough about the writing task at hand, the type of story they are about to craft.

Too often, they fake it. They employ some florid language, an adverb, a scene, a special phrasing. They look for a descriptive anecdotal lede. But they've failed to take time to think about their story as they report. In the end, a lot of good reporting may be wasted.

So here's a few of my own tips, gathered over 20 years of writing, reporting and studying how successful journalists convey what they learn in their reporting.

RULE ONE: Be assured that you *can't* write.

Writing isn't innate. Great writers are not born. (Even if they are, there must be only one in a billion. So why bet on that?) Some may be given a little bit more to work with up front. But successful journalists learn to write. And that learning comes only with hours and hours of study and practice.

Much of that hard work involves what old-time editors would call "shoe leather" reporting. You can't describe a scene — making it vivid to a reader — unless you're there. You can't really get a subject in a story to trust you unless you look him or her in the eye. You can't earn that "fly-on-the-wall" view of a person's world until you spend hours with the person.

More hard work involves the craft of writing. Outlining, transcribing notes, studying successful stories or writers, reading as much as you can — including those how-to books. Some even find that typing a story you love, every word of it, can somehow bring rewards.

Don't be discouraged when writing doesn't come easily, especially in a first draft. Expect it. Count on it. Then deal with it.

Only journalistic "reports" — the daily story coming out of a defined event, such as a press conference or a meeting — should be expected to be very clear or readable on first draft. Everything else must be revised until you're sure it's perfect. Then revise it again. Just for fun: Experiment with dropping each word from a sentence to see if you really need it.

Think of learning to write as learning to be a finish carpenter. They aren't born, either. Over time, with enough practice and experience, some tasks come easily. But on the really fine jobs, the jobs that they'll be proud to claim later, time and careful, methodical work are still required. And often they'll have to throw out a chunk of work and do it all over.

RULE TWO: Determine what kind of story you are writing.

This is not to say you should have some pre-formed idea of what a story is. In reporting news that sort of preconception would obviously be a grave sin.

But think about the type of story you will probably write as the result of your reporting. And while you're reporting, think about whether the story form you first thought of still fits. If you're covering an EPA announcement about air quality in your

community, know that this will be a *report*.

A report is the old reverse-pyramid style of story that you see by the dozens in the AP dailies. They begin with the important news at the top, an explanation of significance up high, how it occurred and other details, peppering it along the way with a few quotes.

Reports are not "stories" — pieces that today are more commonly referred to as "narratives." They delve deeply into an event or, more commonly, a person's struggle. The bulk of the story often hinges on a chronological structure.

Jon Franklin, two-time Pulitzer winner and author of the book "Writing for Story," describes most stories as fitting this form: A sympathetic character meets an obstacle and overcomes it.

Think Cinderella. Think Pinocchio. Think Bilbo Baggins.

For environment writers, think "A Civil Action."

Narratives, of course, like an investigative home-run, are a goal. They come rarely for most of us slight infielders. Most often we find the time and material only to write other forms of non-reports. I like to think of these as "news features."

Usually, they have some news hook — a person in the news, an event, a place. And we find some interesting way to tell those stories, using anecdote, quotes and painting scenes. Scenes are moments recreated that make the person, event or place stand out. I find they are often the moments we tell friends about later over beers or dinner. So take the reader to a moment or a place they haven't been, somewhere they wouldn't know to go. Strive for the interesting.

A standard form for telling many stories — all types of features, including narratives — is to start in the middle of the subject's life: *in media res*, to use the Latin. Then soon after that scene, step back in time to introduce the characters more clearly. The story then often picks up naturally from its chronological beginning, following it over time back to the moment where the written story began. It's a good, easy form with which to start a first draft.

RULE THREE: Know home.

Wherever you write, know that place. As the great *St. Petersburg Times* feature writer Jeff Klinkenberg, author of "Dispatches from the Land of Flowers," explains: Too few people, and that includes us writers, don't know their homes. They don't even know the trees in their backyards.

It's crucial, especially for a nature writer or environment beat reporter, to learn his or her place.

What *are* the trees in your backyard? Which are native? What natural elements shape your place? In my home, it's the Missouri River. How was it formed? Who were its first discoverers? What were its early creatures?

"Ideas of place give us the rudiments of narration: a story, its teller, and a setting," writes William Howarth, editor of *The John McPhee Reader*. "Without some 'sense of place' we could not describe, relate, read or write."

Even in your own home, you can go on journeys. Take readers out with a person who knows your place, a creature who lives there or a problem that mars it from being better. When you go — again, it's most important to be there — soak it in.

For certain, read the writers of your area. Who best captures

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The great book list

What every environment writer should read — or have handy

By **SETH BORENSTEIN**

From Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring," the beginning of modern environmental journalism, to the recently released in paperback "Nail 'Em!," an anti-media screed from former Reagan spinmeister and current corporate crisis manager Eric Dezenhall, environment books could easily buckle your shelves, bury a desk or wipe out your social life.

Some, Rachel Carson's masterpiece is the prime example, are must-reads. As is most anything by John McPhee.

Reading McPhee — any McPhee really — can both inspire and depress you, but it is a necessity. His prose is so wonderful that it takes you to places like the Pine Barrens or Florida orange groves or Alaska. What's depressing is that there seems to be no way anyone can match his ability at nature writing.

If you haven't read any McPhee, start with "The Pine Barrens," "Oranges," "The Control of Nature" and "Coming into the Country." If you want short (for him) pieces, go for the "The John McPhee Reader." Its introduction details how McPhee goes about his work, even his outlining methods. It is a true must.

Many other books are should-reads. And more are handy to keep on the desk for easy references. Unfortunately few are free, although some people in SEJ are talking about some kind of book buying system to save costs.

Perhaps the most useful of these categories is the reference books that any good environment reporter has within arm's reach (or at least those of us who still use books).

Eric Nalder, a two-time Pulitzer-winning investigative reporter for the *San Jose Mercury News* who has worked on several environmental projects, said, "What I keep is a horrible mess of papers."

His bookshelf, while not environment oriented, provides the good meat-and-potatoes of any project writer and Eric is one of the best in the business. His shelf, minus the esoteric stuff on ship safety, includes:

World Almanac, dictionary, three different Investigative Reporters and Editors handbooks, spelling dictionary, thesaurus, Brant Houston's "Investigative Reporter's Handbook" and "Computer Assisted Reporting: A Practical Guide," "Bartlett's Familiar Quotations," "Say It Safely" by Paul Ashley, "On Writing Well" by William Zinsser (a classic!), "Black's Law Dictionary," "The Craft of Interviewing" by John Joseph Brady, "Get The Facts On Anyone" by Dennis King, a Congressional guide and "lots of phone books."

