

SEJ Journal

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Hurricane Katrina jolts journalism – and New Orleans

By **ROBERT A. THOMAS**

For years, I've awakened each morning to my radio broadcasting the latest in news. In fact, the radio station most often simply presented the news in the day's New Orleans *Times-Picayune*.

Mark Schleifstein, environment reporter for the *Times-Picayune*, evacuated the newspaper's offices in the back of a large "paper truck" as it drove through three feet of water, Schleifstein recalled at SEJ's annual conference. As the truck rocked back and forth, he swayed to and fro, making notes from news reports by broadcasters at WWL radio. Thus began the topsy-turvy world of reporting after Hurricane Katrina.

Major catastrophes result in widespread human suffering and intensive, yet independent, news coverage. Hurricane Katrina was no exception. Considered the worst and most costly calamity in U.S. history, Katrina forever changed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people and quite possibly changed the basic approach to reporting.

Such events bring out the best in journalism, and they open doors that serve as unanticipated portals to excellence for those who have special skills.

During the early hours of Aug. 29, a Monday, the nation turned its attention to Katrina's destruction of the central Gulf Coast. In those early hours, most visuals were coming from the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The images were awe inspiring. For hundreds of yards inland from the beach, nothing was left standing. Buildings that survived Hurricane Camille in 1969 were reduced to either a pile of lumber or they simply disappeared.

As the storm progressed, reporters were quick to announce that New Orleans had dodged the bullet – there was wind damage throughout most of the city, but long forecasted devastating floods did not happen. But by late afternoon on that first day, a collapse of a portion of the 17th Street canal was reported on the Orleans Parish side of the canal.

Hurricanes: First hand
Stories begin on page 11

(Continued on page 25)

Inside Story:

'Carbon black' report shows impacts on Native Americans

By **MIKE DUNNE**

An effort to document the lives of Oklahoma Indians introduced reporter Vicki Monks to a story that begged to be told: how a carbon black plant affected the health of a neighboring Ponca Indian community.

Carbon black, made by the burning of waste oil, is used primarily to strengthen the rubber in tires.

Monks' story, which won a 2005 Society of Environmental Journalists' Award for Radio Reporting, focused on how emissions of the ultra-fine carbon particles used to make tires black also made neighbors' homes – even their sheep – black.

With the story, aired on Public Broadcasting System's "Living on Earth," Monks found a pollution problem that was being ignored by the officials who were supposed to be protecting the environment. The story also was rich with the competing sounds of rural Oklahoma and modern-day industry, sprinkled with the unique language of the Ponca.

"No matter how interesting the subject might be, if the

interviews are dull, it won't be a great story," Monks said when asked how one makes a radio story extraordinary.

Patience and an understanding of the Ponca culture were also key. Monks outlines how she did the story:

Q: How did you conceive of the project?

A: When I ran into this story last year, I'd gone to White Eagle, Okla., to do research for a book (still in progress) about Oklahoma Indians 100 years after the tribes here were forced to give up their communal lands. White Eagle is one of the few almost entirely Indian communities that remain in the state. A federal attorney warned me not to go there because "those Poncas are pretty rough." So of course I went immediately, and met good, gracious people who led me to some of the most astonishing stories I've ever encountered.

The first time we walked through the Ponca Indian housing project next door to the carbon black plant, I decided immediately that this story was too important to wait for publication in my book. I've covered environmental stories for more than 20

(Continued on page 21)

Journalism's struggle offers big challenges for SEJ

By **PERRY BEEMAN**

SEJ's truly marvelous family of committed journalists, educators and other friends came out of the Austin conference with the usual amazement about all the talent, helpfulness and great work that our members exude.

Far be it for an SEJ veteran and board leader to rain on that parade. I relish the strength of what goes on. In fact, I think the chemistry that has kept SEJ going into a second decade is a recognized international force. That chemistry and joint experience may be one of the few things assuring that environmental journalism won't fall from the pages in favor of all-Britney, all-the-time "journalism."

I am left wondering about the future of our careers, though.

Is there going to be room for serious environmental journalism in an O.J., Robert Blake, Janet Jackson, Michael Jackson world in which television networks have resigned themselves to presenting as news not-so-hard-hitting interviews about a star's latest CD? Will chain journalism, in which top leaders are at locations far removed from some of a company's media outlets, leave room for the independent-thinking, probing pieces we offer? Can we expect column inches and air-time slots to expose the dangers of air pollution or the effects of the latest endangered-species battle when a certain element thinks the way to get readers to buy the paper is to tell them how to buy a prom dress, cook a Thanksgiving turkey, or carve a Jack o' Lantern?

I'll let people with bigger paychecks than mine define the fine line between connecting with readers' lives and insulting their intelligence. Some papers have done a fine job of reporting new angles on the holidays or life's events, or of finding compelling stories timed to the calendar and sure to grab attention.

But why do people make the commitment to watch a certain network, or buy a particular paper? They are committing to a relationship. In many areas, readers consider their favorite newspapers something they own, a utility of sorts, a place where readers write to say "good job" but also raise hell when they think they've been wronged in some way.

So there is a connection, but folks have to want to read or view your work for some good reason. I believe they make the commitment to that journalistic relationship based on the body of work they've seen. A coupon clipper may buy a single copy here and there. Subscribers and regular viewers check in because they know what to expect; they've been grabbed by good coverage in the past.

Perhaps they appreciated the clip-art, pre-fab Jack o' Lantern patterns you ran at Halloween. Maybe that's the answer to newspapers' circulation woes, though circulations continue to fall. It's

hard to see strong gains, though some papers have lost less circulation than others.

I try to use my relatives and friends as indicators of how the general readership behaves. Many of them are casual newspaper readers. Their ages range from teens to 90s.

I see only one pattern in the articles that move them. They like good stories. They like a good investigative piece, like the one my paper ran recently detailing some questionable back-room dealings that let developers buy land from a charity on the cheap and grease a highway interchange project that would help them add to their riches. They like a tear-jerker. They like a story that gives them faith in humanity. They like a story that tells them what the next big

project in town is. The problem is that their choices don't seem to fit the slogans or campaigns some newspapers favor now.

I have yet to hear any of them tell me that what they really need is a rerun of last year's picking-a-tux package. (One paper did have a lot of Web hits about how to carve a pumpkin, though.)

There is no doubt that some people enjoy the stories connected to the calendar, or to life's events. I just have never met anyone who considered that a main reason to buy the paper. It's part of the mix.

Where does that leave more serious journalism, such as environmental stories?

Environmental reporting does have this advantage. One week, we can analyze records and describe the top polluters in our areas. We connect with readers by telling them why they should care, by objectively and with balance detailing the health risks, by laying out the political forces and the sometimes amazing back-room pressure that informs decisions. Another week, we can help people learn the latest about their recycling programs, compost operations and volunteer water-monitoring efforts in which they may participate. Few beats offer such a wide array of topics that connect with readers in so many ways.

Still, in many ways I think we face the toughest challenge of SEJ's history. There are symptoms. Where is Dan Fagin, the former SEJ president? His work on breast-cancer stories at *Newsday* was among the finest printed. Now he's writing books and teaching, a fine vocation that nevertheless will keep him mainly out of mainstream journalism. Natalie Pawelski was one of the few broadcast reporters with a regular environmental reporting gig when she was at CNN. Now she's some sort of diplomatic diva for the Brits. David Ropeik long ago gave up environmental broadcast and print reporting to mull risks at a center at Harvard University. All three were on the SEJ board in the recent past.

Perhaps Fagin and others could see the writing on the wall more clearly than the rest of us. Or perhaps they jumped too early.

(Continued on page 10)

Report from the Society's President

By
**Perry
Beeman**



SEJournal

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In This Issue

Cover

■ Hurricane Katrina jolts journalism – and New Orleans

By Robert A. Thomas1

■ Inside Story: 'Carbon black' report shows impacts on Native Americans

By Mike Dunne.....1

Report from the Society's President

■ Journalism's struggle offers big challenges for SEJ

By Perry Beeman2

Viewpoint

■ Not a single armadillo was killed

By David Helvarg4

SEJ News

■ SEJ Awards 2005.....5

■ Media on the Move

By Elizabeth McCarthy.....6

■ Bill Moyers in Austin: Covering penguins and the politics of denial

By Bill Moyers.....7

Science Survey

■ Acid oceans: A new twist to report when covering climate change

By Cheryl Hogue8

Reporter's Toolbox

■ What's in the air? Conducting your own air-pollutants study

By Dina Cappelletto9

Online Bits & Bytes

■ Using TRI, please!

By Ken Ward Jr.10

Features

■ Lake Charles newspaper staff persists against Rita's fury

By Jeremy Harper11

■ Troubling predictions come true for reporter and friends

By Katina Gaudet13

■ The devastation ran clear down to Plaquemines

By Amy Wold15

■ Species-protection law overhaul sits in Senate

By Allison A. Freeman.....17

■ Top-notch panel named for \$75,000 Grantham Prize

By Michael Mansur19

Book Shelf

■ "The Grail Bird: Hot on the Trail of the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker" by Tim Gallagher

Reviewed by Christine Heinrichs28

■ "Garbage Land: On the Secret Trail of Trash" by Elizabeth Royte

Reviewed by Michelle J. Lee.....28

■ "A Spiritual Field Guide: Meditations for the Outdoors" by Bernard Brady and Mark Neuzil

Reviewed by Christine Heinrichs29

■ "The Republican War on Science" by Chris Mooney

Reviewed by Stuart Leavenworth.....30

The Beat

■ Checking tavern air (it's bad) and more pollution stories

Compiled by Mike Dunne31

SEJournal submission deadlines

Spring '06	February 1, 2006
Summer '06	May 1, 2006
Fall '06	August 1, 2006
Winter '07	November 1, 2006

Not a single armadillo was killed

By DAVID HELVARG

Not surprisingly this year's SEJ Conference in Austin, Texas, was overshadowed by a singular but all too predictable disaster, the lack of affordable booze at SEJ events.

Ironically, the last really boozy SEJ conference was in New Orleans where I recall Mark Schleifstein ominously predicting that someday we'd end up meeting in Texas. If only we'd listened to his warnings.

I was a day late arriving and so missed the usual tours of "Cancer Alley," Sprawl Zones, Coal and Oil pits, impoverished, polluted communities and other sites designed to assure us that we'll always have work. I'd really hoped to participate in the "Birds in the Hood" tour, "I'm a raptor" being my favorite song. "I'm a raptor, I fly through the sky, I'm a raptor, owl tell you why, hawk, hawk, hawk, hawk. If your Mama is an eagle then to shoot her is illegal, if your Daddy is a vulture, that's a whole other culture..."

I also missed Molly Ivins' talk where she expressed sympathy for Tom DeLay's legal difficulties in much the same way my late cat expressed sympathy for injured birds and rodents (like Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, my cat considered the Geneva Convention "quaint.")

I put up at the La Quinta motel (translation: "Next to the Denny's") and made my way over to the Omni where I ran into the Used Car Lot of the future. Here anxious salespeople offered to give me test drives in hybrids, diesels and natural gas pickups with optional longhorn hood ornaments. I opted for the most advanced ride – a \$2 million Honda hydrogen fuel cell car that had the smooth feel and sleek look of a 1982 Civic. That evening I cruised the receptions given by various groups seeking to educate environmental reporters and was amazed to learn that the British Embassy can mix a good margarita. By the third one I was loudly wondering about the wisdom of the IRA's disarming in the face of Protestant intransigence.

Austin's Sixth Street turned out to be less a bastion of outlaw country music than a traditional college town tribute to rock and roll cover songs and binge drinking.

The bats, quite frankly, also turned out to be something of a disappointment. The fact that the largest urban bat colony in the United States is made up of Mexican short-tails, reduced to living under a bridge and eating insects, does not speak well to our sense of social equity.

SEJ's Opening Plenary was a lively and engaging post-Katrina reflection on whether journalism

is dying or just gagging and why the fake news is doing better reporting than the real news. Jay Harris suggested that media consolidation is a threat to democracy while Merrill Brown saw it as an opportunity for individual journalists to become more entrepreneurial. As a longtime freelancer I certainly appreciate how you can creatively generate extra income with just a few pencils and a tin cup.

During Q&A a 20-year-old journalism student got up to say that she spends hours a day online and only reads a newspaper because her professor requires it. Inspired by what smart, promising young people can teach us, I immediately went out and got my eyebrow pierced.

Over all, this storm-inspired session reminded me of how there's nothing like massive human tragedy to restore journalists' sense of hope and optimism.

Many of the conference sessions were held at the UT Thompson Center (and I'm sure Hunter would appreciate both the honor, and the Gonzo-like Temple of Doom Architecture). The hurricane panel was as wide-ranging as, well, the hurricane. The Climate Change participants made some good points but there was also a lot of hot air. Thirsting for more, I attended the desalinization panel, though I skipped the one on nanotechnology and pollution. I just don't see it as a big issue.

I also thought the Christians and environmentalists panel could have had more spirit. Someone said the natural gas panel stank (someone else claimed it just lacked color). As for the dead zone panel, that one was too obvious.

For the first time in years I missed SEJ's annual business meeting. How could I have known this time they'd be doing the election game with the tequila shots, the live rattlesnake and the silk cowboy shirt?

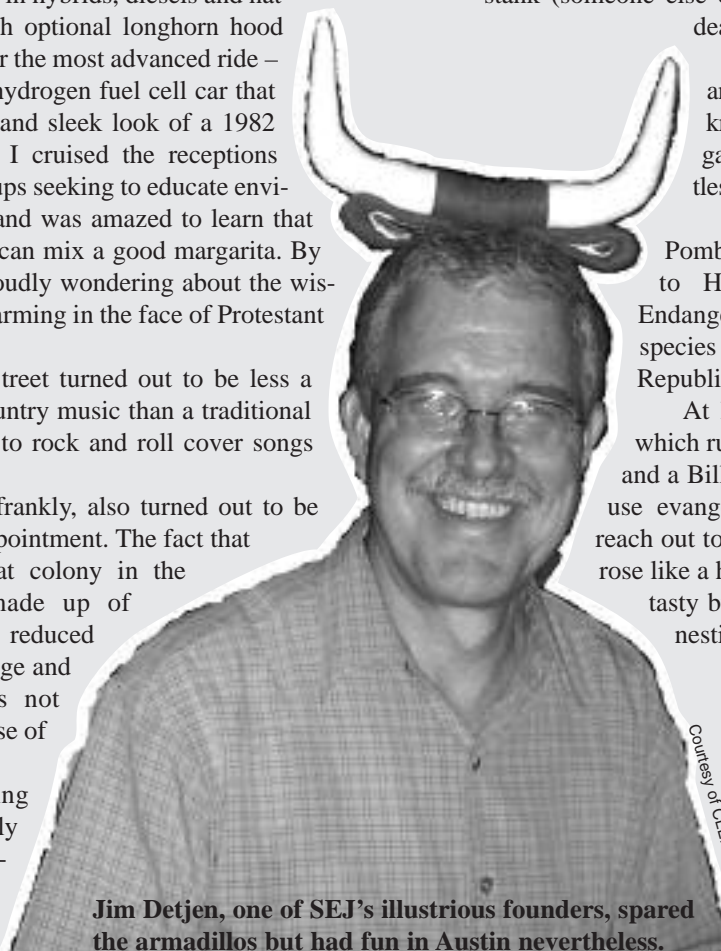
The next day Representative Richard Pombo explained how the best way to respond to Hurricane Katrina is to abolish the Endangered Species Act. Among the endangered species he finds most offensive are moderate Republicans.

At lunch we were served a hybrid meal in which rubber and chicken were genetically fused, and a Bill Moyers sermon in which he asked us to use evangelical, poetic metaphorical language to reach out to faith-based folks. From there his speech rose like a heavenly bat flitting into a better world of tasty but sustainable bugs and big-haired Texas nesting habitat.

Moyers was also quite hopeful about the future of Public Broadcasting if the public you're referring to is Serbia's around 1995.

Among the afternoon tours I was tempted to go on was one to the LBJ Library and Dinosaur Museum except that sounded redundant.

(Continued on page 34)



Jim Detjen, one of SEJ's illustrious founders, spared the armadillos but had fun in Austin nevertheless.

Courtesy of CLEM HETZEL

SEJ Awards 2005

SEJ honors outstanding print, broadcast and online reports

Investigations into air pollution and the oil industry took many of the top prizes as the Society of Environmental Journalists announced the winners of the largest environmental journalism contest in North America.

First-place winners, announced at SEJ's 15th annual conference in Austin, accepted \$1,000 checks and a trophy at a ceremony at the historic Driskill Hotel downtown. This is the fourth year for the awards.

Judging panels consisting of leading journalists and journalism educators selected the 27 winners from among 240 entries from print, online, television and radio journalists.

This year's contest marked the debut of the Kevin Carmody Award for Outstanding Investigative Reporting. The award, for print entries, was named for Kevin Carmody of the *Austin American-Statesman*, who died earlier this year. A founder and former president of SEJ, Carmody was the chief organizer of this year's annual conference.

Full text, video or audio versions of many of the winning entries are available at www.sej.org. This year's winners were:

KEVIN CARMODY AWARD FOR OUTSTANDING INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING, PRINT:

1st Place: **Dina Cappiello** and **Dan Feldstein** of the *Houston Chronicle* for "In Harm's Way," a five-part investigative series that identified petrochemical plants as the source for toxic air pollutants in residential neighborhoods. As part of the project, the newspaper installed its own air monitors.

2nd Place: **Tom Hamburger, Alan C. Miller** and **Julie Cart** of *The Los Angeles Times*, for "Environmental Politics: A Changing Landscape."

3rd Place: **George Watson, Guy McCarthy, Ben Schnayerson** and **Lisa Lambert** of the *San Bernardino Sun* for "Unnatural Disasters."

OUTSTANDING BEAT REPORTING, PRINT:

1st Place: **Craig Welch** of the *Seattle Times* for seven stories that covered the gamut of environmental issues, from old-growth forests to oil spills.

2nd Place: **Tom Pelton** of the *Baltimore Sun*.

3rd Place: **Tom Avril** of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

OUTSTANDING EXPLANATORY REPORTING, PRINT:

1st Place: **Bruce Barcott**, for "Changing All the Rules," a story he wrote for the *New York Times Magazine* that detailed the electric utility industry's successful push to rewrite air-pollution rules.



2nd Place: **Dennis R. Dimick, Peter Essick, Lynn Addison, David Whitmore, Jeff Osborn, Tim Appenzeller, Daniel Glick, Fen Montaigne, Virginia Morrell, Nora Gallagher, Abigail Tipton** and **Patricia Kellogg** of *National Geographic* magazine, for "Global Climate Change."

3rd Place: **Ray Ring** of *High Country News* for "Environmental Politics: New Angles."

OUTSTANDING ONLINE REPORTING:

1st Place: **Bob Williams, Kevin Bogardus, Daniel Lathrop, Alexander Cohen** and **Aron Pilhofer** of the Center for Public Integrity for "Gimme Shelter (From Taxes)" and other stories, a series on the oil industry and its powerful influence on government.

2nd Place: **Roger McCoy, Jon Schwantes, Gerald Tebben** and **Joel Chow** of Dispatch.com and WBNS-TV in Columbus, Ohio, for "Radon in Schools: A Lesson to Learn."

3rd Place: **Kellyn Betts** of Environmental Science and Technology Online for "PBDEs and the Environmental Intervention Time Lag."

OUTSTANDING RADIO REPORTING, LARGE MARKET:

1st Place: **Vicki Monks** of National Public Radio's "Living on Earth" for "Carbon Black," a riveting account of how industrial pollution has affected Native Americans in Oklahoma.

2nd Place: **Rebecca Williams** of the Great Lakes Radio Consortium for beat reporting.

3rd Place: **Daniel Grossman** and **John Rudolph** of American RadioWorks for "Climate of Uncertainty."

OUTSTANDING RADIO REPORTING, SMALL MARKET:

1st Place: **Sadie Babits** of KNAU Arizona Public Radio for "Living Without: Water in a Dry Land," her colorful and compelling stories about water shortages in Kenya.

(Continued on page 20)

Members elect five journalists to SEJ board

SEJ members brought three incumbents and two new faces to the Society of Environmental Journalists' board of directors on Sept. 30 at the annual meeting in Austin, Texas.

Re-elected to the board were freelancer Peter Fairley, Mark Schleifstein, environment reporter at the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, and Carolyn Whetzel, staff correspondent for the Bureau of National Affairs, Inc. Each were elected to three-year terms.

