

SEJ Journal

The Quarterly Publication of the Society of Environmental Journalists

Vol. 14 No. 3

‘Get the story talking’

Making connections between people and the altered land

By HEATHER DUNCAN

My series “Tied to the Land” was one of those stories we usually tell when we go home, but don’t put in the paper. By this I mean that I sometimes find myself passing up the most compelling aspect of a story because I’m planning to tell the one that fits journalistic conventions instead.

In this case, I had received a fellowship with the Institute for Journalism and Natural Resources that took me to Georgia’s low country, and I expected water issues to be the focus. Instead, what struck me was the similar descriptions we were hearing in various communities where livelihoods were threatened by changes in the landscape.

Farmers, fishermen and the Geechee descendants of slaves were all fighting to keep their access to a piece of land or water they knew like their own skin. In some cases, they were using

pretty creative and progressive approaches to problems of international competition or development. Crabbers, for example, had lobbied to reduce their catch size – not an intuitive step for most fishermen – to restore the crab population.

These people would never consider themselves environmentalists. But many uneducated, working-class rural Georgians are the ones that have the most intimate connection with a river, a field or a mountain. In a state without a strong environmental sensibility, I think this kind of connection is the only one that will really awaken residents to conservation issues.

I cannot claim to be the only fellow on my trip who had this insight. We all talked about it. When I went home, I told my editor about what I had learned, and (like going home at the end of the day) this was the story I was most excited about. But I thought my

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Editor’s Note: In this issue’s cover stories, two reporters, one a much-decorated veteran and the other a relative newcomer to the beat, tell how they took big concepts – overconsumption and connection to the land – and turned them into intriguing, award-winning series.

Inside Story:

The enormous task of writing about consumption

By MIKE DUNNE

The *Sacramento Bee*’s Tom Knudson recently looked at conservation and consumption, California-style, and came to the same conclusion as the cartoon character Pogo: “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

California is well known for its conservation tilt – setting aside old-growth forests for preservation, banning offshore oil drilling, having more restrictive vehicle-emissions standards. But it is also known for consumption – just think of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Hummers.

It was that dichotomy – or, perhaps, some would call it hypocrisy – that piqued the interest of veteran reporter Knudson. If Californians were saving forests here but gobbling up wood, then where did it come from? With cars drinking fossil fuels in Los Angeles’ famous traffic while off-shore oil drilling was banned, what was the source of all that oil being consumed?

What’s more, was California’s desire to preserve and conserve its own resources just exporting environmental problems that come from exploitation elsewhere?

Knudson found the answers when he looked at the forests in

Canada, denuded because of wood being consumed in California; millions of barrels of oil pumped from Ecuador’s sensitive rain-forest with little environmental protection or planning while Hummers buzzed LA freeways.

Knudson also Californians could learn something about saving resources from elsewhere. In California, the rockfish fishery was shut for over harvesting. But in Canada, the public rockfish resource had been privatized with quotas that not only were good for the fishermen, but apparently for the resource they fished.

The *Sacramento Bee* also did some introspection – looking at its own newsprint consumption and its impacts. It was a rare newspaper self-examination that said, yes, we are part of the problem.

The series brought a lot of awareness to the role of consumption versus conservation. It was aptly named “State of Denial.”

Knudson’s package of stories was the winner of the Society of Environmental Journalists annual journalism contest for Outstanding In-Depth Reporting – Print.

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SEJ's more mature and stable but also more fun

By **PERRY BEEMAN**

I'm here to tell you that SEJ is one mature 15-year-old. Any parent knows that teenagers have a reputation for flashes of maturity, nods to adulthood, some more than others. The teens also struggle to give up their juvenile past – and sometimes they fail.

Fortunately for all of us, SEJ seems to be maturing nicely, pushing past the age of insecurity and awkwardness. If there ever were serious questions about whether SEJ would grow into a firmly established, respected journalism association here for the long haul, those doubts are gone.

Consider these healthy signs as SEJ turns 15 in February 2005:

With the help of conference chair Don Hopey and staff conference coordinator Jay Letto (with a cast of hundreds plus generous underwriting), the Pittsburgh conference was the most elaborate we've ever staged. Maybe too elaborate in a logistical way, but certainly a good gut check on how many tours, panels, and other perks SEJ can throw into a single program. It worked. Sure, at one point Hopey resorted to wearing a Batman costume and used bathroom humor – that's the teenager fighting to get out – but we all loved it anyway (which says something about us). And so many of us couldn't help but hit the dance floor to the hard-driving beat of No Bad JuJu, easily one of the hottest bands SEJ has ever staged – and on a riverboat, no less. (Note to Austin conference co-chair Kevin Carmody: Two-steps have their place, but you can never go wrong with a horn section blasting charts from various genre.) We're looking forward to Burlington, Vt., in 2006 and are already talking to prospects for 2007 and beyond.

New leaders just keep coming. In the most recent board election, SEJ stalwarts Cheryl Hogue of *Chemical & Engineering News* and Bill Kovarik of Radford University won seats in their first attempt – not all that easy a task. A couple of other fine candidates didn't make it, but vowed to continue their cherished work for SEJ. The board lost Mark Neuzil and Brenda Box, whose contributions will be missed, but they are still in the fold.

Financially, SEJ is on solid ground. However, you never know when the next fiscal earthquake could hit. So we're going to spend the next year pushing hard for major gifts to our 21st Century Fund, the endowment. With leaders such as Peter Thomson and Christy George, we hope to earn enough interest money to help keep the SEJ office lights burning, and the conferences coming, far into the future.

Then we have the stable of SEJ programs, maturing every year. The awards program has had three years under its belt, thanks to the work of Dan Fagin, Natalie Pawelski, Vince Patton, Tim Wheeler and others who shepherded the long-sought program through its infancy. We are in negotiations with potential university financial partners who could ensure we are handing out etched glass for decades, always with an eye toward fine-tuning the categories, and perhaps adding new ones.

The mentoring program gained a few more volunteers at Pittsburgh, and appears to be another natural SEJ service that is here to stay.

Our work to reach out to a diverse membership continued with a stellar group of fellowship winners joining SEJ for Pittsburgh. Also helping is an effort by Wheeler, former president Emilia Askari and others who are translating portions of our website and other materials into Spanish.

Much of our trek into adulthood is the work of Beth Parke, our long-time executive director, associate director Chris Rigel, conference guru Letto, superstar staffers Carol Nolen, Cindy MacDonald, Linda Knouse and Joe Davis. Parke has been SEJ's den mother for a long time, somehow managing to keep board members flung from California to Iowa to New York working on their merit badges, keeping an eye on future advancement and playing well with other environmental journalists. It's been a wild

ride for her, and she deserves even more admiration than she typically gets. She doesn't ask for the spotlight, but she deserves one. I'm guessing if we tried to shine one on her, she'd decline the equipment rental request to save money for something else.

These next few years are critical in SEJ's future. Newspaper newsrooms are facing hard times, with layoffs, circulation book-cooking and the pressures of trying to find out why fewer people smell the soy ink on a daily basis. Climates like that tempt editors to cut corners, and the environment beat has always been a quick target. It seems as though many papers have discovered that

it's not, actually, the fad beat they thought it once was. They have realized, with SEJ's help, that the beat features hard news, investigative reporting and features about compelling topics. That, of course, also applies in the worlds of TV, radio, online, magazine, freelancing, book publishing and academia – other equally important markets for SEJ services.

Those reportedly tough budget situations have worsened an already pathetic constellation of news organizations' training programs for journalists. That's what makes SEJ that much more important. In addition to our website, listserv, *SEJournal*, tipsheets and other programs, we now are working with the Poynter Institute on News University, an online training program. We're hoping that editors consider zero airfare the right price and will back the cost of a reporter tapping into a series of specially designed units.

The trick now is to fine-tune SEJ's offerings while trying to take the roller-coaster ride out of the finances. Nonprofits always dread the next grant decision letter. We're always a few sentences away from real cash problems. Parke has done a phenomenal job the past few years taking us from what looked like trouble to a balance sheet that allowed some measured program expansion. The grant-seeking will ramp up, with more direct help from board members than in the past. This is different from the endowment. This is day-to-day financial support. Hopey had considerable suc-

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Report from the Society's President



By
**Perry
Beeman**

SEJournal

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Mike Mansur

Assistant Editor

Mike Dunne

Design Editor

Orna Izakson

Section Editors

BookShelf	Elizabeth Bluemink
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SEJournal will accept unsolicited manuscripts. Send story ideas, articles, news briefs, tips and letters to editor Mike Mansur, *Kansas City Star*, mmansur@sej.org. To submit books for review, contact Elizabeth Bluemink, bookshelf@sej.org. To submit to The Beat, contact Mike Dunne, (225) 388-0301, mdunne@theadvocate.com.

For inquiries regarding SEJ, please contact the SEJ office, P.O. Box 2492, Jenkintown, PA 19046 (215) 884-8174; Fax: (215) 884-8175; E-mail: sej@sej.org.

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Fall '05.....August 1, 2005

Winter '05.....November 1, 2005

A stand-up's view of the SEJ conference....or the real story of how SEJ swung the 2004 election

By DAVID HELVARG

Looking back at the election of 2004, few can doubt that it was the 14th annual Society of Environmental Journalists conference, held in the swing state of Pennsylvania (strategically placed next to Ohio), that ultimately determined the outcome.

While professionally non-partisan and explicitly not environmentalist (about half of SEJ members recycle while the other half litter), the conference broke through the campaign rhetoric about the war in Iraq, the economy, health care, God, guns and gays to focus on key wedge issues like combined sewage overflows and the risks of nanotechnology.

The first indication that this was seen as a make-it-or-break-it event by the two parties was the opening panel on Hollywood celebrities during which Ted Danson spoke of growing up in Arizona and absorbing a lot from his scientist-father (whose eco-rays also created one of the first Giant Gila monsters to appear on film). Film critic Myron Ebell of the Competitive Enterprise Institute suggested that Hollywood actors are mostly liberal and ill-informed, his backhanded way of saying that Arnold Schwarzenegger and Mel Gibson aren't truly actors in the thespian sense (though he still supports their right to marry).

After people volunteered hair samples to be tested for mercury (with surplus DNA going to the Department of Homeland Security), environmental journalism awards were handed out. Surprisingly, none addressed the highest profile environmental issue of the election, encouraging gay marriage as a way to reduce population.

On Thursday, people spread out to the districts for visits to failed nukes, dams, abandoned steel mills, decapitated mountains, robo-coal mines undermining homes and rivers, chemical plants that could blow up like Hiroshima, and catch & release bird banding, or as the SEJers put it, a fabulous day.

That evening Bobby Kennedy Jr. reminded SEJ that only 4 percent of broadcast stories are on the environment which led to an angry walk-out by the TV contingent, only later she told me she'd just had to go to the bathroom. He also suggested that the Bush administration is poisoning one out of six American women, although Karl Rove later issued a White House clarification that these were single women who tended to vote democratic.

The next morning EPA Chief Mike Leavitt refused to get political, instead focusing on the important anecdotes like the one

about a speech he gave in Las Vegas where he learned how to hypnotize an empty room, so that I woke up 20 minutes later as he was explaining how many unanswered questions remain on global warming, like how could the oil industry, that's such a major contributor to his party, also be contributing to climate change? He insisted he wanted to get "deep into mercury" perhaps to physically demonstrate that it's not a neurotoxin, and explained the administration's position of moderation between bumper stickers reading "Earth First - Mine the Other Planets Later" and "Save the Earth - Kill Yourself." I understood, being a gun moderate myself, somewhere between "Columbine was Fun" and "Stab all Gun Owners."

I next went to a panel that offered an "emerging infectious disease website," for reporters "that gives you SARS every three days, or Ebola, or whatever." Talk about your computer bugs! There was also discussion of nanotechnology but I can't see that as a big issue.

Other panels discussed older cities and sprawl (older cities sprawled on their couches watching FOX being a key factor in the morbid obesity vote). Emerging clues on air-sickness suggested small unregulated particles (not unlike campaign ads) affected not only the lungs, but the heart and other organs, failing only to reach the brain.

The FOIA and 9/11 panel was quite amazing. If you'd like to learn more you can appeal to the Justice Department.

The Ocean News was very in-depth while the sportsmen in the election season compared Kerry's approach (he wouldn't carry his own dead goose) to Bush's (he started killing small animals as a young boy).

I also heard that 32 percent of the world's amphibians are now at risk, not counting newspaper editors. And I learned Combined Sewer Overflows put the equivalent of 1 million Olympic-size pools of human waste a year in our waters, just about enough to float Swiftboat Veterans for Truth.

That evening, after the SEJ annual meeting - one too many suspenseful elections for me - we had theme dinners spread around various wards. Mine looked at the historic role of hops and brats and more hops in the development of Pennsylvania voting patterns.

I missed the "Cheerios and PIOs" breakfast Saturday morning, also the "Eggs and Endocrine Disrupters." The Science and

(Continued on page 23)

Photos by Mark Schliefsstein



Mark Schliefsstein, Peter Fairley, Ken Ward Jr., Sara Shipley, Jim Bruggers, Perry Beeman, Natalie Pawelski and Beth Parke, oh my!

SEJ conference mercury study

Nearly a quarter of participants show high levels of the metal

By SARA SHIPLEY

Nutritionists tell us to eat more fish, and many of us happily oblige by tossing down tuna sushi rolls, grilled swordfish steaks and poached salmon.

But fish's dark underbelly, as it were, surfaced at the Society of Environmental Journalists conference in Pittsburgh last month.

In the first study of its kind at an SEJ conference, nearly a quarter of 200 attendees who participated in a hair-analysis test had mercury levels above the limit recommended by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Fish consumption was the strongest factor associated with high mercury levels.

Even Jack Spengler, the Harvard School of Public Health scientist who oversaw the study, was surprised at the results. His own mercury level was 3.4 parts per million, more than three times the EPA limit of 1 ppm.

"This was not fun to find out," Spengler told SEJ members at a panel discussion. "I'm going to have to figure out what to do about this."

Mercury is a potent neurotoxin dispersed into the atmosphere from coal-fired power plants, cement kilns, hazardous waste incinerators, volcanoes and other sources. The mercury eventually settles into water bodies, where it accumulates in the food chain. Mercury tends to build up in predatory species, such as bass, halibut and swordfish.

Mercury exposure can damage development of the brain and nervous system in fetuses and children. Adults can stomach higher levels, but they, too, may be susceptible to memory loss, heart damage and other symptoms.

The Food and Drug Administration advises women of child-bearing age to monitor their fish intake. Forty-eight states have fish advisories recommending limits on consumption of certain kinds of locally caught fish.

Environmental groups protest the widespread contamination of an otherwise healthful food. Fish are low in fat, high in protein, and rich in heart-healthy Omega-3 fatty acids.

"People should not have to stop eating fish because they're afraid they'll get poisoned by mercury," Casey Harrell, an energy activist for the environmental group Greenpeace, said in a statement. "We need a president who will cut mercury pollution and move us away from dirty fossil fuels by investing in clean, renewable energy."

President George W. Bush's administration has announced plans to issue new mercury regulations for coal-fired power plants by March 2005. (See accompanying story: Mercury regulations coming, but in what form?) EPA officials have pitched a

cap-and-trade program designed to reduce mercury emissions by 70 percent within 15 years.

EPA Administrator Michael Leavitt, speaking at the SEJ conference, said that agency scientists are "rigorously" questioning assumptions about mercury emissions, which he described as a complex problem.

Critics of the administration's proposal say that the existing Clean Air Act rules, if enforced, would do a better job, removing 90 percent of mercury by 2008. Those rules would have required maximum emissions controls on each plant.

