



Environmental Advocacy

Prospects for the Twenty-First Century

by J. W. Anderson

PALM SPRINGS, California, April 22–23—Alliances between greens and business will be central to environmental progress in the next century, a succession of invited speakers told the RFF Council at its annual meeting. (This is the group of individuals, foundations, and corporations that provide significant support to RFF.) But those alliances will be uneasy, several environmental leaders emphasized, and the subject of continuing controversy among their organizations.

“We have a low comfort level” with broad agreements with business corporations, observed Mike McCloskey, about to step down as chairman of the Sierra Club. Case-by-case cooperation, he said, is preferable.

Paul Portney, president of RFF, asked whether corporations are not more likely than national governments to carry the developed economies’ environmental standards abroad. Joshua S. Reichert, director of the environment program of the Pew Charitable Trusts, briskly replied that he hoped not. There are opportunities to work productively with business, he said, but the goals of corporations and of environmentalists are fundamentally different.

McCloskey agreed that multinational corporations are likely to build to U.S. environmental standards abroad, but doubted that they could make much difference in countries like China, India, or Russia.

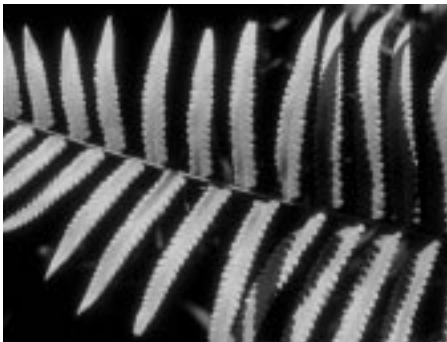
The Council session was devoted to the direction that environmental advocacy is likely to take in the years ahead. Pressure for alliances between green organizations and their sometime adversaries in the business world is rising for two reasons, the increasing importance of international environmental issues and the deadlock in Washington over national policy.

Marcia Aronoff, deputy director for programs of the Environmental Defense

Fund, said that, because of the deadlock, her organization saw little hope of persuading federal regulators to tighten their rules for paper-making. Instead it went directly to McDonald’s restaurants and persuaded it to use less, and different kinds of, paper for its containers and wrappers. When the dominant corporation in the field changed its practices, other companies in the fast-food business rapidly followed.

Privatization is good for the environment, John E. Bryson told the Council. Bryson, a co-founder of the Natural Resources Defense Council, is now chairman and chief executive officer of Edison

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International and its subsidiary, Southern California Edison. Drawing on his experience as a former chairman of California’s Water Resources Control board, he said that it was relatively easy to enforce the law on private corporations, and almost impossible to enforce it on the state’s two biggest violators of the water pollution rules—the cities of Los Angeles and San Francisco. Environmental advocates who keep a close relationship to business, he argued, tend to have greater effect, at lower cost, than those who are adversarial.

Adversarial tactics have vigorous defenders. Luke Cole, of the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation’s Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, foresaw more attacks on corporate charters and criminal actions against businesses in environmental cases.

He chided what he termed the traditional environmental movement for “fusing” with business.

But environmentalism itself “is a social change movement,” retorted Mark Van Putten, president of the National Wildlife Federation. “One of its great assets is the passion the believers bring to the cause.”

Victoria Tschinkel, a member of RFF’s board of directors (many of whom participated in this meeting), raised a question about indicators, from the size of new houses to the number of miles that people drive daily, that are moving rapidly in the wrong direction. The environmental movement is very middle class, she observed, and its organizations do not challenge middle class values. Aronoff replied that while few environmentalists were willing to dispense with, for example, air conditioning, they are receptive to producing it with the least damage to the ecology. But it’s also true, she wryly added, that everybody in China wants a car.

Some of the environmentalists at the conference acknowledged that they had not yet worked out effective techniques to deal with international issues.

“Tensions will continue to grow between the clean and the dirty parts of the planet,” McCloskey warned. These issues will become more salient as pollutants are better understood. International agreements are extremely difficult to negotiate, he said, but action solely at the national level is inadequate.

And yet, as Aronoff observed, with the arrival of the Internet, technology has given the environmental movement a powerful new tool. A worldwide communications system offering instantaneous speed at almost no cost, it promises to be a significant force, she forecast, in shaping green politics. ☸

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