Serving for the first time are Dina Cappiello, environment reporter for the *Houston Chronicle* and Vince Patton, environ-

ment reporter for KGW-TV in Portland, Ore. Cappiello and Patton will serve one year each, finishing the incomplete terms left by Dan Fagin, who stepped down, and Kevin Carmody, who died in the spring.

Officers for the 2005-2006 term are President Perry Beeman, *Des Moines Register*; Vice President for Programs Tim Wheeler, *Baltimore Sun*; Vice President for Membership Christy George, Oregon Public Broadcasting; Treasurer Carolyn Whetzel, BNA Inc.; and Secretary Don Hopey, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.



Drunk elephants and a mercury-peddling voodoo priest

By ELIZABETH MCCARTHY

Paul Kvinta won the Daniel Pearl Award for reporting on South Asia from the South Asian Journalists Association for his story on the human-elephant conflict in India. His “Stomping Grounds” also won a silver award in the Environmental Tourism category of the 2005 Lowell Thomas Award given by the Society of American Travel Writers Foundation. The piece was published by *National Geographic Adventure* in August 2004.

The biggest surprise of the story was its cultural/theological component, Kvinta said. The relationship between the two beasts is centuries old, and Indians love elephants. It’s akin to the one between the American cowboy and their horses, he said. “Assamese mahouts are the Marlboro men of India.”

In addition, Genesha, the deity with an elephant head, is one of the most popular Hindi deities. Thus, in spite of the growing conflict between humans and elephants, largely because of the deforestation and the elephants’ attraction to the rice fields – and rice beer – people in Assam are generally reluctant to harm them, Kvinta found. He also learned that elephants, like their human counterparts, “love a stiff drink.”

Kvinta spent months familiarizing himself with the topic by reading online reports about elephant-human clashes in a daily newspaper in Assam, an obscure region of India. He spent three weeks following a herd of elephants in the northeast Indian state where humans are killed every week by the animals.

The Population Institute awarded its Global Media Award for the best environmental-population reporting to the *Environment Change and Security Report*, edited by **Meagan Parker**. The winning piece by **Sahlu Haile** focused on how Ethiopia’s ever increasing population contributes to unsustainable farming and deforestation. Haile is a senior advisor and Ethiopia country representative to the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. “The government’s half-hearted attempts to stabilize Ethiopia’s population growth have not stopped the de facto demolition of his country’s natural resources,” Parker said. The award was given to Haile for his piece, “Population, Development and Environment in Ethiopia.”

The Record’s (of Bergen County, N.J.) three-part series on the health impacts of mercury pollution by **Alex Nussbaum** and **Lindy Washburn** won first place for excellence in journalism in the small newspapers category. The award, given by the Association of Health Care Journalists in Minneapolis, was for the stories published in early 2004. The series looked at the science, politics and health impacts of mercury emissions, extending from Midwestern power plants “to New Jersey fishing holes to the storefront of a mercury-peddling voodoo priest in New Jersey,” said Nussbaum, who covers environment issues at *The Record*.

Also reaping journalism awards was **Peter Lord** at the *Providence Journal*. The New England Society of Newspaper Editors bestowed upon Lord its annual “Master Reporter,” which is based on career achievement. The prize was reported by colleague **Geb Carbone** because Lord was said to be “too modest to blow his own horn.”

Among SEJ members’ new books is **Jacques Leslie’s** “Deep Water, The Epic Struggle Over Dams, Displaced People and the Environment.” The publication was released in September by

Farrar, Straus & Giroux. “Deep Water” is a narrative work that follows three people representing different interests on different continents. Leslie’s narrative follows an anti-dam activist in India, an anthropologist in South Africa and a water manager in Australia. The book won the J. Anthony Lukas Work-in-Progress Award.

Also recently published is “The Urban Imperative,” edited by **Ted Trzyna**. The book considers how protected areas in large cities can better serve urban dwellers and how better constituencies can be built to safeguard them. “This particular book came out of a realization ... that cities weren’t on the international conservation agenda,” Trzyna said. He noted that protecting nature and improving city life are complementary goals. “Conservation and urban leaders are natural allies. The challenge is in making the right connections,” he wrote. The publication is free online at www.interenvironment.org/pa/papers2.htm.

Bill Brichard’s new book, “Nature Keepers: The Remarkable

Media on the Move

Story of How the Nature Conservancy Became the Largest Environmental Organization in the World,” looks at nine of the organization’s leaders over five decades.

Just after Brichard signed the book deal in 2003, a series of critical reports about the conservancy was published by *The Washington Post*. He thought that was the end of his book but the conservancy’s mistakes “made good fodder for the closing chapters of the book,” Brichard said.

This last summer, **Jim Schwab’s** “Planning for Wildfires” was released. Co-written with **Stuart Meck**, the report looks at the practices of allowing development in the wildland-urban interface and reasonable ways to reduce wildfire risks in these vulnerable areas.

Those making career changes of late include **Matt Weiser** and **Alan Scher Zagier**. Weiser now works for the *Sacramento Bee*. Scher Zagier, who spent the 2004-05 academic year as a Knight Fellow at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, is the Associated Press’ Missouri correspondent. He hopes to create a niche covering the environment and agriculture as well as higher education – plus the occasional tornados, emphasis on occasional.

Harper’s Magazine and *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* have been named the winners of the 2005 John B. Oakes Award for Distinguished Environmental Journalism. **Erik Reece**, author of “Death of a Mountain” in *Harper’s*, and **Dan Egan**, a reporter for *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* for “Troubled Waters, the Great Invasion,” were hailed for the “exceptional contribution to public understanding” of environmental issues. Oakes was a longtime *New York Times* reporter and op-ed writer.

Two other stories – **Elizabeth Kolbert’s** “The Climate of Man,” which appeared in *The New Yorker*, and a project written by staff at *The Los Angeles Times*, “Environmental Politics” – were named second-place winners, each carrying a \$1,000 award. The *Times* project was done by **Tom Hamburger**, **Alan C. Miller**, **Julie Cart** and **Henry Weinstein**.

Elizabeth McCarthy is editor of California Energy Circuit. After many years overseeing this feature, Elizabeth is stepping down. Many thanks to her. Anyone interested in taking on the task, please contact the editor at mmansur@kcstar.com.



Bill Moyers in Austin:

Covering penguins and the politics of denial

By **BILL MOYERS**

(Excerpts from the keynote address to the annual convention of the Society of Environmental Journalists, Austin, Texas, October 1, 2005. The full text is available at www.sej.org/confer/austin/PenguinsandthePoliticsofDenial.pdf)

Theodore Roosevelt warned a century ago of the subversive influence of money in politics. He said the central fact in his time was that big business had become so dominant it would chew up democracy and spit it out... But a hundred years later mighty corporations are once again the undisputed overlords of government. Follow the money and you are inside the inner sanctum of the Business Roundtable, the National Association of Manufacturers, and the American Petroleum Institute. Here is the super board of directors for Bush, Incorporated. They own the Administration lock, stock, and barrel, and their grip on our government's environmental policies is leading to calamitous consequences. Once the leader in cutting edge environmental policies and technologies and awareness, America is now eclipsed. As the scientific evidence grows, pointing to a crisis, our country has become an impediment to action, not a leader. Earlier this year the White House even conducted an extraordinary secret campaign to scupper the British government's attempt to tackle global warming – and then to undermine the UN's effort to stabilize greenhouse gas emissions. George W. Bush is the Herbert Hoover of the environment. His failure to lead on global warming means that even if we were dramatically to decrease greenhouse gases overnight we have already condemned ourselves and generations to come to a warming planet...



Let's go back for a moment to America's first Gilded Age just over a hundred years ago. That was a time like now. Gross materialism and blatant political corruption engulfed the country. Big business bought the government right out from under the people. Outraged at the abuse of power the publisher of *McClure's Magazine* cried out to his fellow journalists: "Capitalists...politicians...all breaking the law, or letting it be broken? There is no one left [to uphold it]: none but all of us."

Then something remarkable happened. The Gilded Age became the golden age of muckraking journalism...

The Gilded Age has returned with a vengeance. Washington again is a spectacle of corruption. The promise of America has been subverted to crony capitalism, sleazy lobbyists, and an arrogance of power matched only by an arrogance of the present that acts as if there is no tomorrow. But there is a tomorrow. I see the future every time I work at my desk. There, beside my computer, are photographs of Henry, Thomas, Nancy, Jassie, and SaraJane – my grandchildren, ages 13 down. They have no vote and they have no voice. They have no party. They have no lobbyists in Washington. They have only you and me – our pens and our keyboards and our microphones – to seek and to speak and to publish what we can of how power works, how the world wags and who wags it. The powers-that-be would have us merely cover the news;

our challenge is to uncover the news that they would keep hidden.

A lot is riding on what we do. You may be the last group of journalists who make the effort to try to inform the rest of us about the most complex of issues involving the survival of life on earth...



Last year, my final year on "NOW with Bill Moyers," we produced a documentary called "Endangered Species," about a neighborhood in Washington, D.C., known as Anacostia, just a few blocks from Capitol Hill. It is one of the most violent and dangerous neighborhoods in the city, one of those places that give Washington the horrendous distinction of the highest murder rate of any major city in the country. It's horrendous in other ways too. The Anacostia River that gives the neighborhood its name is one of the most polluted in America; more than a billion gallons of raw sewage end up in it every year.

We went there to report on the Earth Conservation Corps, a project started by one Bob Nixon to recruit neighborhood kids to help clean up the river and community... One of the most charismatic of the kids who joined the Corps was named Diamond Teague. He worked so hard the others jokingly called him "Choir Boy." His work became his passion; he loved it. It gave purpose and meaning to his life to try and clean up his neighborhood and river. But one morning while he was sitting on his front porch someone walked up and shot him in the head...

After his death Diamond Teague got the only press of his short life – 43 words in *The Washington Post*:

"A teenager was found fatally shot about 2:05 Thursday in the 2200 block of Prout Place SW, police said. Diamond D. Teague, 19, who lived on the block, was pronounced dead."

That's all. That was Diamond Teague's obit. Not a word about his work for the Earth Conservation Corps. Not a word.

It was left to his friends to tell the world about Diamond Teague. One of them explained to us that they wanted people to know that just because a black man gets killed in the Southeast corner of the nation's capital, "he's not just a drug dealer or gang banger...and not just discount him as nobody when he deserves for people to know him and to know his life."

They made a video – you can see part of it in our documentary. They turned out for his funeral in uniform. They wept and prayed for their fallen friend. And then they went back to work, on a dusty patch of land squeezed between two factories that they envisioned as a park. "We see the bigger picture," one of Diamond's friends told us. "All great things have to start in roughness. We're just at the beginning of something that's gonna be beautiful."

They've said they would call it the Diamond Teague Memorial Park...On that fleck of land, where anything beautiful must be born in roughness, they see "the bigger picture."

Just blocks away, at opposite end of Pennsylvania Avenue, in the White House and the Capitol, the blind lead the blind, on one more march of folly.

Who is left to open the eyes of the country – to tell Americans what is happening? "There is no one left; none but all of us."

Acid oceans

A new twist to report when covering climate change

By CHERYL HOGUE

The increasing levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere due to human activities, such as burning fossil fuels and deforestation, is well known. Scientists – with the exception of some skeptics – predict changes in the Earth's climate from rising levels of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases.

But rising concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere are also turning the oceans sour, according to recent scientific reports. This can endanger sea creatures such as clams and coral by weakening shells or exoskeletons. This, in turn, could have major impacts on marine species that feed on shellfish or depend on coral ecosystems.

Commercial fisheries could also be affected, and the protection that coral reefs provide from tsunamis would likely be diminished.

Scientists estimate that the world's oceans have already absorbed about half of the carbon dioxide released by human activities over the past 200 years, since the Industrial Revolution. The pH of the oceans has fallen during that time.

Understanding how carbon dioxide in the atmosphere relates to ocean mollusks and corals requires a little basic chemistry.

The pH scale ranges from 0 to 14, with 7 as neutral. A pH less than 7 is acidic, while a pH greater than 7 is alkaline, or basic.

Surface waters of the world's oceans now have a pH that averages about 8.08, according to Britain's Royal Society. Sea water has already gotten a bit less alkaline due to emissions of carbon dioxide. Two-hundred years ago, the oceans' pH was about 0.1 higher, scientists estimate.

What happens chemically in the ocean when sea water absorbs carbon dioxide is the same process that helps make Coke and Pepsi acidic. (Soda pop, which usually includes citric or phosphoric acid, has a pH of about 3.)

In this process of carbonation, carbon dioxide and water react to form carbonic acid. But oceans differ from the sugary water that soft drink makers bubble carbon dioxide into.

Sea water is what chemists call a buffered solution. This

means it has the ability to absorb carbon dioxide and, though its pH drops somewhat, still remain alkaline.

Carbonate ions found in sea water are responsible for this buffering action. (Chemistry detail – the carbonate reacts with the hydrogen in carbonic acid to form bicarbonate.) However, the buffering capacity of the oceans will decrease as their waters take in more carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and carbonate levels decline.

The effects of increased ocean acidity could be wide ranging, with the most severe effects expected in the Southern Hemisphere.

Shellfish, such as oysters and scallops, as well as coral reefs, sea urchins, and starfish are likely to find it difficult to develop and maintain their shells and exoskeletons, which are made of calcium carbonate. This is because calcium carbonate, the same stuff chalk is composed of, will dissolve in sea water unless that water contains a high concentration of carbonate. Some types of plankton, a key part of the oceanic food web, have shells made of calcium carbonate and they may be adversely affected too.

Projections are that by 2100, surface waters of the oceans will experience a pH drop of up to 0.5. That's a sharp drop over a short time, scientists point out, and would be the least alkaline the oceans have been in hundreds of thousands of years or longer.

Journalists who wish to explore this subject further can find more information through the following links:

- The Royal Society (U.K.) 2005 report at: www.royalsoc.ac.uk/news.asp?year=&id=3250
- NOAA article and link to workshop highlights: www.research.noaa.gov/spotlite/spot_gcc.html
- pH comparisons of familiar liquids on page 4 of this document: www.estuaries.gov/pdf/potential.pdf



Cheryl Hogue reports for Chemical & Engineering News.

Environmental journalism fellowship at Kauai Gardens

The National Tropical Botanical Garden annual Environmental Journalism Fellowship program will take place May 8-13, 2006 on the Hawaiian island of Kauai. Application deadline is Feb. 27, and acceptance notification on March 8.

NTBG's fellowship provides working journalists in broadcast, print or online media information about ethnobotany and tropical ecosystems. The week-long, intensive course provides deep background in tropical ecology with daily field trips supervised by NTBG's research scientists. Study areas include historic, ancient Hawaiian cultural sites and botanical collections extending back to the period of Hawaiian royalty in the late 1800s.

The congressionally authorized, nonprofit organization offers a rich living classroom for basic concepts in tropical biol-

ogy, indigenous use of plants for medicine and the ecology of tropical fauna. The Garden is a nesting site for both threatened Green sea turtles and endangered water birds.

Lodging, airport transfer, ground transportation, and meals are provided. Journalists are responsible for their own airfare to and from Lihue, Kauai, Hawaii. Application information is available at www.ntbg.org.

Requests about the NTBG Environmental Journalism Fellowship may be directed to Dr. Gaugau Tavana, Director of Education, National Tropical Botanical Garden, 3530 Papalina Road, Kalaheo, HI 96741. Telephone: (808) 332-7324 ext. 225 or 251. Fax: (808) 332-9765, tavana@ntbg.org. Or contact Dr. JoAnn M. Valenti, course coordinator, at valentijm@yahoo.com, (801) 942-8516.

What's in the air?

Conducting your own air-pollutants study

By **DINA CAPIELLO**

When it comes to air pollution in Houston, there are two basic views: It smells of money or it just stinks.

This dichotomy prompted the *Houston Chronicle* to dig deeper. Everyone here knows the air is polluted. That's hardly front-page news.

But despite decades of research and one of the largest and most sophisticated networks of air pollution monitors in the country (facts that the state and industry like to boast about), people living next door to the massive industrial facilities that line the Houston Ship Channel didn't know what exactly was in their air or whether there was enough of it to be harmful. Huh? How can that be?

"In Harm's Way," our series that recently won SEJ's inaugural Kevin Carmody Award for Outstanding Investigative Reporting, set out to answer two specific questions:

- What chemicals are in the air near industrial plants?
- Are these chemical concentrations dangerous?

At the heart of the project was a *Chronicle* study that enlisted community members to monitor the air in their neighborhoods. Going door to door with a letter in English and Spanish, the newspaper assembled 84 citizen scientists. Their only requirements: You can't be anonymous, we can take your picture, and you won't be paid.

The newspaper paid the University of Texas School of Public Health to conduct the laboratory work.

At 72 of the 100 locations tested, concentrations of at least one air toxic exceeded a 1-in-1-million cancer risk – the level at which the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency decides to investigate a hazardous waste site.

In one neighborhood, Manchester, levels of 1,3-butadiene – a carcinogenic chemical used to make synthetic rubber – were 20 times higher than a 1 in 1 million risk level.

By obtaining more than a decade's worth of data recorded by state monitors, the paper determined that the state had known for years about the levels of carcinogens in Manchester and other hot spots across the state – but failed to tell anyone.

Further digging unearthed reports of state employees monitoring for pollution along public streets wearing gas masks, vomiting – and in one case refusing to sit inside the testing van because of the fumes. Yet their reports concluded communities were safe.

Levels of hazardous air pollutants that would cause alarm in other states were accepted here. While a 1-in-1-million cancer

risk generally is seen as acceptable, here in Texas a 1-in-10,000 risk, and sometimes even greater concentrations, were allowed.

The pollution levels we found matched the state's readings – but failed to exceed state guidelines. No problem? Not really. When the *Chronicle* compared the pollution levels of both the state and the newspaper's studies to stricter and more scientifically based risk thresholds – such as the human health screening levels set by EPA and standards set in other states, the problem emerged.

"I certainly would question whether the state's system is protective," said Rob Barrett, former director of Harris County Pollution Control in the lead quote of the first day's story. "The state is operating in a vacuum. Data like the *Chronicle* collected are needed to say whether air pollution is affecting public health."

Try it in your town.

While "In Harm's Way" focused on industrial point-source pollution, the same monitors we placed outside homes could be clipped to residents' shirts to measure pollution exposure at work, home and elsewhere over the course of a typical day.

If your newspaper or station won't pay for your own pollution study, go after what data is already out there. Even if you don't have monitoring in your area, the National Air Toxics Assessment modeled the concentrations of air toxics in every community. If you do have monitoring, ask for the raw data. If the *Chronicle* had simply read the state's analysis of the results, we would have missed the story. We may even have come to accept that the stench along the Ship Channel is only the smell of money.

Here's some helpful tips for getting started, including some useful documents and sources:

- Obtain all raw air pollution data collected by state, county and local governments.
- Ask the state environmental agency for all reports evaluating or analyzing air pollution's effect on communities.
- Search MedLine and other academic databases for independent research papers that might contradict the state's analysis.

Internet resources

- "In Harm's Way," including detailed methodology: www.chron.com/toxic
- EPA's Toxics Release Inventory: www.epa.gov/tri
- EPA's Integrated Risk Information System: www.epa.gov/iris/
- Texas' Air Emission Event Report Database: www2.tnrcc.state.tx.us/eer/main/index.cfm?fuseaction=searchForm
- To access the National Air Toxics Assessment, to find modeled concentrations for 33 air toxics in your community, go to: www.epa.gov/ttn/atw/
- Mickey Leland, National Urban Air Toxics Research Center: www.sph.uth.tmc.edu/mleland/

• Hunt down ex-employees of your state environmental agency's toxicology department (where health evaluations are made and guidelines set).

• Spend time with the actual people who monitor air pollution for the state – and breathe it in. We got some of our best quotes here.

• Consult experts in other places about how your state monitors air pollution and evaluates pollution risks.

Questions to ask:

- How does your state permit
- (Continued on page 27)

Using TRI, please!

By **KEN WARD Jr.**

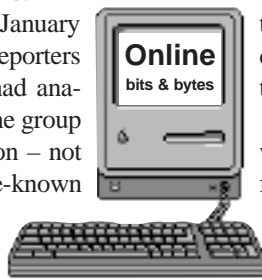
I know that a lot of folks are down on TRI, and I agree that the data is not perfect. But I'm also terribly concerned that we as environmental reporters don't use it frequently enough (or well enough) and particularly frightened about EPA's proposals to cut back on the program. I also know that some of the best stories I do are based in some way on TRI data. It's still simply the best basic set of pollution numbers we have. Here's my latest example of how TRI helped me make a so-so story into a darned good one.