While the mercury debate rages, the issue is becom-

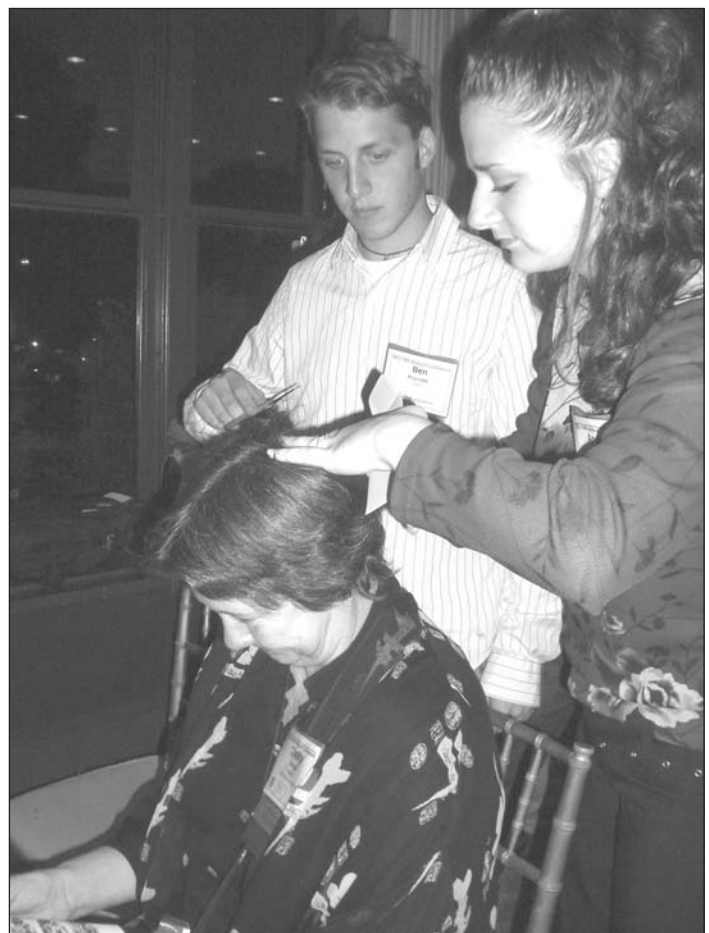


Photo by Vince Patton

Christy George of Oregon Public Broadcasting gets snipped

ing intensely personal for thousands of Americans who are having their own mercury levels tested.

The SEJ study, the first study of its kind at a journalism conference, was lead by the Harvard School of Public Health. Amazingly, the study team turned around the results in just three days.

Trained volunteers, many of them environmental journalism students from the University of Pittsburgh, snipped hair samples
(Continued on page 24)

**More on mercury:
see page 15**



Rousing ovation for Kennedy taints even those who sat

By **SETH BORENSTEIN**

I wanted to sink deep into the padded seats in the auditorium at the Carnegie Museum and disappear out of embarrassment Thursday night (Oct. 21, the second night of SEJ's annual conference in Pittsburgh). Not for me, but for my profession, and more importantly for SEJ.

Journalists were giving a rousing standing ovation – complete with war whoops – for Robert F. Kennedy Jr. The night before Teresa Heinz Kerry got a similar ovation.

How could we?

Many of us have fought hard to point out that journalists who cover the environment are not environmentalist journalists. We try to remain objective. The reception to Kennedy (after an insulting, error-prone, exaggeration-laden speech at that) gives ammunition to all those media bashers. They're out there.

Last year, one of them attended the SEJ conference and wrote a blistering piece for some alt-weekly. Had he been at the Kennedy speech, he could have painted us broadbrush as a bunch of anti-Bush partisans who only masquerade as objective journalists. I was tempted to lead a standing ovation for EPA Administrator Michael Leavitt as a backlash the next morning, but that too would have been wrong.

I know that only some people stood. Others sat and applauded politely. Dan Fagin tried to defuse my righteous indignation, telling me I have no right to impose my standards (I prefer the term "ethics") on others and SEJ's big tent is for different viewpoints. I'm all for a wide membership in SEJ, but when an audience gives a standing ovation to a partisan political speech, it taints all of us,

even those of us who stayed seated. And, yes, professional societies like SEJ do have a responsibility to set ethical standards. Doctors do it. Even lawyers do. Why can't we?

Number one on any ethical list has to be objectivity. Our duty is to remain OBJECTIVE, non-partisan reporters. If you want to be an advocate, more power to you, but don't taint the rest of us. Don't consider yourself an environmental journalist.

Probably most of the standing ovation came from non-journalists. Maybe we should separate ourselves in such events so as

not to be tarred by partisans who are visiting the convention. Dan Fagin said that wouldn't work and said many reporters joined in the ovation. If that's true, I'm more saddened than appalled.

When I cover an event, I don't applaud for anybody. But it is different when someone is coming to an event sponsored by SEJ. There we should be courteous and applaud politely. That happened for Leavitt. But Kennedy and Heinz Kerry got special treatment that tarred all of us. Later Thursday evening, one new member from a prestigious news organization told me how shocked she was at the audience's reception of Kennedy and it made her want to rethink her membership. She had been reluctant to join because she didn't want to part of something that was advocacy oriented. I

tried to explain that this was an aberration.

I hope I'm proven right.

Seth Borenstein is national correspondent for Knight Ridder Newspapers in Washington, D.C.

Viewpoint

Photo by Orna Izakson



Kennedy, before the applause.

SEJ members vote in new board, change bylaws

At SEJ's annual conference in Pittsburgh, members elected two new board members and returned three others to office. The SEJ board also appointed a sixth member.

Joining the board are Cheryl Hogue of *Chemical & Engineering News* and Bill Kovarik, journalism professor at Radford University. Returning members are Perry Beeman, *The Des Moines Register*; Peter Thomson, an independent journalist; and Tim Wheeler, *The Baltimore Sun*. All were elected to three-year terms.

Rebecca Daugherty, FOI Service Center director for the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, ran unopposed for re-election to represent associate members. The number of votes cast did not meet quorum rules, so the SEJ board then appointed her to a one-year term.

The board elected new officers. Beeman is president; Wheeler, first vice-president/programs committee chair; Mark

Schleifstein of the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, second vice-president/membership committee chair; Thomson, treasurer; and Carolyn Whetzel, *The Bureau of National Affairs Inc.*, secretary.

Voters approved 94 to 28 (77 percent) a bylaws change that will give the academic and associate board members votes on board business for the first time. Those board members will not be eligible to serve on the executive committee.

The vote did not change SEJ's longstanding bans on lobbying or public relations work relating to environmental issues. It left in place the criteria used by the SEJ board's membership committee to decide who is eligible to join and whether they should be considered active, associate or academic members. The changes also mean that future bylaws changes will require a two-thirds vote of both the SEJ board and the membership to pass. Previously, only a simple majority vote was required.



Pittsburgh conference jam-packed and fun

The Society of Environmental Journalists' annual conference in Pittsburgh, Oct. 20-24, was marked by politicians' wives, TV stars, trips on the Three Rivers – including a whale of a party on a freshwater vessel – and, of course, much discourse on journalism and the environment.

Nearly 720 people, nearly half of them SEJ members, registered for the 14th annual SEJ conference, hosted by Carnegie Mellon University.

Among the memorable moments:

- Batman made a brief appearance at the conference's opening plenary on Wednesday night, "Celebrity, Media and the Environment." Sam "May Day" Malone (aka Ted Danson), and real-life sports hero Franco Harris (Mr. Immaculate Reception) also came to discuss their views on protection of the environment.

- Our host university's president, Dr. Jared Cohon, made what may have been the first appearance on a panel – not in an opening welcome or a plenary introduction – addressing, of all things, combined sewage overflows. Cohon and his university have been active in the Pittsburgh region's efforts to address CSOs.

- At the SEJ membership meeting, SEJ staff announced that the organization had topped 1,500 members. The record high is due to many factors, including the popular awards program.

- SEJ conference attendees were greeted by volunteers with scissors who snipped a bit of volunteers' hair for a study on mercury levels in participants.

- In an amazingly quick turnaround, Dr. Jack Spengler of Harvard University presented the results of the mercury study on Saturday. Spengler, who told student reporters Wednesday that the study was an important way to make pollution personal and "change the nature of the way we think," soon discovered that his own mercury levels were high, as did dozens of other SEJ participants.

- Politics tinged the event and some attendees – some of whom may not have been working journalists – were so moved by Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s remarks they gave him a standing ovation. Kennedy assaulted the Bush administration and its environmental policies as well as the corporate use of the nation's natural resources and the media's coverage of the costs. "Truth is often far far away from balance and these days it's farther than ever," Kennedy said.

- The third annual SEJ Environmental Journalism Awards recognized TV, radio, online and print reporting, including reporters from *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Sacramento Bee*, PBS Frontline, CBC Radio Canada and *The Telegraph* in Macon, Ga.

- Numerous key science and government sources made pre-

sentations at the conference, including EPA Administrator Mike Leavitt; then-EPA science advisor Paul Gilman; Devra Davis, Director, Center for Environmental Oncology, University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute; and Stuart Pimm, Doris Duke Chair of Conservation Ecology at Duke University.

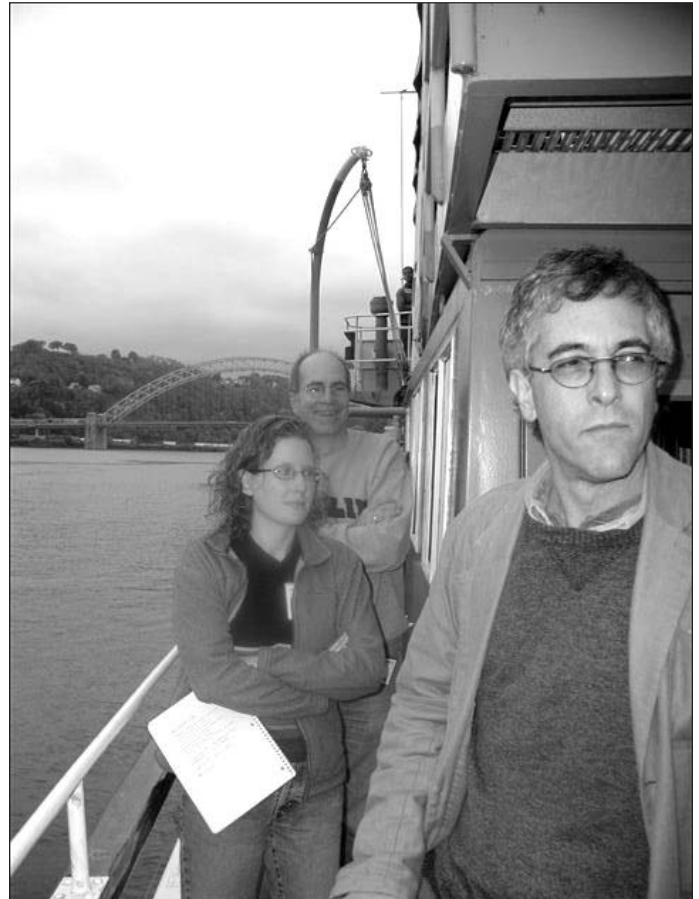


Photo by Joe Davis

Participants on the Pittsburgh rivers tour learned how to take their own water samples for environmental analysis.

- Other offerings included 18 tours, 41 panel and breakout sessions, 38 Network Lunch and Beat Dinner discussions, 47 exhibitors, two movies, two receptions and that Saturday night party on the Gateway Clipper.

If all that sounds like more than any organization could pack into four days of a conference, then you haven't been to an SEJ annual conference.



Photos by M. Schliefsstein & O. Izkson

Theresa Heinz Kerry, Andy Revkin, Carol Nolen, Ted Danson, Beth Parke, conference chair Batman, Peters Thomson & Fairley.

Everything is bigger in Texas



The state, the university, the skies above Big Bend National Park, the towering loblolly pines and expansive cypress swamps of the Big Thicket National Preserve, Big D, the 625 miles of Gulf Coast shoreline, Houston's petrochemical complex and port, the Texas State Capitol, and whooping cranes that find winter refuge at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge.

Come join us for the Society of Environmental Journalists 15th Annual Conference Hosted by the University of Texas at Austin, Sept. 28 thru Oct. 2, 2005

Come to Austin – deep in the heart of Texas – and experience this once-sleepy oasis for artists, hippies, musicians and progressive environmental politics which, in the past decade, has been transformed into a major U.S. metropolitan area of more than 1 million that is grappling with the pressures of maintaining its famously rich quality of life and scenic Hill Country beauty.

Conference planners including journalists from *The Austin American-Statesman*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, *Dallas Morning News* and *Brazosport Facts* are drafting a program designed to allow attendees to explore, either via tours or through panels, much of the state's stunning beauty and prized natural resources, along with the serious environmental and public health chal-

lenges facing Texas and America's Southwest. In an unprecedented endeavor necessitated by the state's geographic mass, we're working with Texas-based Southwest Airlines to arrange low-cost flights that will allow a limited number of one-day tour participants to visit the far corners of the state – perhaps to view refinery row on the Houston Ship Channel, stroll a Gulf Coast beach with scientists from the renowned UT and Texas A&M marine research centers near Corpus Christi, or trek a section of the high desert plains and mountains of the Big Bend region on the Texas-Mexico border.

For more information, contact SEJ at sej@sej.org or (215) 884-8174. Visit www.sej.org for updates.

Austin is served by all the major airlines, with American and Southwest providing the most schedule options, and regular fare sales providing roundtrip travel from many major metro areas for about \$200 or less. Our conference hotels, with affordable rates from \$119 to \$149 per night, include the swank Omni and the world famous Driskill Hotel, built by a cattle baron Col. Jesse Driskill in 1886 and recently restored to its former grandeur as one of the finest historic hotels west of the Mississippi. Both adjoin Sixth Street, the heart of Austin's music scene, and are a 5-minute walk from the more upscale restaurants, coffee shops and music clubs in the Warehouse District or along Congress Avenue.

Come say 'Howdy, Austin.' Learn to two-step. Ride a real mechanical bull in Texas. Catch a live act, maybe even B.B. King or Willie Nelson or Los Lonely Boys. You won't be sorry y'all came down. And we're serious as a heart attack 'bout that.



Society of Environmental Journalists
P.O. Box 2492, Jenkintown, PA 19046
(215) 884-8174, www.sej.org



Outstanding environmental journalism of 2003-04 honored at Pittsburgh conference

At the Society of Environmental Journalists annual conference in October, winners of SEJ's third annual Awards for Reporting on the Environment were recognized. SEJ awards honored outstanding work in nine print, broadcast and on-line categories.

Winners were selected by independent judges from among 253 entries submitted by reporters from throughout North America. Topics spanned the globe, from the search for signs of global warming in Antarctica to pollution in a municipal lake in Texas and to the changing environment and lifestyles of Georgia's traditional communities.

The number of entries, their quality and diversity impressed the judges and signaled a renewed interest in environmental journalism after a year in which the nation's attention – as well as the news media's – had been focused on terrorism and war.

First-place winners, chosen by independent panels of judges, received \$1,000 and a trophy, while second- and third-place finishers collected framed certificates.

In all, 24 entries from at least 38 journalists were honored for outstanding in-depth and beat reporting on the environment in newspapers and on radio, television and the Internet, as well as in small-market media.

Winners, by category, were:

IN-DEPTH REPORTING–TV: Paul Adrian, Paul Beam and Joe Ellis, for "Dirty Waters, Dirty Secrets" on KDFW-Dallas. The judges praised the "detailed and rock-solid investigative work that exposed a city government that was polluting a municipal lake while, all the while, enforcing pollution laws and levying stiff fines on citizens."

2nd: Ed Jahn, Oregon Public Broadcasting, for "Biscuit Fire Recovery."

3rd: Mark Schapiro, Camille Servan-Schreiber, Oriana Zill de Granados, PBS Frontline/World, for "The Lawless Sea."

IN-DEPTH REPORTING–RADIO: Daniel Grossman, for "The Penguin Barometer" on Radio Netherlands. Judges lauded his "subtle use of sound" and storytelling through the voices of his characters in this globetrotting treatment of the complicated subject of global warming.

2nd: Cynthia Graber, freelancer, for "The Ritual Uses of Mercury."

3rd: Monica Kidd and Jim Handman, CBC Radio Canada, for "Sonic Gloom."

IN-DEPTH REPORTING–PRINT: Tom Knudson for "State of Denial" in *The Sacramento Bee*. "Traveling from the rain forests of Ecuador, where oil rigs scar the land and people, to the boreal forests of Canada, where loggers leave clear-cut swaths of destruction, Knudson made his readers eyewitnesses to the



Orna Izkson, for SEJournal

A handful of the 2004 SEJ Award winners were on hand in Pittsburgh, but you didn't have to be present to win.

costs of their hunger for oil and timber," the judges wrote.

