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After the Stockholm Conference

The fate of the U.N. Conference on the Human Environment, scheduled for June 1972 in Stockholm, is in doubt. The Soviet Union and other Communist countries have threatened to withdraw over the issue of East German participation. Preparations for the conference are nearly complete. The Secretariat has finished its work on the basic conference papers, which deal with the six principal themes: human settlements, resources management, pollution, education and information, development and environment, and organizational implications. Cancellation of the conference would not lessen the urgency of responding to these problems—it would delay action.

Whether or not the conference takes place, the preparatory effort has had effects that justify the outlay of money and energy to date. Stockholm has sounded a global alert that has prompted a substantial number of countries to move environmental problems to the center of the political stage. It has spotlighted matters of concerns common to East and West as well as North and South. It has led to a new concept of economic development that includes concern for the quality of the environment. It has prodded governments to reorganize their institutions to accommodate environmental priorities on the national and international levels.

If the conference is held, we can expect an increasing volume of news and comment concerning it as we approach the June dates. Reporters will engage in their usual practice of building up the story. Greater expectations will be raised than can practically be achieved. In part, this is because of the difficulties of achieving common action by more than 100 jealous sovereign states. In part, disappointments would be in store because there are no magic wands or quick paths to a clean environment, to proper resource management, or to solutions of related, complex social problems. One impediment to achieving a livable environment is that we do not really know in quantitative terms what we are trying to achieve. Man has had many adverse effects on the environment, but we have not identified all, or even probably most, of these effects. Beyond that, we are largely uninformed as to rates of change of cogent variables. We have only to contemplate how little is known about environmental effects in the United States and its surroundings to get a picture of how poorly the situation is known in many parts of the world.

We should not expect miracles from Stockholm. Instead, the scientific community, for its part, should begin to look beyond June to the years of sustained effort that will be necessary to fill the voids in our knowledge and to build a basis for informed global action. Already stimulated by the conference, one basis for future action has been outlined in a report entitled *Global Environmental Monitoring*.^{*} This document was prepared under international auspices by a high-quality commission. The report identifies major crucial variables to be measured and outlines components of a monitoring system. It also discusses the technical organization needed for a coherent global monitoring system.

If the Stockholm Conference is canceled, many people throughout the world will feel despair, for it will seem that man is unable to submerge small political considerations to gain common objectives. But there is a brighter side to the picture. The Stockholm conference has already justified the efforts devoted to it, and we begin to see something of the continuing efforts that will go on after June.—PHILIP H. ABELSON

^{*} *Global Environmental Monitoring*, a report submitted to the U.N. Conference on the Human Environment (Scientific Committee on Problems of the Environment, International Council of Scientific Unions, Stockholm, Sweden, 1972). Copies are available from Dr. Bengt Lundholm, Swedish Natural Science Research Council, Sveavägen 166 8tr., S-113 46 Stockholm, Sweden.