The press release popped into my inbox back in January 2005. It was one of those things we environmental reporters get all the time. A national environmental group had analyzed some data and published a report. This time, the group was called Oceana. The topic was mercury pollution – not from coal-fired power plants, but from a major, little-known source called chlor-alkali plants.

I've grown a bit tired of these reports, in large part because they make me feel guilty. These groups are doing our jobs, I tell myself. I should have found that data and done this report as a project or a Sunday story.

But this study caught my eye. It said that there were only nine of these chlor-alkali plants in the country, but that, as an industry sector, they rivaled the nation's 500 coal-fired power plants as a source of mercury pollution.

And, the report told me, one of these plants was in West Virginia. PPG Industries operates it at Natrium, a dot on the map along the Ohio River in my state's northern panhandle.



Chlor-alkali plants make chlorine by pumping salty water through vats of pure mercury. Some mercury is directly discharged through vent stacks, but huge amounts of it are believed to simply evaporate out of the facility – and still more mercury is somehow “lost” into the environment. The process is more than 100 years old, but is fast being replaced by newer and cleaner technology.

I'm a little ashamed to admit that I had no idea that this plant was such a big source of mercury pollution. I didn't even really know what they make there. In my defense, the plant is pretty far from Charleston, in a corner of the state the *Gazette* does not cover very closely. But I drive by it all the time on the way to my in-laws in East Liverpool, Ohio.

So, I knew right away I had to do a story. But I didn't want to just do a quick daily that rewrote the conclusions from the Oceana report. It seemed to me that this was a rich topic that deserved more attention from me and my paper.

My boss and I decided right away that this has the potential for a big Sunday take-out piece. We set a couple of goals: First, to go to Natrium and visit the plant and find out what it was all about. Second, to get our own data and develop our own news about this plant's pollution, rather than just quoting from Oceana.

So the first thing I did was get some data. The Oceana report, published in January 2005, used 2002 numbers from EPA's Toxics Release Inventory. When I started my story, the 2003 data were out.

I went to EPA's TRI Explorer website (www.epa.gov/triexplorer)
(Continued on page 16)

Struggles... (from page 2)

At least one of those departed from the ranks of daily journalism confided that they believed their days of long explanatory and investigative pieces appeared numbered, even at papers with national readerships.

Editors have fallen even farther into the “show me the bodies” mentality that SEJ stalwarts have bemoaned for years. Some don't think readers want stories that describe a remote risk, something that might take some thinking. Many apparently would like to save space for the story that says “14.5 people will die tomorrow if these emissions don't stop.” Hold it to eight inches, too.

The big outlets are laying off reporters and struggling to figure out what readers and viewers want. Maybe they have lost touch with readers. I still have a hard time seeing CNN and “60 Minutes” puff pieces on celebrities and musicians during what appear to be regular news programs. Can you imagine *The Washington Post* using a cover to tell people how to treat crabgrass in the spring?

It's a strange time. On the one hand, SEJ is more visible and important than ever. Our freedom of information work has sent us skyrocketing to the top of the journalism-group network. Our endowment is growing, our awards honor very important work, and above all we train journalists in a focused way you just don't see many other places.

Yet we face this uncertainty about journalism's future. As we write on WI-FI laptops and surf the Web on our phones we forget

how far technology, and journalism, have come in just a couple of decades. It's no surprise that media companies are struggling to figure out what readers and viewers want. Often, it's hard to tell, even with all our scientific surveys.

I think they want good stories. I don't think we'll ever find a single formula or approach that fits their diverse interests. I think they long to learn, to be told something new, to have their news served with a dollop of perspective and information that tells them why they should care.

Are we giving people enough credit? We face a tough decision. Do we pare our coverage because people are so in a hurry, and used to getting immediate information online? Or do we go in the other direction, offering in-depth coverage they don't get from reading tickers and news summaries? Wouldn't we be better off giving them more if they've bothered to take time to pick up a paper or watch expanded broadcast coverage? Don't they expect more?

Environmental news reports can offer the hit-at-home stories and the compelling explanatory pieces, investigations and breaking news. We should therefore be in a position to help mold the new media world and give our readers and viewers insightful coverage they will welcome.

Perry Beeman reports for the Des Moines Register.

Hurricanes: First hand

Lake Charles newspaper staff persists against Rita's fury

By JEREMY HARPER

When I went to sleep Wednesday, Sept. 21, Hurricane Rita was threatening the Texas coast, promising to pester Louisiana with no more than a quick bout of tropical storm conditions. I was prepared to ride out the fringe of the storm in either my apartment on the second floor of a sturdy historic building in downtown Lake Charles, La., a city of 75,000 about 40 miles inland of the Gulf of Mexico, or in the newsroom of the *American Press*, the city's daily newspaper where I have worked for four years as a reporter.

Though the National Hurricane Center's projected path for the surging Category 5 storm had been creeping eastward, landfall was still expected to be somewhere west of Galveston, Texas, more than 150 miles away from Lake Charles. Under that scenario we would get plenty of rain and maybe tropical storm-strength winds, harsh conditions no doubt, but nothing devastating or potentially deadly. A voluntary evacuation was issued for the parish. There was no way I was leaving.

By the time I woke up Thursday, Rita had wobbled further to the east toward the Louisiana/Texas line. Local officials issued a mandatory evacuation for Calcasieu Parish early that morning, but the exodus had already begun. I showed up to work at the *American Press* and found a nearly empty newsroom. Only our editor and publisher remained, and they were discussing whether to print a Friday edition, who would deliver it and who might be around to read it.

Plans to print were forged, then scrapped, before the decision was made to move the paper online and start a blog. Friday would mark the first time in more than 100 years that the *American Press* failed to print a paper.

I worked Thursday in the eerie quiet of a mostly evacuated city, covering an emergency press conference and interviewing anyone I could find, still unsure whether or not I would evacuate. Later when I heard a weather man say the words "Lake Charles," "Category 5," and "eye wall" in the same sentence, I started packing. My girlfriend, Darla, and I put our TV in the bathroom, dragged the couch into the kitchen and taped the windows. We threw our cat in the car and caught the crawling wave of north-bound evacuees. My sister's place in Shreveport, about 200 miles to the north, was our destination. The plan was to wait for the storm to pass and return home as quickly as possible.

Nearly six hours later, when we made it to DeRidder, 45 miles to the north, we realized that we would run out of gas

before we reached Shreveport. It was past midnight, the car was down to half of a tank and the radio station was reporting that the few service stations still open between DeRidder and Shreveport were already out of fuel.

A bit distraught, we stopped at the *American Press*' news bureau in DeRidder to ponder our options. We were preparing



Photo courtesy of THE AMERICAN PRESS

When the power went out at the *American Press*, staffers like night editor Dennis Spears were forced to work on backup power at their newsroom work stations.

for a night in the car when *American Press* city editor Hector San Miguel's van rumbled into the parking lot carrying his mother, four kids and two dogs. We joined his motley crew in the small bureau for the night, sleeping for a few hours on the floor of a cubicle with towels for beds and clothing for blankets. We made it to Shreveport the next morning and spent the day waiting helplessly for the storm to hit, wondering what we would have to go back to.

Meanwhile, back in Lake Charles, a group of about 20 employees, family members and visiting media were hunkering down at the *American Press*. Only three newsroom employees – two photographers and a night editor – remained.

Tropical storm winds started in Lake Charles around 3 p.m. Shortly thereafter, a local woman who was stranded with her 11-year-old son and their dog phoned the paper with a desperate plea for shelter. Photographer Rick Hickman picked them up and brought them to the newspaper. Hickman ventured out as late as

(Continued next page)

Rita... (from page 11)

6 p.m., snapping photos of the early destruction before conditions became too dangerous.

After the *American Press* lost power around 8:30 p.m., night editor Dennis Spears blogged as long as he could on backup power, then relayed information by cell phone most of the night before his signal bowed to the storm. Thanks to a generator and a miraculously storm-resistant satellite, those sheltered at the paper had the surreal experience of watching part of the television news coverage of the very storm they were riding out.

Rita, by now a Category 3 storm, unleashed her worst in Lake Charles around 3 a.m. Saturday. Tropical storm winds persisted well into the afternoon. The *American Press* building was damaged, but those sheltered inside made it through the night unharmed.

Due to my sister's annoying lack of cable television, I spent much of Friday night in the lobby of a Shreveport hotel watching television news coverage of the storm with a group of fellow Lake Charles residents. I reported when I could, but was mostly a helpless spectator to the destruction of my hometown. Other reporters and editors, scattered about Louisiana and Texas, gathered information and posted it on our site throughout the night.

Late Friday, forecasters began predicting that Rita would stall around Shreveport, drop up to 20 inches of rain on the area and cause massive flooding. Faced with the possibility of being stranded in a flooded Shreveport for days, we evacuated again to Dallas, the only city in two states with an available hotel room.

By Sunday, I couldn't take it anymore. I bought a propane stove and as much non-perishable food and water as I could fit in my car and headed for home. It wasn't long before Rita's destruction became visible.

The power was out in the town of Leesville, 120 miles from the coast. Back in DeRidder, trees were uprooted and buildings were damaged. The destruction only got worse as we headed south, past the National Guard checkpoint at the Calcasieu Parish line and into another world with military convoys, tent cities and splintered homes. Rita's swift arrival spared the city of major flooding from either storm surge or rain, which made navigation through most major roadways still possible.

The *American Press* was my first stop, and it was in worse shape than I expected. The giant sign outside our plant was on the ground. Trees were toppled and sheet metal was strewn about the property. The newsroom, dark and dank, had been vacated. The carpet had begun to bubble; the smell of mildew was overpowering. When I picked up a notebook, it limped cartoon-like from the extreme humidity.

I headed through the black newsroom toward the distant humming of a generator, sloshing through an inch of water, and eventually found our press operator, who told me the building and the printing press were badly damaged and would probably be unusable for weeks. He recounted how an outdoor metal porch was ripped from its foundation by the storm and dragged across the roof of the newsroom, slicing a huge gash that allowed water to pour through.

After a few more stops to check on houses of friends and family and empty their refrigerators, we made it to our apartment, which had survived, though the roof on the opposite half of the

historic building peeled away, ruining the dwellings below. Somehow our place didn't even have a broken window.

I worked that day as our sole reporter in town, gathering what I could before retiring to my apartment shortly after the 6 p.m. curfew that was now in effect. Though I was exhausted, sleep really wasn't a realistic option in the post-Rita downtown Lake Charles. Dozens of generators hummed in a parking lot across the street near the parish courthouse. Four industrial-strength flood lights were pointed at my window. Energy company trucks and ambulances passed by intermittently, lights flashing. Military transport trucks also rumbled down the road. Helicopters landed late into the evening.

But the noise was nothing compared to the ever-present and oppressive heat from which there was no escape. The heat index was 105, unseasonably hot for late September. My apartment, now serving as my temporary office, turned into something not unlike a sauna during the day. After sunset the inside temperature may have dropped below 90, but the evening breeze went dead. To make matters worse, there was no running water. And after a day of racing around in 100-degree heat, a bottled-water bath offered little comfort. But I had a roof and a functional phone line and I was working. I really couldn't complain.

I received a call at home that night from a woman with the White House advance team who informed me that President Bush would be visiting Lake Charles Tuesday morning. She later told me she had seen my byline in an old paper and looked me up in the phone book. I just happened to be home.

Hickman, the photographer who still hadn't left town, and I showed up at the local airfield the next morning as instructed, sweaty and grumpy, where we baked on a runway for three hours waiting for Air Force One to land. Bush's visit was followed by a press conference with FEMA officials across town. I wrote my stories in the passenger seat of my car as we made our way toward family in Texas City, Texas, near Galveston, where I got some much-needed sleep and the best shower of my life.

For the next few days, *American Press* reporters came and went, staying anywhere cool (City Editor San Miguel slept in the back of his van for two nights). A few days later a group of managers, copy editors and reporters set up a makeshift bureau in a conference room at the *Daily Advertiser* of Lafayette outside of the paths of both Rita and Katrina. The first paper since the storm – 12 pages with the headline "Hope amid ruin" – was printed Thursday, Sept. 29. The free edition was printed at noon in Lafayette and trucked in the afternoon to various locations in southwest Louisiana. The news bureaus in DeRidder and another outlying town were reopened.

By Oct. 2, power was restored to the Lake Charles newsroom, and people began trickling back over the next week. The building was patched, the carpet was cleaned and the press was revived. The *American Press* sign is still down, the roof still leaks, but we haven't missed a paper since.

Jeremy Harper reports for the American Press, the largest newspaper in southwest Louisiana, covering six parishes from the Texas line to Cajun country to the east.

Hurricanes: First hand

Troubling predictions come true for reporter and friends

By **KATINA GAUDET**

“We have a different fear of hurricanes.”

My friend Yasmin was trying to rationalize her fearlessness in the face of an imposing Hurricane Katrina, expected to make landfall near New Orleans the next day, from her first-floor Uptown apartment.

But I was having difficulty, although safe in a hotel room near Memphis. I was frantic, yelling into the phone at Yasmin, “You cannot stay there.”

A series of evacuation plans had already failed Yasmin. And she was determined to remain confident that she’d be safe in weathering Katrina.

At about 7:30 a.m. Monday morning, while Hurricane Katrina was trashing New Orleans, my cell phone rang. “The storm is tearing this hospital apart,” Yasmin said. “You guys were so right to leave here.”

On Tuesday, we learned of the levee breaches and that New Orleans was drowning. I began to fear the worst for my friend, whom I had persuaded to take shelter at a neighborhood hospital where her roommate worked. I hadn’t heard from either of them.

Since I began reporting on coastal issues in southeast Louisiana, I’d heard about the worst case scenario. Although many had warned of an impending disaster along the Louisiana coast – with doomsday scenarios of Louisiana crippled and New Orleans all but destroyed – I don’t think people were ready for what they saw.

“I don’t think most people have in their frame of reference the type of destruction that these powerful storms can do,” said Windell Curole, a local levee system and parish emergency preparedness manager. We were discussing Hurricane Betsy, the last major storm to hit our area directly, for a story I’d been working on about Betsy’s landfall 40 years earlier. More powerful than Betsy? Without a doubt, Hurricane Camille in 1969 had leveled the Mississippi Gulf Coast. What would a storm like that leave behind today were it to hit south Louisiana?

Aggravating the situation was our state’s ongoing subsidence and coastal land loss. A veteran in flood protection and coastal issues, Curole considered the possibilities. “Oh, man,” he said, shaking his head.

When Katrina came around, I figured we were in trouble when our company encouraged employees to evacuate. I ended up in Tunica, Miss. with a caravan of family. But I knew we were in trouble when there was talk of delaying publication.

With family I spent my time watching the national news until we returned home on Thursday. I was intermittently buoyed by the knowledge that my friend had sought shelter in a place that would surely be a priority for authorities to check on and secure. But I also knew there was a lapse in communications that

might have posed danger. With no electricity, no television or Internet, for example, people might set out after the storm’s winds had passed to inspect the damage to their homes.



Photo courtesy of MIKE DUNNE

Hurricane Katrina flooded most of New Orleans, including many of the city’s famous above-ground cemeteries. This one was downtown near a public housing project.

Unknown to them, their neighborhood might be flooding due to the levee breaches.

Through it all, I wanted to be home, doing my job. I felt helpless sitting in front of a TV in Mississippi. I’d jot notes from TV press conferences, scribble quotes from people I had met in northwestern Mississippi, hoping I could use the material when I returned home.

I arrived back in Thibodaux Thursday to an empty newspaper building and a newspaper whose banner headline that day read, “We’ve been really blessed.” Although I knew it to be true,
(Continued next page)

Predictions... (from page 13)

I couldn't really appreciate that sentiment then. New Orleans was decimated, a few of our own communities were hit hard and I still hadn't found my friend. I was left with a sense of loss – and guilt.

Why hadn't I done more to get her out of there? I left for *The Courier* in Houma, our sister newspaper where staffers from New

Orleans arates the island from what's now left of its beach and the Gulf of Mexico.

We met with town officials who spoke of the most urgent of needs, re-establishing electricity to the island and providing medical care for residents and responders. Medics were working from the island's central fire station, which already was showing

signs of mold, and the Presbyterian Disaster Agency and the local Catholic diocese had joined forces to establish a medical clinic on the island.

More than 500 structures on the island had been destroyed and another 400 had been badly damaged, officials estimated. Grand Isle only had about 1,200 permanent residents, so those numbers were startling.

Having interviewed officials, residents and first responders in such damaged communities about the loss of lives and homes, I appreciate now how fortunate I am.

My friend is safe and our area's recovery efforts are ongoing.

When Hurricane Rita raised water levels in the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, threatening to flood my own neighborhood in southern Lafourche Parish, I went to bed one night uncertain of what was to come.

High tides were expected in the early morning, and the Intracoastal had already overtopped its banks.

But I was certain I'd work the next morning nonetheless. The water didn't come for us.

Grand Isle, though, was once again dealt a blow. Rita erased much of the recovery effort that followed Katrina.

Such anguish across the Gulf Coast reminded Edna Duplechin Ortego, 91, and a native of Avoyelles Parish, of the great Mississippi River flood of 1927. She told me how many people didn't heed the talk of high water coming, how her family was displaced from their farm to a tent city and how had to wait months to find out if friends or family had survived.

Nearly 80 years later, as television stations broadcast photos of a flooded New Orleans, Ortego said, "I felt so bad for those poor people when....I hope they can do what we did."

Recover.

Katina Gaudet reports for the Daily Comet in Thibodaux, La.

Photo courtesy of MIKE DUNNE



Texas wildlife agents, part of a flotilla of rescuers, transport New Orleans residents stranded by Katrina's floodwaters to safety. About 80 percent of the city was flooded by Hurricane Katrina.

Orleans' *Times-Picayune* were camped out and our own operations were ongoing. Our newspapers' leaders had decided on combined storm editions for the *Comet* and *Courier*.

I wouldn't get my first post-Katrina assignment until a few days later. In the meantime, my editor agreed it would be best for me to go home and wait.

Nearly a week after Katrina had made landfall, I got a 1:30 a.m. call. My friend was safe in Houston.

My first post-Katrina assignment was to check on residents and property in nearby Grand Isle, the small barrier island made famous in Kate Chopin's "The Awakening" as a resort for New Orleans' wealthiest.

Grand Isle, after Katrina, was heatwrenching.

It took two attempts just to make it to Grand Isle. I made it riding with folks from the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance who had set up camp to provide food, clothing and medical supplies to affected residents. The destruction on Grand Isle was immediately evident, with piles of rubble – once camps and homes for part-time and full-time residents alike – lining Louisiana Route 1 and the hurricane protection levee that sep-

Hurricanes: First hand

The devastation ran clear down to Plaquemines

By AMY WOLD

Two days after Hurricane Katrina, my editor called me over to his desk and pointed to a place on the map below New Orleans. He said, “Try to get somewhere in this area.”

At the time there were four adults, two dogs and two children (some of whom were New Orleans evacuees) staying in my one-bedroom home so getting “somewhere in this area” sounded like a really good idea.

A photographer and I bought food, found gasoline and were ready by that afternoon having no idea what we’d find or how far we’d get before dark. We got turned around by police officers on the main road, but a back way wasn’t blocked. We made it to the Plaquemines Parish line by 6 p.m. where law enforcement had shut down the road to traffic.

A quick call to the sheriff and the deputies had someone escort us in.

It was all so easy.

To say we were surprised at what we found – well that’s an understatement.

The Plaquemines Parish emergency operation center had generators providing air conditioning and lights, the bathrooms worked and a kitchen over at the high school was providing hot meals three times a day. Although some shelters, even in Baton Rouge, were operating without power or air conditioning, we walked into the Plaquemines Parish shelter to cool air and the sounds of people watching the latest new broadcasts.

Parish officials were running out of gasoline, had “liberated” a lot of food from local grocery stores and were trying to get news about what was happening in other areas. Otherwise, they seemed to be self-sufficient right down to some innovations with duct tape, cardboard and string they used to secure a leaking fuel tank.

We’d driven down trying to prepare ourselves to rough it, to sleep in a mosquito-infested, hot swamp while trying to connect with rescuers pulling people out of the flooded towns south of us.

Instead, we slept on a cot, in an air-conditioned room and found out the next morning that most of the people in the flooded areas weren’t all that interested in leaving. In fact, one man brought back to the dry land confided that he planned to just grab a sandwich and walk back down the many miles to his boat. As far as we know, that’s just what he did.

Fishing boats in south Louisiana are outfitted for long stays in the Gulf of Mexico. Some of the boats in the destroyed marina at Empire were still floating and stocked with beer, food, water and had generators that would keep everything cold for a month.

Sometimes people weren’t all that happy to be leaving and weren’t planning on staying in a shelter long.