2nd: Cathy Zollo, Eric Staats, Janine Zeitlin, Jeremy Cox, Alan Scher Zagier, Chad Gillis, Dianna Smith and Gina Edwards, *Naples (FL) Daily News*, for "Deep Trouble: The Gulf in Peril."

3rd: David Ottaway and Joe Stephens, *The Washington Post*, for "Big Green," a series exposing problems and abuses inside one of the country's largest and most prestigious environmental organizations.

BEAT REPORTING–RADIO: Ilsa Setziol of KPCC-FM in Pasadena, Calif. Her range of topics, crisp writing and confident delivery impressed the judges, who called her reporting "accessible and never preachy."

2nd: Erik Anderson, KPBS Radio, San Diego, Calif.

3rd: Doug MacPherson, freelance journalist.

BEAT REPORTING–PRINT: Seth Borenstein of Knight Ridder Newspapers, Washington bureau, for outstanding coverage of what the judges deemed "an unusually wide range of envi-

(Continued on page 23)

From tennis balls to GIS: cool tools & techniques

By AMY GAHRAN

All journalists rely on tools and techniques to get their stories done. Which tools are especially useful or interesting to environmental journalists?

This was the focus of a Beat Dinner event at this year's SEJ conference. Our conversation ranged over things technical and Luddite that make environmental journalism easier or that open new possibilities for journalists. Here are the highlights:

Photos as note taking:

Co-host Chris Bowman of the *Sacramento Bee* explained how, when he goes out to cover a story, he always takes a camera (digital for him, but you could even use a throwaway film camera). He takes photos of his sources, the surroundings and anything that catches his interest – but not for publication. He uses these photos as visual notes to both jog his memory and supplement his taped or written notes. Sometimes he'll even spy important details, context or some incongruence in the photos that he didn't notice earlier.

GIS as an investigative and visual tool:

It's a good idea for journalists who cover the environment or many other beats to learn how to use mapping/locator resources and tools that rely on Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology. (More about GIS: <http://gislounge.com/library/intro-gis.shtml>) These include devices such as Global Positioning Systems (GPS) receivers and a wide range of free and commercial GIS-based resources. (Here's a good list of resources: <http://www.american.edu/radiowave>.)

Basically, journalists can use GIS data to literally map out stories. This can help you spot trends, connections, or inconsistencies that might not be obvious from reading data in text form.

A good book to get started is "Mapping the News: Case Studies in GIS and Journalism," by David Herzog, 2003, ESRI Press. Review: <http://snipurl.com/aoap>

Metadata is a journalist's friend:

Metadata is data about data. In other words, it's how people who create or use information describe that information in terms of parts and categories in order to enhance or expand how people access or use that information. (More: <http://snipurl.com/aoak>)

I introduced participants to the concept of metadata as it relates to content, especially news content (whether text, audio, video, or interactive). In a nutshell, I suggested that journalists and editors should understand what kinds of metadata their organization's content management system allows them to specify for the news content elements they create (stories, photos, supporting documents, etc.)

Don't leave this job up to IT people or anyone who was not involved in the creation of the story. This guarantees that accurate and appropriate keywords and other identifiers will be associated with your work. That not only enhances downstream uses of existing content, but also makes it easier and faster for journalists to retrieve their own content.

Try starting with graphics:

Bowman explained that the concept for his September 2003 series, "Fleeing smog? Look out for trees" (<http://snipurl.com/aoau>) didn't really crystallize until he worked with a *Sacramento Bee*

graphic artist to draft some info-graphic artwork (<http://snipurl.com/aoaw>) based on his initial research and data.

Seeing even a rudimentary info-graphic clarified to Bowman the core essence of the story he wished to tell and guided the rest of his work on that project.

Best tool: wetware

The most useful tool that any journalist possesses is the human mind. This seems obvious, and it is – so obvious that this core journalistic tool routinely gets overlooked.

Three of the most important functions of the human mind are information intake and processing (learning), information storage and retrieval (knowing) and managing communication (sharing). Each of us has, within our skulls, a product of millions of years of R&D and field testing that accomplishes these core tasks with far more subtlety and versatility than the most advanced supercomputers. This tool is completely unique and constantly self-customizing. A journalist can benefit in many practical ways from learning more about how the human mind works in general, and how your mind works in particular.

For example, what – to you – feels like your clearest thinking? What are your clearest or most profound thoughts like? Do they tend to be visual, verbal, symbolic or visceral? In what kinds of conditions do you tend to think most clearly or creatively? When and where have you experienced specific flashes of insight? What were you thinking in the hours, minutes, and seconds leading up to those insights?

Considering these questions generally helps highlight patterns that support optimal thinking. Your patterns are unique to your mind. Recognizing and replicating these patterns or circumstances can increase your experience of optimal, insightful, multi-level thinking.

For instance, I tend to put ideas together most powerfully in the wee hours of the morning, just after awakening – but I've learned only to write rough notes at that time. Late afternoon or early evening is the best time for me to do considered writing. Something happens with that information in my subconscious in the intervening hours which enhances the quality and efficiency of that writing. I can't explain it and I don't need to understand it consciously. It's just how my mind works, so I've tuned my working rhythms to reflect that.

Meanwhile, a colleague of mine writes his best headlines and leads after bouncing a tennis ball off his office wall for a few minutes while letting his mind wander. Whatever works.

It's worth cultivating a deep respect for your unconscious, non-linear mind and the information it provides – which journalists often experience as intuitive hunches and inexplicable nagging questions. Your hunches and curiosities aren't mere flukes – they are signals from your unconscious mind, meriting as much attention, respect, and skepticism as the facts and quotes you consciously collect.



Research News Roundup

Media play crucial role in encouraging activism or apathy

By JAN KNIGHT

Recent studies indicate a need for environment reporters to show their audiences the link between individuals and environmental problems and how individuals can contribute to solutions.

But the studies also suggest that environmental coverage creates apathy. Meanwhile, “green mail,” the letters published on editorial pages, can foster activism and help citizens create their own environmental discourse

Three recent studies suggest that news publications play a crucial role in both discouraging and encouraging people to act on environmental issues.

The first is a 2004 study exploring pollution coverage in *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*. The study suggests that their news reports encourage citizen apathy, not activism.

Linda Jean Kensicki, an assistant professor in the School of Journalism & Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota, analyzed a systematic random sample of 100 of 474 news articles about pollution that appeared in the two newspapers from 1995 to 2000.

The results of this study are alarming because the public gains its understanding of pollution and other social issues via the news media, Kensicki wrote. At the same time, past research has shown that the news media in general generate public apathy and cynicism toward social issues, an idea supported by the findings of this study.

Kensicki found that about 76 percent of the articles studied presented industry as the “overwhelming cause” of pollution within the United States, while individuals were not blamed. Rather, individuals were more likely to be seen as victims of the problem.

She found that 86 percent of the news articles sampled did not mention local environmental organizations and 71 percent did not mention national environmental organizations. The Natural Resources Defense Council and the Sierra Club were the most often mentioned environmental advocacy groups, but no environmental organization was mentioned more than once in the 100 news articles sampled, she wrote.

Additionally, 97 percent of the articles about pollution did not mention activists, and 75 percent of the articles did not use the term environmentalist. None of the 100 articles included a “call to action,” such as offering a website for more information, providing information about a public hearing or offering recycling tips, she found.

She concluded that readers of environmental news are provided with little information that would encourage and empower them to take action on environmental issues.

Past research shows that “readers actually need the media to tell them about the importance of the environment,” Kensicki wrote. “Put another way, why would people find any of these issues relevant if they had no part in its cause, its effect, or its solution? ... By framing these social issues at an individual level, reporters could give readers the understanding that there are individuals at work on the problem. Without these connections, the problems are at best being handled by the government, and at worst being handled by no one.”

Another 2004 study focuses on an analysis of 841 environ-

mental news stories appearing in 69 Pennsylvania daily newspapers between Sept. 1, 1997, and Aug. 31, 1998. It showed that 73 percent of the 841 news leads studied defined environmental issues as problems, with a little more than 25 percent of leads presenting the problems in terms of clashes among individuals, groups, institutions, and/or nations.

About half of the stories defined environmental issues in terms of individual or societal loss of something of value.

“The fact that the press defines problems primarily in terms of conflicts and losses instead of solutions suggests that readers are not provided with adequate information about possible solutions to environmental problems,” stated the researchers, who are from the Pennsylvania State University College of Communications.

They found that almost 50 percent of the people quoted in the stories were government or industry sources, while 20 percent were interest group advocates.

“In terms of their power to confer legitimacy on sources, the press placed greater emphasis on institutional sources than on community activists,” the researchers wrote. “For Pennsylvania communities, the primary definers of environmental problems appear to be government sources.”

Additionally troubling were results showing that scientists comprised fewer than 3 percent of sources quoted in the 841 articles, the researchers added.

More specifically, stories about air pollution were dominated by an industry perspective of relaxing environmental regulations to achieve economic growth, the researchers reported. On the other hand, stories about toxic chemicals were dominated by another perspective – concern for living species – “suggesting that toxic chemicals are clearly an issue that generates more concern at the community level,” they wrote.

The list of environmental issues addressed in the 841 stories included, in order from most covered to least covered: air pollution, burning, energy, environmental policy, land development, landfills, manufacturing, sewage, toxic waste, water pollution and “other topics.” Those issues rarely covered or not covered at all included nuclear energy, nuclear waste, and global warming.

The study illuminates “which groups control the way that issues are defined in the community press,” the researchers concluded. “The reliance on government and industry sources that results in few expert and scientific sources is a serious concern raised by the findings in view of the technical nature and serious societal impact of environmental issues.”

A third study, published in 2003, focuses on “green mail” – letters to the editor about environmental issues – in the Canadian press.

The letters focused on proposed logging in the Carmanah Valley of British Columbia. “In the daily newspaper, letters to the editor act as a forum for public dialogue on forestry issues, mediating perceptions of land use, economy, and environment,” according to the article’s abstract.

While the results of the study showed that letters to the editor support the ideals of the democratic process and economic utility when it comes to determining land-use policy, they also challenged

(Continued next page)

Washington lead stories reveal unsafe water

By SARAH COHEN

Early this year, *Washington Post* reporter David Nakamura received a troubling phone call from a reader: an obtuse notice in a flyer in his water bill alluded to elevated lead levels in the city's water but repeated attempts to get the water authority to provide more information had failed.

It turned out that the problem was severe: Two-thirds of the city's homes that had been tested in extensive follow-up study to routine monitoring for the Environmental Protection Agency had shown unsafe levels of the metal – more than 4,000 homes in all.

The D.C. Water and Sewer Authority, or WASA, had known of the problem since 2002 when routine testing of about 50 homes revealed unsafe tap water. At the time, it sent an 11-page brochure to customers that mentioned in one paragraph on the next-to-last page that some homes had tested above the government's 15 parts per billion safety limit.

Over the next several months, the *Post* assigned a team of reporters to cover the issue locally and, on another track, the EPA's oversight of the drinking water standards.

Among the original research that the *Post* conducted was to analyze the 6,000 test results, map them and provide an interactive map to the readers of washingtonpost.com (www.washingtonpost.com/metro/specials/water/ – free registration required).

Because the authority refused to release the results itself, the *Post* got them on paper from a community activist and used a scanner to get them into a database. Reporters then matched the addresses to property records to get more details on each house, and used the ArcView program to turn the results into a map.

WASA appealed, without success, to Executive Editor Len Downie to stop the publication of addresses with elevated lead levels, although it was refusing to alert homeowners itself. The response from the public was overwhelmingly positive – people were desperate to learn where the tainted water was concentrated.

Other findings included:

- When lead levels are elevated to begin with, following the EPA's instructions can make the contamination worse. In fact, EPA doesn't even test for lead at the point that may be at its highest level – after water has run for one or two minutes and brought

the lead in from the service lines.

- In Washington, it was not just that two-thirds of the homes tested failed the EPA's standard – some had readings hundreds (and even thousands) of times the levels that are considered unsafe.

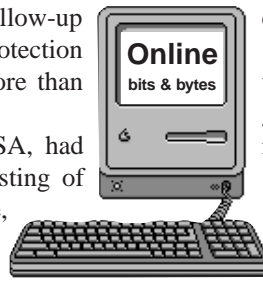
- Cities around the country have manipulated their testing results in a way that may have allowed them to escape costly overhauls of pipes or water treatment formulas.

Once the local story had been reported, Nakamura was joined by Jo Becker and Carol Leonnig to investigate how well the EPA has overseen the water quality in other cities.

Using EPA's own data for water systems (www.epa.gov/safewater/lcrmr/lead_data.html), they decided to delve more deeply into the practices at any major water system that had reported lead levels at or near the safety limit over the past four years. In some cases, the cities simply hadn't reported. But in others, they had withheld elevated test results from the statistics they report to EPA, chosen the wrong, lower-risk homes to test or dropped homes that were "hot" in previous years.

That report came from old-fashioned documents reporting: Becker, Leonnig and Nakamura contacted each of the marginal utilities and their local and state governments and filed public records requests for the individual test results, not just the summary "90th percentile" figure reported to EPA. In some states, the address was considered public and the reporters contacted homeowners to find out why they'd dropped out of the program after showing contamination in previous years. The answer, at least sometimes, was that they were never asked to test again.

Federal prosecutors and state regulators said in October that they were investigating whether several water services across the country had violated laws. But for most of these cities, the information that they have tainted water exists already in EPA's documents. Of course, homeowners may not know and the public may never have been notified. In some cases, the authorities negotiate with EPA to avoid costly fixes.



Sarah Cohen is database editor at The Washington Post.

Apathy... (from page 11)

the "dominant paradigm" by gaining access to the process, the author wrote. In doing so, ordinary citizens developed their own ecological critique and created an environmental discourse that provided an alternative to that of government and industry.

For more information, see Linda Jean Kensicki, "No Cure for What Ails Us: The Media-Constructed Disconnect Between Societal Problems and Possible Solutions" in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, Spring 2004, pp. 53 – 73; Ann M. Major and Erwin L. Atwood, "Environmental Stories Define Problems, Not Solutions" in *Newspaper Research Journal*,

Summer 2004, pp. 8-22; and Melody Hessing, "Green Mail: The Social Construction of Environmental Issues Through Letters to the Editor" in *Canadian Journal of Communication*, Volume 1, 2003, pp. 25-42.

Jan Knight, a former magazine editor and daily newspaper reporter, is an assistant professor of communication at Hawaii Pacific University in Honolulu. She can be reached at jknight@hpu.edu.

Defense Dept. battles for freedom from regulations

By **PAUL D. THACKER**

In the late 1990s, David Henkin, a lawyer with Earthjustice, sued the military for not complying with a host of environmental laws on the Makua military range on Oahu. A judge ordered a halt to all bombing until the military complied and for three years soldiers were unable to train on Makua. During this time span, military commanders and lawyers consistently complained that the lack of training was degrading military readiness.

Realizing he was vulnerable, Henkin fought back. He requested the training records for the company commanders which, oddly enough, are not classified until they move up to higher echelons, processed at the division level and finally sent to the Pentagon. The company commander reports all read the same: "ready to perform our wartime mission."

"Some were a bit spicier," he told me, reading from one record. "The Warrior Brigade remains ready to deploy, fight and win!"

To Henkin, the conclusion is rather clear. "Makua is an example where the military claims that complying with environmental laws...leaves the nation naked and exposed," he said. "And in their internal briefings, everyone's saying it's a hassle, but we're trained. We're ready."

When I brought up the Makua incident with the Department of Defense's lead counsel for the environment, Ben Cohen, he said he would get back to me.

He never did.

Since President Bush came into office, the Department of Defense (DOD) has been slowly chipping away at environmental regulations, citing military readiness. It has won exemptions from parts of the law on endangered species, migratory birds and marine mammals. The department is now in a long-term campaign to win exemptions from laws on Superfund, solid waste and clean air.

The stakes are huge and highly complex. Of the 158 federal facilities on the Superfund National Priorities List, DOD is responsible for 129 with a projected cleanup cost of over \$14 billion. At the same time, DOD is a strong environmental steward and the largest funding agency for marine mammal research. With 25 million acres of property, it houses the greatest concentration of endangered species on any federal land. So while critics complain about the military, they also tip their hat. The problem, critics charge, is that elements within the Bush administration and the Pentagon are leading an unfounded campaign against environmental laws.