Nalder emphasizes the usefulness of good old-fashioned phone books: "State of California, FERC phone books, any agency I'm dealing with I've got phone books."

Getting those phone books, I can attest, is not easy. I've got some pirated agency phone books that I guard with my life (NASA, CDC, EPA).

As far as the traditional environment writer's reference books, an April listserv discussion on SEJ-Talk provides an impressive list of reference books. You get mine first, along with an explanation.

They are, from closest to the keyboard to farthest:

"Risk: A Practical Guide for Deciding What's Really Safe and What's Really in the World Around You." SEJ member David Ropeik and Harvard think-tanker George Gray write this 2003 Houghton Mifflin book that teaches about risk analysis, albeit with a slightly conservative bent. It has a useful risk meter that looks at the likelihood of a problem and the consequences of such a problem. There are many good books on risk. Jim Detjen has "Environmental Risk Reporting." Michigan Sea Grant puts out the highly recommended "Reporting on Risk: A Journalist's Handbook on Environmental Risk Assessment." (Sea Grant sells this \$8 book on their website for \$3 and tosses in "Exploring Science Writing" for free.)

"The Handy Science Answer Book" by the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. It's nine years old but really has some good dumb-ed-down, easy-to-find explanations.

"State of The World" from Worldwatch. It's a regularly updated standby.

"The AMA's Encyclopaedia of Medicine" and "The American Press Dictionary of Science and Technology." Good find-'em-quick definitions.

Several experts guides, Sea Grant, University of Southern California, Brookings Institute, Johns Hopkins, American University, University of Miami, Washington University in St. Louis. Sometimes expert guidebooks are easier in print, than on the Web, but that shows my age.

"How To Use The Federal FOI Act" by the Reporters Committee For Freedom of The Press. Until you have it down by rote, a great resource.

"The Worst Case Scenario Survival Handbook" by Joshua Piven and David Borgenicht. When your editor makes you feel like jumping out a window, this book tells you how to, literally. It's a great tension reliever.

Books recommended by fellow SEJers, without much explanation, include these science encyclopedia: "The OED of Science Terms: Van Nostrand Scientific Dictionary," "Grimek's Animal Life Encyclopedia" (13 volumes and 31 years old), "Oxford Dictionary of Biology," "Concise Oxford Dictionary of Biology," "Encyclopedia Britannica," "Encyclopedia of the Environment," "The Environmental Almanac," "Encyclopedia of Mammals," "Merck Index" (a necessity!, and the "Condensed Chemical Dictionary."

Maps, you need maps, and places to find birds and other critters and faunas. For that you should have: "Maps With the News" by Mark Monmonier, "Dorling-Kindersley Reference Atlas," "American Wildlife & Plants" (one SEJ member called it one of the most useful books ever picked up), "National Geographic Atlas of the World" and, of course, the Audubon Field Guides.

Reports are important, including the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's numerous reports, the "Tenth Report

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New Orleans... (from page 4)



nutrients carried to the Gulf from Midwest farms by the Mississippi River.

This year's conference will be based at the Astor Crowne Plaza Hotel, at the corner of Bourbon and Canal streets on the edge of New Orleans' famous French Quarter. Participants also will be given a taste of Carnival with a party at Mardi Gras World, where some of the city's biggest parade floats are built and stored.

The conference is underwritten in part by Loyola University New Orleans.

To register for the conference, or view the most up-to-date conference agenda, visit www.sej.org on the Web or call the SEJ office, at (215) 884-8174. ♦

Disasters.... (from page 11)

ured in gross domestic product per capita, its military power, its press freedom and democratic political structures. Each of these factors can be highly influential for many reasons, including their impact on ease of communication beyond a country's borders.

Other than number killed, the only other factor that had any influence on U.S. coverage of foreign natural disasters was U.S. tourism. Here, the author expected U.S. tourism to impact disaster coverage – the greater the number of U.S. tourists, the greater the U.S. interest and the more news coverage a disaster in that country would receive. But the influence of U.S. tourism on coverage was limited to major natural disasters, when 8.78 more stories appeared in the *Times* for every 1,000 U.S. tourists. U.S. tourism had no significant bearing on the coverage of minor natural disasters.

"It appears to be the real human impact of the disaster that makes it dramatic, makes it newsworthy, and drives coverage," the author concluded.

For more information about natural disasters, see "New York Times and Network TV News Coverage of Foreign Disasters: The Significance of Insignificant Variables" by Douglas A. Van

Belle in *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 77, No. 1 (Spring 2000), pp. 50 – 70.

Turn-of-the-century weed control reveals U.S. environmental attitudes

For any city editor who's ever searched for a story during allergy season and for any reporter who's ever been assigned to

cover it, it may be of interest to know that weed control is viewed by some as a clue to the evolution of U.S. environmental attitudes.

At the turn of the 20th Century, when urban and industrial development was at a record high and environmental concerns paralleled those of today, weeds "thrived in the turbulent ecology and stabilized the land that humans had stripped of perennial grasses and trees," writes Zachary J.S. Falck in a recent issue of *Environmental History*.

But weeds became associated with poverty, immorality and other ills stemming from rapid urban growth and industrialization, and their control became symbolic of a social order that separated the upper and lower classes and suggested a more certain future. "Weed control advocates in cities believed that reshaping the nature of the urban fringe could create boundaries between healthy, safe spaces and filthy, dangerous places; between wealthy people and meager folk ... and between an ordered future and an unkempt past."

Even newspapers got involved. In 1905, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, responding to a lack of city weed control, asked readers to identify weedy lots and then exposed them, printing names of streets, properties and owners under headlines such as "Weeds! Weeds! Sixth District is Almost Overgrown!"

Falck concludes that the "triumph of weed control was not the eradication of weeds from cities; the triumph was alienating weeds from the urban consciousness and obscuring the nature of the city."

For more information, see "Controlling the weed nuisance in turn-of-the-century American cities" by Zachary J.S. Falck, *Environmental History*, Volume 7, Number 4 (October 2002), pp. 611 – 631.

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Lead...(from page 1)

Day two looked at contamination left behind from a former lead smelter. Twenty years after it closed down, the neighborhood had still not been cleaned up. The newspaper's own testing samples confirmed high levels of lead in the neighborhood.

Day three looked at how many children are exposed to the toxin – playing in contaminated dirt.

Day four looked at some of the victims and pointed out how slowly the state of Michigan had acted on the problem.

Day five explored possible solutions and pointed to the need for leadership.

The series instantly got results. And *The Free Press* staff has continued to follow up on lead stories and efforts to address the problem.

Some of the same lead contamination problems found in Detroit can be found in many cities across the country. The newspaper's team of six reporters used a wide variety of sources to tell a compelling story of how yesterday's modern miracles can become today's toxic tragedies.