Three days after Hurricane Katrina, Plaquemines Parish Sheriff deputies brought in a group of people who rode out the storm on their boats and were still in the flooded areas of the parish. One of those people was a slight, older man with graying stubble who showed up the next day to pilot a tug boat in the hard hit area of Empire.



Photo courtesy of MIKE DUNNE

The welcome sign outside the Louisiana Superdome doesn’t give quite the message it once did during Hurricane Katrina.

When we mentioned that “isn’t that the guy you guys rescued yesterday,” the sheriff’s deputy said, “Yeah, he may not have three teeth in his head, but he’s a good boat captain.”

That’s the kind of place Plaquemines Parish is.

This long narrow parish that follows the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico did what it could to keep going in the week following the hurricane. Most of the parish was flooded as the storm surge pushed water over the levees – in those areas that even had levees – and remained that way for weeks. Yet the people in the parish worked out solutions, “liberated” food and sup-

(Continued next page)

Plaquemines... (from page 15)

plies when necessary and were already cleaning streets of debris before the first FEMA or Red Cross truck was seen.

Try to explain that to an editor who has spent three days watching the human suffering in New Orleans that ... well.... things were bad but no one was still clinging to roofs.

I lucked out and had an editor who trusted his reporters and still saw that this was a story worth covering so we stayed for three days.

The most harrowing adventure was when the sheriff instructed a young man to take myself and the photographer down the flooded parish. It was a very large airboat and a very new driver. More than a couple times, he decided to hop a levee or road and almost sent both of his passengers sailing.

The next day the captain was a little more experienced as we rode down to a town called Empire.

I've never seen anything like it. The historic church still stood – although it had been pushed off its foundation and moved about 30 feet. But the rest of the town was gone. Houses were matchsticks, the concrete post office was rubble and in the background was the high pitched whistling of a broken gas line.

In all this, the place wasn't deserted. Several fishermen who either rode out the storm on their boat or returned to retrieve it from the marina struggled to untangle themselves from trucks, cars, boats and other material that found its way into the water.

Two days later I went to New Orleans and the story wasn't all that different. The drama of the Superdome had passed and

those left in the city were the ones who loved it too much to leave, or just hadn't gotten the chance yet.

There were reminders of what had gone on in the area everywhere. Tons of trash, chairs, blankets, half-eaten MREs and empty water bottles were everywhere. And shoes. There were shoes all over the place. I never figured out why.

New Orleans was strange in other ways. The sight of law enforcement and military carrying guns, being stopped and having the car searched for signs of looting were all nerve-wracking experiences just a week before. Now, they were just routine.

A week later, a photographer and I went back to Plaquemines Parish to see how they were faring. Residents of the most northern city in the parish were being allowed back to their homes to see what was left. Some found good news – some shingles gone, debris in the yard. Others found their house completely destroyed.

Farther south, houses were just gone. Not simply destroyed, but moved a quarter of a mile down the road.

No matter how many pictures people see or how many times people hear officials say "there's nothing left of X town," it's not until someone walks up their driveway that it really hits them. What they had is gone.

Seeing that moment is something you can't get used to.

Amy Wold reports for The Advocate in Baton Rouge.

TRI... (from page 10)

plorer) which let me download several sets of mercury data: All the facilities in West Virginia that report discharging mercury into the air or water; all facilities nationwide that report discharging mercury into the air and water; all coal-fired power plants and all chlor-alkali plants.

When I use TRI Explorer, I like to first view my query results on the screen. Then I have the website download them into text files with comma-separated values. I can open these easily in Excel, which is a heck of a lot simpler than messing with FoxPro or Access or some kind of fancy database manager. For those of you who don't do much "computer-assisted reporting" beyond e-mail and web searches, get to know Excel. You can do almost anything you ever need to do with data or numbers with it – and it's easy to learn.

With my data safely in Excel, I just ranked the top emitters of mercury, both in West Virginia and nationally. I had to do some addition first, though. EPA reports air discharges in two categories, stack emissions and fugitive emissions. For every facility, I had Excel add the two together for a total air emissions figure.

During my reporting, I also learned that the state's water pollution permit for the PPG facility was currently up for renewal. So, I decided to find out about PPG's water discharges of mercury.

I did a lot of standard, old-fashioned reporting. I went to the state Department of Environmental Protection and reviewed its permit files going back a couple of rounds of renewals, I interviewed the agency permit engineers and inspectors and – eventually – got the company to give me a tour and several lengthy interviews.

But I also used a computer resource that I don't think we all use enough. I went to EPA's ECHO system, an online site that gives me access to the agency's Permit Compliance System. There, I could

download the actual discharge information that PPG reported as part of its water pollution permits. I could compare those figures to their permit limits and find out how often they were out of compliance.

ECHO could be more user friendly. It takes some getting used to. But the data is all there, and it just takes a little cleanup and sorting. Again, I did all of that in Excel, without any fancy codes or programming.

We ended up not just with a nice Sunday take-out piece, but with a Sunday-Monday package that ran on 1A both days. The Sunday story was a basic look at the PPG plant and its mercury pollution, as a local example of one of the biggest little-noticed polluters around. The Monday story was an examination of our state agency's record of poor enforcement at this facility.

The stories weren't published until mid-August, about eight months after the Oceana report came out. The delay was largely because of repeated problems getting a date to visit and tour the PPG plant. But, the additional time gave me a greater chance to learn more about mercury and to play more with the emissions data.

I used a lot of tools to produce these stories – including spending a lot of time reading boring Federal Register notices and a few thick reports about mercury's health effects. And, of course, I visited the PPG plant and talked to the people who work there.

But the guts of both stories came from a couple of pretty simple bits of "computer-assisted reporting" that I did with just my paper's high-speed Internet connection, Explorer and Excel.

Ken Ward is a staff writer for The Charleston (W.Va.) Gazette.

Species-protection law overhaul sits in Senate

By ALLISON A. FREEMAN

Congress is considering a rewrite of the nation's law overseeing the protection of imperiled plants and wildlife – in a move that could make sweeping changes to the Endangered Species Act for the first time since it was put into law over 30 years ago.

The House of Representatives has already passed its overhaul of the act, which would throw out many of the existing mandatory requirements in favor of voluntary measures.

The measure faces a tougher slog in the Senate, but efforts are also brewing on that side of the Hill. Several moderate Republicans are working on drafting their own bills, which could come forward as soon as this month, and the chairmen of the committees with authority to take up changes to ESA have spoken in favor of a congressional rewrite.

If Congress succeeds in making changes, it could drastically alter the way the federal government protects at-risk plants and wildlife and the land they inhabit.

Enacted in 1973 and extolled and vilified by various interest groups over the years, the Endangered Species Act provides protection for more than a thousand species, including charismatic mammals like the blue whale and gray wolf as well as lesser-known plants and animals like the Alabama cave shrimp, the noonday snail, the kangaroo rat or the Elf in tree fern.

The bill's wildlife protections have also ensnared development and recreation projects and been the target of numerous lawsuits.

The act's foes characterize it as a case of good intentions gone awry, saying the law allowed the federal government and environmentalists' lawsuits to hold land hostage without compensation. They contend those restrictions create perverse incentives – a “shoot, shovel and shut up” phenomenon – and encourage landowners to get rid of species they might find on their property, lest they prevent them from moving forward with farming or development.

Further, they argue the act has provided little actual benefit for species. Of all protected species, only 1 percent has been removed from the endangered list.

“The overriding problem with the ESA is that it doesn't balance species protection with human needs,” said Reed Hopper of the Pacific Legal Foundation, a property rights group.

Many environmentalists agree the law has some areas for improvement, but they also say that recovery is a longer-term process and in the meantime, it has kept the bald eagle, whooping crane, Florida panther, Canadian lynx and other listed species from tumbling into oblivion.

“When the nation rejoiced last month at the return of the ivory-billed woodpecker, [Interior] Secretary [Gale] Norton said that we rarely have a second chance to save wildlife from extinction,” Defenders of Wildlife's Jamie Rappaport Clark told senators at a hearing on ESA this fall. “But the Endangered Species Act is all about first chances to do the same thing, about preventing wildlife extinction now, just in case nature is out of miracles.”

Congress has amended the act three times over the years, while keeping its overall structure intact, but has not reauthorized the measure since 1988. Hill staffers say the current momentum for changing the law is the most since 1997, when Sen. John Chafee (R-R.I.) oversaw a bipartisan compromise that sailed

through committee but never made it to the floor.

The House of Representatives has already surpassed that benchmark, approving an ESA rewrite that would dramatically depart from existing law in a 226-193 vote in September.

Rep. Richard Pombo (R-Calif.), who chairs the House committee with jurisdiction over the act, sponsored the bill. Its pas-



Photo courtesy of U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

The threatened desert tortoise is one of the species whose habitat may be affected by current legislation.

sage marked an incredible career and personal victory for Pombo, who has been a harsh critic of ESA since he first came to Congress over a decade ago.

But his victory did not come without a fight. A group of Democrats and moderate Republicans, including House Science Committee Chairman Sherwood Boehlert (R-N.Y.) and Fisheries Subcommittee Chairman Wayne Gilchrest (R-Md.), mounted opposition on the House floor in the form of a substitute amendment that would have altered key provisions of Pombo's plan.

That substitute was narrowly defeated, in a 216-206 vote. Its backers said that although the House did not accept their proposal, the close numbers indicate significant concerns among members that would send a message to the Senate and burden the bill with uncertainty as it moves forward.

“The bill will not become law in its present form,” Boehlert said in comments after the vote. “I can't conceive that the Senate would keep it when a vote is that close.”

(Continued on next page)

ESA... (from page 17)

The bill Pombo ushered through committee and the House floor was not as extreme as proposals he has floated in the past. But it does propose major changes to the way the government would protect listed species.

The bill would throw out many of the current act's mandatory requirements, including "critical habitat." It relies instead on recovery plans, which state and federal wildlife officials would draft for each species. The recovery plans could include habitat provisions but they would not have the same legal force as the current act. The bill says recovery plans are binding, but specifies that federal officials cannot write regulations to go with them.

The legislation also includes a host of landowner payments and protections. The most controversial required the Interior Department to pay landowners for value lost if a species halts development on their land. Critics say it could bankrupt the act.

Pombo described the bill as an effort to enlist private property owners as partners in the species recovery process. Critics said it would leave imperiled plants and wildlife in limbo, with even their continued existence in question.

Throughout this year's ESA debate, lawmakers admitted the real question is what could happen on the other side of the Hill. Analysts following the bill see the Senate as the real gatekeepers in a potential overhaul, noting that proposals that could pass in the GOP-dominant House would never make it through the filibuster requirements of the more closely-divided Senate.

Sen. Lincoln Chafee (R-R.I.), who chairs the wildlife subcommittee, has said he is interested in moving on legislation to alter the act, but is on a slower timeline than the House. He has said he has some concerns with Pombo's bill and would like to wait to see what recommendations come out of a planned stakeholder summit in Keystone, Colo., before moving forward.

Chafee, who is facing a tight election race next year in an environmentally conscious state, and the ranking Democrat on his panel, Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.), have said they are leaning toward a much less extensive overhaul than the House bill. Both have noted their desire to make sure environmental groups are on board with whatever proposal they put forward.

Meanwhile, Sens. Mike Crapo (R-Idaho) and Blanche Lincoln (D-Neb.) have formed their own ESA working group and have said they would like to propose legislation this year. Crapo has said he wants to increase landowner incentives and the role of states.

But for any bill to move forward in the Senate, it will have to first meet the approval of Sen. James Inhofe (R-Okla.), who chairs the full committee with jurisdiction over the ESA and to whom Chafee must report.

Inhofe has said he is willing to defer to Chafee and Clinton to work on their own proposal for now. But he reserved the right to step in and take the reins and possibly introduce the Pombo bill.

For his part, Chafee has said he would use his late father's bill to guide his approach to revising the law. That bill revamped

ESA's recovery program and deadlines and gave additional protections to landowners.

But lobbyists who have followed the issue for years said that trying to move a bill forward in the Senate could be even harder now than when Chafee's father worked on his legislation nine years ago. At that time, the blessing of then-President Clinton was enough to garner Democratic votes, but now members are more fractured.

"I think consensus is possible," said Mike Senatore of Defenders of Wildlife. "But saying there is interest and desire is one thing, and actually getting down to do it and trying to get agreement on legislation another. It's tough to see a process that would get us to a bill."

Chafee has acknowledged that the road ahead could be rough. "Is it possible? That's the big question," he said after a hearing earlier this year, noting that even his father's bipartisan bill did not win full Senate approval. "It's not going to be easy."

One chief area of ongoing debate will likely be what changes to make to the act's existing critical habitat requirements, one of the more contentious issues and the chief source of ESA lawsuits. Pombo's plan eliminated the requirement, to the chagrin of environmentalists. The Keystone summit the Senate is organizing will focus on critical habitat.

While opinions differ on how to change critical habitat, consensus is growing around the need to make some alterations. The substitute amendment that challenged Pombo's proposal also eliminated critical habitat. And even Democrats on his committee who ultimately opposed the bill said they were willing to give up critical habitat, as long as some sort of binding agreement was in its place.

The current ESA mandates designation of critical habitat, defined as an area "essential for species' survival and recovery." Agencies or developers within those designations who want federal permits must consult with Fish and Wildlife Service officials before undertaking activities that might harm the species or its habitat.

FWS officials from the Bush and Clinton administrations have said the habitat designations are redundant and burdensome and provide little protection beyond other safeguards that come with a species' listing.

Scientists have gone back and forth on the value of critical habitat, with some peer-reviewed articles showing it provides little to no added benefit and others showing that species with habitat designations can be twice as likely to recover.

But regardless of the benefits or burdens of critical habitat, the surrounding controversy has indisputably kept federal officials in the courtroom. ESA requires the designations at the time of listing, but the government almost never designates habitat until forced to by a lawsuit. Then, even after designations are made, the agency is often met with another string of lawsuits from environmental groups or developers challenging the specifics of the proposals.

Some environmentalists have said a better alternative would be to keep critical habitat requirements, but move the deadlines out, which would give FWS more time to research a species and hopefully lead to a stronger scientific basis for the designation, making it less vulnerable to court challenges.

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Allison A. Freeman is a reporter for Greenwire and Environment & Energy Daily, www.eenews.net.

Top-notch panel named for \$75,000 Grantham Prize

By MICHAEL MANSUR

A prestigious group of journalists has been named to judge the newly established Grantham Prize, North America's largest journalism prize established to recognize reporting on the environment.

The Grantham Prize for Excellence in Reporting on the Environment will provide a \$75,000 cash award each year to one journalist or a team of journalists in recognition of exemplary reporting on the environment.

Named recently as judges: Robert Semple Jr., associate editor of the editorial pages, *The New York Times*; David Boardman, managing editor, *The Seattle Times*; Dennis Bueckert, national affairs reporter with Canadian Press in Ottawa; Diane Hawkins-Cox, senior producer with the CNN Science and Technology Unit; and Philip Meyer, the Knight Chair in Journalism and a professor at the University of North Carolina School of Journalism and Mass Communication.

The Grantham Prize will be administered by the Metcalf Institute for Marine and Environmental Reporting at the University of Rhode Island's Graduate School of Oceanography.

Funding for the prize is provided by The Grantham Foundation for the Protection of the Environment. The deadline for entries is March 24, with the winning journalist or reporting team announced in July.

"We are living in a world that tragically underestimates environmental problems. Independent and accurate journalism offers great hope in this regard. We believe that this prize will highlight the need for insightful coverage and the awareness such reporting can bring about," said Jeremy and Hannelore Grantham, founders of The Grantham Foundation.

Award criteria and other information on The Grantham Prize are available online at www.granthamprize.org.

SEJournal recently spoke with Bud Ward, prize administrator at the Metcalf Institute, about the new prize.

Why is such a large prize necessary?

Ward: The funders, Jeremy and Hannelore Grantham, feel strongly that contemporary society, both domestically and internationally, significantly underestimates environmental problems we face. "Nothing offers a better hope in this regard than independent and accurate journalism," they said in establishing the new prize program.

In addition, all of us in this field recognize the challenges that journalists – certainly including environmental reporters – face day in and day out in the current competitive journalism climate. We recognize and appreciate the enormous potential of the digital age while at the same time being concerned about the potential negative implications for traditional, responsible journalism and the highest standards of journalism.

The shrinking news hole and dwindling air time many environmental journalists face each day combine with concerns posed by consolidation of media ownership, loss of readers and audiences at many news organizations, and shrinking advertising revenues. All these are among the factors figuring into the need to further recognize and reward outstanding environmental journalists and call attention to their work with a prize of this size.

How much attention has the prize announcement received?

Ward: There are clear signs of a healthy and ongoing "buzz"

among journalists about the Grantham Prize, perhaps not surprising given the substantial \$75,000 award. Needless to say, the mere establishment of the prize itself was not expected to "make news" on its own. At this point, the key audience we want to be aware of the prize is editors and reporters, and not their audiences, who we believe will come later. Among journalists, the prize has gotten substantial early recognition, in part the result of display ads in *American Journalism Review* and *Columbia Journalism Review*, references in a number of online publications and as a result of distribution to newsrooms via the PRNewswire.

That said, there continues to be lots of outreach to newsrooms ongoing and planned over coming months as we build toward the March 24 postmark deadline for submitting entries for the first annual prize. Pieces aired or published during 2005 will be eligible for the 2006 prize.

Have you heard any negative reaction from journalists to the size of the prize?

Ward: The lede, of course, was the size of the prize – \$75,000 to a single journalist or team of journalists. The Metcalf Institute prize committee that worked with The Grantham Foundation to structure the prize clearly anticipated that the size of the award would be the major focus of most journalists' reactions. That's how it's working out.

There have also been a number of questions about eligibility. Are book authors published in 2005 potential entrants if they are not themselves "journalists"? (Answer: Yes, but the entries will be judged by the highest journalism standards.) Can a reporter's body of work throughout the year be submitted as a single entry if those pieces deal with a particular environmental issue? (Answer: Series must be identified as such in the initial release.) I'm certain that the newly established panel of prize jurors will grapple with other such questions as their work gets under way.

As for reactions to the prize, a particularly interesting one comes from Frank Blethen, third-generation owner and Publisher of *The Seattle Times*:

"This is awesome! There are three monumental issues which will determine if our country can sustain an adequate quality of life and if our American democracy will survive three centuries: The environment, inclusions and tolerance, and an independent watchdog press. This is an amazing commitment to our future and to two of these critical issues."

I think that sentiment may resound well in so many newsrooms and among environmental reporters constantly clamoring for more space for their stories.

There has not been as much "negative reaction" from journalists to the size of the prize as I personally perhaps had anticipated. Some have characterized the dollar amount as "disproportionate," and at least one reporter went so far as describing it as "obscene." Needless to say, reporters with those concerns are unlikely to submit an entry.

On the other hand, we've heard some prominent academics joke that "Wow, perhaps I should get back into environmental reporting!" and jest that "I didn't know environmental journalism paid so well!"

Anecdotally, I get a sense that more of the negative reaction, *(Continued next page)*

Grantham... (from page 19)

such as it is, may come more from academics teaching environmental journalism than from working reporters themselves. It's possible, of course, that they're just not telling us to our face, but overall the reactions we hear are decisively enthusiastic, and we pick up lots of traffic from various reporters about plans to submit entries. We're being advised to prepare for a deluge of entries come next spring.

In either case, we welcome all reaction from journalists, negative as well as positive. I suppose the real test will be in the number and quality of entries we receive in March.

Will the size of the prize cause more newsrooms to produce more environmental journalism?

Ward: I don't think so, and in fact I hope not, because I firmly believe that so-called "prize journalism" seldom is the best kind.

A more realistic hope is that the prize – and the size of the award – will send a message to top editors and news managers that quality environmental journalism is to be prized, to be valued. And that it's vitally important to our society and democracy.

Another hope is that we will succeed in helping the eventual winning entry – and over the years entries – gain broader distribution and higher visibility among journalists, the public, and decision makers.

How will you ensure the prize's credibility?

Ward: A critical early step, and one we've just completed, involves the selection of an absolutely outstanding pool of jurors – independent journalists with impeccable standing among their peers. Journalists who among them will have the final say on selecting the winner. And who will be committed to doing so in the most transparent and most journalistically responsible ways.

There's more to building and maintaining one's credibility. But take a look for yourself at the bios of the five jurors who constitute the prize judges. We think they provide an exceptionally strong foundation on which to build the credibility of the prize.

Will it be fair to smaller news organizations who must compete against large news outlets?