"The armed services have a history they can be proud of," says Ray Clark, the former top environmental official with the Army. Under previous presidents, military leaders were told they had a responsibility to balance military readiness with environmental protection, he said. "This administration is a departure from that value set."

After interviewing numerous current and former DOD officials and military leaders, a story has emerged explaining the reason behind this change. In the late 1990s, the Center for Biological Diversity brought suit against the Navy under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act for killing birds during bombing runs on the Farallon de Medinilla, a small, uninhabited Pacific island. The Navy continues to claim that the Farallon is vital to military readiness and was also alarmed that this lawsuit might be the start of a wave in litigation.

Ben Cohen says that pilot skills degrade as aircraft carriers transit across the Pacific from the United States. "It was the last place in the region where carrier aircraft could train as they prepared to enter the theater of operation," he said.

At the same time the Navy feared losing the Farallon as a training site, other groups were suing the government to protect

(Continued next page)

Environmental history and the media

By **BILL KOVARIK**

TEN YEARS AGO, 1994: Ndyakira Amooti, a reporter with *The New Vision* in Kampala, Uganda, exposes smuggling of endangered chimpanzees and African Great Grey parrots. Both endangered species are protected by the Convention on Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). As a result of his work, wildlife agents were able to stop the smuggling at Entebbe airport. His 1996 Goldman Prize citation notes that Amooti put himself at great personal risk.

TWENTY FIVE YEARS AGO, March 29, 1979: Hundreds of journalists begin to gather at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in Harrisonburg, Pa., to cover the largest accident in the nuclear industry to date.

FIFTY YEARS AGO, March 20, 1954: Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas challenges *Washington Post* editorial writers to join him hiking through the old Chesapeake and Ohio canal from Cumberland, Md., to Washington, D.C. The writers, Mario Pusey and Robert H. Estabrook, had backed a plan to run a highway along the Potomac River. By inviting them on the hike, Douglas hoped to convince them that the highway would spoil the natural beauty of the canal. The area

became a 12,000-acre national park in 1971.

SEVENTY FIVE YEARS AGO, 1929: *New York World* wins Pulitzer Prize for its effective campaign to correct evils in the administration of justice. One part of the campaign included opposing a delay in a lawsuit by five women dial painters dying from radium poisoning. Walter Lippmann had written: "If ever a case called for prompt adjudication, it is the case of five crippled women who are fighting for a few miserable dollars to ease their last days on earth..." The court delays, he said, were "a damnable travesty of justice."

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, 1904: Books by Ida Tarbell ("History of Standard Oil") and Upton Sinclair ("The Jungle") energize the Progressive movement by pointing out abuses in the oil and meat-packing industries.

ONE HUNDRED FIFTY YEARS AGO, 1854: "Walden", by Henry David Thoreau, is an observation of nature and a philosophical analysis of life of natural simplicity and deliberate with nature. Thoreau also wonders about the mania for news and communication. "We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate."

Defense... (from page 13)

habitat for endangered species at another naval installation, Camp Pendleton.

A former high-ranking DOD environmental official told me that there are real concerns with endangered species at Pendleton but that they could have been easily handled. "That has not been the priority of this administration. They have focused on how to get relief from environmental laws because they believe they have a favorable political climate."

The final straw for the Navy was a lawsuit to curtail use of certain types of radar. Scientists are not exactly certain how radar affects marine mammals, but since 1960, there have been a number of stranding incidents involving mostly beaked whales when Navy sonar was in the area. In March 2000, 17 whales beached themselves in the Bahamas at a time when Navy sonar was turned on. Six whales later died.

"It appeared from all evidence that the whales attempted to get out of the sonar, and then swam onto the beach," says Dan Schregardus, the top environmental official at the Navy.

In a September 2002 incident, 14 beaked whales were stranded on the Canary Islands just four hours after the onset of a naval training exercise. Necropsies found tissue damage consistent with trauma due to in vivo gas bubble formation. [*Nature*, Vol 425, 9 October 2003, pg 575.]

"It's not clear if the sound is so loud it damages the animals directly or if it triggers a behavioral response so that the animals surface too quickly and get something like the bends," said Peter Tyack, a senior scientist at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. "In the end, we know there is some correlation between these sounds and the animals ending up on the beach."

Tyack said that the issue is not well understood because so little is known about marine mammals.

Citing the lawsuits, the DOD won congressional exemptions to laws on migratory birds, endangered species and marine mammals. Interestingly, the military disputes the term "exemption," and at the recent SEJ meeting in Pittsburgh a spokesman from the Army argued with my use of it. The DOD has been moving to have journalists use the term "legislative clarification," although military commanders even use the "exemption" word on occasion.

Many of these environmental laws already have exemptions built into them, but the exemptions are difficult to acquire and are likely to create controversy.

The military is seeking exemptions to Superfund, solid waste and clean-air laws. Again the military claims that these exemptions are important to maintain readiness in the face of third-party lawsuits.

Cohen cites Fort Richardson in Alaska as a prime example of such a "potential train wreck." A group sued the DOD for poisoning waterfowl with white phosphorous left on the ground from exploding mortar shells. Cohen says there's a fear that third-party lawsuits could force the EPA to shut down live-fire training ranges.

"It's not responsible for us to wait until we're actually shut down at a vital installation, before we go to Congress and tell them there are troubles," Cohen said.

However, during Congressional testimony in 2003, EPA Administrator Christine Todd Whitman said there have been no incidents where the agency was forced to interfere with military readiness. "I'm not aware of a—any [sic] particular area where

environmental protection regulations are preventing the desired training," she testified.

This was made clear during a congressional hearing last April. Subcommittee meetings are normally quiet – too boring even to appear on C-SPAN. But this hearing was packed with people standing in the aisles and lining every wall. A host of groups, from state attorneys general, local water agencies and environmental groups were adamantly opposing the exemptions from environmental rules.

During heated questioning from Congressman John Dingell, laughter passed through the crowd after Deputy Undersecretary Ray DuBois admitted that there was not a single incident where Superfund, solid waste or clean air legislation had interfered with military readiness. In fact, the military had been desperately seeking such incidents. DOD Secretary Paul Wolfowitz sent letters to all the armed services trolling for cases where environmental regulations were interfering with national security or military readiness.

Cohen told me that not a single instance has yet been found.

Yet there are numerous cases where military activities have affected the environment. Contamination from DOD sites has shut down groundwater supply wells in both Massachusetts and Maryland. Further, there are 40 DOD sites where perchlorate contaminates ground or surface water.

The contamination of groundwater in Maryland has resulted in numerous plumes of underground toxic chemicals. That is now the most studied ground water system in the world. Thousands of testing wells dot the Cape Cod area, and hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent on cleanup. Total cleanup cost is projected at around \$1 billion.

"The question becomes what [DOD] would have done if they hadn't been required to meet those statutes," says Ed Eichner, a hydrologist with the Cape Cod Commission.

Commenting on the exemptions, former top EPA enforcement official Sylvia Lowrance says people within the EPA are appalled at the DOD. "The main issue here, after stripping away all the details, is that the DOD wants to become self-regulating."

Expressing equal shock, Jamie Clark, former director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the Clinton administration and a former member of the National Guard, said the exemptions go beyond anything she had ever imagined. The DOD's push for exemptions would have never come to fruition except for a willing Bush administration, Clark added. It was never about national security, she says, but the 9/11 attacks created a favorable environment. "They wrapped themselves in the flag," she told me.

DOD officials say that they plan to resubmit the exemptions this congressional session. An internal DOD document leaked to Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility states that exemptions to other environmental laws are also being considered. The copy that was sent to PEER was barely legible, but it appeared that one of the other laws that the DOD is also considering is NEPA.

Paul D. Thacker is an associate editor at Environmental Science & Technology in Washington, D.C., and served four years in the U.S. Army where he drove tanks. During training at Fort Polk, La., he was really miffed to be told that he could not run over trees that served as vital habitat for the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker.

Mercury rule coming soon, but in what form?

By **DARREN SAMUELSON**

The Bush administration ignites controversy with most every major environmental decision it pursues, and the issue of mercury emissions from power plants is no exception.

This March, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is expected to finalize a federal regulation to address toxic emissions of mercury from electric utilities. While that much is clear, considerable uncertainty remains as to what method the agency will take to require the pollution reductions.

EPA has expressed a strong interest in allowing mercury trading among coal-fired utilities in a manner akin to its widely hailed market-based program for acid rain. But critics on Capitol Hill and in some state capitols, as well as environmentalists, have sounded off against EPA expanding trading to mercury. For one, they say the Clean Air Act on mercury implicitly requires strict controls on all power plants by the end of this decade without trading. Second, they say trading does little to address local hot spots near a power plant that buys emission credits. Requiring Clean Air Act-mandated installation would be better protection for areas around all power plants.

EPA has expressed a strong interest in allowing mercury trading among coal-fired utilities in a manner akin to its widely hailed market-based program for acid rain.

Some of the largest members in the electric utility industry hold the view that trading would spur technological development. Further, they say a tight deadline before 2010 would be impossible to comply with because of the lag time needed to deploy technologies. If all of the nation's utilities were scurrying to acquire the same finite technical expertise and materials, and with a firm deadline on hand, coal utilities would be forced to shut down and energy users would be pressed into using more expensive natural gas, potentially crippling the U.S. economy.

This is a familiar shouting match to an experienced observer of environmental debates. Set a strong requirement and the technology will follow versus set too strong a requirement and the technology will not be ready in time.

And here, like in similar pollution-control debates, the courtroom and the halls of Congress very well could decide the outcome.

There is little dispute that Congress gave EPA specific instructions when it adopted the 1990 Clean Air Act amendments. In the law, EPA was told that it must require industries which release certain Hazardous Air Pollutants to install the Maximum Achievable Control Technology. In the alphabet soup of Washington acronyms, that's also called the MACT standard. But before EPA could issue a MACT standard for power plants, it was told by Congress that it first needed to conduct numerous studies and collect sufficient data to support its regulatory efforts.

During the 1990s, EPA released mercury-specific MACT requirements for several other major polluting industries, including municipal and hazardous waste incinerators. Recent studies, including one from Everglades National Park, have shown the pollution requirements from those rules have led to reduced mercury levels in ecosystems near the facilities.

For power plants, EPA at the tail end of the Clinton administration took an important step when it issued a "regulatory deter-

mination" that deemed mercury emissions from utilities as a toxic pollutant. That decision triggered the start of a two-year clock requiring EPA to propose a mercury rule.

Enter the Bush administration, which indicated its preference for mercury trading soon upon its arrival with Vice President Cheney's energy task force. The Cheney report called on EPA to develop a market-friendly "multiple-pollutant" legislative plan to control emissions of nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxides and mercury from power plants. That directive would lead to Bush's Clear Skies Initiative, a bill that has languished on Capitol Hill since its introduction in early 2002.

While the Bush administration touted its legislation, the December 2002 deadline came and went without an EPA proposal. EPA focused, instead, on a deadline one year later set by a consent decree with the environmental group Natural Resources Defense Council.

As the December 2003 deadline approached, most observers

expected EPA to issue a MACT standard, albeit one where no one knew what firm numbers the agency would choose concerning required emission controls. But about two weeks before the deadline, word began to leak that EPA preferred a trading scheme where states would set up caps and then distribute allowances among their utilities. While EPA also proposed a MACT plan and a less controversial trading idea, environmentalists latched onto the change in direction and issued calls for EPA to scrap the plan altogether. Democratic presidential candidates at the time, including former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean and Sen. John Kerry (Mass.), rebuked the administration for violating the intent of the Clean Air Act.

EPA responded that it had the authority to revoke the Clinton-era regulatory determination. It also could consider mercury trading under a different section of the Clean Air Act. On the public relations front, negative news coverage of the mercury plan pushed EPA into action and within days the agency was touting a separate plan for power plant pollution that would deal with nitrogen oxides and sulfur dioxides. Eventually, EPA would coin the names "Clean Air Mercury Rule" and "Clean Air Interstate Rule" for their two rulemakings.

Since December 2003, EPA has faced a handful of controversial questions about the mercury plan. Administrator Mike Leavitt and his top air deputy, Jeff Holmstead, have made contradictory statements regarding the type of modeling the agency would conduct on mercury. Speaking in generalities, Leavitt has said he is open to any analysis, while Holmstead has delved into specifics and resisted calls to compare the trading plan with a MACT approach.

Internal memos from industry were found copied verbatim in the EPA proposal, a move the agency said was unfortunate but not

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Consumption... (from page 1)

SEJournal asked Knudson to talk about how he researched and reported “State of Denial.”

Q: How did the idea for the story come about?

have to sell it much at all with her. We both seized upon it. We then, very simply, put together a one-page memo for the higher-ups – for the managing editor and assorted folks.

They signed on and said, “Yeah, let’s take a look.” Nobody knew at this point where it was going to go, but it was worth exploring. That’s how it would typically happen here. I don’t know if there is any overall management system – we just try to keep it simple. We take a general idea and see where it develops.

Q: Is that what you do typically – write out the one-page memo as succinctly as possible?

A: Exactly, exactly. If it is with Amy, my editor, we talk it out. But for the people higher up I try to keep it pretty simple. I talk about why the story is important, what we know, and – probably more importantly at this stage – what we don’t know but would like to know.

Q: To get the impact you had to connect California environmentalism with consumption. How did you connect the two – did you start with consumption or the problem and work back to the consumption?

A: I think we started mostly with the consumption. We know with lumber and oil we had a sort of two-pronged story – we had conservation at home and consumption abroad. Because of the huge role that Canada plays in supplying wood to the United States, it was fairly obvious. Oil was a little bit more subtle. We looked for a country that was a significant supplier of foreign oil to California. The two biggest were Saudi Arabia and Iraq and, for a number of reasons, they were not our first choice. Ecuador, which was close, just down the coast two or three thousand miles in South America, was surprisingly No. 3 because of its geographic proximity to California. Ecuador is a biologically rich country, biologically diverse with indigenous populations and an oil field in its Amazon forest and headwaters, so that seemed like a good choice. So, we tried to hedge our bets a bit and go someplace where the story would be strong and Ecuador turned out to be the right choice. This year, it is second (in oil exports to California) now that Iraq is out of the picture.

We had just gone through a near coastwide shutdown, or ratcheting down, of commercial rockfish fishing on the West Coast, yet our consumption of rockfish continued to increase. I remember a conversation with somebody in the seafood industry,
(Continued next page)



Abico Javier Ordo-ez, 12, far right, stands on a petroleum pipeline which runs in front of his home near the town of Chiritza, Ecuador.

A: I think it grew out of an earlier series I did called Environment Inc., where we took a look at some of the fundraising and other behavior of the environmental community.

There we focused on the non-profit environmental industry. This story began by looking hard at ourselves here – being stuck in a sea of traffic and, every car gobbling fossil fuels, yet opening the paper (it doesn’t matter which one) – and reading another story about how determined we are to protect our coast from oil drilling. I guess it began by shopping in and watching the construction of big-box lumber stores all over the landscape and again opening the paper and reading the stories, reading the editorials about how generally harmful it is for us as a society to log in our ancient national forests. I was beginning to think about the double standard – the hypocrisy of our lives – and beginning to wonder if we are going to save our own backyard while continuing to consume these things, where are they going to come from? They have to come from someplace.

I began to make a series of phone calls to specialists of one sort or another, and I began to talk with my editor about this very subject. There was no real Eureka moment. We just decided that maybe instead of looking, as journalists are wont to do, at the behavioral patterns of companies, non-profits, cities, counties, we decided to look at ourselves instead, our consumer culture.

Q: How do you sell your editors on something like this?

A: Initially my projects editor, Amy Pyle, was part of the conversation. She and I kind of talked this out and I really didn’t

I said, “Where’s it coming from now?” And the guy said, “How fast can you say, Canada?”

That piqued my curiosity. At that time, we didn’t know if it was a good-news or bad-news story up in Canada. I kind of wanted a food commodity to go with wood and oil, so by making a trip up to British Columbia, a long trip, a dreary trip in November, we turned up with a sort of contrarian’s tale of a well-managed coastal fishery, which I think lent a fresh, different, important angle. It is as important to talk about the things that work as don’t work.

