

# Letters

## Etzioni's View of the Environment

Etzioni's editorial attack on the "anti-pollution fad" (22 May, p. 921) may have been painful to those of us concerned with environmental problems, but it was justified. Most public attention has focused on pollution and, to a lesser extent, wildlife conservation, as if these represented the sum total of the environmental crisis. This narrow focus has not only distorted the meaning of the ecology movement, but has given it an air of triviality. Pollution and wildlife conservation are problems of some importance, but they hardly rate, in themselves, the frantic attention they have received. Their actual importance is that they are symptoms of something far more basic: our refusal to recognize the limits inherent in our finite planet. A strong argument can be made that social injustice, hunger, and the war in Asia are also symptoms of our failure to perceive these limits, but unfortunately, these more important problems have not received sufficient emphasis from either environmentalists or the press.

The message of the ecology movement is that Earth is, in fact, a spaceship of limited size and resources, whose continued satisfactory operation is threatened by waste, overcrowding, and thoughtless tampering with the life-support systems. Etzioni is correct when he states that environmental problems have sometimes been exaggerated. They are, nonetheless, real. The "end of the world" probably won't come "within 10 or 15 years," but today's decisions *will* determine the quality of life enjoyed by our children and grandchildren. Some decisions may conceivably determine whether they survive at all.

It was especially appropriate that Etzioni commented that "our society and policy are still organized as if our real top priority was the production of consumer goods and their consumption." The ever-accelerating conversion of resources into garbage is, indeed, the chief characteristic of our culture. Such behavior is clearly irrational on a planet limited in both resources and garbage

dumps. The ecologist would suggest restructuring our institutions so as to maximize the fulfillment of human needs with minimum consumption of materials. The pollution problem would then take care of itself.

The goal of the ecology movement is to meet the *totality* of human needs, now and in the future. I suspect that Etzioni is therefore probably more in sympathy with the movement than his rather negative editorial would suggest.

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... Etzioni's view of the environment is too limited. The only aspect he considers is pollution. Taking a broader view, it becomes obvious that the environmental crisis deals with the whole human life support system: air, water, food, shelter, aesthetics, serenity, and what is generally termed the quality of life. Ugly cities, degraded countrysides, inadequate housing, dirty air and water, transportation snarls, upsurging crime, profligate use of resources, and increasing human degradation reflect years of neglect for the basic health of our socioecologic environment. This is our environmental crisis.

The answer to these problems is not the piecemeal approach of more housing, more jobs, and more material consumption. These were the attempted political solutions of the 1950's and 1960's, and, in fact, pursuit of these objectives alone will exacerbate the larger environmental problems now pressing in upon us. For example, Etzioni cites increased fuel costs to landlords as an unacceptable cost for pollution control; yet he overlooks the human and economic costs shared by all when we fail to control pollution.

Our current troubles are inevitably linked to expanding population and exploding technology in the limited space of our own country and the world as a whole. On the global scale, the coming crisis in man's relations with his environment is indicated by such evidence as the progressive increase in

atmospheric carbon dioxide and turbidity, and the depletion of commercial fish in the ocean. These are results of the total scale as well as the nature of human activity, and so long as human populations continue to increase as at present, there is every reason to believe that we are heading for disaster.

In America, coupled with this is our addiction to the concept of unlimited growth, the promotion of blatant consumerism, and the direction of much social and economic energy into frivolous aspects of society rather than basic aspects such as the construction and maintenance of livable cities, the artful development of our landscapes, and an exacting guardianship of our most fundamental resources of land, air, and water. What we need is a new political concept whose goal is greater harmony among all men and between man and his environment. This goal can be achieved only by recognizing basic ecological laws governing our ecosystem and by attempting to see into the mind-boggling maze of socio-ecologic-economic interdependencies that control and direct the growth or degradation of human society.

It is clear that control of population growth and movement toward a stable economy are basic steps if we are to survive as a healthy nation. Coupled with this must be reordered priorities that will funnel more of our national energies and wealth into rebuilding our cities and transport systems, cleaning our air, water, and land, and jealously conserving our renewable and nonrenewable natural resources. Only with this total approach, with its implied change in ethical values, can we expect to enhance the dignity of man.

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Etzioni suggests that current emphasis on environmental quality may be only a fad. . . . I sincerely hope that he is wrong. Certainly there has been a rapid swell of enthusiasm, particularly among students, as well as great interest by the mass media. And, unfortunately, there have been many exaggerated statements published concerning the environmental crisis. Nevertheless, this national concern, expressed also by the Congress and by the Administration, is not a sudden fad. In the case of water pollution, legislation has been progressively

strengthened since 1965, and the full appropriation of funds authorized some years ago is now making it possible to pursue pollution control at an optimum rate. The President is right when he states that the problem has to be attacked without delay: "It is literally now or never." I don't believe that the public commitment is shallow; the public can and will pay the costs. The additional cost for water and air pollution control, even at the higher level of the next 4 to 5 years, will still be only about half of the cost of garbage collection and disposal. The total national expenditure for all forms of waste control will be substantially less than 1 percent of the gross national product.

It is clear that Etzioni is unhappy about the possibility that pollution control might take attention and funds away from many pressing domestic problems. One reason for the strong support for pollution control may be that the public and the Congress are aware that at last we have all the tools—the laws, the scientific technical know-how, and the resources—to restore the quality of the environment to a much higher level, hopefully to a purity that hasn't been seen in this country for decades. Social problems, as opposed to engineering, are much more complex, and it is not clear that a given amount of funds can be guaranteed to improve schools or save the "57,000 Americans who will lose their lives on the roads in 1970." (Etzioni does not explain how this is to be done.)

