



# SEJ Journal

Fall 2008, Vol. 18 No. 3



## **In this issue:**

**Bringing Rachel Carson to the silver screen**

**The environment plays in the prez campaign**

**The roots of conservatives' E-view**

**Sound advice for new freelancers**

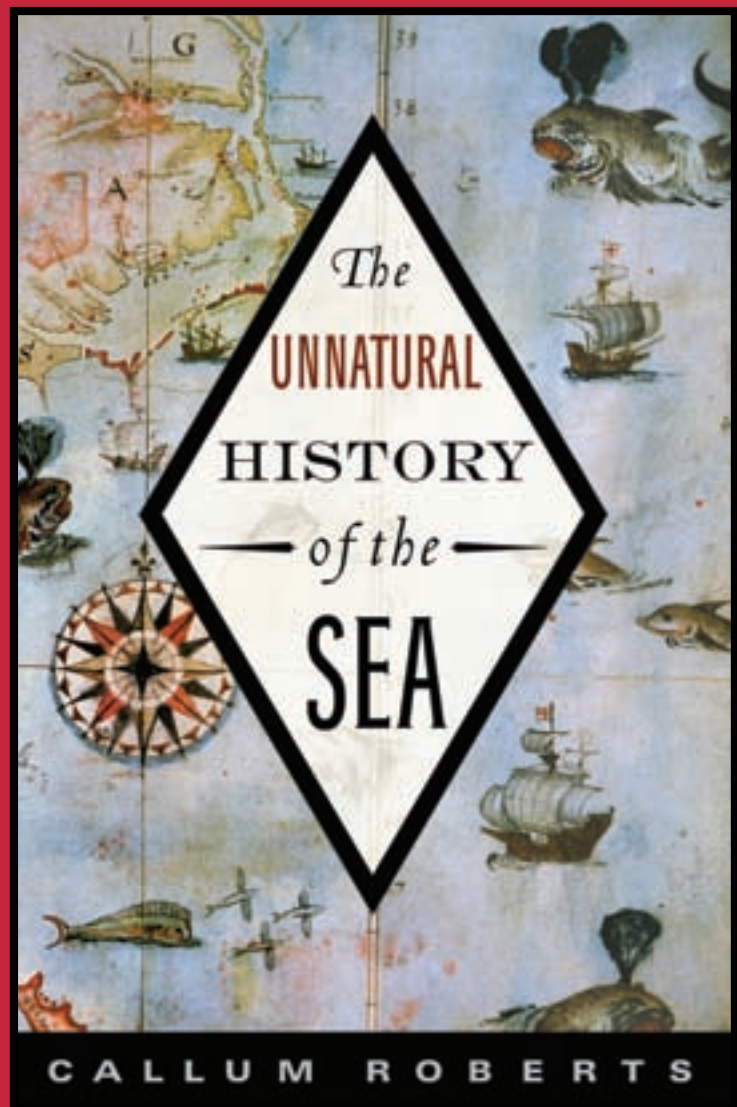
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# SEJournal

Fall 2008, Vol. 18 No. 3

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# Amid the newsroom wreckage, a bit of E-beat hope

By TIM WHEELER

I've never lived on the West Coast, but I think I know now what it feels like to survive a major earthquake. This past summer, my newspaper, *The Baltimore Sun*, slashed its newsroom staff, then redesigned the paper dramatically and shrank the amount of space for news.

Newspapers have been lopping off staff and dropping features for years now, but never had there been so much upheaval in such a short time. Suddenly, a lot of familiar faces were gone – at least one in five. Where we'd had three reporters covering environmental news, now there's one. One of my colleagues left on a leave of absence for a previously planned fellowship. But the other – dismayed by the cutbacks – left the paper to work for an environmental group.

It's a sadly familiar tale these days. This news earthquake is being felt from Los Angeles to Atlanta to New York, even to Toronto. Newspapers, once the mainstay of journalism, have been drastically reduced in size and reach as their readership and profits crumble. Radio and network TV news also have been losing audience. The number of people getting their news online is growing, of course, but has yet to make up for the drop in other media.

Amid such upheaval, it's hard to feel optimistic. But strangely, I do, at least about the future of environmental journalism. Rising energy prices, bisphenol-A, climate change, green marketing – these and other environmental topics are all over the news these days. They're not eclipsing celebrity fluff, sadly, or news of war and economic woes. But the frequency with which they crop up reflects people's enduring concern about their health and the health of the planet.

Even in their earthquake crouch, many newspaper editors seem to recognize the public's hunger for news and information about the environment. While 17 percent of newspaper editors surveyed by the Pew Research Center said they had cut back on staff and space devoted to covering the environment along with many other topics, 22 percent had actually increased resources. We can only hope the others see the light – and the need.

