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Natural Beauty and Conservation

Science and technology have led to an affluent society, a population explosion, and a concentration of our people in urban areas. But while the number and concentration of human beings has increased, the quality of living has in some ways diminished. The affluence that provides so many automobiles brings with it air pollution and great parking lots in the form of expressways. Water pollution has robbed us of much potential recreation and simple pleasure; once-beautiful rivers now are little better than open sewers. Disposal of the solid waste of cities is a noxious and growing problem. Discarded automobiles increasingly litter our countryside as low prices for scrap make them practically worthless.

President Johnson emphasized his concern about these matters in a recent White House message on natural beauty. Recognizing that most of our population resides in urban areas, Mr. Johnson devoted part of his message to a call for improving the beauty of cities. He wrote of the contrasting effects of ugliness and beauty on man's spirit. Perhaps he wrote from a background of personal experience, for many who live in the nation's capital find great pleasure in its numerous vistas. Most cities are not so fortunate as Washington. They are constructed on an ugly pattern, and so they will remain, though the dreariness may be relieved somewhat if the President's recommendations for an Open Space Land Program are implemented. This program would provide matching grants to help urban areas obtain land to serve as open space. In addition, city governments would be helped to acquire and clear areas to create parks and playgrounds.

Part of the President's message was devoted to the countryside. He recommended the establishment of 12 additional national parks. All who have enjoyed the existing parks will support the needed legislation. President Johnson sounded another welcome note when he stated that he is taking steps to encourage a national system of trails. These would include abundant trails for walking, cycling, and horseback riding in and close to our cities.

Another part of the message was devoted to water pollution. In principle, the problems of sewage and industrial wastes can be controlled by legislation. There are other problems of pollution that were not mentioned in the report and that are of scientific interest. The task of revitalizing Appalachia is complicated by the pollution of water there by acid mine water. When exposed to air, sulfides in coal are oxidized, and sulfuric acid is produced. A more subtle kind of pollution occurs in rivers like the Potomac. The clear effluent from a treatment plant provides a rich source of nutrients (fixed nitrogen, potassium, and phosphate) for algae. On sunny days, a great algae bloom occurs in the slow-moving river. Often cloudy days follow, and the algae consume more oxygen than they evolve. The water can become anaerobic; fish die, and the river may become much like a sewer.

The President proposes only limited action on the problem of air pollution; a modest \$24 million is budgeted for air pollution programs. In addition, he has promised to discuss with automobile manufacturers means of reducing pollution from liquid-fueled vehicles.

The problems involved in improving the quality of life are difficult; some are almost insoluble. It is good to find that the matter is getting top-level attention.—PHILIP H. ABELSON