

editorial

SCAREMONGERING OR COMPLACENCY?

When *New York Times* television critic Walter Goodman said, "John Stossel, who made his reputation as a consumer-affairs reporter . . . now maintains that in addition to raising blood pressures, the incessant scaremongering feeds public misapprehension and leads to the misallocation of public money," he probably spoke for many people who are sick and tired of scaremongering about a number of issues, including environmental problems. And Rae Tyson, of *USA Today*, expressed the sentiments of many people around the environmental debate when he said of the *New York Times*'s Keith Schneider at the 1993 annual meeting of the Society of Environmental Journalists: "Schneider has, in essence, suggested that we've gotten too complacent, [and] he's probably right. For years, we have been writing or broadcasting stories that seldom question some long-held assumptions about the toxicity of dioxin and other environmental contaminants. Basically, he's challenged us to return to many of those assumptions and take a fresh look."

In one sense, they are correct. Assumptions always should be challenged. Neither journalists nor the rest of us can ever become complacent about environmental problems, be they local or global. The future of the world is too important to be left to the complacent and the comfortable.

In another sense, however, their statements are wrong—or at best misleading. They leave the impression that, when we stop being complacent and start really investigating, we will find that there are no environmental problems at all, that they are merely media hype.

As readers of this magazine well know, that is far from true. Yes, when one looks closely at environmental data, some problems appear less serious than conventional wisdom suggests, but others seem worse. For example, PCBs and dioxins may be, as some claim, slightly less harmful than they appeared to be when they first leapt into public view, and alar may not be the scourge it was once thought. But some problems, like radon, may be much worse than they once seemed.

The point is, we do have serious environmental problems, and we do need scientific data to understand them and to develop the analyses that will aid in their resolution. Complacency in either direction will do no good; data and understanding will.

The purpose of this magazine is to bring its readers the most up-to-date information and analyses of worldwide environmental issues and to encourage readers' participation in the debate. As we continue to do that, we hope that you will continue to respond with your questions and comments.

—ALAN MCGOWAN

Cover: Slash-and-burn agriculture—long denounced as environmentally ruinous—is now recognized as a catch-all epithet for a wide variety of farming systems, many of which are sustainable. (Photograph: Photographers/Aspen—David Hiser)

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