Much of my hope for the future, though, stems from the commitment and incredible energy I see in this organization devoted to promoting the quality and visibility of environmental journalism. For all the tremors throughout the news business, SEJ remains strong. Membership is on the rise, soaring well above 1,400 through the summer despite the continuing drumbeat of newspaper staffing cuts. Free-lancers have surpassed newspaper reporters and editors as our largest group. But our membership in all categories, including broadcast, magazines, student and academic, seems to be on the rise.

It's a credit, no doubt, to the growing recognition of SEJ as the source for reporting on the environment. But it's also due at least in part to the dedicated outreach efforts of our staff and volunteer board.

Our conferences, meanwhile, just get newswier and more exciting every year. Last year's, at Stanford University, drew more than 900 attendees, a record. Registration for Roanoke looks to be strong, as well it should be. Our volunteer conference co-chairs, Ken Ward Jr. and Bill Kovarik, have overseen a small army of volunteers in crafting a meaty program that tackles the big universal themes on our beat while also casting a spotlight on a neglected region, Appalachia.

But SEJ isn't taking the future for granted as the news landscape shakes and tilts. Your board of directors has been working hard to ensure that the group remains relevant and vibrant.

You're reading a product of that effort. One of the most



visible changes in the past year has been the stunning, color-rich redesign of *SEJournal*, our quarterly newsletter. Unlike some of the facelifts newspapers have been going through lately, this one enhances a truly substantive publication, with more useful features and information in it than ever.

It's taken a bit longer to revamp SEJ's Web site. But the groundwork has been largely completed, and an appealing, more user-friendly look is coming very soon. A team of volunteers has been hard at work "migrating" content from our current Web site to the new framework. Stay tuned, and please don't be shy if you have a yen to help out with this exciting project.

Our awards program, recognizing outstanding environmental journalism, has seen remarkable growth. Last year, we granted SEJ's first award for student work. This year, with the help of a generous benefactor, SEJ is honored to present another first: a \$10,000 prize to the author of an outstanding nonfiction book about the environment.

Award-winning journalism doesn't just happen, however. SEJ has been working to help journalists cover the climate story in all its complexity and sweep. We've hosted or cosponsored workshops for reporters and editors across the country to provide background on the science, the health implications, the policy responses and the positions of the presidential candidates. We've staged environmental reporting workshops at other journalism conferences, including the Associated Press Managing Editors and Society of American Business Editors and Writers.

SEJ has been just as active this past year in its advocacy for journalists' ability to report on and gather information about the environment. We've stood up for the rights of journalists and the public to take pictures, video and audio recordings in national parks and on other federal lands. We've also argued for keeping information about farm animal health in the public domain.

Less visibly, but no less important, the board has reorganized SEJ's top staff in an effort to sustain the important activities I've described above, plus others. Chris Rigel, our longtime associate director, was promoted to director of programs and operations. She's taken on expanded responsibilities in planning, marketing, coordinating and executing all of SEJ's programs and services. Chris's promotion enables Beth Parke, our executive director, to focus her extensive experience and abilities on fund-raising and strategic direction for SEJ. Through this, and an ambitious fund-raising effort, we hope to ensure that SEJ can continue to be the source for covering the environment, no matter what medium journalists use in the years to come.

I don't mean to make light of the challenges ahead, either for journalists or for SEJ. It's hard to see what the future holds just now, or how independent, enterprising reporting on the environment will continue and grow. But I do know that the need has never been greater. And I see a lot of other survivors out there, picking themselves up after the earthquake and heading out to get those stories, with SEJ there to help and support them. I plan to be among them.

This is my last column for *SEJournal*, as I conclude two years as SEJ's president. I'm honored that the board – and indirectly, you members – have entrusted this important position to me. It's been challenging at times, not least this summer, but rewarding far beyond the trials. There's no other journalism I'd rather be doing, and no other group I'd rather be doing it with, than you here at SEJ. Thank you for the privilege. See you in Roanoke, and beyond!

*Tim Wheeler, SEJ board president, covers environment and growth at The Baltimore Sun.*

# Presidential campaign proves environment a hot story

By BOB WYSS

For the first time in decades, energy and the environment are proving to be issues in this fall's Presidential campaign.

"It will be a bigger issue than any time since the 70s," said Kate Sheppard, who writes about politics for *Grist*. "It can't be avoided this year."