Certainly, the elimination of pollution will not settle all other domestic problems. But a clean environment will make it easier to approach many of these social problems, particularly in the cities. It will improve the sanitation and the health of the very people who need help. Without doubt, the poorest people living in the least desirable parts of cities will benefit most from an improvement in environmental quality.

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... To state that if Louisiana's brown pelicans "were to disappear, it is still ridiculous to expect that the whole ecology would be thrown so out of equilibrium that our economy or society would collapse" is to view the problem through the wrong end of the telescope. The pelican's problem is of course not confined to Louisiana. A 1968 census along the entire Texas

coast turned up only 13 individuals and the prognosis for the West Coast population is equally dim. In 1969 the nesting season of the brown pelican in California and northwestern Baja California was almost a 100 percent failure.

From the estimated breeding population of 2000 pairs, each of which normally incubate a clutch of three eggs, only 150 young—none of them in California—were produced, a figure which recent field investigations by the San Diego Natural History Museum indicate will be even lower this year. As is now well-known, these nesting problems have been traced directly to DDT through a compelling chain of evidence, including the demonstrated inverse correlation between eggshell thickness and DDT residues in the eggs of several species of pelagic birds and the presence of as much as 2500 parts per million of DDE, the principal metabolite of DDT, in the yolks of the thin-shelled California pelican eggs. The sudden extinction of the brown pelican and other birds such as the bald eagle, the osprey, and the peregrine falcon will probably have little direct ecological impact. But when viewed as a symptom of a widespread and accelerating deterioration of our environment, and in fact of the very food supply upon which the ever growing human population must increasingly depend, the problem assumes its proper magnitude and character. . . .

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Etzioni believes that human problems should be handled before problems of the nonhuman environment. Unfortunately even a city slum dweller is affected by the nonhuman environment. A change of climate or only an increase in the CO<sub>2</sub> concentration of the atmosphere (and environmentalists warn about the layer of pollution which the SST would leave behind) could cause a rise in temperature. The melting ice caps of the globe could raise the level of the ocean to make Manhattan uninhabitable.

Poisons that kill laboratory animals are taken seriously, and hazard to man is inferred. But environmental poisons killing vegetation and wildlife are dismissed as unimportant. On the contrary, the death of brown pelicans *does* imply that the spread of insecticide poisons may be a hazard to man, be-



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cause man, like the brown pelican, is at the end of the food chain. The dead pine branches along the roads leading to Boston, and presumably to any city, indicate that pollution is killing trees, and to believe that man is resistant while vegetation is not is probably unwarranted. Environmental problems affect the purity of water supply to city dwellers, the disposal of their garbage, their ability to find swimming beaches or recreation areas.

There is no question that the lot of the disadvantaged should be improved and that education is in a crisis. Education must concern itself not only with the problems of people, but also with the problems of biology as it relates to man, a relationship that Etzioni appears not to see.

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Etzioni's editorial is the type of irresponsible article which should not appear in a scientific magazine. He offered no concrete evidence that "newly found environmental dangers are vastly exaggerated," or that a great number of people do not face starvation and plague within the next 10 to 15 years. While Etzioni and his contemporaries quibble about which priorities have priority, the world population continues to grow at an alarming rate (doubling every 35 years). Unless the population growth can be stopped, none of mankind's environmental problems can be solved.

LEON MATTICS

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*The above excerpts from letters commenting on Dr. Etzioni's editorial are representative of more than 35 letters which were received. Lack of space prevented publication of others.—ED.*

In the few months that have passed since my editorial was published, the antipollution fad has already subsided considerably. By fall the ultraactivists should be ready for the new Cause of the Year, while those of us seriously committed to fighting pollution can settle down to the long, arduous, significant project before us.

A major question raised by practically all the letters published here (and in the many others which reached me) concerns the definition of the problem. My editorial dealt with pollution; most of my correspondents see it as an inte-

gral part of the environmental crisis, in which they include overpopulation, hunger, lack of housing, crime, and more generally, the quality of life. Here too, the dangers are often exaggerated; most experts now agree that we are not about to run out of prime resources, or to multiply to the point of global starvation. But, I do see a more immediate and severe threat in any one of these problems than in that posed by pollution, which is one reason I referred to its abatement as the wrong *top* priority.

To roll all these problems into one, or to assume that by handling any one we can seriously help solve the others, is a grave mistake. A detailed examination would show that most problems are *not* that closely interrelated and that they differ in their degrees of linkage. For instance, the reduction of pollution alone would have little effect on the other problems listed; effective population control could do relatively much more for pollution control.

But, if lump we must, let me say that improving "man's relations with his environment" benefits little from a wild pell-mell onslaught, but requires the kind of sustained, encompassing, deeply based effort I advocated. And, if there must be one central Archimedean point, I still see it as the shifting of our collective energies away from the production of more consumer goods and wars, toward our impoverished domestic public sector.

As to the traffic fatalities, those could be cut very substantially: (i) by introducing the British road test for detecting drunken drivers (with a greater focus on the hard, rather than the social, drinker); (ii) by implementing the Swedish system of hard labor for all offenders; (iii) by asking our engineers to further develop a radically safer car; and (iv) by requiring the auto makers and importers to sell only these safer cars.

It seems that in expressing our concern we tend toward alarmist generalizations, throwing together everything from plagues to pelicans. However, sustained enlightened citizen participation in mobilization for change requires attention to the differences among the parts, to the linkages among them, to the points of leverage, and to the setting of priorities. A movement pursuing the most recent "fix-it" fad will not go very far, least of all, forward.

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