

President's Message

Regional Commitment and Public Opinion: A broader perspective

...John M. Barry, Ph.D.

In the extreme southwestern corner of Poland where Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic come together, there is a soft coal fired power plant which provides approximately 10 percent of the electricity for the entire country. Across the river in Germany is another such plant, and nearby in the Czech Republic is a third. None of them has any controls for acid gases, and cumulatively there is a total emission of nearly three million tons of SO² per year. Prevailing westerly winds have carried acid gases toward the Sudeten Mountains, where nearly 75 percent of the forests have been either destroyed or adversely affected, and other acid deposition is affecting poorly buffered soils over a wide area of the European Community.

In other areas of Eastern Europe rivers and estuaries are bearing the brunt of human carelessness. In the Odra River basin on Poland, for instance, 98 percent of the surface waters, for one criterion or another, fall below the classification for industrial grade.

Prior to the Single European Act taking effect in 1987, there were no legal provisions for community environmental action. The current document now acknowledges the need to combine free trade objectives with a high level of environmental protection. But a second factor is now in evidence: European Community countries have realized that no country can develop isolation from attitudes. Public opinion has swung drastically in favor of a more environmentally and dynamically conscious community. In the city of Wroclaw, located in southwest Poland, newly elected leaders are not only young and enthusiastic, but they have a consciousness about the need to combine environmental protection with economic development. They have realized that a coordinated approach will result in a better quality of life for all, and that environmental practices condoned and supported by the communists were ex-

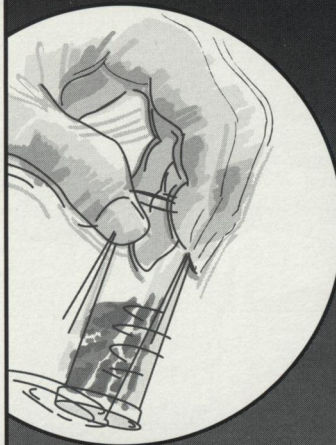
tremely detrimental not only to the environment, but to the health and welfare of the people. They also realize that a diversity of attitudes toward the environment is not only healthy, but is essential.

Environmental practitioners and elected officials in the European Community are learning what we in the United States have known for some time — public opinion and perceptions are very strong. It doesn't always matter who is right in an environmental negotiation, especially when perceptions are involved. Therefore, the true professional must recognize these perceptions and consider them along with the facts. You can wade into a confrontation or

environmental negotiation armed with all kinds of facts if you want to, but (to modify somewhat an old southern saying) facts don't do you a whole lot of good when you are up to your waist in perceptions.

For some Europeans, concepts such as regionalism and the importance of public opinion will be easy to learn — for others it will be a bit harder. But one way or another, they will learn (as hopefully our environmental professionals have learned) that *environmental issues are emotional, environmental decisions are political and environmental solutions are technical. Whoever controls any two of these will succeed in an environmental negotiation.*

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