The rise in stature also comes with the pressure to both understand and clearly communicate the environmental platforms of Republican John McCain and Democrat Barack Obama. While both candidates have tried to paint themselves green, several national environmental reporters who have been covering the campaign agree that the two have distinctly different approaches.

"You are seeing these differences starting to emerge," said Margaret Kriz of the *National Journal*. She said significant philosophical differences exist between the candidates.

Opportunities exist for both national and local environmental reporters in covering this emerging issue during the fall.

Energy and environment issues popped up rather suddenly this summer, after being pretty much ignored during the primary campaign.

Part of the change was precipitated by oil prices that rose during the summer to as high as \$145 a barrel and gasoline that was over \$4 a gallon at many pumps. McCain quickly took the offensive, suggesting that federal gasoline taxes be suspended and that a moratorium on offshore drilling for oil and natural gas be lifted.

With energy so closely tied these days to climate change, both candidates were also able to better promote their global warming platforms. Again, McCain appeared to be more aggressive and successful in coverage on the issue, in such strategies as calling for building 45 new nuclear power plants across the country by 2030.

Coverage was intense at times, according to a review of the LexisNexis database of major U.S. newspapers and wire services between June 15 and July 15. A search for stories carrying the words McCain, Obama and war produced 2,633 articles published during that time frame. When the word economy was substituted for war, the database reported there were 1,850 stories and for environment there were 840. But when the word energy was used the database produced 1,998 stories.



PHOTO COURTESY PNEWSFOTO, VIA NEWSCON.COM

Regardless who wins the 2008 Presidential Election, change is definitely coming to the White House. Here, construction workers raise the final column on an exact replica of the White House located inside the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum in Springfield, Ill

Reporters agreed there were other reasons the environment and energy were not issues during the primary. Darren Samuelsohn of *Greenwire* said that as early as January he was reporting that McCain contended he had a stronger environmental platform than Obama. But strong environmental platforms do not play well with Republican voters in Republican primaries and McCain had few incentives to tout those views.

Meanwhile, the Democratic candidates, especially on the issue of climate change, had very few differences even when the race narrowed to Obama and Hillary Clinton.

Historically, Republicans have rarely embraced environmental issues, leaving much of the territory for Democratic candidates. But McCain can be different and he has been promoting himself as a Republican preservationist in the spirit of another GOP stalwart, Theodore Roosevelt.

Not everyone is impressed with his environment credentials.

The League of Conservation Voters says that McCain only voted on what it felt was the correct environmental approach about 25 percent of the time. In contrast, they give Obama an 86 percent rating.

Despite that record, McCain has been sponsoring legislation since 2003 that would control the level of greenhouse gas

The mission of the organization is to advance public understanding of environmental issues by improving the quality, accuracy and visibility of environmental reporting.

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Clearly, as many news stories have indicated, the real environmental mark of an Obama or McCain Presidency is likely to be how they deal with climate change. Samuelsohn at *Greenwire* points out, "This will be the first time a president will be talking about global warming from the Oval Office. And if Obama wins, he will be using his rhetorical skills in a way on this issue that has never been done before."

Both candidates stress a cap-and-trade approach in which the volume of pollution would be limited or capped but companies could buy and sell emission permits. Some stories have suggested that the differences in the two cap-and-trade plans are minimal.

Obama wants to reduce emissions by 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050 while McCain has suggested cutting them by 60 percent. Another difference is that McCain would use market incentives to lower the level of carbon pollutants while Obama wants to use more federal mandates and tax incentives to reach his goal.

Sheppard at *Grist* says some of these differences are significant and most of the other national environmental reporters interviewed agreed with her. Kriz, in the lead of a June 21 article in *National Journal*, highlighted that contrast between Obama's federal mandates and McCain's market-based approach.

McCain's selection of Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin as his running mate, and her carefully worded comments about climate change, opened new opportunities for reporters to explore the issue.

Other related issues also reveal differences. For instance, while McCain has called for more nuclear plants, he has not been as clear about what to do with the high-level waste they will produce. Obama has focused more on the waste issue, while being more vague about his thoughts on the future of nuclear generation.

Osha Gray Davidson, a freelance writer based in Phoenix, said reporters should also look at how the candidates stand on renewable energy. McCain's platform states that he believes in tax credits for renewable energy. Yet Davidson said he has been tracking federal legislation on tax credits for solar energy, which has failed in seven different votes this year, some by margins as thin as one vote. McCain missed all seven while Obama voted yes on five of those occasions.

Davidson said he received varying answers from the McCain camp on the Arizona senator's failures to vote. He said the example illustrates the importance of digging into issues that initially do not appear very promising.

McCain's "position does not seem to be consistent," said Davidson. "He seems to be getting a pass on his environmental credentials."