It's become increasingly clear, with the breakdown of the traditional "mainstream" news media, that responsible journalism can and must occur in a wide range of different settings and media and books. In fact, outstanding journalistic undertakings increasingly are taking place in outlets that at one point weren't even considered part of the journalism world.

That's not being naïve. It's clear that smaller news organizations, with even tighter news budgets than today's large daily newspapers, are stretched to find the resources needed to undertake the most outstanding journalism. We recognize that good journalism costs money and labor hours and top management commitment. It doesn't come free.

Our hope is that the prize will attract such an array of entries that we will see winners from reporters and media far from the beaten track of relative "household names" in the environmental journalism community. We're determined to recognize and reward the most outstanding journalism on these issues, without regard to the corporate size of the outlet.

What is the commitment to this prize? Is it here to stay?

Ward: The Grantham Foundation has made a commitment to fund the prize over the next four years, but it has expressed the hope and intention to fund it into perpetuity if the early years justify that commitment.

We all recognize that no new journalism prize can become "another Pulitzer" without years of tradition, a highly transparent selection process, and an unbending commitment to the most rigorous standards of professional journalism. Being recognized as meeting the highest standards of journalism excellence for a prize program won't come easily, and it won't come overnight. But we are all determined to strive for that standard.

Michael Mansur reports for the Kansas City Star and is editor of SEJournal.

Awards... (from page 5)

2nd Place: **John A. Dillon** of Vermont Public Radio for stories on several subjects, including controlling cormorants in Lake Champlain.

3rd Place: **Erin Toner** of WKAR, Michigan State University public radio, for her stories about environmental issues in the Great Lakes region.

OUTSTANDING SMALL MARKET REPORTING, PRINT:

1st Place: **Wendy Lyons Sunshine** of *Fort Worth Weekly* for "Mud Wrestling," a three-part series about the environmental damage caused by the fast-growing region's ravenous appetite for construction stone.

2nd Place: **Benjamin Joffe-Walt** of *The Progressive* magazine for "China's Computer Wasteland."

3rd Place: **Hope Burwell** of *Orion* magazine for "Jeremiad for Belarus."

OUTSTANDING TELEVISION REPORTING, LARGE MARKET:

1st Place: **Jeffrey Cooperman** of NBC News for "Clearing the Air," a hard-hitting story about the Bush Administration's campaign to rewrite air-pollution rules to accommodate industry.

2nd Place: **Jim Parsons, Kendall Cross** and **Michael Lazorko** of WTAE-TV in Pittsburgh for "Dying to Breathe" and other stories.

3rd Place: **Carisa Scott, Brian Maass** and **Kevin Hartfield** of KCNC-TV in Denver for "Water Thieves."

OUTSTANDING TELEVISION REPORTING, SMALL MARKET:

1st Place: **Barbara Noyes Pulling, Michael McDade** and **Caleb Crosby** of Maine Public Broadcasting for "Quest: Aquaculture, Down on the Salmon Farm," a series about the economic promise and environmental perils of fish farming.

2nd Place: **Marc Schollett** of WPBN/WTOM in Traverse City, Michigan, for "Water Watch."

3rd Place: **Hagit Limor, Anthony Mirones** and **Bob Morford** of WCPO-TV in Cincinnati for "Airport Pollution."

Ponca... (from page 1)

years, and I'd never seen anything quite like this – the carbon dust was so thick around the houses the kids playing outside looked like they'd been rolling in charcoal, and I discovered that simply walking across the grass had coated my legs with the dust almost up to my knees and had ruined a good pair of shoes. (On my second visit, one of the women gave me plastic bags to tie over my feet.)

Over the next few months, I returned to White Eagle six times, driving back and forth from Santa Fe, N.M., to research this story and others. Every detail I learned made the carbon black story that much more compelling. It was like peeling a pungent onion – every layer seemed to be smellier than the last: the pollution began almost immediately after the carbon black plant opened in the 1950s, but regulators consistently ignored complaints; a farmer down the road showed me his white sheep that had turned sooty black from the dust and gave me stacks of inspection reports all concluding that the black dust wasn't coming from the Continental Carbon plant.

The Oklahoma's Department of Environmental Quality enforced a rule requiring that its own inspectors must witness the dust blowing across the factory fence before the agency could act and the Bureau of Indian Affairs had approved building a low-income Indian housing project next to the plant, even though the agency knew the land was so contaminated no one else would buy it. Children and elderly people at the housing project were suffering from high rates of respiratory and other illnesses. New research was demonstrating precisely how ultra-fine particulates such as carbon black can damage health. And finally, the DEQ admitted to me that the agency had been using a faulty test to determine whether dust samples taken from the homes contained carbon black.

Q: How did you get started? Had you covered the topic before? If not, what did you do to background yourself?

A: I've been reporting on toxic pollution since the 1970s when Karen Silkwood's apartment in Edmond, Okla., was contaminated with radioactive plutonium from the Kerr-McGee plant where Silkwood was a union activist. At the time, I was a reporter for KWTW in Oklahoma City. Working on that story not only opened my eyes about the presence of potentially dangerous contaminants in the environment, it taught me something about the nature of power and how it can be used to suppress information. During the Silkwood case, the *Daily Oklahoman* fired two reporters who covered the story. The action had a chilling effect and even though the national press became intensely interested in the Silkwood story, local reporting remained minimal. My news director told me that Kerr-McGee President Dean McGee paid a personal visit to KWTW station owner John Griffin to ask that I be fired or at least pulled off the Silkwood story. Fortunately, Mr. Griffin was a bootstrap-up independent businessman who took offense at anyone trying to tell him how to run his TV station. I got word to bulldog the story, as long as I made absolutely sure that my facts were correct.

When I began to understand how severe the pollution from Continental Carbon's plant had been for so many years, how state regulators had refused to enforce environmental laws, and how the story had been ignored by local media, it seemed to me that not

much had changed in the 25 years since I left the state. That's one of the reasons I moved back to Oklahoma this summer. There's a wealth of environmental stories here that go largely unreported.

So, back to your question ...

In the early 1990s, I gave myself a crash course in toxic contaminants and risk assessment when I decided to challenge *The*



Photo courtesy of RICHARD RAY WHITMAN



Photo courtesy of VICKI MONKS

Continental Carbon plant near Ponca City, Okla. Downwind, John Hough's white sheep changed color from carbon dust.

New York Times' coverage of dioxin. At the time, I'd been researching a story on Agent Orange, and was astonished to see a front page story in *The Times* concluding that dioxin was no more dangerous than sunbathing. That assertion was contrary to all the scientific research I'd been reviewing, but dozens of major newspapers picked up the sunbathing theme and parroted the same conclusion. When I set out to write a critique of *The Times*' dioxin coverage for *American Journalism Review*, I spent several months intensely studying scientific literature on dioxin, endocrine disrupters and other toxic chemicals. What I learned about how to evaluate various contaminants and how to read health studies has informed my reporting ever since.

The first question I had to answer on the carbon black story was whether that substance poses health risks, and if so, how severe. The nuisance of the black dust was one thing – but if carbon black was also dangerous to human health, the state's failure to control emissions would mark a serious breach of responsibility. My first step was to gather all the health effects information on carbon black that I could find in medical and scientific journals.

(Continued next page)

Ponca... (from page 21)

I began calling authors of those studies for interviews, but most had done such specialized research, their comments would have been incomprehensible to a general audience. I asked each scientist for recommendations on others to interview and after phone conversations with around a dozen peo-

Union workers who'd been locked out of their jobs at the carbon-black plant... provided extensive documentation of chronic safety violations, advance notification of DEQ inspections and the subsequent special cleanups meant to hide ongoing violations as well as eyewitness accounts of midnight stack releases.

ple, I finally persuaded UCLA Professor John Froines to record an interview. He is chairman of California's Scientific Review Panel on Toxic Air Contaminants and his research on the health effects of ultra-fine particulates (a class that includes carbon black) was downright scary. I knew that I could only include the briefest description of his findings in the story – but it was enough to establish the potential for serious health problems from breathing carbon black.

In terms of the Native American aspects of the story, it helped immensely that I'd had the opportunity to study Indian law with Charles Wilkinson at the University of Colorado Law School in 2003-2004 as a Ted Scripps Fellow in Environmental Journalism.

Q: What kinds of sources did you use?

A: My initial sources were the people affected by the pollution. They knew the rough outlines of the situation but didn't have solid proof. One Ponca man who lived in the housing project had gotten a copy of a 1973 Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) memo acknowledging that the land was so contaminated it couldn't be sold. I needed to make the connection between that memo and the subsequent transfer of the land to the (U.S.) Department of Housing and Urban Development for the purpose of building the Indian housing project. So I drove to the county seat in far northern Oklahoma to dig through land records until I found the transfer of title to HUD signed by the same BIA regional director who had received the original memo about the contamination.

The regional director, Sid Carney, had retired and said he couldn't remember anything about the project. BIA officials in local and regional offices came up with nothing more than the memo that I already had. A spokeswoman for HUD said that all relevant records were destroyed in the Oklahoma City courthouse bombing. An expedited search at BIA headquarters in Washington, D.C., produced one more memo from an attorney concluding that Interior had no basis for a lawsuit against Continental Carbon (but that was a detail I couldn't work into the story.)

Other sources included union workers who'd been locked out of their jobs at the carbon black plant. They provided valuable details about factory processes and how leaks occur, as well as extensive documentation of chronic safety violations, advance notification of DEQ inspections and the subsequent special

cleanups meant to hide ongoing violations as well as eyewitness accounts of midnight stack releases (since the company was well aware of DEQ's requirement that its own inspectors see the dust leaving the plant, the union workers told me that managers figured they'd be off the hook if they released most of the dust-filled emissions at night.) I also interviewed and obtained documents from consultants and attorneys working for the union.

Union workers at Continental Carbon's plant near Houston had been mining the company's dumpsters for information and had pieced together memos showing that the company's own engineers had warned the board about critically needed new equipment and maintenance – but those improvements weren't approved even though the memos made it clear that serious pollution problems would continue otherwise.

In Alabama, residents living near a Continental Carbon plant had recently won a sizeable judgment in a lawsuit against the company. I interviewed residents and attorneys by phone and obtained additional detailed documentation.

The Ponca Nation's environment department provided information about its own investigations of pollution from the plant, including air sample reports.

Since the handle for this story was the move by tribes to take over regulation of environmental laws, I also interviewed representatives from the Cherokee Nation and other tribes, Oklahoma's Environment Secretary Miles Tolbert, EPA Region 6 Director Richard Greene, and other EPA personnel.

And of course, I interviewed spokespeople for Continental Carbon and Oklahoma's DEQ. I did these interviews last because I wanted to make sure I had all of my facts and documentation assembled first. When I recorded the interview with DEQ, I took a 2-inch stack of documentation with me so that I could refer to specific points if I didn't get a responsive answer. I think that's why the DEQ spokeswoman admitted, near the end of the interview, that the lab test they'd used for years to determine whether samples contained carbon black was never a valid test.

Even though I had 16 minutes on the air, there wasn't time to include many of even the juiciest background details, but it was important for me to have that information anyway to help with my own understanding and evaluation of the story.

Q: Did you have any sort of problem getting people to talk to you?

A: Native Americans, especially the more traditional people, are frequently reluctant to talk with outsiders. Dashing in for quick interviews doesn't usually produce good results. Since I've been covering Indian issues for many years and am Chickasaw myself, I already knew some of the protocols for approaching native people and earning their trust.

Family connections – including far-extended family connections – are critically important. When I decided to visit White Eagle for the first time, I persuaded a Euchee friend, who was

(Continued next page)

married to a Ponca woman, to go with me. Because he was willing to vouch for me, everyone I met that day was eager to talk.

After interviewing a number of people and forming the outlines of my story, I knew that Thurman and Thelma Buffalohead could be the most important people to interview – if I could persuade them to go on tape. The Buffaloheads had owned an Indian allotment next to the carbon black plant when it was built in the 1950s and knew the company’s history of pollution. I’d heard that the Buffaloheads had both been ill with respiratory disease. But they are elderly, full-blood Poncas, and I was warned that they might not want to see me.

One of the Buffalohead grandsons that I’d spoken with previously went with me to make the introduction. I stopped by to visit again, but didn’t take out my recorder and microphones until my third visit. I recorded for nearly four hours. After a while, Thurman and Thelma began to relax with the equipment and started speaking in Ponca, translating for themselves and each other, making jokes about the stinking contamination, and then getting serious about their frustration that it had gone on for so long. It’s one of the best interviews I’ve ever recorded. And Thelma Buffalohead and I still write letters back and forth.

Q. Do you use an outline or some other mechanism to help you organize the material? If so, how often do you think you changed it?

A: I begin with a very rough outline that lists all the elements I’d like to include in the story – along with lists of potential interviews for each element – and lists of every detail that I need to confirm or document.

My elements outline almost always changes frequently as I gather material.

The story outline itself is dictated by the quality of interviews and natural sound that I’m able to collect. The white farmer with the black sheep gave me some wonderful, colloquially accented comments and I had good natural sound of him feeding the sheep – plus, the idea of farm animals changing color from the pollution made the farmer’s “sound scene” a natural lead.

I needed to follow that lead with the nuts and bolts of the story – and a description of potential health effects – and even though those sections weren’t as interesting from an audio standpoint, the information was strong enough to carry into the next vivid sound scene with the Buffaloheads.

The first script I turned in was half an hour long, but the material was so good it was agonizing to cut. “Living on Earth’s” brilliant western editor Ingrid Lobet worked with me through several revisions until we got the story down to a manageable length for the program. We ended up dropping all the sound bites with the EPA regional director and the Oklahoma secretary of environment, mostly because what they had to say wasn’t all that interesting. But we still had to cut some great material, including a scene with Karen Howe, whose young daughter Angela had such severe respiratory problems she was never allowed to play outside during the five years they lived in the Ponca housing.

Q: What do you do to make a radio story from ordinary to extraordinary?

A: I think the best radio stories are character driven. No matter how interesting the subject might be, if the interviews are dull, it won’t be a great story. Often, the tricky part is in drawing out people who aren’t media savvy and feel uncomfortable in the presence of a microphone. My technique for putting people at

ease consists mostly of talking with them for such a long time; they forget the microphone is there.

Q. I know in radio and television, reporters often use “natural sound” to help give a story a sense of place. What do you look for and do you think it is a tool that print reporters could also use?

A: Since I’ve worked in radio and television for so many



Photo courtesy of RICHARD RAY WHITMAN



Photo courtesy of VICKI MONKS

Ponca City businesses warn customers not to track carbon black dust inside. Downwind from the carbon-black plant, everything is covered with a stubborn film of black dust.

years, even when I’m writing a print story I usually think in terms of sound and visuals. And I do believe the process helps my print reporting by reminding me to keep the stories grounded in specifically placed reality.

When I begin a radio project, I try to come up with as many potential sound scenes as possible. Then I see which of them actually work out well on the ground. Instead of interviewing the Ponca environment director in his office, I asked him to drive me around the area on a sort of “toxic tour.” It was good sound but I didn’t use it because other scenes were even better.

Q: What kind of response did it get from listeners? Was there any government response?

A: “Living on Earth” had quite a number of letters and e-mails from listeners saying they appreciated the story. The best was from a lineman who maintains radio and television antennas. He wrote that he’d complained for years because emissions from the plant were deteriorating antenna guy wires. He was also annoyed that he always had to throw away the clothing he wore whenever he worked on those antennas because the carbon dust would not wash out.

Since I moved back to Oklahoma, I keep running into people
(Continued next page)

Ponca... (from page 23)

who heard the story and ask me why none of the local media had done it before. (My former TV station, KWTW in Oklahoma City, is now in the process of producing a story on the carbon black plant). The Cherokee Nation invited me to do a presentation on carbon black and other environmental threats to Indian lands at a statewide tribal conference in Tulsa.

After my interview with DEQ, before the story went on the

When Thurman and Thelma Buffalohead began speaking in Ponca and translating for each other I was elated because the sound of the Ponca words expressed the essence of this elderly couple better than anything I possibly could write... The continued existence of the Ponca language illustrates how Indian culture still thrives in the midst of an industrial world. Simply allowing listeners to hear the language gets the point across about how much is at stake in this situation.

air, DEQ finally imposed a small fine against the company – the first penalty the company ever paid in more than 50 years of operation.

Q. In some quotes with the people in your story, they are talking in their native language, but then they translated what they said, or someone else said, into English. Since time is important in a broadcast story, why use comments in a language none of your readers will understand? Did they just naturally translate? Did they occasionally discuss your questions in their native tongue before answering? I've had that happen to me with French-speaking Cajuns.

A: When Thurman and Thelma Buffalohead began speaking in Ponca and translating for each other I was elated because the sound of the Ponca words expressed the essence of this elderly couple better than anything I possibly could write. These are people with a unique culture and language, and they are not relics from historic past. The Buffaloheads are modern American Indians who've held on to their traditional values and language while they've tried to cope with pollution from an industrial giant over the past half century.

The continued existence of the Ponca language illustrates how Indian culture still thrives in the midst of an industrial world. Simply allowing listeners to hear the language gets the point across about how much is at stake in this situation, without any direct comments from me.

Plus, I just love how the words sound. I loved how they relaxed and teased each other when they began speaking Ponca. In my view, letting the Ponca language flow – instead of butting in with a translator – communicates the nuances of the story far better than if I'd edited out the non-English.

Q. Do you think this story is repeated in other locations where Native Americans or other minority groups are impacted? If so, what advice would you give another reporter

who wanted to do a story about a unique population being impacted by an environmental problem?

A: I'm certain that similar problems are occurring on Indian lands all over the country – and I'm currently working on a few of those stories.

My best advice for covering stories in Indian country is to be patient – and listen carefully. Be willing to wait through long silences while the person you're speaking with considers a reply to your questions.

Also, one of the most interesting aspects of these stories is that many of the tribes are developing their own expertise on environmental problems. For the past 30 years, the tribes have been supporting their young people to attend college, and many have come home with advanced degrees in science, law and policy. It could be that a push from the tribes will lead to improved environmental enforcement that will benefit other people as well.

Q: Have you done some follow-up stories? Someone told me you are doing a book. How is that coming?

A: I'm currently working on a story about the backlash against tribal environmental regulation among a few groups that have extraordinary political clout here (Farm Bureau, independent petroleum producers and others). During the conference committee on the federal transportation bill, committee chair U.S. Sen. Jim Inhofe (R-Okla.) inserted a rider that effectively prevents any Oklahoma tribes from taking over environmental enforcement on their lands.

I'm also doing a series of stories on other environmental threats to Indian lands here – but I can't discuss those at this point.

I'll include many of these environmental stories in my book – which I hope to complete by next summer for publication in 2007 – the centennial of Oklahoma statehood.

View the script at:

www.loe.org/shows/shows.htm?programID=05-P13-00003#feature5 or use the link on the SEJ Contest winner's page www.sej.org/contest/index4.htm

Vicki Monks has worked for more than 30 years as a television and radio correspondent, documentary producer and magazine writer specializing in science, health and environmental reporting. Her articles have appeared in magazines including National Wildlife, Rolling Stone, and Vogue. She was also the primary author and editor of an in-depth PBS website produced as a companion to the Bill Moyer's documentary "Trade Secrets," www.pbs.org/tradesecrets.

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

Katrina... (from page 1)

And so the story of Katrina changed dramatically. New Orleans and the people who report on it will never be the same.

Times-Picayune

The most-discussed Katrina topic among journalists is the performance of the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*. The team gathered in the newsroom and covered the approach of the storm as it tracked across the Gulf of Mexico as a much-feared Category 5 hurricane.

When it became obvious that the neighborhood around the offices were flooding, the crew fled the rising waters in New Orleans, spending a day at the *Houma Courier*, then two weeks at the Manship School of Mass Communications at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. The next move took them to an office complex across town. After setting up a newsroom of laptops, the journalists continued their typical in-depth coverage of emerging events.

With a flooded press and displaced journalists, the *Times-Picayune* maintained thorough coverage via their website. After just two days, they returned to paper editions that were printed for two weeks by the *Houma Courier*. From that time until they returned full operations to New Orleans, the *Times-Picayune* was printed by the *Mobile Register*.

This daunting task of evacuating the entire team of journalists and administration, locating and preparing new facilities – twice – while maintaining high-quality productivity for the their audience, must be admired.

Radio collaboration

Truly one of the media success stories was the formation of United Radio Broadcasters of New Orleans, comprised primarily of some 15 stations owned by Clear Channel Baton Rouge and Entercom New Orleans (www.clearchannel.com/Radio/PressRelease.aspx?PressReleaseID=1187). United Broadcasters placed reporters and deejays from all the stations in mixed pairs, featuring 24 hours per day of continuous news coverage and a constant stream of callers offering their impressions and observations of events as they unfolded.

