Needed: A Rebirth, of Community

January 26, 1970

Man has had his Age of Exploration, and proved himself a master at discovering the riches of his planet. He has moved on to an Age of Exploitation, and demonstrated great skill in putting those riches to use. Now the time is long overdue for an Age of Conservation to begin, and so far man has shown little talent for replenishment.

The habits that must be re-formed, the attitudes that must be reshaped are so deeply ingrained that the entire task might l>e given up as hopeless if it were not so urgent. Perhaps, as some fear, it will take a major disaster to shock mankind into mending its ways. The human animal is the most adaptable of creatures, and the challenge of preserving his environment may well lie his greatest test.

Somehow industry and consumers alike must be persuaded that their present binge of expansion and accumulation is a ruinous mistake. It is difficult to see this being accomplished without accepting some fairly important modifications of the American traditions of free enterprise and free choice. In a nation that has just managed, after 43 years, to reduce from 27 1/2 per cent to 22 per cent its oil depletion allowance, a government subsidy that actually encourages exhaustion of nature's petroleum supplies, these changes are not going to proceed easily.

Nor will it be easy to restrain the impulse for industrial growth when, in the world as a whole, there is a host of less-developed countries clamoring for what they see as the blessings of industrialization, and when—in the United States—there are millions of poverty-stricken citizens whose main hope for relief under the present system lies in business expansion. The dilemma is neatly illustrated by a controversy currently raging in the Atlantic resort town of Hilton Head. S.C. Local citizens, fishing interests and resort developers are up in arms against a German company that plans to construct a $123 million dye and chemical complex on the coast. But the new plants would offer desperately needed jobs to hundreds of the county's unskilled blacks.

The battle against pollution must also overcome the jurisdictional boundary lines that carve the planet into separate sovereignties. It does a city little good to pass strict water-pollution laws if another city upstream runs its sewers into the river. No state can legislate against the dirty air that drifts from its neighbor. A nation's laws for the conservation of ocean fisheries are useless if other nations practice no such restraint. Any rational approach to a worldwide affliction such as pollution requires that national and local rivalries lie put aside.

That, of course, is really the fundamental lesson that ecologists would have us learn: that people cannot seal themselves up as individuals or nations or species—like it or not, they depend on each other and on other creatures and things. What is needed, the ecologists suggest, is a rebirth of community spirit, not only among men but among all of nature. "We can change our ways," says Rockefeller University's noted microbiologist Rene Dubos, "only if we adopt a new social ethic—almost a new social religion. Whatever form this religion takes, it will have to be based on harmony with nature as well as man, instead of the drive for mastery." There was a glimpse of this new ethic, perhaps, and of man's predicament at last summer's Woodstock music festival. The overcrowding was horrendous. Food and sanitary facilities were scarce.

The weather was terrible. "If we're going to make it," someone told the crowd, "you'd better remember that the guy next to you is your brother."

And not only the guy next to you, but the guy in the next century, too. Many of man's depredations upon the environment amount to what conservationist David Brower calls "grand larceny against the future." As veteran ecologist Eugene P. Odum points out, "the American creed is get rich today and to hell with tomorrow." In order to rescue the environment, man must learn to consider time in longer stretches. He will have to perceive disasters that do not occur with dramatic suddenness—the tiny increments of waste that gradually overwhelm a river's powers of self-cleansing, for example—and he must grow accustomed to undertaking cures that will show no results until after his lifetime.

These obstacles to reform—man's traditional notions of growth, sovereignty, individualism and time—are formidable in themselves, but all of them might lie overcome if it could lie persuasively demonstrated that man's survival is at stake. The trouble is that despite all the cries of the ecological doom-savers, it cannot. Perhaps the greatest obstacle to rescue of the environment is man's own uncanny adaptability. "Modem man," as Dubos notes ruefully, "can adjust to environmental pollution, intense crowding, deficient or excessive diet, as well as to monotonous and ugly surroundings." And these adjustments are reinforced by the process of natural selection; so that the human beings who take most readily to regimentation, overcrowding and esthetic privation rise to positions of leadership and also outbreed their less adaptable fellows. The real specter that pollution casts over man's future is not. perhaps, the extinction of Homo sapiens but his mutation into some human equivalent of the carp now lurking in Lake Erie's fetid depths, living off poison.

Symbol of the Age of Conservation?

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