SEJ member and former president Emilia Askari was one of the reporters who worked on the reporting team. *SEJournal* interviewed the reporting team by e-mail, with Askari answering most of the questions with input from reporters Tina Lam and Wendy Wendland. Other reporters on the series were Hugh McDiarmid Jr., Shawn Windsor and Dan Shine.

Q: How did the series begin? Who came up with the idea?

A: Deputy Director of Photography Craig Porter gets credit for pushing the idea for the series early on. In the summer of 2001, he began urging newsroom management to commit resources to a major project on lead poisoning. His idea was put aside for months following the terror-

ist attacks of 9/11/2001. In the spring of 2002, the paper's editors gave the go-ahead for reporting to begin.

Q: According to your website, the *Free Press* interviewed about 300 people and reviewed 10,000 pages of documents. The series had at least six writers. How

project. Most of us were paired with another reporter to work on a specific story that already had a fairly detailed budget line. We worked to verify and document the assertions in the budget line, dig up details and examples and find the real people to make the stories come alive. The plan was to do all this in a few more months, not letting the project drag on for a year, which is what it



Photo courtesy of THE DETROIT FREE PRESS

These windows are lead paint free now but (from left) Nolan Kukla, 3, brother Avery, 6, and Nolan's twin brother Zachary, 3, got lead poisoning from flaking paint on windows like these and others while living in the home and during its renovation from August 2000 to May 2001.

did the team manage all of the information they gathered? Was there a way it was shared with other team members?

A: The project started with just two reporters: Tina Lam and Tamara Audi. Audi left the project to continue her coverage of local terrorism investigations. Lam, who has many years of experience investigating local government, became the project's lead reporter. She spent several months working solo, submitting FOIAs and conducting interviews about lead poisoning.

She reported to a top-notch editor, Alison Young, who had worked closely with Porter to crystalize the project concept. Together, Young and Lam sorted through the information that Lam was gathering and came up with a budget of stories. By fall, another six reporters had been added to the

would have taken if only a couple of reporters were working on it.

Two photographers and Porter, the photo editor, also were important parts of what came to be known in the newsroom as "the lead team." The photographers did some of their own reporting and played a key role in finding some of the victims.

Throughout the fall, we had weekly meetings where we shared developments and advice. Of course, we also talked and e-mailed on a daily basis.

Q: I think one of the key things that I liked about the series is the newspaper went out and did its own testing. I am sure that was not cheap. How were the editors sold on the idea of spending

(Continued next page)

Lead...(from page 19)

money to test soil when you were not sure what you were going to get?

A: I don't want to answer with specifics on what we spent on testing. Part of the project was editor-driven and they hired consultants to do the testing before reporters

from city or state records on homes that had been abated with public money. We knocked on the doors.

Also, one of the companies that does initial "super cleaning" on homes where lead-poisoned children live allowed us to

base form. To get information about how various parts of state and local government had spent federal dollars targeted for lead clean-up, we had to submit lots of FOIAs (Freedom of Information Act requests) and waded through tall stacks of paper documents.

We used some census data to determine the age of housing in Detroit, percent of children in poverty in Detroit and things like that. Lots of scientific studies on lead and information from nonprofits were on the web, easily accessible via (the search engine) Google. We also created our own database based on the soil samples taken and used that to help report.

Q: The series mentions some problems getting documents. If you had it to do over again, what would you do differently to get better access to documents?

A: Sue right away.

Q: What has been the impact of the stories? I saw where before the last story ran, there was already a Detroit council member call-

ing for creation of one commission to address the problem.

A: The response to the series has been tremendous.

The second day focused on an old smelter site that never had been fully cleaned up or even locked up. It was right across the street from a housing project and less than two blocks from an elementary school. Although in other parts of the country such sites have received much more attention from the EPA, federal officials admitted that the Detroit site was a low priority because no one complained about it. Very little testing of soil had been done in the neighborhood around the former smelter and there had been no special focus on testing local children for lead.

In the first six weeks after the series ran:

- The EPA told the responsible parties that they must clean up the former

Photo courtesy of THE DETROIT FREE PRESS



Despite this and other signs warning of contamination, broken windows and gaps in the surrounding fence make the abandoned Master Metals smelter in eastern Detroit an easy playground for children and a haven for vagrants.

were involved in the series. Like all really good journalism, the story was told through the lives of the victims — in this case usually little children and their parents.

Q: How did your team find them?

A: We had a very hard time finding victims initially. We never did get any names from the public health officials. We had more success with the local children's hospital. The hospital permitted us to attend a weekly lead clinic and introduce ourselves to patients' parents. A few of them agreed to talk to us later, and be part of the story.

Conveniently, the city had a "town hall" meeting on lead poisoning while we were reporting the series. About 30 people showed up there and we collected all their names and phone numbers. Many were just there for the free chicken dinner, but there were a few who had lead-poisoned children in their families.

We got about a dozen other addresses

tag along for a couple of days and ask the clients if we could observe the cleanings and interview them.

So it was a mix of luck and a lot of work convincing the right people to give us access to the victims.

Q: I also noticed that sometimes the first inkling some people had of the contamination was when your reporters used the information from your tests. How did they react?

A: Generally people were surprised to learn they lived in areas where our soil tests came back high, though a handful of people who lived near old plants were not surprised.

Q: What kinds of databases and documents did your team use? How did you find them?

A: Very few of the government documents we needed were available in data-

Lead...(from page 20)

smelter site now or face reimbursing the federal government for clean-up costs plus damages. The agency just opened a storefront office in the neighborhood and has begun testing soil in the area for lead. The first public hearing with the soil results was scheduled for April.

- Detroit's City Council created a pilot program to help renters remove lead hazards from their homes. Previously, most

assistance programs in the city were open only to homeowners.

- Sherwin-Williams began negotiations to give the city reduced-cost, lead-free paint to be used in lead remediation. It's unclear whether the city will accept the paint company's offer.

- Two state legislators — one in the House and one in the Senate — have publicly declared their intentions to introduce legisla-

tion that would require all Michigan children under age six be tested for lead poisoning.

- Leaders of Detroit's health department called on the City Council to reform the city's housing code regarding lead. The health officials want greater punishments for people who ignore peeling leaded paint.

- Detroit's mayor called on state officials to give more grants for lead abatement.
(Continued on page 28)

So you can't write...(from page 16)

the people and place? For my home, it's Richard Rhodes, Calvin Trillin, Evan Connell, William Least Heat-Moon.

RULE FOUR: Find the telling details and show them.

Henry David Thoreau wrote that all things should be seen in the morning with the dew on them, with early-opened eyes. Try to look anew at your place. When you go out with experts, ask them simple questions — or even dumb questions — about the place or the subject of your story. It gets them explaining the basics, thinking anew about the subject.