United Broadcasters' main strength was offering its listeners the opportunity to share information, find loved ones, make public statements. Since the 50,000-watt station went nationwide at dark and ultimately was streamed on its website, United Broadcasters was the principal source of up-to-date information for coastal citizens and those interested in following events as they unfolded.

By early November, United Broadcasters was hosting town meetings for area communities. It hosted elected officials who presented the state-of-the-community and took phone calls from citizens. These programs were very popular, as they were often the only source of information for displaced residents living in shelters and other distant places.

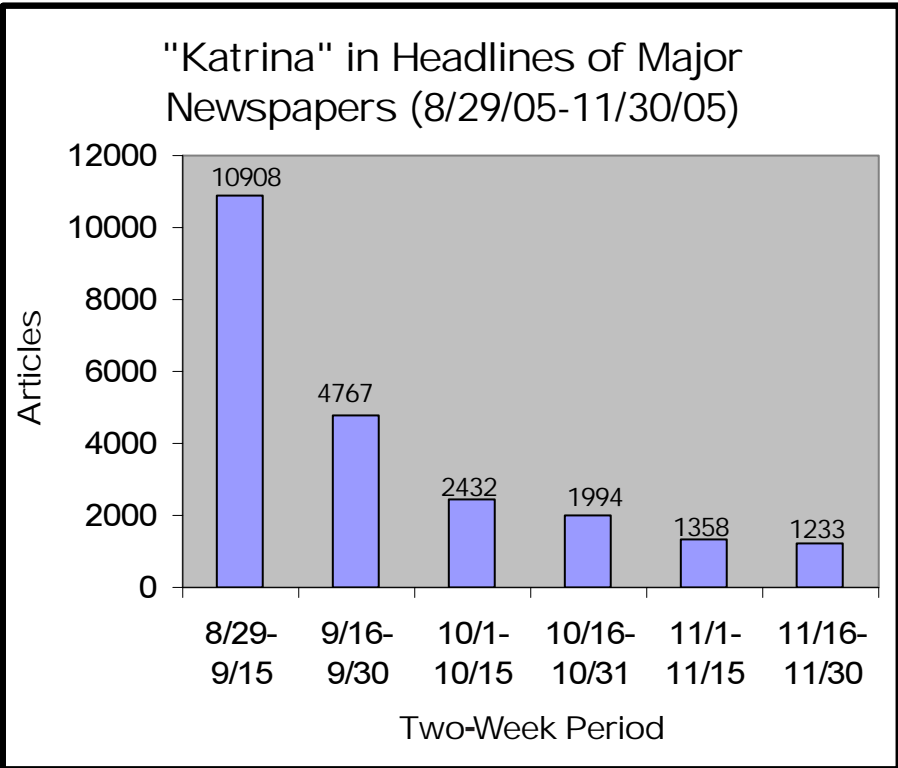
As in any broadcast medium, United Broadcasters' weaknesses centered on the veracity of some information shared by

callers, such as reported violence. But these weaknesses were minor compared to the heartfelt support given to United Broadcasters by its audience. It was the lifeline for many otherwise estranged citizens.

New Orleans area television

The four main television stations in Greater New Orleans – WWL (CBS), WDSU (NBC), WVUE (Fox) and WGNO (ABC) – had different experiences, but all worked diligently to supply their audiences with up-to-date news.

Mary Blue, a communications professor at Loyola University New Orleans, said that no station had functioning



Doppler radar. WWL was the only one of the four whose transmitter survived, allowing them to remain on the air throughout the storm. It sent part of its team to Baton Rouge, while the rest stayed at their French Quarter station. With the threat of floods, WWL moved the local crew to its transmitter station in the Algiers neighborhood across the river.

WDSU had its transmitter destroyed, and was off the local air until late November. Its staff, however, was split among New Orleans, Jackson, Miss., and Orlando. Within a week, they had moved their hard drives to Orlando, allowing weatherman Dan Thomas to have the same graphics as usual in his telecasts. Viewers had little idea that the news team was spread across several states.

WVUE was the hardest hit, taking on about 5 feet of water in its studios and being down for a month. Its staff worked out of a sister station in Mobile, Ala., with field crews in New Orleans transmitting through their satellite truck parked at a shopping center in nearby Metairie.

WGNO moved to Baton Rouge and shared its newscast with
(Continued next page)

Katrina... (from page 25)

WBRZ, displaying both logos and sharing talent. Though WGNO was sending its signal to New Orleans, it was off the air for ten days since it had no transmitter in the city. Its studios were damaged, and its landlord has yet to let the staff reenter the facilities. It is working out of two double-wide trailers and telecasting its news programs from different outdoor locations throughout the city.

According to Blue, all four stations were streaming news after the storm (only WWL and WDSU were doing so before Katrina). She found that they were broadcasting on a variety of stations in the central Gulf area, thus reaching many of their regular viewers with power. WDSU, as an example, is still broadcasting in Jackson, Houston and several other cities. Belo Corporation, the owners of WWL, gave permission for any station in the nation to simulcast its coverage.

Websites

Because evacuees were spread all over the nation, and due to the intense interest in the disaster by citizens throughout the world, websites suddenly became more important sources of news.

The *Times-Picayune* experienced enormous increases in its website's use. For page views, it averaged 850,000 per day before Katrina and as high as 30 million per day immediately following the storm. Nola.com, its website host, measures unique users by the month. During this past summer, the site's unique users were about 500,000 to 550,000 per month. The number for September was 4.5 million.

WWL has an excellent website and consistently directs news viewers to consult its site for supplementary information. According to a Belo Corporation letter to its employees, its website on Aug. 28 had 2.1 million page views, including 187,000 unique users and 140,000 unique video users. The day after Katrina, Aug. 30, it had 10 million page views, including 560,000 unique users and 250,000 unique video users (1.3 million video streams were viewed).

Changing news

As in all breaking news, Katrina coverage has evolved with time. Initially, we were exposed to images and stories about the horror of the storm. Who can forget the photo essays in print media, or those of broadcast? We will never forget the man in the yellow t-shirt who had just lost his beloved wife, or Marsh Walton's haunting CNN production of images over Aaron Neville's rendition of Randy Newman's Louisiana 1927 ("They're trying to wash us away.")

It is important to note the emotional toll taken on reporters who had no respite from the unfolding tragedy. Among the first was the telephone interview with Jeanne Meserve by Aaron Brown (both of CNN), in which Meserve recounted her film crew's boat trip into neighborhoods where they heard calls for help from inside flooded attics (<http://tiger.towson.edu/users/bstelt1/tvn/meserve.mp3>).

After long hours covering the first 48 hours after the storm, CNN's Anderson Cooper repeated his plea, "Where's the help?" (www.crooksandliars.com/2005/08/31.html).

The next day Cooper blasted U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.) for her paying homage to elected officials' hard work while the harsh realities to his surroundings went unresolved (www.crooksandliars.com/2005/09/01.html).

The next day Fox's Geraldo Rivera and Shepard Smith openly expressed their anger and frustration about the authorities' – and their colleagues' – lack of attention to matters they deemed unconscionable (www.crooksandliars.com/2005/09/02.html).

For the first two months, the biggest story was the failure of government to arrive and deliver basic services. From the SEJ listserv to the reportorial work of its members, stories detailed the "who's on first" confusion that resulted from people in leadership positions failing to communicate and execute.

Especially obvious were the managerial failures of FEMA Director Michael Brown, which led to his removal by mid-September. Journalists whose work led to his dismissal include CNN's Paula Zahn ("Sir, you're not telling me that you didn't know that the people in the Convention Center didn't have food and water until today, are you?") and ABC's Ted Koppel ("Don't you guys watch television? Don't you guys listen to the radio?") (www.crooksandliars.com/2005/09/02.html). That same website credited Koppel with "...leading the growing chorus of speaking truth to power."

By late November the news focus had turned back to the integrity and design of New Orleans' levees.

This investigative work is proving to be the most difficult and time-consuming task since the storm hit land. Mark Schleifstein said his frustration is that he and fellow reporters at the *Times-Picayune* spend all their time pursuing documents and interviews from evasive agency people, while the paper continues to work diligently to meet the needs of its entire readership plus producing its daily with a severely reduced staff.

Contaminants coverage

When reporters saw floodwaters commingled with the debris and residue of urban life, it was natural to postulate that a toxic soup was brewing in the Big Easy. The saline lake water looked nasty, and speculation about the presence of chemical spills seemed plausible and was reasonable to suggest.

Though it is never appropriate to report unqualified speculation as news, it is understandable that in the early hours of catastrophic conditions such reports may surface, especially when being fueled by comments by local officials. Former *Newsday* environment writer Dan Fagin, who now teaches at New York University, said it is difficult to make clear observations when journalistically triaging a complex, new situation.

A topic that is not receiving adequate coverage is the extent and health importance of environmental contamination, especially pertaining to air (mold spores) and soil (arsenic).

By early September, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency had gathered data on soil contamination at a number of sites in the New Orleans area. These data, however, were not made available, resulting in a number of SEJ members filing Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. Ultimately, the reporting community received the data, and EPA made it publicly available via their enviromapper (<http://134.67.99.185/katrina/Emkatrina.asp>). These raw data are of little to no value to citizens (for whom they are presumably generated).

Randy Lee Loftis, *Dallas Morning News*, downloaded the raw data and used EPA Region 6's residential soils screening levels as benchmarks for comparison. His Nov. 6 story explained the issue, but was not available to most residents of New Orleans.

In the absence of local coverage and communication of what is known, environmental groups such as the Natural Resources Defense Council and Louisiana Bucket Brigade have stepped in, done testing, and met with the press to share their results

The *Times-Picayune's* Matthew Brown reported on the present status of knowledge on Dec. 1.

It's clear from this and similar disasters that there will be a continued need for reporting on environmental contaminants to which returning citizens and new workers might be exposed. Depth beyond simple reporting is required so those affected can make personal choices on returning and living in the region. If this is not done through fair reporting by journalists, then the people are forced to get their information from potentially biased sources.

Future implications

Christy George, of Oregon Public Broadcasting, observed that one of the hurricane's most positive outcomes for the media is that radio and television stations got their grooves back – they launched into investigative reporting and have continued that track with other news issues (the CIA leak, bird flu, Iraq). Aggressive reporting styles, surfaced with growing anxiety within reporters, may become a permanent fixture in interviews.

The Katrina disaster may have marked a major phase in the maturing of SEJ, George said. Discussion and analysis of the issues that ensued on the SEJ listservs have provided members a common cause and developed a sense of community. It showed that the analytical sum of the membership is greater than the individual beats that we cover.

Paul Thacker, of *Environmental Science & Technology*, says Americans have developed a greater interest in global climate change issues as a result of the bevy of fierce storms that marched through the Gulf of Mexico this year. He says the present administration has concerns about this new interest, as

evidenced by the frequent appearance of government scientists (most of whom are meteorologists, not climatologists) who are saying there is no relationship between the strong storms and the warming of the seas. This testimony is given in spite of three major publications over the last year that suggest the possibility that the relationship does exist (*Science* 2005, 308, 1753-1754; *Nature* 2005, 436, 686-688; *Science* 2005, 309, 1844-1846).

The most important Katrina-associated issue facing New Orleans today is protection from another fierce hurricane, especially addressing restoration of coastal wetlands that dampen the impact of approaching storms and the integrity of its levee system in order to protect the citizens and their businesses.

The local media must also make a priority of investigating environmental quality of neighborhoods and informing citizens how to understand the meaning of the data. The fact that people are very unsettled about the environmental safety of their neighborhoods is slowing their return to their homes and jobs.

Today, a city that continues to exist only because it is protected by levees has been imperiled by their failure. More ironic, the city had ample warning of Katrina's potential. Schleifstein and John McQuaid in their award winning series "Washing Away" (June 2002) detailed the possible dangers. They echoed the concerns in coverage of Hurricane Pam simulation in 2004 and focused continually on the city's hurricane preparedness.

Even so, Hurricane Katrina brought devastation to New Orleans. Now one must wonder if people can ever be convinced to take all appropriate steps to avoid a disastrous repeat.

Robert Thomas is Loyola Chair in Environmental Communications and Director, Center for Environmental Communications at Loyola University New Orleans

Air... (from page 9)

companies for air pollution? What type of analysis is conducted on potential health impacts? Do they consider just the one facility being permitted, or do they factor in emissions from other nearby industrial sources and automobiles?

- Does your state keep a database on accidental or unauthorized releases of pollution? If so, get the database.

- What standards or guidelines does your state have for air toxics? How are they used? How are they derived? At what risk level are they set?

- How does your state monitor for air toxics? Are monitors close enough to communities to ascertain exposure? How does the state analyze results? Be sure to ask whether the monitored concentrations the state detects meet or exceed its own standards or guidelines for air toxics. Where they do exceed the thresholds? What is being done about it?

- What research is being conducted locally?

Dina Cappiello covers the environment beat for the Houston Chronicle.



Courtesy of JOE DAVIS

***Houston Chronicle* reporter Dina Cappiello points to the stacks of Texas Petrochemicals on a tour during SEJ's Austin conference. The *Chronicle* found some of the highest levels of carcinogenic 1,3-butadiene in this neighbor's home.**

GOP politics, industrial collapse, biodiesel and national parks

Writer's search for lost woodpecker produces perfectly timed book

THE GRAIL BIRD: HOT ON THE TRAIL OF THE IVORY-BILLED WOODPECKER

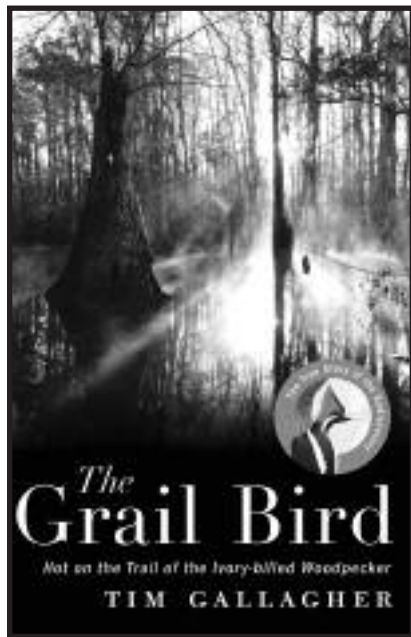
By Tim Gallagher

Houghton Mifflin Company, \$25

Reviewed by CHRISTINE HEINRICHS

The announcement of a confirmed sighting of the ivory-billed woodpecker in April 2005 was greeted like a confirmed extraterrestrial alien sighting. It was astonishing, contrary to accepted general wisdom, breathtaking.

Voices crack talking about it. This bird is so amazing that it is commonly called the Lord God Bird, because that's what people would exclaim when they saw it. Its wingspan is 30-31 inches, white flashing wings topped by a red head.



After the last confirmed sighting in 1944, conventional wisdom abandoned the ivory-billed woodpecker to extinction. By 2001, Tim Gallagher, a lifelong bird lover and editor of *Living Bird* magazine, official publication of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, had heard enough whispers and unconfirmed reports that he was convinced Ivory-bills were still out there somewhere. He started writing this book, one of the reasons it was able to appear on the market so soon after the announcement.

Gallagher has studied nesting seabirds and falcons from an open boat along Greenland's coast. He has climbed Iceland's cliffs in pursuit of the gyrfalcon, the world's largest falcon and he was ready when the Ivory-bill beckoned.

One of the effects of assuming the Ivory-bill was extinct was disbelief of any reported sightings. Worse, those who report sightings faced outright ridicule. That silenced the trickle of reports that continued through the years, relegating them to personal communications and, with the advent of the Internet, electronic chatter.

The Ivory-bill developed the identity of a ghost bird, not only rare or unusual, but whose sightings were more like apparitions. Reports came from psychics who were in telepathic communication with the birds and cryptozoologists who hunt the Loch Ness Monster and Bigfoot. It became the Grail Bird.

Gallagher set out to sift through the reports. The Grail Bird

recounts his experiences as he visited the individuals who reported seeing Ivory-billed Woodpeckers, seeking the nuggets of fact, weighing the credible against the wishful. When a solid report from experienced outdoorsman Gene Sparling in Bayou de View, Ark., reached him in February 2004, he was prepared. On the trail with old friend and colleague Bobby Ray Harrison a week later, they were rewarded with a tantalizing but irrefutable sighting.

Keeping the sighting secret, they assembled a team to search for the bird. Intensive searching produced at least 15 more sightings, additional brief video and several audio recordings of the characteristic rapping.

No serious doubts remain as to the bird's existence. For an endangered species, it's a reprieve from the brink of extinction.

The Ivory-billed Woodpecker disappeared when its habitat, the 24 million acres of Mississippi Delta bottomland swamp forests, was destroyed. A remnant 4.4 million acres is scattered and isolated, its timber logged off and the river that nourished the bottomlands confined behind levees and dams. The Big Woods Conservation Partnership has formed to restore 200,000 more acres in addition to the 18,000 acres The Nature Conservancy has already saved in the 550,000 acres of Big Woods in Arkansas.

The morals of this story, still unfolding, are many and varied. Gallagher offers the one he considers most important: "It gives us one final chance to get it right: to start restoring the vast bottomland forests of the South that these birds require."

For journalists, perhaps it's equally important to remember that reports that are initially unbelievable may hold a kernel of truth. Perhaps the finest sense we can develop is the perfect pitch that discriminates between the real and the bogus, the compass that directs us to the true and complete story beneath the comfortable and received wisdom of the conventional.

Christine Heinrichs is a Madison, Wisc.,-based freelancer who writes about genetic diversity and other issues relating to rare and historic poultry, environmental issues on golf courses and environmental law.



Writer tracks down her own impact on the garbage pile

GARBAGE LAND: ON THE SECRET TRAIL OF TRASH

By Elizabeth Royte

Little, Brown and Company, \$24.95

Reviewed by MICHELLE J. LEE

Imagine 1.31 tons of garbage.

That's how much trash the average American generates a year, according to the 2003 "State of Garbage in America," by *BioCycle* magazine and the Earth Engineering Center of Columbia University. About 65.6 percent is buried, 26.7 percent is recycled or composted, and 7.7 percent is incinerated.

In *Garbage Land*, Brooklyn-based journalist and author
(Continued next page)

Elizabeth Royte tries to track down her own contribution to the pile. Royte's project involves muckraking in the most literal sense. For 10 months, Royte records her kitchen trash and recycled materials and attempts to follow them to their final destinations.

Royte interviews sanitation workers and trash experts, rides along on garbage and recycling truck routes and starts her own compost bin. She observes the conversion of scrap metal, paper, plastic, and sewage sludge into new products. Royte also visits landfills, such as the Fresh Kills Sanitary Landfill, which collected New York City's trash for nearly 50 years and contains 2.9 billion cubic yards of trash – about the volume of 1,160 Pyramids of Cheops.

Royte uses her experiences and research to drive home a sober lesson about the thoughtlessness of our living.

"We care about animal rights and clean water," Royte says in her introduction. It isn't fair, she reasons, to feel connected to the rest of the world "only on the front end, to the waving fields of grain and the sparkling mountain streams." We must "cop to a downstream connection," she says. Our lifestyles are taking a heavy toll on the planet, and it's only getting worse.

Just the cost of our trash is troubling. From 1996 to 2002, the New York City Department of Sanitation budget nearly doubled, from \$631 million to about \$1 billion, Royte writes. With the March 2001 closure of Fresh Kills, New York City pays about \$105 per ton to export it to outside landfills and incinerators. It had cost \$40 per ton to dump in city limits.

But garbage is a \$57-billion-dollar business. The companies that truck, dump and incinerate it have a financial incentive in higher production of waste and in shipping it out of state. Royte's historical overview and discussion of New York City garbage removal indicate how little progress has been made in reducing the waste stream.

Meanwhile, the environmental costs are staggering. Thousands of gallons of diesel fuel are required to collect and take trash to landfills. Even the most advanced landfill covers and liners often leak from natural and chemical erosion and thus "merely delay, rather than eliminate massive pollution to groundwater," Royte writes. While the garbage decomposes in landfills, it also emits methane and carbon dioxide, both greenhouse gases, among other pollutants.

Royte strongly advocates for recycling programs to cut back on waste but she acknowledges that some of the programs aren't as benign as they seem. While 11 states have passed bottle bills, distributors and manufacturers are not obligated to reuse or recycle the containers they collect. And tons of post-consumer plastic (also called "Satan's resin" by environmentalists), wastepaper and used electronic appliances are shipped to places like China and India, spreading the pollution overseas.

