

PANEL: "THE ROLE AND IMAGE OF THE PROFESSIONAL ECOLOGIST IN THE 70'S"

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The role of the professional ecologist must be related to the particular function that each person concerned with the relationship of man to his environment occupies. To the legislator, that role is unique and important, for only out of sensibly planned programs of management of our resources and our practices can come, within the time now available to us, an effective reorientation of our practices.

Man has historically treated our environment as an inexhaustible resource to be utilized on short term perspectives. This conduct has been, particularly since the industrial revolution, a way of life. In fact essentially a religion, when we recall the biblical admonition to subdue the earth.

We have done that quite well. In fact, there is nothing in this world not subject to the capacity of men to destroy. It is even becoming quite evident that at present rates of resource destruction and environmental pollution, man is about to destroy even himself.

These habits, with their effects now evident, must change or else we must acknowledge to ourselves and admit to future generations that we, not someone else, but we, have deliberately either by design or failure to act placed a time limit on the opportunity of man to in any sensible relationship exist upon this closed and finite system, the earth.

That change, if we accept that responsibility, must come soon or it will not come at all. Evidence of the incapacity of nature to accept our pillage is at hand. Our canary in our mine lies on the floor of its cage. The inventory of the causes of its passing are known. Our responsibility is quite evident. We obviously must act, but how? As individuals, impossible. In our complex society, can we demand individual treatment of wastes? Can we demand that we transport ourselves in pollution-free transportation and such transit is available? Can we prohibit eutrophying detergents without there being alternatives in the marketplace? Can we control the use of pesticides without substitute systems of agriculture?

And even more important, can we instill new habits, new morals and new priorities in our society, including environmental concern as an indispensable element of economic decisions.

Those answers beyond the capacity of the individual to produce must come from organized, sensible programs, and those programs must come from government in all its branches: legislative, executive and judicial. There is no time for revolution.

Speaking briefly to one responsibility, that of the legislature. It is from that source, most responsive to the people, that we should sensibly expect the initiative of change. It would be ruinous indeed if that responsibility were neglected or even delayed.

The tragic scene of judicial intervention which, even with the delays inherent in a judicial system, is found more expeditious than the legislative or executive process, is a sad indictment indeed of both.

The legislative branch of our governments can no longer shirk its fundamental responsibility. Not only must it provide the leadership to changed attitudes and conduct, but it must provide the sensible systems through which these changes can fairly be made and accommodated. Issues must be declared; public knowledge and understanding provoked; research stimulated to cut across the maze of contradictory information and open discussion initiated. Public participation must be provoked and encouraged and comprehensive planning and programs initiated that, step by step, properly coordinated, will successfully bring us to the point of environmental balance in which both man and nature as well can survive.

That is the legislative image I suggest. Without it I see little prospect for success in the struggle ahead.