Get the main character — the protagonist of your story — to explain her dreams, her motives, her fears, her problems. Klinkenberg suggests to ask them about their "sacred places."

Don't write pretty. Instead of characterizing a moment: "It was frightening." Describe what actually happened: "Fagin entered the room, eyes bugged wide. 'My God,' he screamed. And he ran."

What did you see? What did you hear? How did it smell?

Don't write that it was "stunningly hot." Write that "workers dripped sweat, lounged under shade trees and slurped water from a thin garden hose."

Here's the opening to a first draft I wrote of a series of stories on William Least Heat-Moon's attempt to cross America by boat.

ABOARD THE NIKAWA — Under a menacing sky, trees litter the rising Missouri River like bodies on a bombed-out battlefield. It's not a good day to be on the river.

But writer and adventurer William Least Heat-Moon plows ahead.

It's the 27th day of his journey across America by boat....

Here's how it ran after several revisions:

ABOARD THE NIKAWA — The sky is a mass of angry slate-gray clouds. Rain splatters against the windshield. Writer and adventurer William Least Heat-Moon squints to see the river as his boat, the Nikawa, motors west against the current and toward Kansas City.

The Missouri River is as mean as the sky. Its current

is swift, rolling at 8 to 10 mph. The river rises and spreads, covering boat ramps, telephone booths and parking lots. It has ripped big trees from its banks — root balls, limbs and all. Once-tall cottonwoods cruise downstream like submarines on patrol, their limbs waving in the wind like periscopes. Wet-black branches the size of a man's leg hurtle past the Nikawa like torpedoes.

It's the 27th day of Heat-Moon's journey across America by boat. He has pushed 76 miles up the Missouri from the river's mouth, just north of St. Louis. His timing is lousy.

There's a lot more action in the revised story. Sentences are punchier, mostly because I'm describing exactly what I see, not characterizing it. And "his timing is lousy" has more effect because it comes at the end of a long sentence, not early, as it did in the first draft.

To help you find telling details and quotes, I suggest two practical things. When you're in the field reporting with a character, take a tape recorder. You can't take good notes while you're paddling in a canoe or hiking along a ridge. But it's at such moments that important conversations can occur.

Heat-Moon taught me another neat trick — even neater now in the world of digital cameras. He snapped pictures of important people and places as he reported. Later, he'd spread out the pictures of the scene that he was writing about. He told me that the feelings that he had experienced earlier would come back. Often he would remember more details, words spoken or even a smell.

It worked for me as well. I also realized that I often spotted in photos details I had never noted.

In feature stories, consider sharing an early draft with the subject. I've found that more telling details, stories and moments can come from the subject reading your first impressions.

That brings us to the final rule. And it deserves no explanation. Have passion.

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

Basics... (from page 1)

Obviously, many of these sources will have their own agendas and often strong points of view. But you'll also find knowledgeable experts (such as former environmental officials now working at a local university) who are no longer involved in the fray and who can provide you with perspective and guidance on key issues.

Read! Read! Read! In some areas of the country, some excellent books have been written about the natural and environmental history of your region.

Check permits,
inspection reports,
notices of violations of
agency regulations and
other documents.
Become friends with
the secretaries and
clerks who maintain
these files and they'll
often become valuable
sources of tips for
future stories.

When I began my career as an environmental reporter for *The Poughkeepsie (N.Y.) Journal*, I read and reread Robert Boyle's excellent book, "The Hudson: A Natural and Unnatural History."

I also read histories of the region's politics and folklore and read many articles from other newspapers and magazines in the region.

Absorb everything you can. Make it your goal to become an expert on the environment in your region. When interested readers see that you are covering environmental issues, they'll call you up and offer you suggestions and ideas. Many of the best stories I've written have come from tips given me over the phone by knowledgeable readers.

Make it a point to learn about the

requirements of key local, state and federal environmental laws by interviewing officials in environmental agencies. You'll quickly find that these laws require companies and other organizations to submit extensive paperwork to government agencies and that these agencies keep extensive files on the pollutants discharged by these companies.

If you learn to comb these files on a regular basis, you'll soon be breaking stories that few other reporters in your area have reported about or written. If the Alpha Manufacturing Company has been fined \$50,000 by the state environmental agency for violating clean water laws, go to the agency and ask to review all their files. Check their permits, inspection reports, notices of violations of agency regulations and other documents. Become friends with the secretaries and clerks who maintain these files and they'll often become valuable sources of tips for future stories.

In most cases officials at the state agency will suggest that you speak to the media officers at the state agency to obtain the information you are looking for. You should meet with these officials and make sure you receive all of their press releases.

But resist the temptation to rely on media officials exclusively. Remain independent and ask to review the complete files on a company or a polluting organization. You'll often find nuggets of useful information in the files that never find their way into agency press releases.

In fact, you may find that a company has a terrible record of complying with state or federal environmental laws and that environmental regulators have done little to force the company to comply with the regulations. Perhaps the agency has lacked the staff to force compliance. Perhaps politics has intervened to encourage the agency officials to look the other way.

If officials are reluctant to let you look at the records, then utilize state open records laws or the federal Freedom of Information Act. You can find out how to utilize these laws through state press associations, the Society of Professional Journalists or the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press

(www.rcfp.org). Another useful organization is Investigative Reporters & Editors (www.ire.org).

When you file FOIA requests, be sure to identify the precise individual to send them to in a state or federal agency and to be as precise as possible in your request for information. Read through state and federal environmental laws to find out what these laws require companies to submit and then ask for these records.

Many of the best environmental journalists use FOIA laws on a regular basis to pry out of state and federal agencies information that few other journalists ask for. Once you start reporting and writing these stories, chances are likely that individuals in these agencies will call you up to provide other useful information.

Cultivate these people! Meet with them and get to know them. Many state and federal environmental agencies are filled with altruistic people who genuinely care about improving the environment. You may discover inspectors or enforcement officials who are disgusted with the politics they see in their agency and who are willing and even eager to talk to you about the political pressures they see and experience.

To track the hot issues at the EPA, you can also check the enforcement docket or even use FOIA to request all the FOIAs that have been filed. Multiple FOIA requests for a particular waste site, for instance, can signal a brewing storm over cleanup.

Some regulatory agencies also use weekly or monthly "activity reports" that can help you track issues.

Developing sources within agencies and organizations is crucial for most journalists. I'm a strong believer in cultivating what I call "front line people." These could be inspectors within an agency, nurses in an emergency room or neighbors living near a nuclear power plant or chemical factory. They often are eyewitnesses to all sorts of activities and can really tell you what is going on.

Sometimes important sources aren't official or even immediately obvious. When I've written about water pollution being discharged into a river by a chemi-

(Continued next page)

cal company, I've sometimes found it useful to interview anglers, swimmers or water skiers who utilize the river to get their views on the situation. When I've written about air pollution, I've interviewed window washers, city foresters and pilots.