Still, there are positive examples in *Garbage Land*. One chapter is devoted to the "Zero Waste" movement, a philosophy



which strides to eliminate garbage through reduced consumption and creating items that can be reused or recycled back to nature. In San Francisco, 52 percent of city waste is diverted from landfills through recycling and separating organic material for composting. Royte also highlights a University of California-Davis student who recycles his shower water with a homemade wetland.

Garbage Land is informative but Royte has a penchant for piling on facts and statistics so fast that the book can get as overwhelming as its subject matter. While the book contains a valuable list of additional reference books, reports and articles, charts and a glossary of garbage and recycling jargon also would have been helpful.

The message of Royte's book, however, rings strong. We should be aware of our garbage "imprint," and *Garbage Land* is a good place to start.

Michelle J. Lee, a staff writer for the Poughkeepsie Journal, is from New York City.



Small book carries big spiritual messages on nature

A SPIRITUAL FIELD GUIDE: MEDITATIONS FOR THE OUTDOORS
By Bernard Brady and Mark Neuzil
Brazos Press, \$12.99

Reviewed by CHRISTINE HEINRICHS

Nature can evoke spiritual stirrings, regardless of one's religious affiliation or lack thereof.

Bernard Brady and SEJ's own Mark Neuzil have put together their favorite meditations to deepen and enhance our spiritual experience of the outdoors.

The Christian tradition predominates in this pocket-sized collection, and that's not surprising from a pair of professors from University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn., a Catholic institution. Brady is a professor of theology and Neuzil is associate professor and chair of the journalism and mass communication department. Neuzil also was a longtime SEJ board member.

Most selections are from the Bible, though Brady and Neuzil include passages from writers like Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard, Barbara Kingsolver, Mother Teresa, Chief Seattle, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Julian of Norwich, St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, Henry David Thoreau and St. Francis of Assisi. The authors include quotations from less prominent individuals, too: astronauts Edgar Mitchell, James Irwin and Gene Cernan.

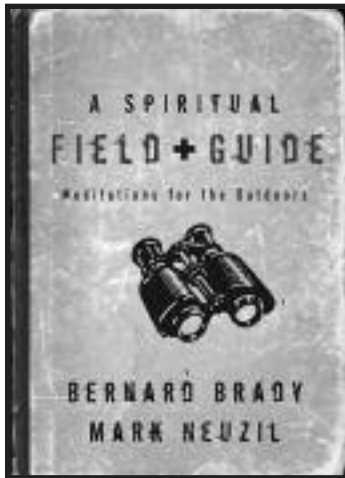
Their selections are culturally familiar ones even in the secular world: the Garden of Eden, Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt and selections from other religious traditions like the Buddhist scriptures.

One of the book's moral lessons: The call of religion for humans to be good stewards of the earth can be understood as an imperative for environmental protection, and on the flip side, pollution can reflect spiritual failure.

The authors bridge literary selections with their own guidance and direction on the types of inspiration that can emerge from
(Continued next page)

nature and the many reasons we seek such experiences in nature. They give us reading plans – for an afternoon, a day or a week spent in Nature – to understand our relation to it and to the divine.

“One of our hopes for the book is that people use it in the field,” Neuzil said in a phone interview. “I hope people take it with them, in the tackle box, or motorcycle saddle bag. I hope they get fish guts on it. I’d be honored if people spilled coffee and goose blood on it.”



The book cover is designed to look already tattered by the kind of use it deserves: crammed into a pocket on regular outings into the outdoors. (It has become my companion on my own ramblings and paddling trips.)

The book is already in its second printing, having sold out its first run in a few months. Such brisk sales suggest it is answering a need. Chances are, it will turn up in unexpected places. Stay on the alert for its pre-tattered cover and the opportunity to open a conversation on the spiritual, a subject that doesn’t often arise in our daily work.

Christine Heinrichs is a Madison, Wisc.,-based freelancer who writes about genetic diversity and other issues relating to rare and historic poultry, environmental issues on golf courses and environmental law.



Book packs good jobs, but can it go the distance?

THE REPUBLICAN WAR ON SCIENCE

By Chris Mooney

Basic Books, \$24.95

Reviewed by STUART LEAVENWORTH

Here’s a news flash: President George Bush and some of his minions have targeted scientists who don’t share their agenda. They have intimidated certain government researchers, reassigned those who cause trouble for key constituencies and discouraged an entire generation of biologists, climatologists and other professionals from ever working on the federal payroll.

If Chris Mooney had written that book, he would have produced a work of global impact. Instead, he reaches for the stars. He posits the argument that the entire Republican Party has declared war on the scientific method. It’s a careful dissection of GOP policies, laden with all the right caveats. Unfortunately, it reads like a book aimed at people who already believe the Bush administration has an anti-science agenda, instead of those who need some convincing.

Mooney, a first-time author who is also Washington correspondent for *Seed* magazine, has assembled a wide array of documents to make his sweeping case. He shows how former

House Speaker Newt Gingrich – “the science lover on the one hand, the science abuser on the other” – dismantled the Office of Technology Assessment. He documents how certain Republicans used the mantra of “sound science” to discredit studies showing that tobacco is deadly, mercury is toxic, global warming is real and obesity is a growing threat to millions across the globe.

Mooney notes that liberal activists have abused science to advance their own causes, such as animal rights and a land free of biotech crops. But those sentences amount to just a few crumpets in a 14-chapter, 342-page meal.

No doubt, there are many GOP leaders who are scientifically illiterate and make decisions on research based on orders from Karl Rove, Gary Bauer and corporate CEOs. On the other hand, there are many Republican moderates – such as Sherwood Boehlert and Arlen Specter – who are strong advocates of independent science. They are MIA in “The War.” Nor are there interviews with top conservatives in the GOP, such as Sen. Sam Brownback of Kansas or Rep. Richard Pombo of California. Both might have provided some important – and revealing – insights.

Bereft of any real communication with those in power, Mooney leaves us with some alarming conclusions.

“The politicization of science presents a severe challenge to modern democratic governments,” he writes in his epilogue. “The advent of the modern conservative movement, its takeover of the Republican Party and its ultimate triumph under the administration of George W. Bush have brought us to a point where a true divorce between democratic government and technocratic expertise seems conceivable.”

Sorry Chris, but the divorce between democracy and technocracy has been ongoing for some time. Ever since Ben Franklin flew a kite in a storm and had the means to publicize it, science has been politicized. These days, if you take a scientist out for a drink, he or she will rant and rave like a partisan hack. Although most good scientists keep an open mind about their research, their values often determine what they investigate, so long as there is money to finance it.

Here in California, a bastion of the Democratic Party, scientists were the driving force behind the state’s new \$3 billion embryonic stem cell institute. This agency, created by a ballot initiative, is unaccountable to the Legislature, and enjoys exemptions from state open-meeting requirements. Many academics would call this agency a victory for science and a rebuff of the Bush administration. But it is it a victory for democracy? Mooney doesn’t begin to explore this question. It doesn’t fit into his thesis.

I’ll admit, while disappointed in this book, I am also a little jealous. Mooney has produced the “It-Book” on a subject that many of us at SEJ have incrementally reported over the years, but not pulled together in a comprehensive form. Now Mooney is being quoted and courted on a topic that undoubtedly deserves wide attention.

But that is the challenge of both journalism and science. Whoever gets there first gets to define the substance of the debate. Standing the test of time is another matter.

Stuart Leavenworth is an editorial writer and columnist for The Sacramento Bee.

Checking tavern air (it's bad) and more pollution stories

By MIKE DUNNE

The Chicago Sun-Times took a portable air monitor into 25 bars and restaurants to detect levels of PM 2.5, a pollutant that also is an indicator of secondhand smoke and found that indoor pollution can reach levels that exceed outdoor standards.

"Chicago was considering an indoor smoking ban and we wanted to see just how polluted the air is. The short answer: Very.

"Indoor air pollution was on average 39 times higher in venues that permitted smoking than in those that didn't," said reporter Lori Rackl. "Since there are no indoor clean air standards, we adjusted our findings to compare them to the EPA's outdoor clean air standards. We found that workers logging a typical eight-hour shift in 12 of the 22 places that allowed smoking — we tested three that didn't allow smoking — would breathe in pollution levels that exceed federal clean-air thresholds."

One place was so bad, employees would be breathing air deemed "hazardous" — the EPA's worst category which

is rarely seen these days except in the event of forest fires or volcanic eruptions, said Rackl, the newspaper's health reporter.

"The story is easy for reporters to replicate in their communities," she said. "They just need to rent a portable air monitor and do some data crunching." The newspaper ran a very extensive graphic saying what was found in each of the 25 places and where those areas are located in the city.

"The idea actually came from the SEJ conference in Texas. My paper is really eager to do some of its own testing on environmental stories, so I went to the conference hoping to come back with ideas. I attended the session on Do-It-Yourself testing and was talking to the moderator, Sara Shipley-Hiles. She mentioned that she came across a study in Centers for Disease Control's Morbidity and Mortality Report that was using a portable air monitor to measure PM 2.5 levels in bars and restaurants to see how bad pollution was in the smoking versus non-smoking

establishments," Rackl said.

"She suggested that it's a simple protocol and reporters could do the same thing," Rackl said. "This was a very timely idea for Chicago since the city council is hotly debating a smoking ban that would bar smoking in virtually all indoor places open to the public."

"I contacted the epidemiologist involved in the CDC report and he agreed to look at our PM 2.5 readings and give us an average for each location. He also suggested a place for me to get the air monitor... We concealed the monitor in my purse and spent at least 30 minutes in each location we visited.

"The monitor records PM 2.5 levels every minute. We downloaded that data and sent it to the epidemiologist, Mark Travers at the Roswell Park Cancer Institute in New York. He gave us an average PM 2.5 reading for each location. We paid him \$200 to do this, but I think he would've done it for nothing," Rackl said.

(Continued next page)

HOW POLLUTED IS THE CITY'S INDOOR AIR?

Federal standards would call it 'unhealthy' for some workers

BY LORI RACKL AND CHRIS FUSCO Staff Reporters

An debate rages over a proposal to ban smoking in bars, restaurants and virtually all indoor public places in the city. Chicago Sun-Times used an air monitor to find out just how polluted those venues can get.

The newspaper found that workers logging a typical eight-hour shift in 12 of 25 places that allowed smoking would breathe in pollution levels that exceed federal clean-air thresholds.

Pollution was found in one room of nine taverns; employees would be breathing air that second federal Protection Agency deems "hazardous" — the EPA's worst category that's rarely seen these days except in the event of forest fires or volcanic eruptions. There's nothing about that, however, as the EPA doesn't regulate indoor air.

Overall, indoor air pollution was on average 39 times higher in venues that permitted smoking than in those that didn't.

The newspaper found that workers logging a typical eight-hour shift in 12 of 25 places that allowed smoking would breathe in pollution levels that exceed federal clean-air thresholds.

Research is being done that shows that fewer than 30 minutes of secondhand smoke can spark potentially dangerous, changes in heart rate and arteries in smokers similar to what's seen in smokers.

These microscopic particles, called PM 2.5, are small enough to get into the lungs and are linked to increased hospital admissions among people with asthma and other lung conditions.

At each of the 25 venues the reporters visited, Rackl carried the monitor in her purse, with its intake tube sticking out to corners of the room in air samples. The reporters stayed at least a half hour in each place, following a testing protocol used by researchers who have conducted similar studies.

The monitor measured microscopic pollutants known as PM 2.5, which stands for airborne particulate matter measuring at least 2.5 microns, or 1/50th the width of a human hair. The news-

paper measured PM 2.5 because the pollutant is released in large amounts from burning tobacco, making it an accepted marker for secondhand smoke.

The monitor's readings were downloaded and sent to Mark Travers, an epidemiologist at Roswell Park Cancer Institute in Buffalo, N.Y., who has extensive experience testing secondhand smoke.

Using the monitor's minute-by-minute readings of PM 2.5, Travers computed the average amount of pollution the reporters were exposed to at each place.

"We've got rights, too," Florio said, her Veeray cigarettes resting near her bingo cards.

That's precisely what worries some bar owners and the state's powerful restaurant lobby: A smoking ban would be unhealthy for business.

David Gerver, owner of the Matchbox, an intimate bar just west of downtown that had some of the highest pollution readings recorded by the air monitor, doesn't buy Amanda Starnovic's argument. "I don't see how it's going to be any different than what we've had in the past."

"It's a horrible idea," Gerver said of Chicago's proposed ban. "All of these little taverns would be forced out of business."

The bid for the bottom line argument doesn't sway Amanda Starnovic, who's worked as a waitress and bartender since she was 21. She's now 34 and has a son after that city's smoking ban took effect.

"I'd go anywhere else," she said. "That's precisely what worries some bar owners and the state's powerful restaurant lobby: A smoking ban would be unhealthy for business."

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Amenda Starnovic, 34, a non-smoker, blames her chronic lung condition on secondhand smoke. She's been a bartender and waitress since she was 21.

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Alderman: We have enough votes to pass smoking ban

BY FRANK SPELMAN City Hall Reporter

Given three weeks to compromise on a proposed Chicago smoking ban, the Illinois Restaurant Association responded with a "press release" to a "charismatic" tactic that will not hold the city's attention, says an alderman said Monday.

Adm. Pat O'Connor (D-16), Mayor Daley's unofficial City Council floor leader, said his own lead conference with the city's restaurant industry on Friday that outlined a realistic compromise.

Without a viable and credible alternative proposed by the restaurant association, O'Connor said he expects the high-stakes vote to take place Thursday.

The mayor has "tried to encourage the sides of an argument to come up with a compromise," O'Connor said. "I don't think they're able to work that out."

In the Sun-Times analysis, the recipe for high pollution levels was simple: Take a lot of smokers and put them in smaller spaces. The Sun-Times found that the highest pollution levels were in venues with high ceilings and smoke-filtration systems can be effective in mitigating secondhand smoke to varying degrees.

Conflicting engineers' reports touted their investments in air-cleaning technology, but the Sun-Times found that the health risks associated with it is to ban smoking activity.

Good ventilation, high ceilings and smoke-filtration systems can be effective in mitigating secondhand smoke to varying degrees. Conflicting engineers' reports touted their investments in air-cleaning technology, but the Sun-Times found that the health risks associated with it is to ban smoking activity.

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195 times higher than in non-smoking places. Callahan said the health risks of secondhand smoke are "not going to be eliminated by any technology."

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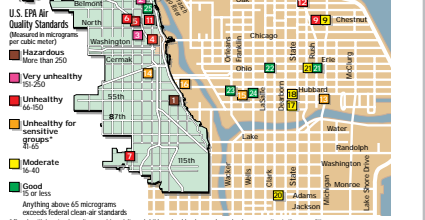
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AIR RESTAURANT AND BAR WORKERS ARE EXPOSED TO

Using a portable air monitor, the Sun-Times went to 25 Chicago bars, restaurants and other venues to measure microscopic particles that come from secondhand smoke. An epidemiologist used that data to compute average pollution levels based on spending eight hours — a typical work shift — in each place.



Location	Address	When visited	Of note
1	Jimmy's Woodman Tap	10/12/08, 11:00 p.m.-11:30 p.m.	Sat at back room of 3-room tavern. Moderately crowded, very heavy smoking.
2	The Long Room	10/12/08, 10:15 p.m.-10:44 p.m.	Sat at table in front of bar. Moderately crowded, heavy smoking.
3	Old Fire	10/12/08, 10:24 p.m.	Sat at table behind front of bar. Very crowded, heavy smoking.
4	The Matchbox	10/12/08, 9:49 p.m.-10:25 p.m.	Sat in middle of room. Hangar-shaped bar. Moderately crowded, moderate smoking.
5	Marie's Ripside Lounge	10/12/08, 10:12 p.m.-10:44 p.m.	Sat at table in middle of bar. Front door open. Moderately crowded, heavy smoking.
6	Freddie Bow	10/12/08, 10:44 p.m.	Sat at table near bar. Very crowded, moderate smoking.
7	Gene & Kerry	10/12/08, 10:12 p.m.-10:38 p.m.	Sat at table in bar. Moderately crowded, moderate smoking.
8	Flam McCoon's	10/12/08, 10:06 p.m.-10:40 p.m.	Sat at table near bar. Very crowded, light smoking.
9	City Hall	10/12/08, 10:12 p.m.-10:38 p.m.	Sat at table near bar. Very crowded, light cigarette and cigar smoking.
10	City Post Hall	10/12/08, 10:12 p.m.-10:38 p.m.	Sat at table in middle of bar. Moderately crowded, light smoking.
11	Henry Caray's	10/12/08, 10:12 p.m.-10:38 p.m.	Sat at table in middle of bar. Moderately crowded, light smoking.
12	Starbucks	10/12/08, 10:12 p.m.-10:38 p.m.	Sat at table in non-smoking section. Non-smoking throughout.
13	McDonald's	10/12/08, 10:12 p.m.-10:38 p.m.	Sat at table in non-smoking section. Non-smoking throughout.
14	Low Mehlhoff's	10/12/08, 10:12 p.m.-10:38 p.m.	Sat at table in non-smoking section. Non-smoking throughout.
15	Ann Shan	10/12/08, 10:12 p.m.-10:38 p.m.	Sat at table in non-smoking section. Non-smoking throughout.

1. People with heart or lung disease, older adults and children should avoid prolonged or heavy exertion in these conditions. 2. Pollution level: (micrograms per cubic meter) When visited: 10/12/08, 11:00 p.m.-11:30 p.m. 3. Sat at table in middle of bar. Front door open. Moderately crowded, heavy smoking. 4. Sat at table near bar. Very crowded, moderate smoking. 5. Sat at table in middle of bar. Front door open. Moderately crowded, heavy smoking. 6. Sat at table near bar. Very crowded, moderate smoking. 7. Sat at table in bar. Moderately crowded, moderate smoking. 8. Sat at table near bar. Very crowded, light smoking. 9. Sat at table near bar. Very crowded, light cigarette and cigar smoking. 10. Sat at table in middle of bar. Moderately crowded, light smoking. 11. Sat at table in middle of bar. Moderately crowded, light smoking. 12. Sat at table in non-smoking section. Non-smoking throughout. 13. Sat at table in non-smoking section. Non-smoking throughout. 14. Sat at table in non-smoking section. Non-smoking throughout. 15. Sat at table in non-smoking section. Non-smoking throughout.

Courtesy of THE CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

"Before publishing our results, we attempted to contact every bar and restaurant to tell them what we found. One place in particular was upset at us, but that seems to have blown over. We got reaction all over the country but most of it was from smokers' rights groups who were trying to dispute that secondhand smoke is dangerous," she said.

The city council health committee passed the smoking ban and at press time it was headed to a vote by the full council, she said.

Rackl's do-it-yourself-testing story is one of many stories published and aired on the environment in the past three months.

University of Texas student **Naomi King**, who is attending that university after Loyola University of New Orleans was flooded, wrote that the city of Austin was considering the nation's first ban of the use of coal-tar-based sealants on commercial and residential parking lots. Austin City Councilman Lee Leffingwell has proposed such a ban. The late **Kevin Carmody** of the *Austin American-Statesman* wrote about the contamination in popular swimming hole Barton Springs, prompting a two-year study by the city's Watershed Protection and Development Review Department and the United States Geological Survey.

The study found high concentrations of particles called polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons in runoff water from parking lots coated with coal-tar sealants. PAHs occur naturally from fossil fuels. The city had already asked companies and contractors to voluntarily stop using those sealants. Now the environmental risk of using the sealant is "unacceptable," Leffingwell said, because of the danger to aquatic life and local waterways. King's Oct. 24 story ran in the *Daily Texan*.

Lynette Wilson of the *Pensacola News Journal* reported Aug. 22 about mercury contamination in area waterways. Mercury is the biggest pollution threat in the Pensacola Bay drainage basin and is the main reason numerous portions of area bays, bayous and creeks are considered polluted, according to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's proposed list of impaired waters.

Not far away, **Ben Raines** of the *Mobile Press Register* wrote about the effectiveness of a 2001 Superfund cleanup at the Olin Corp. facility in McIntosh. The

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency evaluation will not address the central human health and environmental questions now swirling in the community, he wrote. Instead, it is a standard, pre-scheduled review, conducted five years after Olin initiated cleanup operations in McIntosh. The cleanup was aimed at limiting contamination in the underground aquifer.

Anton Caputo of the *San Antonio Express-News* wrote about a provision in the energy bill enacted by Congress this year that calls for a study of the health risks to people living near oil or gas refineries. The Aug. 23 story said community activists and medical experts are dismissing the study as inadequate, arguing that Congress hasn't allocated enough time or money to accomplish much. And inconclusive results from a badly conducted study, they add, could be worse than no study at all. Congress has given the Department of Energy six months to study the direct health impacts from living in proximity to petrochemical and oil refinery facilities. No funds were allocated, Caputo said.