I think in general, solutions are important. I think, as journalists, we are wont to focus more on the problem and the controversies and there are interesting solutions out there. I admire people who are solving problems. But we really didn’t know quite what we were getting into when we went to Canada. That is part of a project like this. You can’t know what the situation is going to be like on the ground or on the ocean until you get there. We went there,

found out what an intriguing story it was and how it was part of a larger story – the partial privatization of a living, biological resource and how it seemed to be working to benefit both the resource and the exploiters of that resource and how that contrasted with the dismal, largely government-driven system we have here in California. It just seemed interesting and worth pursuing.

Q: Your stories are loaded with facts about California consumption. Where did you find all those numbers?

A: It wasn’t easy. They are widely scattered. Some came out of journal articles, some came out of websites, obscure government reports, databases of various kinds, even conversations with specialists in the field. Like all reporters, I want my figures to be as solid as they can get. We got solid figures, but they came from all over the map. It is a bit like hard-rock mining, you have to sift through a lot of dull uninteresting layers of rock and overburden to get the nuggets. They just weren’t consolidated anywhere. As often is the case, if these numbers are simple and out there, maybe someone else would have gotten to them first. When I see something interesting – like the number of barrels of oil consumed in California in a day, the billions of board feet (of wood) – I write it down and footnote it and gradually you get to a point where you have a small working index of key facts and figures. It varied. Sometimes I would end up going to very obscure Canadian government websites or even the website of the Ecuadorian National Oil company. I mean, how much more obscure can that get?

When you tied it into the fact that – I forget the figure – but tens of millions of barrels of Ecuadorian oil is coming into the Long Beach harbor near Los Angeles, it suddenly became pertinent.

Q: You write it down, you footnote it, you keep a small working index. Do you keep that someplace separate? I noticed



Photo courtesy of the SACRAMENTO BEE/Bryan Patrick

A commercial fisherman off the coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia unties the net releasing rockfish onto the deck of the Canadian trawler Miss Tatum. These rockcod were headed for California.

you didn’t attribute a lot of those facts. How do you index and footnote?

A: One of the reasons we didn’t footnote (and attribute) was for economy, to keep the prose moving. But you can be assured every one of those is sourced. What I do, when I am on a story about oil, this sounds terribly old fashioned – but I keep a file that says “facts” that is in my general oil archive. The same thing for wood. Anything that I find in the reporting process that might be useful – a fact, a figure, a comparison, an analogy, I put in that file.

Q: Is it electronic or is it paper?

A: It is paper. I am not going to bash computers, I love them. I usually make it a little bit different colored file, too. If my files are manila files, I put the facts in a red file, something like that. Old-fashioned. I will have files and subfiles in computers, but my foundation stone is the hard copy.

Q: At what point did you sort of map out an idea or make an outline?

A: I need to use outlines more. I don’t as much as I should, in writing. In reporting, in getting a sense of where the project is going, we just draw up the map or blueprint as we go along. In this case, we wanted to follow those three product lines – wood, oil and seafood. It began in kind of an exploratory mode, and we developed it from there. It is important in a big project

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Consumption... (from page 17)

like this, when you don't know a lot of what you should know early on, to leave some leeway for exploration, for curiosity, for chasing down good leads and running down dead ends, which eventually happens. That is part of the process. I am lucky. McClatchy is one of the few chains left that gives a reporter this much leeway. Having the time to pursue leads in distant places is great.

The most important thing for me was to have a good editor, Amy Pyle, who I could talk to as much as I need to about what I was seeing and how things impressed me and I listened to how they struck her. I would say it was really an evolutionary process – it started with an idea, it went to field work then on the finished product. It is hard to pin down, to encapsulate how you do this. The thing that was important to me was to have a good editor there, somebody I could talk to and we could draw up that map along the one. One thing I do with Amy that has always helped is we are always bouncing drafts back and forth. Not early in the reporting process, but as soon as I can start writing. I will send in a tentative lead, top of a story, and she'll respond. We may bat things back 10, 20 times, more times, by that time, we kind of know what the lay of the land looks like and it is a matter of putting the story together. That's where you put the outline together.

In reporting, the outline is putting the cart before the house. The outline comes later, once you have gathered the facts and figures and you are sitting down and trying to write it. Sometimes, I will do just a partial outline and that will help me get through some rough sections.

Q: That's kind of what I do. In the reporting phase, I am like a giant vacuum cleaner.

A: Yes, that's so important. I can't tell you how much stuff I gather up that I never use.

Q: How do you use photos and graphics?

A: That is where Amy takes a load off my shoulders. I will gather materials, she will too, from various sources. She is sort of my front-person. She will carry photo and graphic information and assignments to those departments for me. She said that is about 25 percent of her time. Photos and graphics, to me, are part of the process. If I see something I like, I toss it to her and she carries the weight and lets me focus on my end of things.

Q: Your project makes good use of photos and graphics. Do you try to make it visual for the readers?

A: Certainly. When I am traveling with a photographer, I try to maximize the photographer's time. Let's say if we are traveling and there is some key interview in, say Alberta, and I have to interview the head of the oil company, then I have to do that. But if there are other ways to organize the day to help the photographer get the opportunities he or she needs, I try to do that because that is important. Everybody knows it is important to get photos. In Canada, we struggled and struggled and struggled to get ourselves onto a boat – not just because it would make good color for a story. My first love is words – they always will be. But I realize we live in a multi-media age and photography is neat, so I try to work with the photographers.

I am not a photo editor so I can't talk to you about why that is critical, I just know that it is.

Q: How did the package originally run? I saw the Internet version.

A: It did run as a special section. This is my first special section. It did come as a bit of a surprise. The decision was made above me. They ran it on a single day, a Sunday. As Amy relates the story to me, there were various options discussed, including
(Continued next page)

Metcalfe Institute announces journalism fellowships for 2005

The Metcalfe Institute for Marine and Environmental Reporting offers two fellowships for journalists interested in expanding their knowledge of science, marine issues and environmental journalism.

For information and an application go to www.gso.uri.edu/metcalfe or contact Jackleen de La Harpe, executive director, 401-874-6211, jack@gso.uri.edu.

The Metcalfe Institute Marine and Environmental Sciences Fellowship/Seventh Annual Workshop for Journalists

June 12, 2005 - June 17, 2005

This fellowship program focuses on science in the coastal environment for journalists. This intensive, hands-on workshop gives reporters opportunities to work in the lab and field with scientists, graduate students, and policy experts and attend lectures, debates and panel sessions given by leading writers and researchers. The workshop emphasizes data analysis, research methods, and the integration of science with public policy. Fellowships are available to print, broadcast and electronic journalists who are interested in marine and environmental science reporting. Fellowship award includes room, board and

tuition (transportation not included).

Applications must be postmarked by March 4, 2005.

Metcalfe Institute Environmental Reporting Fellowships

June 12, 2005 - April 7, 2006.

Description: The Metcalfe Institute Environmental Reporting Fellowships are available to two minority journalists interested in learning basic science and reporting on the environment. A fellowship provides support to attend the Seventh Annual Workshop for Journalists (June 12-17, 2005); four weeks of independent study at the University of Rhode Island Graduate School of Oceanography with science faculty mentorship; and a \$28,000 stipend for 37 weeks to work as a reporter with a journalism mentor at either NPR-member station, WBUR, Boston, or *The Providence Journal*, Providence, R.I., covering environment and some general assignment news. The fellowship does not include compensation for travel. Applicants must have a minimum of two years' journalism experience, U.S. citizenship and may include science writers or reporters from any medium. Women and minorities are encouraged to apply.

Applications must be postmarked by Feb. 11, 2005.

the traditional Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, whatever. But they wanted to give this the kind of continuity in color. They also wanted control over how the thing looked. They also wanted to find newsprint with the maximum recycled paper. So all of those factors went into it.

Q: One of the things that I really liked about this story is our newspaper industry is part of the problem – or just as involved as everybody else. Looking at yourself is a real rarity in this business.

A: I think so, too, and that's why we wanted to address that issue. If we, as the press, are commenting on forest management around the country, then (newsprint consumption) is a topic that deserves fuller or more treatment. I forget the numbers, but newsprint is a very large piece of the puzzle. I have to give kudos to my editors for being willing to be introspective here.

Q: How much did you set up in advance before you traveled off to Ecuador and Canada?

A: I try to do as much as possible as I can (before leaving). I do set up key interviews, I try to make appointments with people I want to talk to. I leave huge hunks of time, maybe half or more, for travel and research, exploring. Most of the best material I got in these stories came from interviews I didn't set up – things that you could not set up in advance. I am thinking of visits to indigenous people in rainforests.

Once you get there it is a process that evolves. Editors and managers, I guess, would like to have all this stuff pinned down ahead of time, but you can't. The Internet only goes so far, so, I do what I can. But, the most important stuff is done unplanned.

Q: I noticed you have done a lot of follow-up stories. What kind of reaction did this get?

A: It has gotten a lot of reaction. But the nature of this business is you are swept off to new issues. Mostly recently, I've gotten involved in a biotechnology project (Seeds of Doubt) we did earlier this year. There is one thing, a very serious process is underway on the part of the Pacific Fisheries Management Council to bring fishing quotas to the rockfish fishery along the West Coast. It has not been adopted, but proposed. But, it was proposed by the body that could eventually make that happen. There was also a bill introduced in the Legislature for the State of California to buy homegrown wood when it goes out to bid. However, for whatever reason, and I have been too busy to find out, Gov. Schwarzenegger vetoed it.

On a larger level, all reporters hope for reaction. But, this is the kind of story that doesn't have the traditional black hat-white

hat, a traditional story to stir up outrage, in part, because we are all part of the problem. You can't pass a bill to require people to buy fewer cars or consume less wood. A story like this should raise awareness about our conservation practices and consumption. For every forest we save here, there is another forest that will hear the whine of chainsaws.

That's what troubles me even more, because we are not even having that discussion. Maybe a story like this will raise the level of awareness. I have to say I think we are in this consumer culture and I am a bit pessimistic. I wish there were Congressional hearings, I wish the EPA was talking about it, but they are not.



Photo courtesy of the SACRAMENTO BEE/Bryan Patrick

An Abitibi Consolidated employee makes his way down the center of road covered on both sides with logs. The waste from the cuts make up the newsprint. Picture taken in MacKenzie, northern B.C.

Government is government and it is going to grind on. I think it was an important gesture to get this out there – that we are all part of the problem.

Q: In his introduction to the package, Executive Editor Rick Rodriguez takes the myfootprint.org test (an online measurement of consumption) and he scores a 34. I was actually a 22 – which is a little less than average – but it still would take 4.9 Earths to support everybody if everyone's consumption was like mine. How did you do?

A: I knew you were going to ask. I figured it up today. I am right around where Rick is. I think I could do better. I guess I am a part of the problem – but I guess I am not in a State of Denial. (He laughs). I know I am part of the problem. It would be interesting to do more on the footprint thing. There are an awful lot of questions they didn't ask. Like, "Do you have a compost pile?" I heat with wood instead of oil or gas, but they didn't ask about that. So, look, I am no saint, I live like most Americans, which I suspect is a little too well. I want to do better and I think it is important that I will try to live a
(Continued next page)

Consumption... (from page 19)

little lighter on the land. I am probably not as bad as my footprint indicates.

Q: Yes, I am probably not that good. I live real close to work (so scored better).

A: I want to thank SEJ for singling this thing out. It really means a lot to me for this to be cited by a community of my peers and people who know environmental journalism. I am fascinated by the environment. It seems to have been marginalized the last three years. I think it shouldn't but you know that.

Knudson, who has reported for the *Des Moines Register*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times* as well as the *Bee*, is a two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize. In 1986 he was cited for national reporting for the *Des Moines Register's* "Harvest of Harm," a

series about occupational safety and health in agriculture. In 1992, he won the public service award for the *Bee's* "Sierra in Peril," a series about environmental threats to the Sierra Nevada mountain range.

Knudson concentrates on the environment and natural resources for the *Bee*, focusing on longer projects. His most recent project is "Seeds of Doubt" (June 2004), a look at the failed promises of the biotechnology industry. See "State of Denial" and "Seeds of Doubt" at: www.sacbee.com/static/archive/news/projects/

Mike Dunne is assistant editor of the SEJournal and a reporter at The Advocate in Baton Rouge.

President... (from page 2)

cess raising money for the Pittsburgh conference (minus the rental fee for the Batman suit) and has set a high bar for other board members.

If our finances gel beyond our dreams, we would be able to consider some program changes – if they fit our mission and could be sustained financially. The Awards Committee could consider adding a photo or book category, or both, to the contest. We could do more regional events – gatherings that today are typical-

going to get better.

Enough of the serious stuff. Now a few words about SEJ's fun side. Any veteran SEJer knows that the hallway conversations, the renewal of friendships, the quick email, the beer-hoisting toast and the phone calls just to check in are at the heart of why SEJ attracts and keeps so many members.

As your new president, I'd like to encourage us to think of ways to nurture all this camaraderie, during and outside the conference. Even on our own.

I'm thinking of things like SEJ Coffeehouse, which in Baltimore staged SEJ members who read poetry, played musical instruments and in one case even attempted comedy. The Coffeehouse has been on hiatus. As any conference chair knows, many people would like to see it return. I am one of them. How 'bout an early evening jam before we all head out to the Austin bars?

Many SEJers have similar interests and there is nothing stopping us from organizing our own informal trips. Anybody up for a scuba-diving trip? Cozumel, maybe? How great would it be for a group of SEJ members to get together for a trip to the Galapagos Islands, or Costa Rica, or Belize, or some other natural wonderland, perhaps dragging along Bob Thomas of Loyola University New Orleans or one of our many other in-house experts to tell us what we're seeing? What else? Dina Cappiello of the *Houston Chronicle* would welcome the SEJ Pro Bowlers Tour, I'm sure (she's a ringer, as they say). Maybe a hiking trip in the Rockies? A trip to Banff or Montreal?

You get the idea. Few of us have full bank accounts. But these informal gatherings, lined up by volunteers without treading on SEJ's staff (or liability coverage), would be a great way for people with common environmental interests to spend some time together that doesn't involve rushing to the next panel.

Let me just close by saying what an honor it is to serve as your latest president. If you have questions, suggestions, ideas, complaints or praise, feel free to contact me at pbeeman@sej.org or 515-284-8538.

Perry Beeman, SEJ's new president, covers the environment at The Des Moines Register.

Photo by Joe Davis



2005 Conference Chair Kevin Carmody practices his tour-leading on the Rivers Run Through It tour in Pittsburgh.

ly nearly no-budget affairs staged by a local volunteer. We could improve outreach to Canada and Mexico and beyond. We could hire really good bands for the conference (is Tower of Power available for Austin?).

It's hard to imagine how much SEJ will achieve as it pushes toward adulthood. It will take all of you continuing your many volunteer efforts. It will take SEJ's board continuing to pitch in on the nuts and bolts work that otherwise would be the domain of staffers we can't afford to hire. It will take all of us sticking to our mission to advance the world of environmental reporting. We are the envy of the journalism world already, and it's only

Talking... (from page 1)

paper would never let me write it. We rarely cover anything outside our circulation area, other than state issues with strong local ties. But my editor encouraged me to write a proposal (we don't do this much at my paper) and pitch it up to the managing and executive editors.

I did.

Then I was asked to write a two-page justification of why people in our coverage area would care about these disparate communities. My arguments ranged from the statewide impact of rural jobs, to Macon's obsession with history, to our readers' vacationing patterns.

I also decided to focus each story mostly on one family; the common element in all was the youngest generation's decision to either stay on the family land and in the family business, or to move away in search of mainstream "success." Because most people have left home or experienced the mixed emotions of watching their kids leave home, I thought readers would identify with this dilemma.

The other common element among these cultures was their working-class background. Georgia, and particularly Atlanta, is very focused right now on projecting a "New South" image of upscale, business-friendly suburbanism. But the vast majority of Georgians live in rural areas left behind by the New South culture. And that's not necessarily bad. The Old South still has much to offer besides Boss Hawg, and it remains an economic driver in the success of the state.

This was a hard story to pitch because the concept is pretty abstract. With most of my stories, I can say, "This is about leaky gas tanks," or "This is about endangered woodpeckers." This was about rural Georgia communities whose traditional links to the land are being tested by economic changes that may eventually unravel their culture and erode their connection with the environment. That's a mouthful.