I'm a strong believer in basing environmental reporting on accurate scientific information. It's important to understand the basics of biology, chemistry, geology, meteorology, ecology and other scientific fields. When I began reporting about the environment I had never taken a course in environmental science. But I enrolled in a "fundamentals of ecology" course at a local community college.

If this is not possible, at least buy some basic books on environmental science, read them and use them as reference works. Among the classics are books by Eugene Odom. Other useful books include "The Dictionary of Ecology and Environmental Science," edited by Henry W. Art (Henry Holt) and "The Encyclopedia of the Environment," edited by Ruth A. Folen and William R. Eblen (Houghton Mifflin).

Science professors at local universities can often be very helpful. When I was writing about toxic waste problems in Kentucky for the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, I found several chemistry professors at the University of Louisville who were willing to take the time to explain to me basic principles of toxicology and to loan me useful books and articles to read on the subject.

One helpful University of Louisville chemist was even willing to run scientific analyses for me. I needed to find out whether well water in a suburban community was contaminated with toxic chemicals from a nearby factory. State environmental officials lacked the staff or resources to carry out such tests. But the University of Louisville professor conducted these tests for me and I was able to use his analysis in stories I wrote for the newspaper.

If you need to find scientific experts, consider using the Media Resource Service (www.mediare-source.org) of Sigma Xi, a scientific research society in North Carolina. This nonprofit organization has compiled a list of more than 30,000 scientific experts who are willing to be inter-

viewed by the news media. They can be especially useful when you need to track down an expert on deadline.

Another valuable resource is ProfNet, (www.profnetwork.com) which links journalists with professors and other experts at universities and research centers around the world. If you send a question to profnetwork@profnetwork.com, your query will be distributed to public relations professionals at many universities who will then assist you in finding answers to your questions.

There are two easy sources for information about chemical hazards available in most communities in the United States. The first is the local Poison Control Center. The second is the local fire department. Both organizations have access to databases and reference tools for helping you find out whether specific chemicals spilled during an accident or fire are a threat to citizens in your community.

You can find out some background information about chemicals in your local community by calling up www.scorecard.org, a website established by Environmental Defense. If you type in your community's zip code you'll find which companies are storing and discharging chemicals into the environment.

Another useful site is the website of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (www.epa.gov) which also supplies information by zip code. The EPA has other useful information, including details about chemicals, at www.epa.gov/docs/chemfact. You can also find background information on the toxicity of chemicals by calling up the web site of Michigan State University's Institute for Environmental Toxicology (www.iet.msu.edu) and clicking onto the area for journalists.

Other useful websites for environmental journalists are the Knight Center for Environmental Journalism at Michigan State University (www.environmental.jrn.msu.edu), the National Association of Science Writers (www.nasw.org) and Bill Dedman's Power Reporting site (<http://powerreporting.com>).

Since scientific knowledge about the environment is not static and because new information is being discovered constantly, it's important to regularly attend con-

ferences and educational workshops. The Society of Environmental Journalists holds an annual conference (the 2003 conference will be in New Orleans from Sept. 10-14) as well as many regional events.

Among the other organizations which hold ongoing training programs for environmental journalists are the Knight Center for Environmental Journalism, the Institutes for Journalism and Natural Resources and the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, Mass.

Finally, remember to follow up both on your own environmental stories and

Resist the temptation to rely on media officials exclusively. Remain independent and ask to review the complete files on a company or a polluting organization. You'll often find nuggets of useful information in the files that never find their way into agency press releases.

stories written by your predecessors on the beat. Environmental controversies have a habit of receding from the headlines but in many cases never really disappear. They merely await the next new journalist who has been assigned to write about the environment for the first time.

Jim Detjen holds the Knight Chair in Environmental Journalism and is the Director of the Knight Center for Environmental Journalism at Michigan State University. He spent 21 years reporting about science and the environment for the Philadelphia Inquirer and other newspapers and was the founding president of the Society of Environmental Journalists.

Spreadsheets...(from page 8)

Excel stores a date in the form of a number — specifically, the number of days since Jan. 1, 1900. So Sept. 5, 1990, is exactly 33,121 days after Jan. 1, 1900. (To signify a time as well as a date, Excel uses a decimal, so that noon on Sept. 5, 1990 would be represented as 33121.5.)

Fortunately, there's an easy way to convert that "serial date" into something more familiar. Just click on cell F2, then on "Format" and "Cells." A dialog box labeled "Format Cells" will appear; click on the tab labelled "Number," then on "Date" in the box labeled "Category." Now, you can select any date style you want from the box labeled "Type." Just click on the one you like best, and then click "OK" to close the dialog. The contents of cell F2 will automatically change to match your choice.

That takes care of cell F2. But we want to copy the same formula to all the cells in that column. To do so by repeating the above steps would take roughly forever, but luckily that is not necessary. Instead, just click on F2, then position the cursor over the lower right corner of the cell, where a little box appears. When you do this, the cursor will change from a big white plus sign to a skinny black one. When that happens, hold down the left mouse button and drag it down the column a little bit. Then let go.

Excel will fill in the cells below F2 with the same formula, automatically adjusting the row number as it goes, so that cell F3 is filled with `=DATE(C3,D3,E3)` and so on. (If you ever want to override this feature, just put dollar signs in front of the cell addresses, like this: `=DATE(C$2,D$2,E$2)` to lock the formula on a row, `=DATE($C2,$D2,$E2)` to lock it on a column, or `=DATE($C$2,$D$2,$E$2)` to lock it on both.)

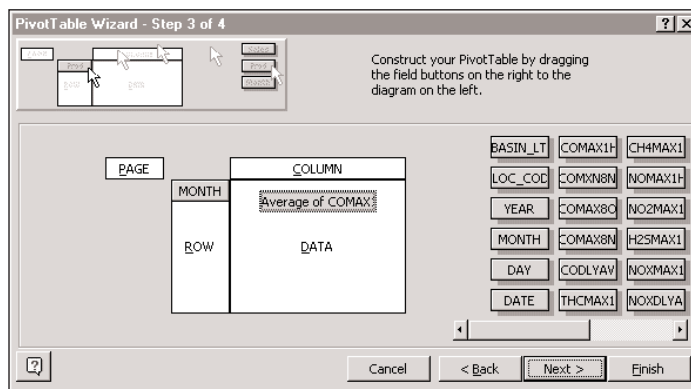
You can also copy a formula to a range of cells by using the old reliable copy-and-paste functions. This can make it easier to do when you have a large sheet, like this one. Just put the cursor on cell F2, hit Ctrl-C or Edit/Copy, then hold down the shift key and use "Page Down" to scroll through the entire page selecting the cells in column F. Hit Ctrl-V or Edit/Paste to copy the formula to the selected cells.