Obama has also faced some scrutiny already because of his ties to the ethanol industry in his home state of Illinois. Davidson said that Obama's relationship with the big-buck coal industry should be examined further as well.

It is possible that interest in both climate change and energy could decline if prices of oil, and gasoline, continue to plummet this fall. But many reporters believed that the spectacle of motorists paying as much as \$80 or \$100 at the gasoline pump is now firmly fixed in the minds of most American voters.

While the issue will remain, questions do crop up about how much of the story will be covered by environmental specialists and what types of stories they will produce.

In some respects, reporting on the Internet has made this choice slightly trickier. It is web-based reporters who have been left with tracking the most arcane details on the campaign trail this year and breaking an increasing number of stories before their more high-powered competition.

Sheppard at *Grist* said that this "rapid-response" reporting style has become important to her online employer and occupies

much of her time. This is increasing the pressure on everyone who works on time-sensitive deadline and making it harder to dig for more comprehensive stories.

But at the same time, the Internet is also providing an increasing amount of information, not only in the form of news stories but documents and briefing papers, that makes it easier for reporters.

Dina Cappiello, who recently joined The Associated Press, said that the campaign reporters at the wire service usually get first crack at the breaking news. But she also anticipated that she would be involved both in the daily coverage and more comprehensive stories.

Despite the increased attention at the national level, reporters agreed there were still numerous opportunities for local beat reporters.

Cappiello, a former environmental reporter at the *Houston Chronicle*, urged local reporters to examine the candidates' platforms and then watch what they do locally. "Regional reporters need to look at how the candidates are playing to the voters and whether the candidates are being consistent as they move from one place to another," she said.

Or find an important local issue, said Kriz of the National Journal. The candidates may not have taken a stand on the preservation of a local wetlands or the cleanup of a toxic waste site, but local people tied to the campaign may have. How do those positions contrast with those of the candidates, and what is the fate of the local issue if McCain or Obama get elected?

For instance, when McCain earlier this year campaigned in Florida he toured the Everglades and vowed to help restore area wetlands. Local reporters responded by asking McCain why he had voted against a \$2 billion appropriation for the Everglades.

Climate change is so big, added Samuelsohn, it can be localized in many ways, including by making it a campaign story. How will a local area fare if McCain or Obama are able to implement their global warming policies?

Local and national reporters will also have to decide what is important to pursue and what is not. During the primary both Clinton and Obama stressed that they were purchasing carbon offsets to compensate for the amount of air travel. Even before the political conventions began this summer, both political parties were promoting the amount of recycled paper and other environmentally friendly measures they were engaged in.

Journalists interviewed disagreed on whether these stories were valid insights into the campaigns or just political fluff. Regardless of the answer, the issue does highlight the importance of finding the best stories at a time when interest in energy and the environment has rarely been higher.

*Bob Wyss is an associate professor of journalism at the University of Connecticut and the author of a new environmental journalism textbook, Covering the Environment, How Journalists Work the Green Beat.*

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# Actress' persistence brings Rachel Carson to film

By JoANN M. VALENTI

Kaiulani Lee's play — *A Sense of Wonder*, presented on stage at SEJ annual conferences in St. Louis and again in Chattanooga — was screened in a world premiere at the Vancouver Film Festival on Sept. 30, 2008.

Sneak previews of the film took place at the Washington, DC Environmental Film Festival and the Maine International Film Festival earlier this year. The original two-act play, written by and starring Ms. Lee, is now a 54-minute feature film, shot on location in Maine at Rachel Carson's cabin by well-known cinematographer Haskell Wexler.

An award-winning actress, Lee has starred on and off Broadway, on television and in films. The play has been presented throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe for over sixteen years with performances at more than 100 universities, the Smithsonian Institution, the Albert Schweitzer Conference at the United Nations, the U.S. Department of the Interior's 150th anniversary and recently on Capitol Hill for Congress. A performance of *A Sense of Wonder* opened the 2005 World Expo in Japan.

The film, transformed from the play, is based on Carson's own writing, interviews with her colleagues and family, and extensive access to her personal papers. The narrative, a monologue, chronicles Carson's reaction to industry attacks after the publication of *Silent Spring* as she also confronts a private battle with cancer.

The film — reenacted now with cutaways to Maine landscapes, the sea and her adopted son (her great nephew) Roger exploring the tidepools — like the play creates not only an intimate portrait of Carson, but brings the viewer into each scene as if she is talking directly to the viewer, sharing her thoughts during one of the most trying times of her life. It's time travel and you're now Carson's personal confidant.

I previewed the film on DVD in August and interviewed



Lee by phone.