I planned for a farming story to be the anchor story which would focus on a community in my coverage area. I proposed five other possible stories. Two were eliminated as too tangential (a historically Scots community) or too difficult (the Muskogee Indians' connection to sacred mounds in Macon). The remaining stories that made up the series were about shrimpers in the tiny port of Darien; African-descended island-dwellers called the Geechee; and the mountain people of Rabun County. Of our North Georgia counties, I chose Rabun because it has long been a vacation spot for Middle Georgia residents. Plus, most Georgians know something of the traditional mountain culture in Rabun from reading the Foxfire series of magazines and books, which document everything from herb lore to whisky-making in that area.

My paper does not have many resources in terms of money or time to spare reporters, so I spread my work on the series over about five months. I found most of my subjects before leaving the office. For some of the communities, like Sapelo Island, I started with people I met on the IJNR fellowship trip. To find the farmer, I sought the help of county extension agents and farmers I knew from previous stories. For the mountain story, I started with Foxfire and county officials, then worked outward. I probably spoke to

dozens of people before choosing the families I would focus on. The mountain story used Foxfire as the family. This was partly because the story was so reliant on the memories of elderly people, and I couldn't identify which ones were the most cogent until I met them in person. In a perfect world, I'd like to have returned to Rabun County another time to focus more on a single family.

I am fortunate to have a good mentor, Sammy Fretwell at *The State* in Columbia, S.C., and he reminded me to focus on recording sights and sounds while I was in each community. Sensory details cannot be gleaned over the phone.

I wrote as much description as possible while I was there, try-

A teenage farmer put me behind the controls of a tractor for the first time and, while I attempted not to destroy the cotton, asked me to "explain about women."

ing to identify key images that would convey a sense of the place or the plight. Each night on the road, I did some free-association writing. For instance, that's when I worked on physical descriptions of people's faces, movements and voices. For me, it's very important to describe something while I'm looking at it, or as soon as possible afterward. Trying to come up with a metaphor or simile from a remembered image just doesn't work.

Before each interview, I brainstormed pages of questions. Usually I didn't refer to them while talking with people, but the process helps me focus and review before an interview. I asked questions about a lot of things I knew I wouldn't include, especially about family history and the process of a workday.

What time do you get up?

What do you do first when you get to the boat?

Then what?

How did you learn to do this or that thing?

But people don't turn off their personal lives and emotions while they're working, so I also asked for their reactions to the different elements of their jobs. What do you think about the tourists? What's the dumbest or most offensive question a tourist ever asked you? What do you think about while you ride on the tractor all afternoon? (In the case of the teenage farmer: girls. I had one of the most fun/bizarre experiences of my career when he put me behind the controls of a tractor for the first time and, while I attempted not to destroy the cotton, asked me to "explain about women.")

These questions ensured that I knew what I was talking about and also made my subjects realize I respected what they do. They opened up with me as a result. The detail questions brought me some of the best illustrative details, like the college boy/shrimp boat captain who almost wrecked his boat while he was distracted by a book. (Don't stop there. Ask the next question.) What were you reading? "Lady Chatterly's Lover." It made a great anecdote.

I was lucky to be working with a very talented, analytical photographer, a sociology major, and we talked about our impressions after each interview. This helped us make sure we were both covering the same thematic elements and helped me weed out some of the over-the-top schmaltz. I needed empathy with these

(Continued next page)

Talking... (from page 21)

people to convey their stories vividly, but sometimes I needed to prod my healthy skepticism, too.

I heavily scheduled each trip beforehand so I could make the most of my time, usually two or three days in each location. I tried to write one story before I started the next. I'd go through all the notes and highlight the quotes and images that most defined

The hardest part was constructing the first section of each draft, because with this kind of story I have to write the lead first. Once I get the story talking, it sort of knows how to tell itself.

each community for me. These were the ones I wanted to make sure to include. I do a very general outline before writing, basically writing the subheads and then organizing my information within them. Most first drafts took about two to three days.

The hardest part was constructing the first section of each draft, because with this kind of story I have to write the lead first. It sets the voice for the rest of the story. Once I get the story talking, it sort of knows how to tell itself. When trying to write the farming story, I sat in front of my computer all day without being able to come up with anything. (This is rare for me.) As I drove home, I found myself reciting the first 10 paragraphs, and typed them up as soon as I got in the house. I finished the draft the next day.

As an aside, I think some of my writing style comes from storytelling, in the literal (oral) sense. I have a Masters Degree in storytelling performance and do some professional storytelling on the side. It helps me write rhythmically. Also, as a storyteller, I am often drawn to the untold histories of women, minorities, and the working class, things that are apparently too interesting and practical to be taught in school. I think that interest helped me "see" the idea for this series and recognize the large-scale impact of these cultures, most of which are traditionally oral cultures themselves.

After all the stories were done, I reworked the earlier ones to strengthen the thread that linked them. For example, I made sure

each story had a paragraph high up contrasting the New South/Old South mentality.

The editing process mostly consisted of cutting and streamlining. My tendency to write too long has always been my biggest weakness. I also need an editor to stop me when I'm getting too heavy-handed with the metaphors or imagery. I like my writing to be lyrical. I don't like it to be fruity. There is a fine line, and I'm sure I've crossed it more than once.

I gathered all the statistics and found maps and facts for the many graphics that ran with the stories and I wrote the hammerheads ("Mountains: Land of Sky and Clouds," "Islands: Land Between Worlds," etc.). Again, this was an effort to link the stories. We chose to run the series on consecutive days rather than consecutive Sundays partly because we wanted to emphasize that thematic thread between the locations.

For me this series typifies the kind of link I need to make as a reporter between the environment and the fabric of people's culture. I wish I could say I did it more often. It requires thinking, a lot. I know that sounds simplistic, but the truth is that I don't usually think critically enough about the elements and the premise of a story once I've conceived it.

Reader response to the series was visceral. Many people sent me e-mails describing memories of childhood they had forgotten: growing up on farms, going to camp in the mountains, driving through sandy towns like Darien on the way to the beach. This was what I really wanted to accomplish: Making readers identify emotionally with these cultures and the environment that once defined them.

Heather Duncan covers the environment for the Telegraph in Macon, Ga. Her series, "Tied To The Land," won a first-place prize this year in the SEJ annual awards.

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Awards... (from page 9)

ronmental topics, from the scientifically technical to the politically contentious.”

2nd: Andrew C. Revkin, *The New York Times* for his superb coverage of climate change.

3rd: Ray Ring, *High Country News* for compelling and provocative coverage of Western natural-resource conflicts.

BEAT REPORTING – TV: Ed Rodgers of New Jersey Public Broadcasting for the “solid construction, exceptional story choice and consistent quality” of his reporting on environmental issues. The judges hailed this veteran reporter for producing “stories that matter in a state with a unique combination of urban, suburban and parkland issues.”

No 2nd or 3rd place awarded.

SMALL-MARKET – PRINT: S. Heather Duncan of *The* (Macon, Ga.) *Telegraph*. Her series, “Tied to the Land,” documented the cultural as well as environmental challenges facing Georgia’s traditional rural communities.

2nd: Margaret Kriz, *National Journal*.

3rd: Sonja Lee, *Great Falls* (Minn.) *Tribune*, for “Asbestos Tragedy Escalates.”

SMALL-MARKET–BROADCAST: Graham Johnson of WPTZ-TV, Vermont. Judges lauded his work for good writing and a “fun-to-watch” style that tends to find good interview subjects.

2nd: Carolyn Johnsen, Nebraska Public Radio, for “Boone County” and “Troubled Waters.”

3rd: Don Dare, Jason Hensley and George Mitchell, WATE-TV, for “Smokies – Out of Sight.”

ONLINE REPORTING: Chris Raphael and Jason Felch, for “Peru: A Gamble in the Jungle,” produced for PBS Frontline/World and WashingtonPost.com. Their three-part series took readers on a journey into this environmentally sensitive mountain region to examine a proposed natural gas pipeline.

Stories entered for awards had to be published or aired between March 1, 2003 and Feb. 29, 2004.

Judges for the contest were selected by an awards committee appointed by SEJ’s board of directors. To avoid any appearance of insider influence, committee members were barred from entering, as were board members, unless they had played an insignificant part in a team reporting effort. Judges were not allowed to review any categories in which they had entered.

The judges were Charles Alexander, former international editor, *Time* magazine; Rachel Ambrose, AP Radio; Eric Anderson, KPBS Radio/TV News; Robert Braile, freelancer; Bob Calo, University of California Graduate School of Journalism; Neil Chase, managing editor, CBS Marketwatch; Sharon Collins, CNN Headline News; Cheryl Colopy, independent radio producer; Gino Del Guercio, Boston Science Communications; Jeffrey Dvorkin, National Public Radio; Peter Dykstra, CNN; Paul Glickman, KPCC; Erin Hayes, ABC News; Marguerite Holloway, *Scientific American*; Randy L. Loftis, *Dallas Morning News*; Betsy Marston, *High Country News*; John Miller, Texas Christian University Department of Journalism.

Also judging were Bruce Plasket, *Longmont* (CO) *Daily Times Call*; Charles P. Quirnbach, Wisconsin Public Radio; Boyce Rensberger, Knight Science Journalism Fellowships, MIT; James V. Risser, director emeritus, Knight Fellowships, Stanford University; Jacques A. Rivard, former correspondent, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation; Steven S. Ross, Columbia University; Mark Thalheimer, RTNDF, Future of News; Al Tompkins, Poynter Institute; Lynn van Luven, University of Victoria, Journalism and Creative Writing; and Jim Van Nostrand, Knight Ridder Digital.

National Tropical Botanical Garden environmental journalism fellowships

The National Tropical Botanical Garden, headquartered in Hawaii, is accepting applications for the 2005 Environmental Journalism Fellowship program. The week long course will be held on Kauai May 16-21. Deadline to apply is Feb. 22 with notification by March 1. See www.ntbg.org for information and application. Or contact course facilitator JoAnn Valenti at valentij@byu.edu.

Helvarg... (from page 4)

Policy plenary, asked the question, ‘Is the Bush administration’s approach simply evolved from previous administrations, or a creation onto itself?’ In explaining the absence of a Climate Change chapter in a major report, EPA’s Paul Gilman suggested that Gov. Whitman ate his homework. Still, all the panelists managed to convey the slow and ponderous nature of science during the Q&A period.

The afternoon included matinees and mini-tours. I did a river raft tour in which I learned the river is either three miles clean or 126 dirty, depending on how you view it.

Either way we got back out on a couple of the three river city’s waters that evening on a rip-roaring ‘forget politics, Go Red Sox!’ riverboat tour. Our tour announcer informed us this was the second most beautiful view after the Grand Canyon, and I admit I’d kind of taken a liking to Pittsburgh. With its hilly neighborhoods it reminds me of San Francisco without the ocean or the culture.

As the rock band jammed on the main deck (it was such a good party no one left till it was over) we sailed past a sewage plant, under a bridge carrying a coal train, and toward a plume of factory flame where the Ohio River merges with the Styx. This suggested the kind of stories you’ll be covering over the next four years, and why, while the leadership will deny it, SEJ helped swing the election. If it hadn’t how can you explain its being invited to hold its next conference in Texas?

David Helvarg is an author and president of the Blue Frontier Campaign (although tolerant of the Red Frontier Campaign).

Editor’s note: We think Helvarg used that editors/amphibians’ joke in one of his past annual spoofs on the SEJ conference. But since this is all in good fun, we let it go.

Mercury... (from page 15)

unexpected considering the amount of input it gets in the course of a rulemaking. The head of the Federal Advisory Committee charged by EPA to study the mercury issue has been among the most critical voices against the trading plan. EPA promised the group a study of MACT scenarios but disbanded the group without providing the materials.

Most recently, three environmental groups have filed suit in U.S. District Court, seeking to force EPA to scrap the trading approach. The environmentalists – the Izaak Walton League, National Wildlife Federation and Natural Resources Council of Maine – say EPA ignored its Clean Air Act obligation to issue a mercury rule by the end of 2002. Additionally, the environmentalists claim the cap-and-trade approach that EPA favors for mercury reductions is an illegal interpretation of federal law.

The Justice Department, arguing on behalf of EPA, has told the court that the environmentalists are sidestepping the basic principles of administrative law by suing over a rule that is not yet final. The Bush administration contends that its failure to meet the 2002 deadline and issue a MACT standard is overcome

by the fact it is currently in the midst of a rulemaking for mercury that accounts for new data and modeling.

It is unclear when a ruling will come.

No matter, further legal challenges are expected once EPA does make its final decision. Environmentalists have said they would sue EPA if it finalizes a rule based on mercury trading. Industry also appears poised to challenge the agency if it adopts a MACT standard, taking the counter argument of environmentalists by saying it would be impossible to comply with a strict set of requirements when the technology to reduce mercury emissions is not available for widespread deployment.

Court cases are likely to last well through 2005. Congress, meanwhile, is eyeing Clean Air Act amendments in its next session that may address mercury.

Darren Samuelsohn covers air pollution, climate change, environmental politics and more as a senior reporter for Greenwire, a Washington-based online news service.

Mercury test... (from page 5)

during the conference's opening session Wednesday night. Each study participant donated a small lock of hair and filled out a questionnaire that included questions about fish consumption.

David Senn, a research associate and lecturer at Harvard,

Fish consumption, followed by age, turned out to be important factors. Among people with the highest mercury levels, the average age was 46, and the participants ate an average of 10.7 fish meals per month.

Among those with the lowest mercury levels, the average age was 35, and that group ate 2.7 fish meals per month on average. A third of those people were vegetarians or vegans; there were no vegetarians in the highest-mercury group.

Salmon was the most popular type of fish consumed, followed by shrimp and canned light tuna. Mackerel, swordfish and bass, which rank among the highest mercury-containing fish, were rarely eaten, according to the study.

Hair sampling continued throughout the conference. A grant from the Heinz Foundations supported the project, which was estimated to cost about \$40,000, Senn said.

Participants can find out their mercury results by matching their identification number to a chart available on-line at www.pennfuture.org. Each participant also will

receive an e-mail with the complete study results and analysis in early December, Senn said.

Sara Shipley is environment reporter at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

Photo by Ken Friedman



When the hair test results were announced on Saturday, some SEJers discovered why they were mad as hatters.

flew back to Boston with the samples tucked into small manila envelopes. There, a laboratory team worked around the clock to analyze the results in time for Saturday morning's session.

The outcome was startling: About 1 in 4 of the first 199 people tested exceeded the 1 ppm recommended limit. One person tested at 10 ppm. The median level was 0.54 ppm.

Kennedy, car chases and the air we breathe

Kennedy slams Bush on environment

Crimes Against Nature; How George W. Bush and his Corporate Pals are Plundering the Country and Hijacking Our Democracy

By Robert F. Kennedy Jr.
HarperCollins, \$21.95

Reviewed by MURRAY CARPENTER

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. doesn't bury the lede in his new book "Crimes Against Nature." It's all right there in the subtitle: "How George W. Bush and his corporate pals are plundering the country and hijacking our democracy." Neither does the environmental attorney, son of the slain U.S. attorney general, pull any punches in his description of the Bush administration's environmental record. "You simply can't talk honestly about the environment today without criticizing this president," writes Kennedy in the introduction. "George W. Bush will go down as the worst environmental president in our nation's history."

Co-author of the 1997 book, "The Riverkeepers," Kennedy covers a lot of ground in his catalogue of President Bush's "crimes against nature." He follows the financial links between the Bush administration regulators and the regulated industries – perhaps the most compelling part of the book.