That's almost the end of this lesson. But first, let's perform some analysis on the data using the simple but powerful "pivot table" feature.

Start by clicking on "Data" and "PivotTable Report." When the "PivotTable Wizard" appears, click "Next," then go down to the bottom of the screen and click on the tab labeled "Sheet1," which is the worksheet we just used, and click "Next" again.

Now you can drag and drop fields to summarize the data. First, drag the field named "Month" into the box labeled "Row." Then pick up the field labeled "COMAX1HR," which represents the maximum one-hour-average carbon monoxide level for a given day, and drag it into the box labeled "Data." It will change to read "Count of COMAX1HR."

Double-click on it to open a dialog box labeled "PivotTable Field" and click on "Average" in the box labeled "Summarize by," then click "OK," followed by "Next." Select "New worksheet." Click "Finish." On a new worksheet, Excel will display two columns of data — the month ("1" being January and so on) and the average 1-hour CO value for that month.



The pivot-table wizard can be used to find average values for a column of numbers.

At a glance, you can see that the winter months — November through February — have the highest CO levels.

Save your work by clicking on "File" and "Save," then selecting "Microsoft Excel Workbook (*.xls)" from the "Save as type:" drop-down box, then clicking on "Save." Remember where you're saving this file. Next time we will use the same data in Excel to create graphs and other things that can help pick out trends from masses of data.

Russell Clemings did a more elaborate version of this analysis for the Fresno Bee's "Last Gasp" project, which can be viewed at <http://www.valleyairquality.com>.

Interviewing...(from page 10)

ing. With pen and notebook in hand, you can rather politely interrupt and ask for an explanation. Once you've broken the flow you can redirect the conversation to the questions you want answered.

Jot down your questions and a possible order. This helps you choreograph the

interview even though you won't stick to these questions as if they were a rigid script. Maintain flexibility when the interview goes in unexpected directions, but don't forget the core questions you want answered.

Be stingy in allowing subjects to go

"off the record" or "on background." On the record should always be the default.

Robert McClure is environment reporter at the Seattle Post-Intelligencer.

Romping through wine country — and feeling it shake

A TALE OF TWO VALLEYS: WINE, WEALTH, AND THE BATTLE FOR THE GOOD LIFE IN NAPA AND SONOMA

By Alan Deutschman

Broadway Books, \$25.00

A DANGEROUS PLACE: CALIFORNIA'S UNSETTLING FATE

By Marc Reisner

Pantheon Books, \$22.00

Forget France. Most people in Washington can't understand California. But two new books, one as frothy as La Jolla surf, the other as sharply cautionary as a shark-bitten seal on your favorite surfing beach, may help readers get a better sense of what it is to live on the economic, demographic and seismic edge of America.

As a Californian-in-exile it didn't hurt that I got to read them while on a trip to the Golden State during the great east coast blizzard of 2003. I was a week in southern California and another in the north, driving between on I-5, the heart of California's main agricultural valley, the San Joaquin, with its endless power-lines, noxious feedlots, cobalt blue irrigation canals and platoons of migrant workers tending row crops. Periodically I'd spot signs planted in the fields, "Water grows food and clothing," a nervous farm corporation's plea to passing motorists reminding us of California's never-ending water wars.

Oddly, water diversions and migrant labor are largely absent from "A Tale of Two Valleys," Alan Deutschman's romp across two agricultural valleys in northern California, the Napa and the Sonoma. While calling himself an "investigative journalist," the former writer for *Vanity Fair*, *GQ* and *Fortune* is much more of a stylist, a Tom Wolfe to Silicon Valley "plutocrats," their pastoral opponents and service employees. He captures a moment in time, just after the turn of the millennium and before the dot.com bubble burst. This was when a six-liter bottle of "Screaming Eagle" could sell for half a million at the Napa Valley wine auction to an unnamed man in black from Cisco, Inc. Here Deutschman's friends and subjects, high-tech bazillionaires, are building and buying their weekend getaway mansions, discomfiting the mere rich among the old wine-growing elite (old in California years, meaning post-1970s).

While putting up in their empty pool houses, he happily muses that he "could become a permanent house guest, the Kato Kaelin of the wine country." Still, it's not long before he's drawn to the bohemian rebels of Sonoma. Professional drop-outs, organic farmers, ex-ad men and third generation cheese makers, they're fighting a holding battle against upscale sprawl and in defense of their rural landscape and the free-range chickens who occupy the town plaza, taking occasional pecks at tourist children.

His tales of rebels in paradise, wealthy weekenders trying to go native and the "glassy-winged sharpshooter" — an invasive insect that threatens to literally suck the water out of the wine — make for a fun read although often as light as the lavender-flavored crème brulee he has at the end of another well-described local feast.

What I found lacking was the full spectrum of valley voices: the non-organic farmers, Napa City townies and most of all the people who actually pick the wine grapes that the world has come to cherish. "The Mexican workers don't like wine. None of them drink wine from the bucket at the end of the crush," he's informed

by the woman who's grown and now offers him a taste of that "Screaming Eagle" cult-wine. His failure to describe the \$15,000-a-glass wine I take as a polite demur if not outright rejection of a wealth- and status-obsessed moment in an otherwise tranquil valley. In a state that no longer has a single ethnic majority, it might have also been polite (and probably quite entertaining, given his natural storytelling ability) to hear from some of the less financially fortunate who toil between the plantings and the crush.

If the vineyard workers of Napa and Sonoma are largely invisible in Deutschman's book, the late Marc Reisner suggests that Californians as a whole have opted for willful blindness as their collective strategy for coping with the hydrologic and geologic realities of where and how they've settled their state.

"California," notes Reisner, "rather than settle its human hordes where its water is and earthquake zones aren't, has done the opposite."

Reisner, who died of cancer three years ago at 51, is the author of "Cadillac Desert," the definitive book on water in the West. In "A Dangerous Place," his slim, compelling and credibly apocalyptic final book, he briefly reprises part of that story, telling the darkly engaging tale of the gold-hunters, rogues and water thieves who built the Bay Area and Los Angeles into the urban megasprawls they are today.

He then introduces us to plate tectonics and the discovery that, by the late 1890s, 80 percent of Californians were living along some of the most active earthquake faults on earth. "In the late 1990s, the figure was unchanged," he reports. "It won't change, at least not much. What's there is there."

He next informs us of a "Delta Doomsday" scenario in which the San Francisco/Sacramento Bay Delta — which provides 50 percent of southern California's water supply, after generations of state-wide replumbing and water diversion schemes — could suddenly implode in a major earthquake.

