

PROTECTING THE AFRICAN ENVIRONMENT

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It is believed by many that before civilised man appeared the world was beautiful, clean and safe, and that it is Homo sapiens with his increasing numbers and industrial development that has produced pollution and all other forms of environmental damage. However, there is another side to the coin, a very different view was expressed by the philosopher Hobbes who described the life of "primitive" man as "nasty, brutish and short." There is some truth in both points of view, and problems arising from natural dangers and those caused by man and his industry both affect Africa today.

The dangers from the natural world were strikingly and terrifyingly demonstrated on August 21 of this year, when a large area of Cameroon was devastated by the emission of poisonous gas from Lake Nyos, and over 1,500 people died. The results were comparable with disasters caused by man's activities including that at the Bhopal chemical works in India a few years earlier, and were, more immediately serious than the accident at the Russian nuclear power station at Chernobyl earlier this year.

But there have been many even more serious natural catastrophes, including earthquakes and volcanic eruptions which have killed their thousands and made large tracts of the globe uninhabitable. And it is increasingly being postulated that the impact on the earth of large meteorites have from time to time caused the extermination not only of the dinosaurs but of the majority of other species which co-existed with them, and a repetition of such an event could exterminate man more surely than a nuclear war with a nuclear winter to follow.

The undeveloped areas of Africa suffer from what may be thought of as "natural" pollution. Man's body still serves as a link in the chain of life of many other organisms which we look upon as parasites, and which cause diseases in the humans in whose bodies they live. Thus bathing in many African rivers and ponds may give rise to infections with various disease-causing helminthic parasites (worms).

The incidence of disease in West Africa was such that this area earned the nick-name of "the white man's grave." A visit to the 19th century graveyard in Freetown, Sierra Leone shews that many young men died of malaria

or yellow fever within months of setting foot in the country. However, the indigenous people suffered equally, as was demonstrated by the horrific infant and child mortality, with a minority surviving having developed some immunity or resistance to these diseases. Improvements in health have been made in many parts of the continent, but disease remains for many the greatest environmental hazard.

In the western world, the industrial revolution was the occasion for serious damage to the environment. Victorian metal smelters poisoned the land over large areas which in some cases have not yet been cleaned up. Air pollution from factories was a serious problem, causing widespread damage to buildings, to vegetation and to human health. Much has been done in the west to control pollution, there have been great successes, but there is still more to be done.

Western nations have urged developing countries in Africa not to repeat the mistakes they made in the past, and to try to control pollution before it becomes a serious problem. There was quite a conflict on this subject at the 1972 United Nations Environmental Conference at Stockholm. Some of the developing countries objected to being pressurised to control pollution, which they thought would add to costs and slow down their development. Some politicians said that if they had to choose between pollution control and economic development, they would for the present at least choose the latter. It is therefore clear that some countries have a difficult decision to make regarding the value they place on the retention of a clean environment. It is up to scientists to devise industrial processes which are both clean and profitable.

However, there is one overriding problem which faces many African countries. This is the rapid rate of population growth. Unless this can be controlled to within practical limits, all efforts at environmental improvement will be unsuccessful.

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