(I tried email but Lee doesn't type. The play was written with pencil and pad.) The Vancouver showing had not yet taken place. She planned to attend the festival showing for only two days. She's booked to perform the play throughout India for the month of October.

**Q. How long did it take you to write the play, and when did you first perform it?**

**A.** I had never written anything. I didn't know how to write it. I had boxes of stuff, collected information, readings, research, interviews with dozens of people who had known her, worked with her, particularly her personal secretary. Carson's literary estate had opened the doors to her personal papers for me. William Shawn [retired editor of *The New Yorker*], who had been impressed with Carson's book *The Sea Around Us* and serialized it in the magazine, is an unsung hero. He helped open doors. I didn't know what would be the arch of the play. My husband said watching me write was like watching a cow eat. I never even made an outline. But I had the great luck of having worked with great playwrights. I had a sense of the architecture of a play. Somehow it all jelled. I knew I was telling an intimate story. I could see the staging in my head, where she would sit or stand. After three years, it all came together. The first performance [in 1991] was in a hotel theater in DC for NCAMP [the National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides]. I was terrified. But when the lights went up I began to understand more fully the effect this play could have on people. Some in the audience were tethered to oxygen tanks, victims of poisoning. I was so moved.

**Q. You seem to have been overwhelmed, completely booked with hundreds of performances all over the globe. With such obvious success, why so long before going to film?**

**A.** My first instinct was live, let an audience experience life, not sit in front of a television. But everywhere I performed the play, people wanted "a copy," a recording of it to keep, to use in classes. Taping a performance is not good theatre. At the time, Ted Turner held the option for a film. When that ran out, I was given permission to film the play. There's no copy of the script, it's not published. The (2007) centennial (of Carson's birth) inspired the filming.



**Q. You're listed as the Executive Producer. Tell me about financing the project.**

**A.** I had never written a grant proposal. I used a bare bones, mom-and-pop approach. I contacted people who had seen the play and written to me. From June through the first week of August I wrote letters and made phone calls. In less than three months I had the support we needed. Everybody knew this would be a low budget production (working for little pay), but everyone loved the material. Our final production budget was only \$200,000. Now we're working to finance distribution.

**Q. How did you put your production crew together? Wexler [Director of Photography] seems an impressive coup.**

**A.** A husband-wife team (Christopher Monger and Karen Montgomery) had seen my husband (an attorney) interviewed in a documentary film about food and later saw my daughter perform in concert. We were acquainted and I liked them. She's a producer and was looking for possible projects. He's a director. I hired them. They led me to Wexler, who had not yet seen the play, and then to a line producer from New York. We hired others from L.A. and added locals (from Maine), then shot in one week with a crew of about 14.

**Q. Your performance filmed at Carson's cabin in Maine creates the feel of a reenactment, time travel back to experience Carson thinking out loud. How did you manage to arrange permission for the site?**

**A.** I spoke to Roger (Carson's adopted son). I've known him for years. He said "sure!" He and his family still summer there. It's (the cabin) exactly as it was (when he and Rachel summered there).

**Q. With most films, much ends up on the cutting room floor. Although the film seems true to the length of the play, I wonder if that was still the case in finalizing the 54 minutes of *Sense of Wonder*. Anything on the floor?**

**A.** We had no B-roll! We just shot the play as two interviews. Then we cut out the questions. Chris (Monger) asked me questions; the answers were the next lines of the play. It was Haskell's idea, a way to keep the immediacy with the audience so it's not flat on the film. We didn't set out to do a big film. We didn't have the rights. We were limited by what we had. Wexler was brilliant.

**Q. Now that you've seen an audience reaction to the film—in DC and Maine, soon in Vancouver—would you change anything?**

**A.** There are things you wish you could do with more money, more rights.... I've learned as an actress not to ruin the experience for people. The play and the film are so different. A film with one person [actor] speaking is so unusual. But within a few minutes they're (the audience members) caught in it. "She" pulls you in. There's laughter, they cry, tearing up...and, so far, a standing ovation.

**Q. You've said Carson's adopted son, Roger, has seen the film. What has been his reaction? Are you satisfied you've captured the message and meaning Carson intended?**

**A.** Roger was in tears the first time he saw the play. He was only six (during the time period depicted). He didn't know she loved him so much. When he saw the film, he said, "Oh my god it's even better than the play. This is magnificent." He loved it. The place is now truly there.