Like the city of New Orleans, the long-subsiding farm "islands" of the Delta have become vast sunken reservoirs, dependent on built-up earthen levees to hold the surrounding waters back. And while a hurricane could create a worst-case scenario for New Orleans, its earthquakes that could cause a massive collapse of the Delta levee system, with the Sacramento River and salt-laden Bay waters rushing in to fill what he describes as "a man-made hole in the California landscape."

Having laid out the history and science, Reisner goes on to visualize a major quake taking place on the Hayward fault on the afternoon of Feb. 28, 2005. It begins with a noise that, "emanates from the basement of time, a Cyclopean orchestra tuning instruments." He describes the shaking and collapsed buildings in areas of liquified landfill, the loss of parts of the Bay Bridge and transportation infrastructure, and his own desperate efforts to link up with his wife and children before the Delta collapse. He also speaks convincingly of the "dreadful fascination" invoked by natural disasters, even as you're experiencing them.

As his death approached, Mark Reisner fought to see this book get into print. Its publication is both a timely warning about how we put ourselves in harm's way, and an unshakable monument to a writer of vision and insight.

— David Helvarg

Yogi's advice... continued from page 2

— and the endowment now totals about \$35,000. It isn't chopped liver, as my grandmother used to say, but \$3 million still looks awfully far away.

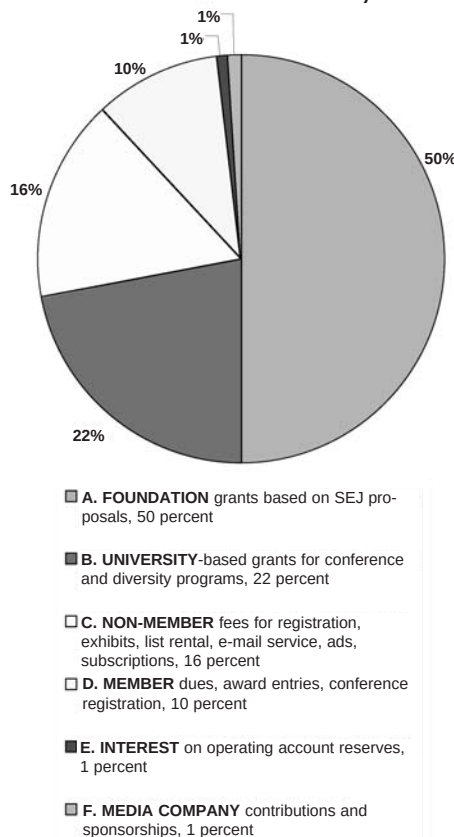
That brings us to Yogi's fork in the road. For the last four years, the SEJ board has been pondering how to broaden our contributor base without changing the character of our organization. We know we don't want to accept grants from corporations, advocacy groups or government agencies, but what about individuals? Should we solicit endowment contributions from *anyone* who supports SEJ's mission to improve environmental journalism, even people who have strongly held views on environmental issues and are not journalists? Our financial guidelines allow us to accept contributions from those people. But is now the right time to begin actively soliciting contributions from this so-called "large universe" of potential donors? What if we accepted an endowment contribution from an officer of an oil company, for example, or a movie star who is also a well-known environmental activist? Would that create a conflict of interest for SEJ, or at least the perception of a conflict of interest?

To answer those questions, the SEJ board surveyed our members and other journalism leaders, and also engaged in a long-running internal discussion about what we should do. We asked all of our members about the issue in 2001 in conjunction with an update of our five-year strategic plan. In recent months the board did yet another survey, this one of prominent members of our profession, including many SEJers. We interviewed 38 high-level editors, ethics experts, broadcasting executives, working reporters, journalism professors and officers of non-profit groups, among others. As you might expect, we got a range of opinions. But the clear majority view was that we could undertake a so-called "large universe" approach to endowment fundraising without compromising SEJ's independence or identity, as long as we first establish some unambiguous rules, including a strict and explicit "no strings attached" policy for accepting gifts.

As the conversation continued from one board meeting to the next, I found that my own views evolved. When I first joined the board three years ago, I had serious doubts about whether SEJ should solicit non-journalists for endowment contributions. I certainly didn't decide to run for a board seat in order to raise money; my interest was in helping SEJ develop some more great programs to serve our members. Besides, I reasoned, we're not facing a budget crisis, so why mess with a fund-raising system that has managed, so far, to get us from one year to the next without having to cut back our programs?

The more I thought about it, though, the more I realized that the time to build an endowment is when we're *not* facing a budget crisis. That way, we won't feel at all pressured to weaken our standards or change the character of our organization in a desperate attempt to stay afloat. After closely watching SEJ's board and staff in action over a period of years, I also concluded that this group is strong enough, and committed enough to SEJ's core values, to keep its bearings even in the midst of a major fund-raising effort. Building an endowment is not a task for the desperate or the weak. SEJ is neither.

SEJ Revenue Sources, 2002



As it turned out, almost all of the other members of the SEJ board came to a similar conclusion. As I hope you all know already from reading the letter and listserv posting announcing the decision, the board voted 11-2 in April to move ahead with a "large universe" endowment campaign aimed at raising \$3 million over five years.

The two board members who voted no believed there was no way to adequately guard against the perception that a contributor was buying influence with SEJ, and thus damaging our hard-won reputation for independence. But I found myself agreeing with the substantial majority of board members who believe we can preserve our values, protect our reputation *and* achieve long-term financial stability as long as we articulate some clear principles to guide our endowment campaign, and then stick to those principles.

That's why the board decided that this campaign would commence only after another round of consultations, and only after the board draws up and approves written policies for the campaign based on four key principles: An insistence on "no strings" gifts, a conscientious effort to balance contributions

across the political spectrum, a clear and accountable fund-raising process, and an ability to reject any contributions that could harm the interests of SEJ and its members.

So that's how we got to Yogi's fork and why we decided to take it. But please keep in mind that the board's decision is not final. We're not going to write our endowment policies or launch the campaign until we hear once again from our members and other friends of SEJ. Have we made the right decision? What, specifically, should our endowment fund-raising policies say? Please tell us what you think!

By the time you read this, many of you will have already shared your ideas with us, we hope. But if you somehow missed the announcements and are hearing about this for the first time, it's still not too late for you to speak up. Please send your comments or questions to Board Treasurer Peter Thomson at pthom-

(Continued on next page)

son@sej.org or to me at dfagin@sej.org. Our hope is that we'll be able to launch this campaign at the annual conference in New Orleans in September, so please send us your ideas as soon as you can.

We'd also love to hear from you if you're interested in volunteering to help with the campaign itself. After all, it's going to take a sustained effort by a lot of people to secure SEJ's long-

term financial stability.

As Yogi said, "It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future." But I think it's safe to predict that SEJ will emerge from this process stronger than ever, and even more committed to our shared mission of improving environmental journalism.

See you in New Orleans!

