

What's wrong with environmental health?

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We in environmental health have a long history and tradition of being self-styled leaders. We have experienced decades of warm, comfortable, incestuous meetings and professional relationships in which we reaffirmed our leadership beliefs, perhaps with extra embellishment. For years, no one questioned our roles or competed. Few gave a damn, few questioned us, few had heard of this thing called the "environment," and very few even cared. We all learned to criticize the dangerous biases and conflicts of interest readily apparent in other agencies that dared to mess around with some of our "turf" as we defined it; and we didn't find it comfortable to even consider that any of our public health peers could possibly have such conflicts. And no one really cared.

Time crept by, but environmental problems, pollution levels, public knowledge and concern, spiraling populations, resource consumption, technological developments and byproducts, ecological crises, governmental inertia, and big-industry arrogance mushroomed while we continued to look forward to another meeting with our friendly peers in San Francisco, St. Louis, Atlantic City, Philadelphia, or Miami Beach. Man, I liked to think I knew all our leaders and I was proud and secure in this knowledge. Allegedly, there were giants in them thar days!

But others began to re-define this thing called the environment, and others decided that problems relating to energy, land-use, transportation, and population were more basic and important than pure health problems which most of us had been addressing through our tried and true programs developed by a leader we knew in city X, or even by the majestic U.S. Public Health Service. Others decided that "health" was not an end unto itself, but only one of several goals to be achieved in solving environmental ills. Still others decided that enforcement and regulation was an essential program tool while many of our friendly peers continued on their health education kick. And others got so distraught with our brand of "leadership," that entirely new institutional arrangements and program methods were developed much to our chagrin and disbelief.

Consumer and environmental protection became well-funded watchwords while we continued to mutter, "But what about health?"

What does all this have to do with APHA, the Section on Environment, and our policy statements?

It was Pogo who said - "'We have met the enemy and he is us.'" If we are to root out the enemy within, we must:

- 1) Recognize the environmental inertia within APHA.
- 2) Recognize that environmental protection may, at times, be in conflict with public health while pursuing the ecological principles of providing the greatest good for the largest number over the longest period of time.
- 3) Realize the truism that "everything is connected to everything else," that the demise of species of wildlife is not something to be ignored as unrelated to human health, but, to the contrary, are advance indicators - early warnings - previews of coming attractions.
- 4) Adopt a broad definition of the "environment."
- 5) Prioritize our efforts on the problems of this decade and the future, not the past.
- 6) Demand, with no thought of compromise, that APHA give emphasis to and be a spokesman for environmental quality on an equal par with issues of personal health.
- 7) Identify the conflicts of interest apparent in APHA, and publicly oppose them when they threaten actions or principles aimed at good environmental protection.
- 8) Make certain that the actions and principles we espouse are designed to protect the environment and consumers rather than protecting or promoting the interest of some polluters.
- 9) Address, through action as well as words, the true basic environmental problems, not just the symptoms.
- 10) Insure that our employing agencies, professional peers, and educational institutions follow these same patterns.
- 11) Join forces with the ecologists, conservationists, and other environmental activists whenever appropriate instead of criticizing these "Johnnies-come-lately" and being so intent on territorial defense mechanisms.

12) Create, plan, and promote concepts and actions instead of reacting, criticizing, and developing paranoia over the proposals of others.

Only then will we truly regain our tarnished leadership roles, recognize the enemies in our midst, and be more effective in our mutual struggle for a quality environment for this and future generations.

It couldn't happen to us, as we were the "elite corps." A feeble attempt was made to plug the dike and close the barn door, but the floods had commenced and many of the horses gone - some by theft, others by abdication of ownership rights, and many because they weren't branded.

We deluded ourselves by saying that the horses would return (they couldn't be handled by those unhealthy, inexperienced rustlers), that the flood waters would recede, we would still be leaders, and we could get back to insuring refrigeration of the mayonnaise through gobs of health education.

And even if the floods don't recede, nor the horses return to their knowledgeable leaders and masters, well, what the hell - the pay's the same and retirement age approaches. (Some of our best friends are retired.)

In general, the new environmental priorities, the new environmental dimensions, the new environmental program methods, the new multiple goals, the new emphases, and the new lights of public opinion are here to stay. Some of our peers have changed, others have chosen not to. The basic questions are - do we environmentalists want to be where the action is, retain or regain our roles of leadership, and be effective in the struggle to prevent and solve environmental problems? Or shall we, as in *Thanatopsis*, continue to be "sustained and soothed by an unfaltering trust like one who wraps the draperies of his couch about him and lies down to pleasant dreams."