Adam Fifield of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* on wrote Aug. 24 about the U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board issuing an urgent recommendation for BP to appoint an independent panel to examine safety management at its five U.S. refineries. The action comes after a March 23 explosion at BP's Texas City, Texas, refinery killed 15 workers and injured 170. While BP has no refineries in the Philadelphia area, the company is considering a natural gas plant in Logan Township.

Michael Milstein of the *Portland Oregonian* wrote on Aug. 26 that dirty air in the Columbia Gorge made it difficult or impossible to see the tip of nearby Mount Hood. Because it is a national scenic area, the air must be "protected and enhanced," Milstein wrote. "The trouble is, no one knows just what that means. And no one is certain whether anyone has the authority to halt the pollution," he wrote. Now the Columbia River Gorge Commission is trying to figure out what power it has to deal with air problems. It usually deals with land-use matters.

Chemical contamination and evidence of toxins affecting people also made a lot of news.

Beth Casper of the Salem, Ore.,

Statesman Journal on wrote Aug. 26 about a study of mothers' breast milk showing that flame retardants are starting to surpass levels of PCBs in human fatty tissue. The study, by the Northwest Environment Watch and the Environmental Protection Agency's Department of Toxic Substances Control, shows 13 of 40 mothers tested had higher levels of flame retardants than PCBs in their breast milk.

Jane Kay of the *San Francisco Chronicle* was one of several writers to do a story about the chemical body burden found in some prominent Californians. Her Aug. 31 story talked about 11 people who cooperated in the study, which was a way to gain support for the Healthy Californians Biomonitoring Program bill being considered by the California Assembly. If passed, California would be the first state to establish a statewide confidential, voluntary program designed to test contaminants in people's bodies.

On Oct. 17, **Talli Nauman** of the *El Universal Online/Herald Mexico* wrote about a study in Mexico to detect the amounts of pesticide and heavy metal residues first-time mothers have in their bloodstreams. It also will identify possible critical areas of the country where higher concentrations of the substances are expected. Results will come from blood samples of 500 18- to 30-year-old mothers.

Childhood diseases from pollution cost Montana more than \$400 million a year, **Keila Szpaller** of the *Great Falls Tribune* reported on Nov. 4. She used figures from the Bureau of Business and Economic Research at the University of Montana-Missoula which publishes the "Kids Count" report each year with funds from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The 2005 report said the \$400 million total is comprised of estimates of the costs of lead poisoning, asthma, neurodevelopment disorders, birth defects and cancer.

Lisa Stiffler of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* had a story on Aug. 26 about research that indicates low-income and minority communities nationwide frequently "bear the brunt of toxic waste sites, polluting businesses, pesticides, highway exhaust and unhealthy homes." She wrote about what's new with EPA's decade-old "environmental justice" policy designed to protect the poor and minorities from suffering an undue burden of expo-

(Continued next page)

sure to pollutants.

Stiffler also had a package of stories on Nov. 7 on urban forests and the threats to them. "Seattle's urban forest is in trouble. Public woods are overrun by weeds that can strangle the hardiest of trees. Street trees aren't getting the care they need. And high-density development threatens the remaining private groves," Stiffler wrote. The web presentation includes a flash media show that explains how unhealthy and healthy natural forests work.

"I got an unusual amount of response to the stories, I think because people connect personally with trees and because they're so much a part of their daily experience (versus salmon in some remote locations) and because it included some ways of getting involved to help address the issues," Stiffler said. See the package of stories at: <http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/specials/urbanforests/>

Tania Soussan of the *Albuquerque Journal* wrote an Oct. 9 article about a "ferret boot camp." Ferrets from captive breeding programs are brought to the Vermejo Park Ranch to sharpen survival skills – learning to hunt prairie dogs and evade predators. The boot camp should improve the chances of survival for black-footed ferrets, the most endangered mammals in North America, as they are permanently released in other sites, she wrote.

Soussan also wrote a Nov. 6 story about the state of the 3,100-mile Continental Divide Trail and efforts to complete it. The Mexico-to-Canada trail passes through 750 miles of sometimes remote river canyons, high mountains, lava flows and scrubby flatlands in New Mexico. Roughly half the trail through five states is complete. But in New Mexico, only about 30 percent is done, leaving hikers to hoof it down highways for miles at a time. Land issues and costs are part of the challenge, she wrote.

Pollution problems always make news.

Sammy Fretwell of the *Columbia State* had a two-part series that began Oct. 9 on lead pollution in South Carolina. "Residents of a Richland County neighborhood have as much as seven times the national average level of lead in their blood – and they want to know why the state health department did not keep the toxic metal out of their drinking water," Fretwell wrote. The state Department of

Health and Environmental Control knew in 1985 that lead tainted the drinking water at Franklin Park and cited the system for deficiencies as far back as 1976. But DHEC never forced the neighborhood utility company to install pollution controls that would keep lead out of the water.

The Cincinnati Enquirer's **Howard Wilkinson** and **James Pilcher** wrote on Aug. 30 about a toxic plume from a rail car which sat unattended for at least five months. It caused hundred of residents to flee their homes and businesses. It also closed schools and Lunken Airport, caused hundreds of other people to shut themselves up in their homes and snarled morning traffic on many roads into Cincinnati. It also closed down Ohio River traffic.

By Sept. 4, Pilcher wrote that nearly 2 million train cars filled with toxic chemicals cross through cities nationwide, with hundreds passing through Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky daily. "Yet, no one knows where all the cars are at any given point – including the federal agency charged with regulating the railroad industry," Pilcher wrote.

Perry Beeman of the *Des Moines Register* wrote about the dirty side of producing ethanol, which is supposed to be cleaner-burning fuel for automobiles. "Internal documents from the natural resources department, obtained by the *Register*, show that a team of 18 department employees met in late June to discuss how to deal with a range of environmental problems surrounding the expansion of Iowa's \$500 million-a-year ethanol industry," Beeman wrote on Sept. 11.

Diana Washington Valdez of the *El Paso Times* wrote about the presence of hazardous heavy metals like lead and arsenic found in fertilizer. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality supervised the removal of soil contaminated by one such fertilizer left behind by the Ionate Corporation of America, which went out of business. Under Texas state law, fertilizer companies are not required to disclose on their packaging that their products contain hazardous substances. The law requires only that they list the helpful nutrients (like iron and phosphorous) meant to improve lawns and gardens, Valdez wrote on Sept. 12.

Robert McClure of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* wrote about pollution at an old asphalt plant next to the Duwamish

River in South Seattle. Despite being declared clean by EPA in March 2000, it turns out the effort left PCBs in concentrations up to 140 times the level required. The property owner, the Port of Seattle, had been set to move on to its next phase of cleanup but outraged neighborhood activists demanded more complete testing of the property, showing the contamination, the Sept. 14 article said.

Adam Bowles of the *Norwich Bulletin* in Connecticut wrote Sept. 4 that more than 40 years after submarine workers started getting sick with asbestos-related diseases, hundreds of people in the region continue to die or get sick each year. Illnesses in former workers from the Electronic Boat factory are not expected to taper off for another 10 years or so, medical and legal experts said. Company spokesman Neil Ruenzel said the shipyard has operated an asbestos surveillance program since the enactment of the Federal Occupational Safety and Health Act in 1971.

John Yellig of the *Charlottesville Daily Progress* wrote on Sept. 20 about a leaking Virginia landfill. The Rivanna Solid Waste Authority determined that the drainage system at the Ivy Landfill, closed in 1995, is failing. There is an estimated 47 million gallons of leachate pooled in pockets in the landfill. Cleanup could cost Charlottesville and Albemarle County millions of dollars. Environmental engineering consultants Environmental Standards and Malcolm Pirnie determined the gravity leachate collection system and the cap on top of the landfill had failed.

Lynette Hintze and **Brent Shrum** of *The Daily Inter Lake* of Kalispell, Mont. wrote a Sept. 25 story about W.R. Grace telling asbestos victims that they are not sick. They reported that roughly 700 of the 870 Libby area residents enrolled in Grace's medical plan got letters earlier this month saying they either don't have asbestos-related disease anymore or may not be as sick as they think they are. Benefits were scaled back, including a reduction in the number of chest X-rays covered to one per year.

Judy Fahys of the *Salt Lake Tribune* wrote Oct. 26 about 500 tons of uranium-contaminated soil from Japan being shipped to Utah for processing rather than as a waste. The International Uranium Corp.'s White Mesa mill, which has not

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processed ore in six years, will handle the soil. Environmental activists were not happy and said Utah is not only a national destination for radioactive discards, but now a global one.

On Oct. 4, **Lee Bergquist** of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* wrote that the state Department of Natural Resources has been aware of PCB-contaminated fish in the Milwaukee River going back to the 1970s. But as the years have passed, no work has started to remove the contaminants from the river and a tributary, Lincoln Creek.

The Record of Bergen County in New Jersey published a series entitled "Toxic Legacy," written in early October by **Jan Barry, Barbara Williams, Mary Jo Layton, Alex Nussbaum, Lindy Washburn** and **Thomas Franklin**. The series looked at Ford Motor Co.'s dumping of paint sludge and other industrial wastes in Upper Ringwood a generation ago. The state's top environmental official said his agency will take a stronger hand in cleaning up the mess. The DEP has been monitoring five rounds of cleanup efforts by

Ford Motor Co. since the 1980s, all done under the direct supervision of the EPA, which had originally listed the area as a Superfund site. One potential option is to have the state step in, do a full cleanup and then bill Ford for the cost. See the series at www.toxiclegacy.com.

Water woes also made lots of news.

Kevin Darst of the *Fort Collins Coloradoan* wrote about pill dumping and water quality. "Package by package, nurses at long-term care facilities in Fort Collins are spending hours a week flushing hundreds of unneeded pills, creams and fluids down the drain," he wrote. "It's a legal and inexpensive way to get rid of medication" but beginning to taint water because sewerage disposal is not geared to remove drugs from wastewater. Colorado regulations allow tablets, capsules and liquids to be flushed down the toilet or sink. They require ointments and creams to be put in the trash, he wrote.

Jim Waymer of *Florida Today* wrote on Oct. 8 about water resources drying up in Brevard County. Utility officials say they can keep taps flowing for the addi-

tional 175,000 people expected by 2025. But a new report from the government agency responsible for regulating water consumption "shows the days of groundwater fueling Florida's explosive growth are trickling to an end." By 2025, the local water management district expects demand to jump 18 percent over today's use – to 1.77 billion gallons a day.

Deb Kinder and **Dottie Aldrick** of the Harrisburg, Pa., *Patriot News* wrote Oct. 6 about Newport's chronic water shortage and the problems it is creating. One week into a water emergency, the writers explained the lack of rain and a leak that has yet to be found had hundreds of customers of the Newport Water Authority struggling with little or no water, or a muddy flow from their taps.

However, the northeast water shortage was followed by deluges. October rainstorms in the Northeast created a host of problems, including an Oct. 18 story by **Jennifer Levitz** of the *Providence Journal*. Heavy rains caused extraordinary havoc at sewer plants along Rhode Island

(Continued next page)

Armadillos... (from page 4)

Instead I ended up on the Green Building tour that included a meeting with one of the pioneering geniuses of the genre who's



Molly Ivins, speaking at the SEJ conference in Austin.

used hay, fly-ash, rock and rebar to design the perfect party house. I was disturbed to think how Texas's draconian drug laws might have denied us this kind of original thinking.

That evening at the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum however, I was forced to consider what happens when

destructive addictions are allowed to run unchecked. Clearly abuse of air-conditioning can only end tragically in hypothermia and death, which, given the generic sounds of the evening's mall-based entertainment, had a certain atavistic appeal. Actually by this point I was hoping Texas might again declare independence so we could bomb it. Luckily someone's cousin was, if not an actual musician, at least the drummer in a C&W band playing at the Broken Spoke. About 20 SEJers made it to this famous two-stepping Texas dance hall and saloon where Rob McClure best expressed the spirit of many an intrepid reporter when confronting a new zone of experience, "I feel like we're going to get beaten up."

In fact people proved dang friendly in a "You're my little buddy, s'cuse me I think I gotta puke," sort of way and a fun time was had by all (though Kevin would have made it more so).

It's hard for me to believe this was my 11th SEJ conference and, with the many good friends and colleagues I've made over the years, I'm still not getting paid for these columns. Oh well, maybe next year I'll get a free hemp pocket protector and some maple sugar candy in the shape of a moose.

David Helvarg would like you to know he's the author of the forthcoming, revised "Blue Frontier: Dispatches from America's Ocean Wilderness" and "50 Simple Ways to Save the Ocean." And no, Lake Champlain doesn't count.

waterways over the weekend, forcing state officials to take the unusual step of closing both Narragansett Bay and all coastal ponds to shell fishing. A damaged wastewater treatment plant in Woonsocket continued to dump millions of gallons of partially treated sewage into the Blackstone River. She reported that state officials couldn't recall so much storm-related environmental damage in one period in Rhode Island.

Tom Henry of the *Toledo Blade* reported Oct. 19 that one of Lake Erie's smallest tributaries has been radioactive for at least 32 years. NASA officials revealed a one-mile stretch of Plum Brook in Ohio has soil with isotopes of radioactive Cesium 137 that are barely above natural background levels. To a much lesser extent, there also are microscopic traces of radioactive Cobalt 60, Henry reported. NASA attributed the contamination to past activities at NASA's former Plum Brook nuclear test reactor, which operated from 1961 to 1973.

Dan Shapley of the *Poughkeepsie Journal* wrote Sept. 6 about the environmental threats from road salt used to clear ice from roads in the Northeast. Scientists at the Institute of Ecosystem Studies in Millbrook said road salt represents "one of the most significant threats to the integrity of freshwater ecosystems." The study was published in the Proceeding of the National Academy of Sciences. "In winter, some urban and suburban streams in Dutchess County, around Baltimore and in the White Mountains of New Hampshire have become so contaminated they have a quarter as much salt as the ocean," Shapley wrote. Even in summer, many streams are 100 times as salty as forest streams buffered from road salt. The concentration of salt in even rural streams has steadily increased over the past 30 years, he wrote.

Shapley also wrote about members of Congress pressing the EPA to set an interim health standard for the toxic chemical trichloroethylene, or TCE. The chemical can seep into the air in homes that sit above polluted groundwater. The EPA has installed dozens of ventilation systems in homes in East Fishkill, where the cabinet manufacturer Hopewell Precision has been accused of dumping TCE years ago.

Without a national standard, cleanup

guidelines vary from state to state. Those standards vary even within the boundaries of East Fishkill, where the EPA has used different guidelines for assessing different neighborhoods. "The EPA is in the midst of a politically-charged study about how TCE affects the human body," Shapley wrote on Oct. 8.

In the wake of the flooding disaster from Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, several reporters looked into the safety and security of levee systems designed to protect people from flooding. On Sept. 8, for example, **Paul Rogers** of the *San Jose Mercury News* wrote about the conditions of the levee system in the San Francisco Bay delta.

"Built below sea level. Ringed by aging, inadequate levees. Struggling with a lack of federal funding. A disaster waiting to happen," Rogers wrote. Those descriptions apply to the levees in the Sacramento River delta. "Scientists and state water experts have warned for more than two decades that a large earthquake or flood could burst holes in the fragile, 1,100-mile network of levees crisscrossing the delta from Antioch to Stockton. Politicians including Sen. Dianne Feinstein and Rep. Richard Pombo, a Stockton Republican echoed those warnings this week, demanding that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers draw up a plan for repairs," Rogers wrote.

Tyler Hamilton of the *Toronto Star* wrote Sept. 10 about legislation in Europe that will soon restrict the amount of lead and other toxic substances allowed in electronic products "from iPods and BlackBerrys to computers and stereo systems." Japan and China are in the process of drafting similar laws, forcing North American electronics makers to meet the new restrictions, he wrote.

Elizabeth Grossman wrote in *The Nation* on Nov. 21 about the exposure of maximum security inmates at the Atwater Federal Penitentiary from smashing computer monitors with hammers. That releases dust containing lead, cadmium, barium and other toxic substances. Her story outlined the darker side of electronics recycling.

Jim Bruggers of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* wrote on Sept. 21 about the 60th anniversary of the city's clean air district and the challenges it faces. The

celebration "comes at a time of new challenges for the agency, which now regulates several kinds of pollutants – not just soot – in an era when medical research shows that air pollution, even at low levels, can shorten lives."

Rachel Melcer of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* wrote on Oct. 9 about misuse of genetically altered crops. "Two Missouri farmers are providing Monsanto Co. and a University of Missouri scientist with a cautionary tale: Misuse Monsanto's Roundup Ready weed-control system and you're likely to create a stronger weed," Melcer wrote. Scientists found common waterhemp, also known as pigweed, shows signs of resisting glyphosate herbicide, sold as Roundup. If the same crop and herbicide are used on a field, year after year, weeds with a natural genetic resistance to glyphosate will survive and thrive.

On Sunday, Oct. 16, **Georgia Tasker** of the *Miami Herald* began a two-part series on the uncertain future for saltwater fish. The fish are fewer and smaller every year. A 50-year worldwide fishing frenzy has wiped out the best fish, and many we eat today would have been rejected as trash a generation ago," she wrote. "Much of the fish we eat in Florida is not caught here, but comes from other countries." She reported that in the Florida Keys, 13 of 16 kinds of grouper can no longer reproduce fast enough to maintain sustainable populations. Some species of snapper are half the size they were 50 years ago, she reported. Populations of top predators such as tuna, marlins and sharks have been reduced to mere remnants, she said.

In a four-part series on development called "Losing Ground," *San Antonio Express-News* writer **John Tedesco** wrote about an obscure Texas law written for developers has cost San Antonio millions of dollars, stripped parts of the scenic Hill Country of trees and blocked attempts to protect the region's water supply. The series, which began Oct. 16, said laws stop cities from imposing new restrictions on a real estate project once a developer files virtually any kind of plan for it. Other parts looked at how developers were using old plans and other techniques to skirt providing the protections often called for in building control ordinances.

John M.R. Bull in the *Hampton*
(Continued next page)

The Beat... (from page 35)

Roads Daily Press in Virginia wrote a two-part series on "The Deadliness Below," about the United States dumping chemical weapons in the oceans off several countries at the end of World War II. It ran Oct. 30-31.

The newspaper said a 2001 Army report said U.S.-made weapons of mass destruction litter the coasts of more than 11 countries – including Italy, France, India, Australia, the Philippines, Japan, Denmark and Norway. "The chemical weapons remain there to this day. And they're extremely dangerous. Some of them have washed up on shore or been dredged up by fishermen. At least 200 people have been seriously injured over the years," Bull's report said. "The Army now admits that it secretly dumped at least 64 million pounds of chemical warfare agents, as well as more than 400,000 mustard gas-filled bombs and rockets, off the United States – and much more than that off other countries," he wrote.

The Army can't say where all the dumpsites are. See the story at <http://tinyrul.com/95jtv>.

Tampa Tribune environment writer **Mike Salinero** was one of many reporters to write about EPA plans to reduce Toxic Release Inventory reporting from annually to once every two years. On Nov. 3, he wrote: "For the past 18 years, any citizen with access to a computer could discover what kind of toxic chemicals were being released in his or her community. The Toxics Release Inventory has become the great equalizer for outgunned and under-funded grassroots groups in their battles against pollution." Polluters could switch from annual reports to every other year, and industries that discharge less than 5,000 pounds of chemicals a year could fill out shorter, less-detailed forms.

Bangor Daily News' **Jackie Farwell** and **Sharon Kiley Mack** wrote on Nov. 7 on efforts in Maine to create a collaborative effort to dispose of medical wastes. Instead of shipping their blood-soaked surgical sponges, tubes and gowns out of state, where the waste is incinerated and sent to a landfill with regular trash, all of Maine's hospitals have joined together to

treat and dispose of the waste themselves, they wrote. Through the Maine Hospital Association, the state's health-care facilities constructed a waste treatment plant in Pittsfield. It is expected to process all 2.4 million pounds of the state's annual bio-medical waste within a year.

Tom Morton of the *Casper (Wyo.) Star-Tribune* wrote about the problems created by Rostad Mortuary's crematory. The facility has damaged the property values, fouled the air with toxic substances and bright lights, and sickened residents who live near it in Rawlins' historic district, according to a federal lawsuit Morton reported. "The crematory with its glaring, all-night illumination, its noise, and the noxious odors it creates is extremely offensive, and such activities would be and are offensive and annoying to any average or normal person," according to the complaint.

Mike Dunne writes for The Advocate in Baton Rouge, La., and is Associate Editor of SEJournal.

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