Books... continued from p. 17

on Carcinogens" by the National Toxicology Program, several National Academy of Sciences reports (Including favorites "Pesticides in the Diets of Infants and Children," "Toxicological Effects of Methylmercury" and "Understanding Risk"), and "Status and Trends of the Nation's Biological Resources" by the U.S. Geological Survey.

Don't forget Rutgers' "The Reporter's Environmental Handbook," Todd Davis' "Brownfields," "News & Numbers" by the late Victor Cohn, Rodes and Odell's "A Dictionary of Environmental Quotations," "The Essential Researcher" by Maureen Croteau and Wayne Worcester, "Tainted Truth: The Manipulation of Fact in America" by *Wall Street Journal* reporter Cynthia Crossen, Detjen's "Field Guide for Science Writers," and "Media and the Environment" and "Who's Poisoning America".

Phil Shabecoff deserves his own paragraph for "A Fierce Green Fire," "A New Name for Peace" and "Earth Rising."

Robert McClure of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* recommends "Toxic Sludge Is Good for You! Lies, Damn Lies and The Public Relations Industry" by John Stauber who also wrote "Trust Us, We're Experts." He likes Michael D'Antonio's "Atomic Harvest," "Worlds Apart" on science writing by Hartz and Chappel and "Chemicals, The Press and The Public."

There are libraries on climate change alone. To me they start and end with Ross Gelbspan's "The Heat Is On." But there are many more, including Al Gore's "Earth in the Balance" and the anti-Gore "Environmental Gore" by John Baden. "The Change in the Weather" by *New York Times* writer William K. Stevens is thought provoking, or so says the back blurb.

For unusual perspectives on how companies can work on global warming, there is "Turning Off The Heat" by Thomas Casten, who ran Trigen Energy, and former assistant energy secretary Joe Romm's "Cool Companies." "The Atmospheric Sciences Entering the Twenty-First Century" from the National Research Council may be a bit too geeky and detail oriented, but it is useful. And then there are the vocal, often industry-funded global warming skeptics, such as Pat Michaels and Robert Bolling's "The Satanic Gases" and the more recent "Global Warming and other Eco-Myths" from the Competitive Enterprise Institute.

No matter what you think of him, Bjorn Lomborg's "The Skeptical Environmentalist" should be on your bookshelf. Another less noticed book looking sharply at the environmental movement is "Global Greens" by James Sheehan.

More on the should-read and must-read category, anything by the never-before-linked James O. Wilson and Carl Hiassen (yes, it's fiction, but it's fun and has healthy environmental themes). In terms of novels, go for John Hockenberry's "A River Out of Eden," which brings Northwest environment issues into a good thriller and along the same lines go for "Mean Hide Tide"

by James Hall. "Theodore Rex" by Edmund Morris is wonderful and gives insights into the start of the park and refuge systems. If you want water books, go for Sandra Postel's "Last Oasis." Recommended health books included: "Exploring the Dangerous Trades" by Alice Hamilton, Duff Wilson's "Fateful Harvest" and Jeanne Guillemin's "The Investigation of A Deadly Outbreak."

Bill Kovacs, vice president for environment at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, touts the chamber's book that makes fun of environmental leaders and purposely takes their quotes out of context to show how humorless they are: "The Environmentalists Little Green Book." On a more serious note, he recommends Scott Barrett's "really interesting" "Environment and Statecraft".

Former reporter turned enviro Frank O'Donnell, chief of the Clean Air Task Force, recommends: "A Season of Spoils: The Story of the Reagan Administration's Attack on the Environment" by Jonathan Lash and "Taken for a Ride: Detroit's Big Three and the Politics of Pollution" by Jack Doyle. That brings up the SUV-tome "High And Mighty" by Keith Bradsher.

Two-time Pulitzer winner — feature writing and explanatory journalism — Jon Franklin has two good reference books for putting science and environment in context: "Timetables of History" by Bernard Grun and Dainel Boorstin and the out-of-print "The Timetables of Technology" by Alexander Hellemans.

Environmental writers, Franklin added, should make sure they read Eric Hoffer's "The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements" because some of us are (although we shouldn't be) true believers, not to mention many of those whom we cover. He also recommends "How To Lie With Statistics" by Darryl Huff and Irving Geis.

Mostly Franklin emphasizes narrative writing and storytelling in science with his must-read list of oldies but goodies: anything by Nigel Calder, the 1926 science classic "Microbe Hunter," "The Lives of a Cell" by Lewis Thomas, 1969's "Life On Man" by Theodore Rosebury, 1974's "Fever! The Hunt for a New Killer Virus" and the more modern "Betrayal of Trust" by Laurie Garrett.

In terms of narrative writing he recommends "Confessions of a Storyteller" by Paul Gallico. And I have to add Franklin's own "Writing for Story: Craft Secrets of Dramatic Nonfiction by a Two-Time Pulitzer Prize Winner."

There's more, but that's a good enough start for a week's worth of reading.

Seth Borenstein covers environment, science and health for Knight Ridder Newspapers' Washington Bureau and has read very few of these books and should be ashamed of himself.

Lead... from page 21

ment to Detroit. State officials are considering the request.

Q: I also noticed that the first day of the series ran on a Tuesday and it appears the front page was basically a big map that referred to the series starting on Page 4A? Most newspapers would kick off a big project like this on a Sunday. Is this what the *Free Press* does normally, or is this something special? Why a Tuesday?

A: The *Free Press* never kicks off a big series on Sunday because we're in a Joint Operating Agreement with the *Detroit News*. The two papers produce separate editions on weekdays and combine to produce the weekend papers together. The *Free Press* gets the front page and other hard news sections on Saturday. The *News* gets them on Sunday.

We could have started the series on Saturday, but the news hole is typically very small. Then what do we do with the series on Sunday? We can't continue it on the front page. So we usually start series on weekdays.

Earlier installments were available on

the web for weekend-only readers.

Q: What's your advice for other reporters who want to look at lead and its impact in their communities?

A: Be persistent, look for the most compelling examples, and don't let civic leaders brush this problem off just because it's been around for a long time. It's still one of the biggest environmental and health threats facing America's young children.

Tina Lam, Wendy Wendland and Emilia Askari can answer questions about the series. Lam, the first reporter on the series, is now covering county government. Wendland, who writes about children's issues, and public health reporter Askari continue to write follow-ups on lead. Their e-mail addresses are lam@freepress.com, wendland@freep-

ress.com, and askari@freepress.com. All three can be reached through the main metro desk number, (313) 222-6600.

See the series on the Free Press website: www.freep.com.



Photo courtesy of THE DETROIT FREE PRESS

The *Free Press* took more than 400 soil samples for its lead series.

Mike Dunne, a reporter for The Advocate in Baton Rouge, La., is associate editor of the SEJournal.

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