Every time before a performance I ask for guidance, that I don't portray her as too ill, that I'm accurate, not too strident, that I find a balance. Do I think I got the essence, yes. It's a snapshot of her life. I want people to see that she started as a naturalist and became an activist. She had the science and the skill to write. She's such a role model, especially for young adults. Her courage inspires deeply. I want to show her as a human being, not only a gifted scientist or acclaimed nature writer. She had no partner, no old boys network, little money, a 9 to 5 job, and she was ill. She worked hard in the face of an infuriated Department of Agriculture and well-connected industry. She died at 56. But she changed the course of history.

**Q. What's your goal for the film now? What comes next?**

**A.** I've been told that Women's History Month (March) next year will highlight Carson. I want to work with them to find a way to get this film into every high school and college in the country. I'm also looking for foundation support to have the film everywhere by Earth Day 2009, at land trusts, churches, garden clubs, everywhere. This film's job is never done! It's like the play. My goal is to reach as many people (with Carson's message) as possible, and I can't be everywhere. I don't want us to lose her voice.

Press materials are available at [www.asenseofwonderfilm.com](http://www.asenseofwonderfilm.com).

*JoAnn M. Valenti, an emerita professor of communication, serves on SEJournal's editorial board.*

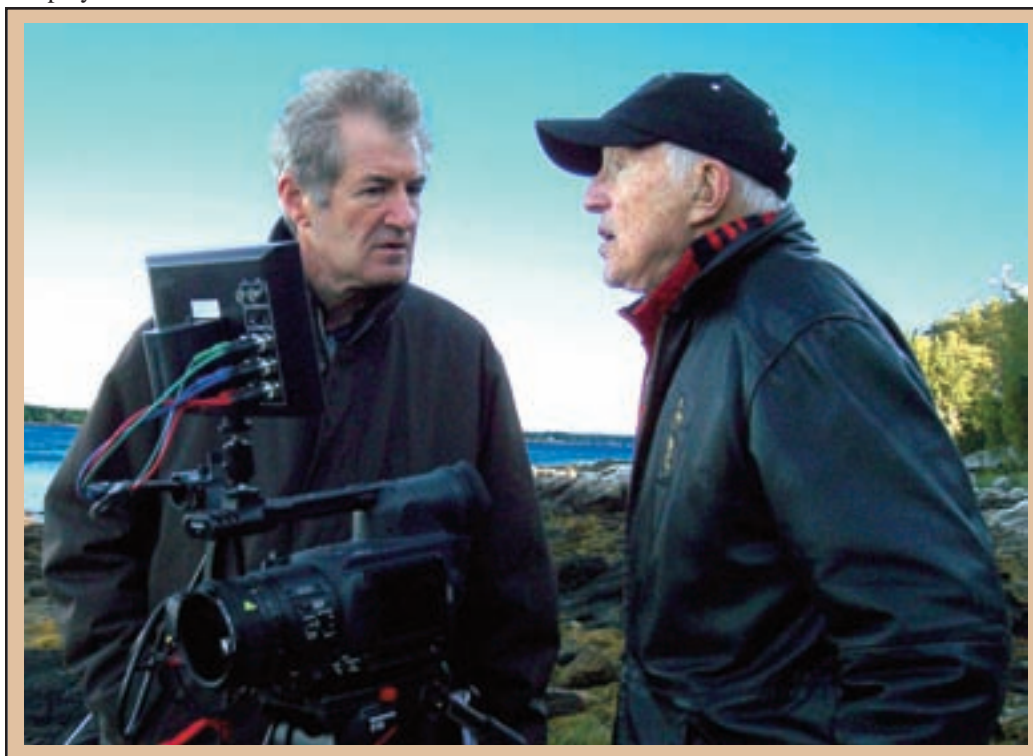
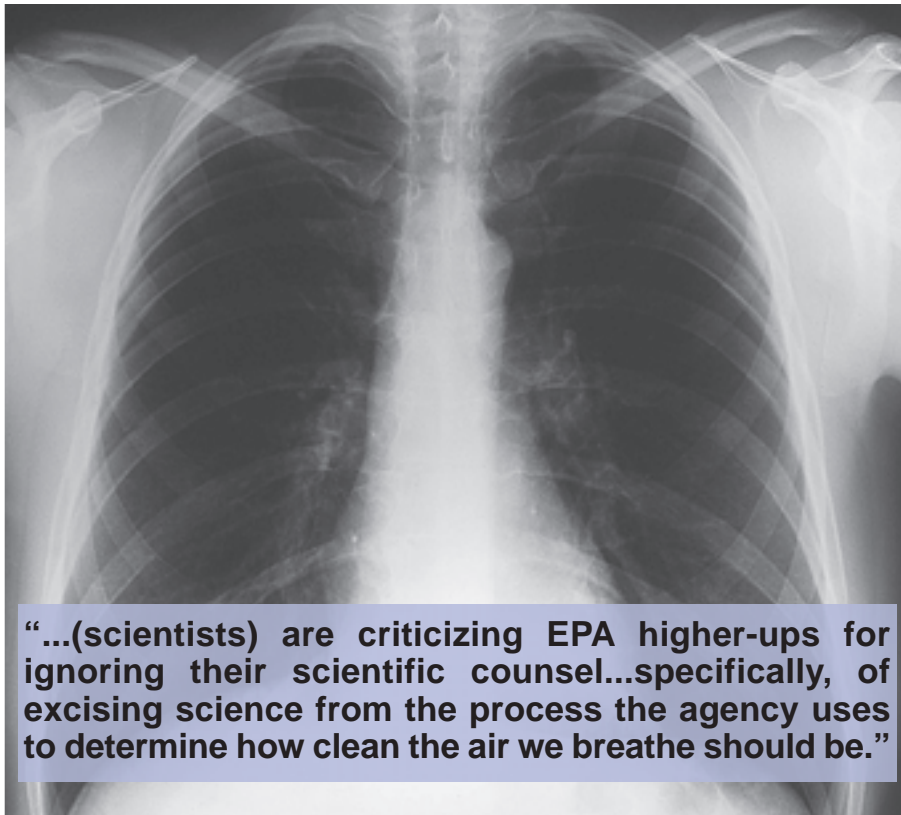