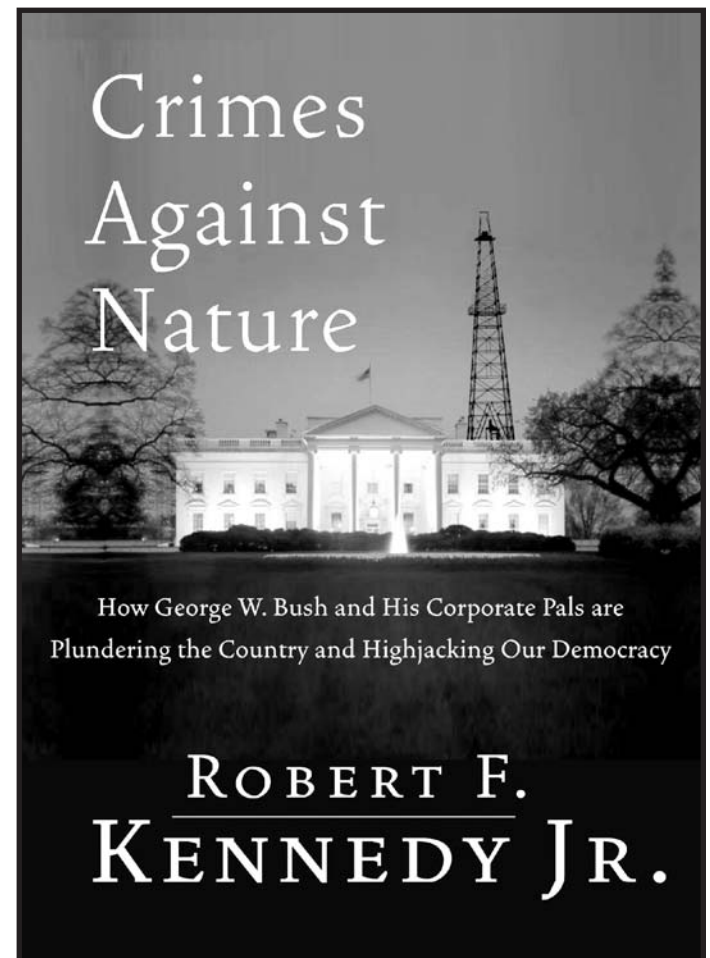
Kennedy's outrages over Bush's environmental policies are evident throughout. "I am angry both as a citizen and a father," Kennedy writes. "Three of my sons have asthma, and on bad-air days I watch them struggle to breathe." The bad air near his New York home is largely caused by coal-burning power plants in the Midwest. Kennedy reviews the regulatory changes that allow the coal-burners to keep on polluting and traces the career trajectories of Jeffrey Holmstead and J. Steven Griles, the industry lobbyists-turned-regulators who have carried water for the coal industry in the Bush administration.

Those of us in the media come in for criticism, too. In a chapter entitled "What liberal media?" Kennedy laments that the Bush administration's environmental policies have received scant attention compared to celebrity news. "Sleazy scoundrels like Steven Griles and Jeffrey Holmstead or medicine-show fakirs like John Graham make the endlessly broadcast Clinton-Whitewater scandal look like a Sunday-school romp," writes Kennedy, "yet they are invisible in the press." It's an over-the-top criticism, easy to take issue with. But when we quibble about this, isn't it really a matter of degrees? Is national environmental coverage – broadcast and print – invisible, virtually invisible or simply insufficient? Tough call. It's probably safe to say that the media outlets providing solid environmental reporting are the exception rather than the rule, and that most Americans are more familiar with murder suspect Scott Peterson than any of the "scoundrels" that Kennedy points to.

Bush appointees get especially close scrutiny. John Graham, director of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, is one Bush appointee who looks shabby under Kennedy's lens. Graham founded the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis (HCRA), largely funded by the industries whose risks were being analyzed.

In his new position with the Bush administration, Kennedy writes, "Graham seems hell-bent on demolishing as many existing regulations as he can."

While much of the book is deadly serious, Kennedy includes darkly humorous passages. In describing how the Bush administration's homeland security efforts have failed to protect U.S. citizens and their environment from terrorists, he cites *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* reporter Carl Prine's ability to walk unchallenged into over 60 chemical plants. Prine sat on a chemical tank and waved at passersby. In a similar anecdote, Kennedy's brother



Douglas, a reporter for Fox News, rents a plane and flies around the Indian Point nuclear plant for 20 minutes waiting in vain for someone to notice. RFK, Jr. takes aim at the Federal Aviation Administration's rejection of a no-fly zone over the Hudson River nuclear power plant – a potential terror target. (FAA provided such protection for Disneyland, Crawford, Texas, and even his cousin Caroline Kennedy's Cape Cod wedding.) Kennedy himself piloted a boat back and forth on the river behind the plant for a long time before guards arrived to investigate; not only were they unarmed, their boat broke down on its way back to the plant.

Kennedy knocks free-market conservatives lobbying for

(Continued next page)

environmental rollbacks. “You show me a polluter and I’ll show you a subsidy. I’ll show you a fat cat using political clout to escape the discipline of the free market and load his production costs on the backs of the public,” writes Kennedy. “The fact is, free market capitalism is the best thing that could happen to our environment, our economy, our country.”

Kennedy writes well and makes good use of some great material. Reporters who’ve struggled to shoehorn a comprehensive look at the Bush administration’s environmental policies into a handful of column inches will envy the 200 pages Kennedy has devoted to his subject and the use he’s made of that space. Now that it looks as though the next four years will bring an amplification of the Bush environmental policies of the last four, Kennedy’s book provides good context for looking forward.

Murray Carpenter is the editor and publisher of Northern Sky News, a monthly tabloid focusing on the New England and Canadian maritime environment.



Ecothriller offers vivid characters – and a chase scene

The Cyanide Canary
 By Joseph Hilldorfer and Robert Dugoni
 Free Press, \$26

Reviewed By JIM MOTAVALLI

Ever since Jonathan Harr’s “A Civil Action,” readers have been treated to a veritable feast of eco-thrillers, both fact and fiction. A case in point: Bill Fitzhugh’s 1998 black comedy, “The Organ Grinders,” an alternatively tragic and uproarious tale of what happens when a corporate earth despoiler, apparently modeled after Maxxam timber magnate Charles Hurwitz, starts a lucrative sideline in baboon organs for human transplants. Needless to say, his plans go awry.

The same could be said of Allen Elias, whose Idaho-based company Evergreen Resources hoped to make money turning toxic mining waste into fertilizer. But as Joseph Hilldorfer and Robert Dugoni describe it in their fast-paced true story, “The Cyanide Canary,” he was willing to cut a few corners and break more than a few environmental laws.

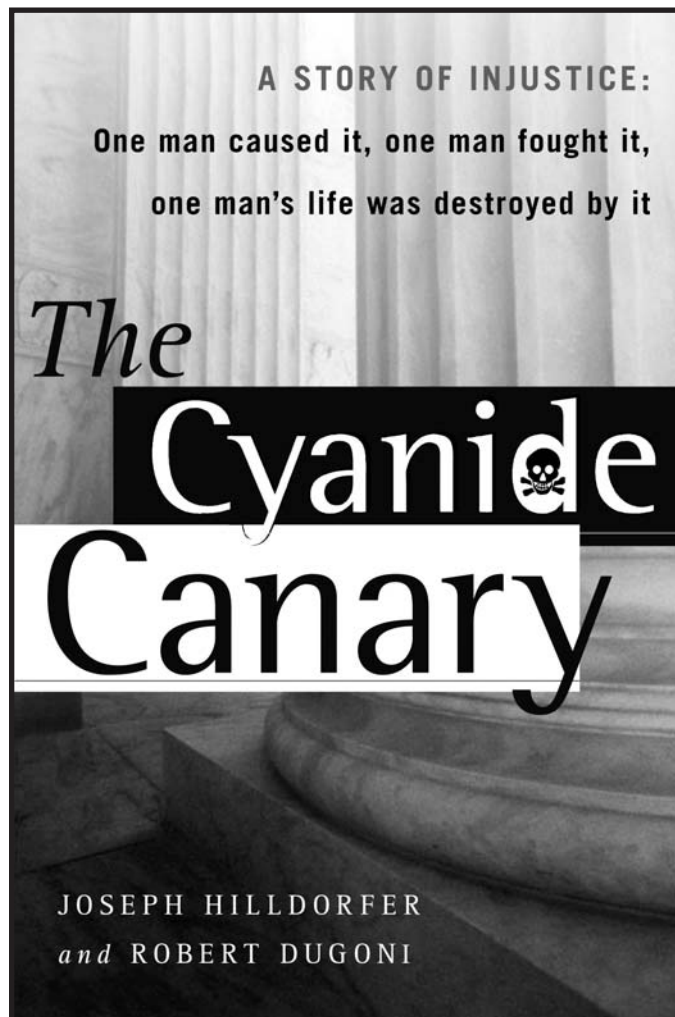
One complaint about this book was its awkward title – a reference to coal miners’ historic practice of bringing canaries into mines. If a canary dropped dead, the workers knew deadly carbon monoxide was filling the air.

Hilldorfer is the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency special agent who investigated Evergreen’s Soda Springs fertilizer plant and its lax handling of toxic chemicals. Dugoni is a writer and lawyer. Instead of crafting a first-person account of the case, the two opted for a third-person narrative with all the novelistic detail of a true crime thriller.

In their book, the canary is an Evergreen Resources employee. The tale begins on a tragic note when 20-year-old Evergreen worker Scott Dominguez was ordered to help clean out a cyanide-filled storage tank without protective gear. Dominguez emerged from his task brain damaged and barely alive; Elias was prosecuted by the EPA. (Yes, the EPA actually does take people to court.)

Dominguez’ heroic rescue by co-workers, for instance, is told in

heated, minute-by-minute prose. The workers, squeezing through a single tiny opening in the tank, struggle through overpowering heat and fumes to bring their friend out, nearly dying themselves in the attempt. Elias, the man who ordered them in, stands by impassively.



The authors conclude he was already working on his cover story.

“The Cyanide Canary” doesn’t slow down when Elias’ case gets entangled in the federal bureaucracy. The authors have a great deal of information to impart about the machinery of American justice – which apparently, rarely does the right thing when offenders commit environmental crimes. But they know they’ll lose readers if they fall into the alphabet soup of federal jurisdiction, so they keep the story focused on a vivid and varied cast of characters: investigators, witnesses and defendants among them.

Evergreen Resources had a well-heeled patron in Kerr-McGee, a chemical corporation that owned a nearby fertilizing processing plant and, according to the authors, was looking to avoid a \$230 million hazardous waste cleanup. (Some also may remember Kerr-McGee as the employer of the late whistleblower Karen Silkwood.) But Evergreen’s low pay and dangerous duty made it a temporary employer of last result. It’s not surprising, then, that the federal researchers had their hands full just tracking down the men who worked at the plant that day.

This book is never dull. The enforcers in this rapid-pulse tale don’t putter around like Dagnet’s Jack Webb in a government-issued Ford sedan. Instead, they fly to Boise, rent the fastest car they

(Continued next page)

can get, slip on a pair of driving gloves, drop their 9mm Glocks on the seat and take off at 100 miles per hour on a race across the state. Will Tom Cruise get the role? “The Cyanide Canary” would make a powerful movie even without any Hollywood hyperbole.

Allen Elias goes to trial for what he did to Scott Dominguez and government lawyers and investigators do a damned fine job of trying to put him behind bars. To reveal any more than that would be to give away the ending, and you just don’t do that with thrillers.

Jim Motavalli is editor of E/The Environmental Magazine.



Meditation on air’s value and disruption

GASP! The swift and terrible beauty of air

By Joe Sherman

Shoemaker Hoard, 2004

414 pages; \$26

Reviewed by KAREN FLAGSTAD

Take a deep breath. Hold it and concentrate on the air inflating your lungs. You contain multitudes of Big Bang molecules right now – carbon and oxygen, hydrogen and nitrogen, dust from that rug you meant to vacuum, traces of thousands of chemical compounds and probably some radiation from live volcanoes on Io, the Jovian moon. It’s all there, but invisible.

Now breathe out. This is a consciousness-raising exercise from a chapter of “GASP! The Swift & Terrible Beauty of Air.”

“Imagine holding your breath, your exhalation, in your hands,” writes author Joe Sherman. “It’s pretty exciting, having basic life-building materials of the universe right there in front of you.” Feeling silly? Meditating on air isn’t so silly, given the problems afflicting it – from smog to ozone depletion to global warming to nuclear radiation to anthrax spores sent in envelopes.

This ambitious, eclectic book is intended as an antidote to our society’s denial of its role in the biosphere. Making people and their political leaders more keenly aware of the intrinsic value of air – its symbiotic evolution with life on Earth, its role in extinctions millions of years ago, and the clear and present danger of ignoring “invisible” problems like climate change – that’s what “GASP!” is about.

Readers of “GASP!” can expect a hefty sampling of evolutionary science. Sherman’s chapter on the origin of our atmosphere may not be light reading, but I found it compelling – espe-

cially the discussion on how Earth evolved differently from its neighbors, Venus and Mars. Sherman writes, “Probably the most important thing to remember about the origin of the unique atmosphere surrounding Earth is that for the planet to become life friendly, the carbon in its early atmosphere had to be removed and locked up somewhere.” Carbon sequestration occurred through photosynthesis and carbonate rock formation.

The former began when certain ancient bacteria – fermenting “bubblers” clustered around deep ocean vents – began evolving into “bluegreens,” the first photosynthesizers. The bluegreens emitted oxygen as waste – hence the term, “breather” bacteria. Such breathers, scientists believe, were our distant forbears.

When he isn’t delving into atmospheric science, Sherman plumbs ancient myth. “I doubt science will ever totally trump myth,” he writes. For one thing, science may never solve the full mystery of life. And, some of the old myths in which Earth creates its own atmosphere come uncannily close to recent scientific ideas such as the Gaia Hypothesis. According to Greek myth, the sky god Ouranos emerged from Gaia, the earth mother; wearing a crown of stars, he then spread himself in sexual union over Gaia. Sherman writes: “Scientists now view the earth and the sky as one continuous entity, a living biosphere. The atmosphere . . . is considered an extension of the earth’s crust.”

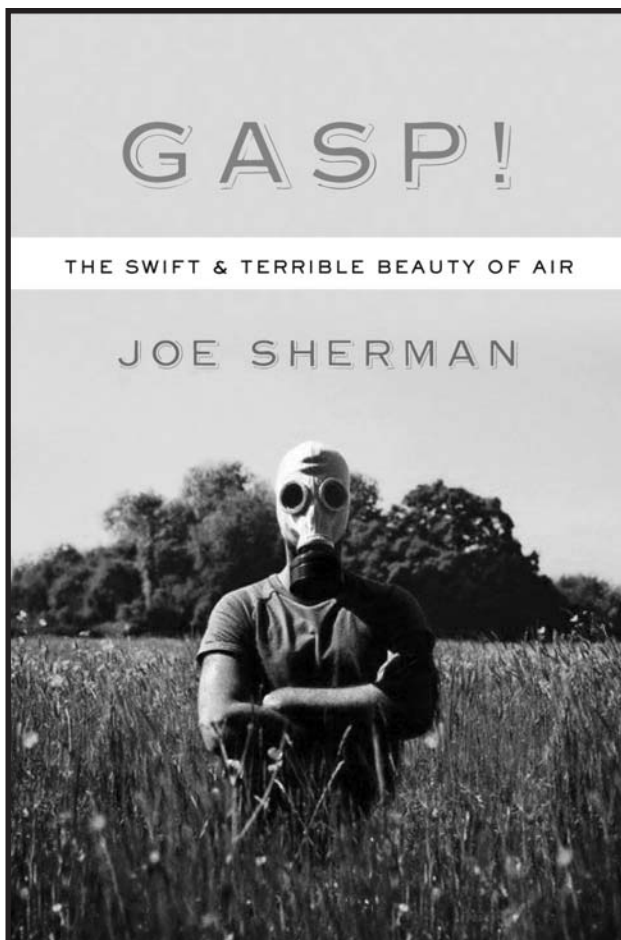
“GASP!” later turns to the air pollution and the incomplete success of environmental regulation. Sherman categorizes everything from the fires of human cave dwellers through the notoriously smoke-saturated urban air of the 19th century as “The Little Atmospheric Disruptions of Man.” Unlike the more menacing atmospheric disruptions of the 20th and 21st centuries, pollution from coal consumption in the 1800s was so obvious it was impossible to deny.

Denial is a prevalent theme in later chapters – mainly, denial of the need to change human consumption patterns. Denial is a political problem, evidenced by the Bush administration’s refusal to sign the Kyoto Protocol to limit greenhouse gas emissions. But it’s also a social problem for areas like the “Black Triangle” in the former Czechoslovakia, a once-lovely basin of lakes and fields near the mountains of Saxony that is sacrificing its health and its communities to coal mining.

With “GASP!” Joe Sherman hopes to confront denial and earn more support for environmental action to protect the air we breathe. I hope it works.

With “GASP!” Joe Sherman hopes to confront denial and earn more support for environmental action to protect the air we breathe. I hope it works.