PHOTO COURTESY SENSE OF WONDER PRODUCTIONS

A Sense of Wonder Director Christopher Monger (L) and Director of Photography Haskell Wexler (R) on location in Maine.

# A question of science in EPA air regulation decisions

By CHERYL HOGUE



When focused on technical issues, most scientists stick to the facts, at least as they see them. They don't often venture into recommending what form environmental regulations should take. Instead, they focus on the scientific information that supports regulations.

In recent months, scientists advising the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on air pollution issues have waded into the policy arena. They are criticizing EPA higher-ups for ignoring their scientific counsel. Specifically, they are accusing the Bush Administration of excising science from the process the agency uses to determine how clean the air we breathe should be.

As required by the Clean Air Act, EPA sets upper limits, or standards, on the amount of six common pollutants in outdoor air. The pollutants are ozone, particulate matter, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxide, and lead. The agency is supposed to reassess these national standards every five years and change them as needed. But EPA is often tardy – its revisions of a national ambient air quality standard (NAAQS, pronounced “knacks”) for the six pollutants usually come after someone sues the agency and the court sets a deadline for action.

The Clean Air Act says these national pollution standards must

be “requisite to protect the public health” and include “an adequate margin of safety.” In a landmark 2001 case, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that EPA cannot consider the costs of achieving the standard when setting a NAAQS. So the clean air standards must be based strictly on scientific data about how pollutants affect human health.

Meanwhile, in the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1977, Congress instructed EPA to get technical advice from scientists outside the agency when it reviews and revises a NAAQS. Thus was born the agency's Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee (CASAC, pronounced “KAY-sack”).

CASAC members pore over reams of detailed reports and published scientific papers. Their meetings are open to the public and advertised in the *Federal Register* and on EPA's website. But CASAC rarely gets much coverage, though SEJ members from regulation-tracking publications such as *Inside EPA* and BNA's *Daily Environment Report* regularly glean news from meetings that can make even the most dedicated journalists' eyes glaze over.

The committee usually only ends up making news when it sends letters to the EPA administrator recommending a range of numbers for an air standard that the panel deems is scientifically valid. Historically, the administrator has selected a NAAQS that falls within the range offered by CASAC.

Until recent years, that is.

In 2006, CASAC recommended that EPA ratchet down the nation's yearly average air standard for fine particulate matter – set at 15 micrograms ( $\mu\text{g}$ ) per cubic meter of air in 1997 – to between 13 and 14  $\mu\text{g}$  per cubic meter. But Administrator Stephen L. Johnson decided to bypass the advice and kept the 15  $\mu\text{g}$  per cubic meter limit, a move that pleased many in industry who had lobbied hard against lowering the standard.

After EPA announced the final decision on particulate matter, CASAC wrote to Johnson, saying his decision “does not provide an ‘adequate margin of safety ... requisite to protect the public health’ (as required by the Clean Air Act), leaving parts of the population of this country at significant risk of adverse health

effects” from exposure to fine particulate matter. The advisers added, “The CASAC’s recommendations were consistent with the mainstream scientific advice that EPA received from virtually every major medical association and public health organization that provided their input to the Agency.”