Karen Flagstad is a freelance writer and technical editor in Portland, Oregon.



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From heartland dairies to D.C. science battles

By **MIKE DUNNE**

The arrival of a cheese plant turned out to be the hook for an examination of the dairy industry's impact on South Dakota by reporter **Ben Shouse** of the Sioux Falls, S.D., *Argus Leader*.

The issues surrounding dairies – smell and manure pond pollution – had been around for several years, “but it became more urgent with the arrival of the Davisco mozzarella cheese plant in Lake Norden, S.D. The plant started operating in 2003 and is capable of using the milk from 65,000 cows. The state's dairy herd is 85,000.

Developers and the state have responded by recruiting dairies with at least 800 cows. Opposition groups raised fears of water pollution, odor and declining property values, Shouse reported.

“Small dairies are gradually fading from the landscape,” Shouse said. Dairy development offers the prospect of local jobs and increased demand for local crops, so it is an important local story, Shouse said.

South Dakota residents want the right to vote on individual dairy permits. They fear development is proceeding too quickly and without enough opportunity for public discussion and public input on decisions, Shouse said. He worked off and on to write “Big Dairies, New Questions” for about three months. He estimated it took about three weeks total time.

Shouse's package was just one of the notable pieces of environmental journalism printed or broadcast in the past few months. Others ranged from increased concerns about other livestock-related pollution issues, to Bush administration battles over science and the plight of the memorably named salamander, the hellbender.

On Sept. 29, the *Des Moines Register's* **Philip Brasher** wrote about the lack of regulations regarding air pollution from livestock activities. While factories and refineries must report the toxic chemicals they release, livestock farms have no such requirement even though emissions include ammonia and hydrogen sulfide.

A court decision could force them to start disclosing those emissions – unless Congress intervenes.

A federal judge in Kentucky ruled in November 2003 that pollution reporting

requirements in two federal laws applied to a group of chicken farms operated under contract with Tyson Foods Inc. U.S. Sen. Larry Craig, a Republican from Idaho, a state that is home to a growing number of large dairy farms, is proposing legislation to exempt farms from the reporting laws.

The Nov. 2 general election was cause for a flurry of coverage on how the Bush

on environmental and conservation issues.

Kilian also wrote about the frustration of environmentalists who complained their issue was not being given much consideration in the debate over who should be the next president.

There was also a lot of post-election coverage that said expect the same for the next four years.

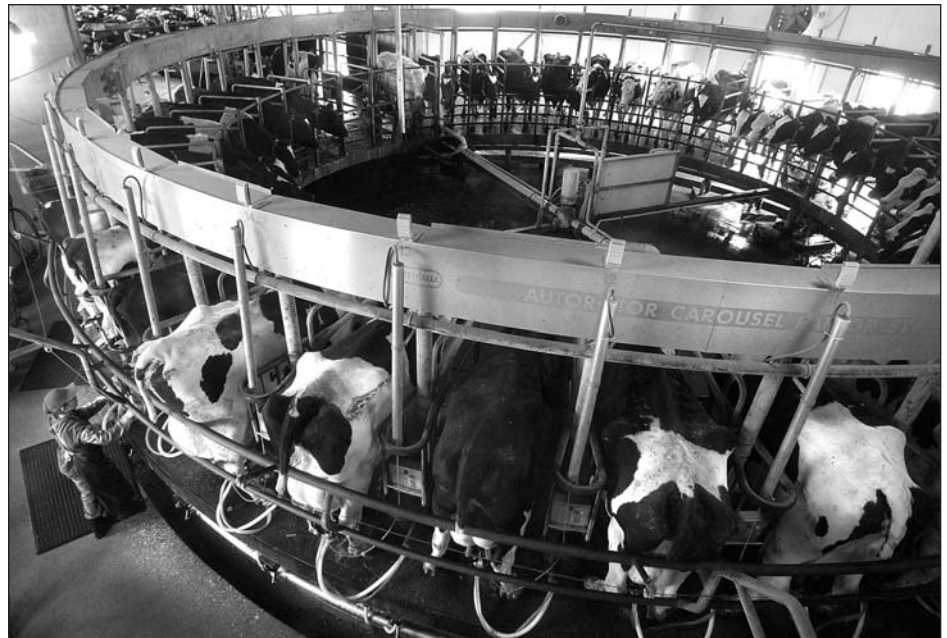


Photo courtesy of the ARGUS LEADER

Cows line a dairy carousel while being milked at the Hill Top Dairy east of Brookings, S.D. on Oct. 12, 2004.

administration has done on the environment and science in general.

On Oct. 19, **Andrew Revkin** of the *New York Times* wrote about the battle between Bush and scientists.

“For nearly four years, and with rising intensity, scientists in and out of government have criticized the Bush administration, saying it has selected or suppressed research findings to suit preset policies, skewed advisory panels or ignored unwelcome advice, and quashed discussion within federal research agencies,” Revkin wrote.

Michael Kilian of the *Chicago Tribune's* Washington Bureau wrote on Oct. 18 that Bush received an “F” rating from the Sierra Club, while the National Parks Conservation Association declared his administration an official threat to the parks.

The League of Conservation Voters, in contrast, gave Democratic candidate John Kerry one of its highest ratings ever

On Sunday, Sept. 19, the *Juneau Empire's* **Elizabeth Bluemink** wrote about residents of the Alaskan town of Gustavus who offered a new idea for logging in their northern corner of the 17-million-acre Tongass National Forest. Instead of a 10-year timber plan, they suggest a 200-year plan. Instead of exporting wood to the Lower 48 or Asia, they suggest reserving it for local homes, businesses and marketable products. “It's trying to make sense for local people and local ecology,” said Greg Streveler, a naturalist who retired from Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve. “The basic idea is, you could do it forever,” he said.

Sara Shipley of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* wrote a story on Oct. 24 about scientists studying a large species of salamanders called “hellbenders” and what they may tell us about the environment.

(Continued next page)

Maurico Solis told Shipley North America's largest salamander could hold clues to the health of the human race. Amphibians are sometimes called "canaries in the coal mine" because their highly permeable skin is sensitive to subtle changes in air and water quality. The hellbender makes a particularly interesting surrogate, because the 2-foot-long animal can live up to 50 years. Its native Ozark streams appear crystal clean – but for some reason the hellbenders are a species in decline.

Sept. 23, **Tom Avril** of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote that DuPont's Teflon is getting attention far beyond the stove-top. It was one of many stories on the topic over the past few months.

A chemical used to make it, perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), has been turning up in people and animals worldwide: river otters in Oregon, polar bears in the Canadian Arctic, and in the blood of 96 percent of children tested in 23 states, Avril wrote.

Scientists are unsure how the chemical is getting into people and animals, but they have ruled out Teflon pans and pots. They also don't know whether it poses any danger at current levels, but it has been linked to liver and developmental problems in lab rats. The EPA is conducting an unusually broad review, Avril wrote.

Wade Rawlins of the *Raleigh News & Observer* wrote about new chemicals being used by clothing cleaners in the Research Triangle area.

H2Only Cleaners is the latest to shun the conventional cleaning solvent perchloroethylene, or "perc," which can pollute groundwater. Many of the estimated 900 dry-cleaning businesses and former sites across North Carolina have soil and groundwater contamination from cleaning solvents that must be cleaned up, he wrote. Some cleaners have embraced alternative cleaning methods of liquid carbon dioxide and detergent, a process invented in Chapel Hill, or GreenEarth, a modified liquid silicone. But H2Only Cleaners is the only one in the state to advertise 100 percent "wet cleaning" – water, soap and conditioners.

On Oct. 10, Rawlins also wrote about paper mill emissions. He said for years, environmental regulators have focused on controlling fumes from paper mill smokestacks but state air studies now suggest waste treatment ponds produce 90 percent of a paper mill's hydrogen sulfide emissions. Regulations don't cover pond emissions.

State and federal health officials say the emissions could be exposing thousands of people around paper mills to unhealthy concentrations of toxic hydrogen sulfide. Their evidence is not conclusive, however. They know that breathing high levels of hydrogen sulfide can cause death or loss of consciousness. But scientists know far less about long-term exposures at lower concentrations, Rawlins wrote.

Greg Harman of the *Biloxi Sun-Herald* wrote about health problems in the neighborhood around a port where

Agent Orange was shipped to Vietnam decades ago.

"The tales of sickness, misery and death blamed by many families around the Naval Construction Battalion Center in Gulfport on Agent Orange contamination have been passed back and forth from front yards and over coffee shop counter-tops for decades," Harman wrote Sept. 12.

"That whole neighborhood is dying over there, and it's not a quick, painless death," said 33-year-old Stephanie Ragar, who grew up playing at her grandparents' house two blocks from the base. Federal and state regulators have been tracking and trying to clean up Agent Orange pollution north of the base, first traced into neighborhood ditches and streams in 1979, for years.

Andrew Schneider of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* continues to follow the asbestos story.

In an Oct. 10 piece, Schneider reported that Congress has spent four years struggling to pass federal legislation that would help people with asbestos-caused cancers. The proposed law is called the Fairness in Asbestos Injury Resolution Act. The bill was meant to help Americans sickened by asbestos exposure without their having to sue the companies responsible for the exposure.

Under the legislation proposed, people would be compensated from a trust fund. But there is disagreement over the size of the trust fund and how much was going to be contributed by corporations

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that used asbestos, their insurance companies and the government, Schneider wrote.

Rob Stein of the *Washington Post* wrote a story headlined "Sprawl can harm health" on Sept. 27.

"People who live in sprawling communities tend to suffer more health problems, according to the first study to document a link between the world of strip malls, cul-de-sacs and subdivisions and a broad array of ailments." Stein said the study analyzed data on more than 8,600 Americans in 38 metropolitan areas and found that rates of arthritis, asthma, headaches and other complaints increased with the degree of sprawl. Living in areas with the least amount of sprawl, compared with living in areas with the most, was like adding about four years to people's lives in terms of their health, the study found.

On Aug. 15, **John Fuquay** of the Jackson (Miss) *Clarion-Ledger* wrote that the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality is watching more than 250 active sites where pollutants have escaped and gathered in amounts exceeding legal limits.

Jerry Banks, DEQ's chief of the groundwater assessment and remediation division, said that while the majority poses no threat, all the sites must be cleaned.

Chris Bowman of the *Sacramento Bee* wrote Aug. 15 that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency plans to conduct the first tests designed to gauge residents' exposure to naturally occurring asbestos, particularly those of children at play. Government contractors in protective jumpsuits with respirators and air monitors would simulate youths playing around a jungle gym, skidding a dirt bike, sliding into home plate to kick up dust containing the invisible, cancer-causing fibers from native asbestos-containing rock churned up by development.

The San Francisco Chronicle's Jane Kay wrote on Oct. 2 that in six months' time, consumers can expect to see labels on seafood sold in grocery stores that will tell them where it was caught and whether it is wild or farmed. She reported that new U.S. Agriculture Department rules will require it. The final rule, scheduled to take effect April 4, requires boats, packers, wholesalers and retailers to keep a chain of records on where the seafood is caught, raised and processed.

Meanwhile, **Stuart Leavenworth**

wrote in the *Sacramento Bee* that federal fisheries agency officials ordered their biologists to revise a report on salmon and other endangered fish so that more water can be shipped to Southern California from the Delta.

Biologists with NOAA Fisheries, an arm of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, concluded in August that a plan to pump more water through the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta could jeopardize endangered salmon and other fish. But higher-ups rewrote the analysis so that it removed a barrier to sending more water south, affecting how much is reserved in Northern California, including for salmon in the American River.

The Naples News, which published an award-winning 15-part series on the Gulf of Mexico last year, continued to follow-up. On Oct. 18, **Chad Gillis** wrote about the impact of storm runoff on the Gulf and other water bodies following the state's four hurricanes. "Storm water pollution that has degraded Gulf of Mexico waters for decades flowed to Florida's shoreline this summer like it rarely has as four major hurricanes dumped several feet of rain and churned up sediments in lakes, rivers and streams," Gillis wrote.

Many water quality monitoring scientists and groups expect to see some changes in coastal waters. Three of the four hurricanes that made landfall in Florida this year drenched areas surrounding Orlando. The Kissimmee Basin, which includes river and lake systems between Orlando and Lake Okeechobee, sent massive amounts of freshwater into the lake.

David A. Fahrenthold of the *Washington Post* wrote on Oct. 15 about male bass producing eggs in the South Branch of the Potomac River. Scientists believe the cause might be chicken estrogens left over in poultry manure or perhaps human hormones dumped in the river with processed sewage.

The story is another example of an emerging national problem of hormones, drugs and other man-made pollutants that appear to be interfering with the chemical signals that make fish grow and reproduce.

Colorado State University researchers are reporting the first-ever detection of livestock antibiotics in a Colorado river, a finding they say raises concerns about waste-handling practices at feedlots, according to a story written by **Jim**

Erickson of the *Rocky Mountain News* on Oct. 20. A two-year CSU effort, which looked at the Cache la Poudre River, is the first in the state to distinguish between animal and human sources of the drugs, said study leader Ken Carlson. "There's been an issue as to whether the primary sources are ag-related or urban-related, and both sides have pointed fingers at the other," said Carlson, an environmental engineer.

On Oct. 2, **Eric Berger** of the *Houston Chronicle* wrote that with just weeks left in the 2004 smog season, Houston appeared set to reclaim the prize for worst air quality in the nation. Through September, Houston had eight more days of bad smog than Los Angeles and appears unlikely to give up its lead, air-quality experts say.

The San Antonio Express-News's Tom Bower reported Sept. 28 that for the third time this year, freight trains carrying hazardous cargo collided in San Antonio.

This time there were no spills, leaks or casualties but frightening nearby residents. A runaway string of 50 rail cars rolled backward from a northbound train and struck an 80-car Union Pacific train nearly broadside just east of a high school. The eastbound Union Pacific train was pulling 14 tankers of sulfuric acid and five tankers of sodium hydroxide, or lye. Both substances are hazardous and potentially deadly.

On Sept. 30, **Patty Henetz** of the *Salt Lake Tribune* wrote about volunteer "trainspotting" who produced a list of 59 hazardous substances rolling down the Union Pacific tracks, with five of those substances considered dangerous enough to be on a federal high-priority registry. The Utah Federation for Youth, with a \$20,000 grant from the Environmental Protection Agency, marshaled 20 volunteers to keep track of hazardous-materials placards posted on the sides of rail cars. Armed with a video camera, flashlights, notebooks and a lot of resolve, the youths matched the placard numbers against lists kept by emergency service providers who must respond in the event of train derailments.

While the volunteer project focused on the Union Pacific route through Glendale and Poplar Grove, organizers stressed the neighborhood was not unique.

Spencer Hsu of the *Washington Post* reported Nov. 1 that three Democratic
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The Beat... (from page 35)

House of Representatives members said CSX Corp. has redirected rail shipments of hazardous materials away from Washington since the March 11 commuter train bombings in Madrid. The decision to divert some chemical freight, which was confirmed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, acknowledges the potential risk the cargoes pose to the nation's capital if targeted by terrorists, Hsu said.

David Wahlberg of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* wrote on Nov. 11 that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 6 percent of American women of childbearing age have mercury levels in their blood high enough to potentially harm a fetus. While the rate appears to be dropping, other studies – including one this year by a scientist

at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency – have put the figure at 16 percent to 21 percent.

The CDC has studied mercury blood levels in childbearing-age women and children since 1999. The latest study was based on blood samples taken over four years from more than 3,600 women ages 16 to 49. It found the proportion of such women with unsafe blood mercury levels dropped from 8 percent in 1999-2000 to 4 percent the following two years. The CDC, which says the decrease may be a sampling error, regards the average as the best estimate.

Finally, here's a new take on an old story: New technology often brings new problems.

Alexandra Goho reported in *Science*

News on Oct. 2 that over the past decade, the development of nanomaterials has progressed rapidly but tests of possible toxic effects of these substances on human health and the environment have been slow to get under way. Recently, an experiment raised concern about the soccer-ball-shaped carbon molecules commonly known as "buckyballs". Researchers found that buckyballs can damage fish brain cells by disrupting their membranes. Now, other chemists confirm that finding and report an innovation that might disarm potentially toxic buckyballs.

Mike Dunne, assistant editor of the SEJournal, reports for The Advocate in Baton Rouge, La.

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