Next, EPA reviewed the NAAQS for ozone, a major component of smog. In light of new information showing that moderate levels of ozone can harm people’s health, the science advisers unanimously recommended the agency lower the national standard to between 60 and 70 parts per billion (ppb) from the 80 ppb set in 1997. However, EPA’s Johnson decided in March to lower the NAAQS to 75 ppb.

CASAC again confronted the administrator. In April, panel members <sup>1</sup>wrote to Johnson, telling him they “do not endorse” the new standard, and reiterated the range they had recommended. “It is the Committee’s consensus scientific opinion that your decisions to set the primary ozone standard above this range fails to satisfy the explicit stipulations of the Clean Air Act that you ensure an adequate margin of safety for all individuals,” they wrote.

These days, CASAC is aggravated by a process, put in place by the Bush Administration, that EPA must follow to revise its air standards.

The advisory committee, the agency, many environmental advocates, and industry all agreed that the old procedure, which took years to complete, was cumbersome and needed streamlining. But <sup>2</sup>the new process, announced in December 2006, garnered criticism immediately. Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), who chairs the U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, predicted that the change would inject politics into decisions that are, by law, supposed to be based on science.

The agency is using the process for the first time as it considers whether to revise the NAAQS for lead. The current standard of 1.5 µg of lead per cubic meter of air was set 30 years ago.

CASAC began criticizing the process after EPA in December 2007 announced its plans for revisiting the lead standard. Under the agency’s new procedure, the notice was to contain an assessment of the scientific and technical information about lead in air. But it didn’t, the committee said in a January <sup>1</sup>letter to Johnson.

Instead, the notice “simply laid out all NAAQS policy options,” CASAC <sup>1</sup>wrote, “while omitting the fundamental scientific rationale for many of them, or even the relative scientific merits of the different alternatives.” It included options that both the advisors and EPA scientists had dismissed on scientific grounds. This, the letter said, “serves only to *undermine* the scientific foundation of the NAAQS reviews.” (Emphasis in the original.) In his letter of response to CASAC, Johnson merely thanked the panel for its comments.

While CASAC recommended that EPA tighten the lead standard to no higher than 0.2 µg per cubic meter, the agency disregarded this limit. On May 1, it proposed a revised NAAQS for lead of between 0.1 and 0.3 µg per cubic meter. EPA is under a court order to finalize the standard by Oct. 15.

This time, CASAC has gone a step further than merely sending a letter to the EPA administrator. Rogene F. Henderson, who chairs the committee, <sup>2</sup>testified about the advisers’ concerns to Congress on May 20. She told the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee that in the case of the ozone

standard, “Willful ignorance triumphed over sound science.”

Henderson said the ozone decision was bad enough, but “even more alarming is the removal of science in the implementation of the new NAAQS review process.” She said that CASAC members were “shocked and dismayed” at the agency’s notice on

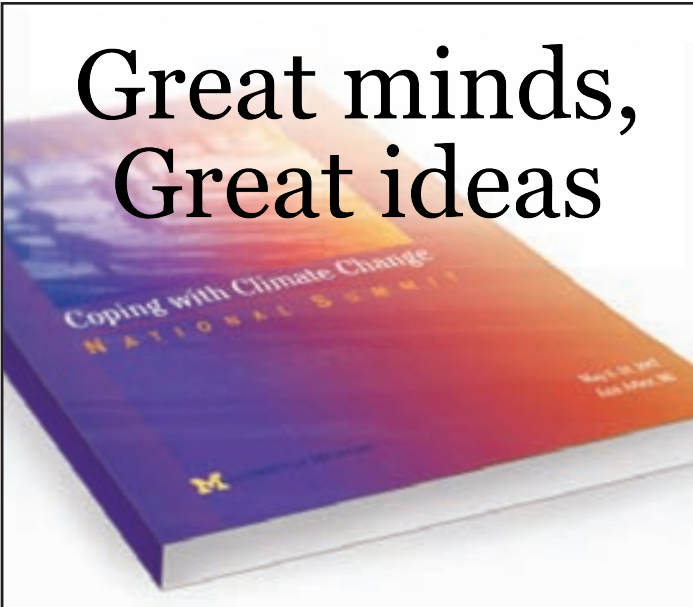
lead. “Obscuring science from the science advisory group cripples the ability of the CASAC to perform its congressionally mandated duties,” said Henderson, a senior scientist emeritus at a private biomedical research institute.

Henderson and others are worried that the process will not only bypass scientific counsel for the air standard for lead, but will hurt the revision of other NAAQS in the future. It also may make EPA’s revised standards more vulnerable to lawsuits based in part on CASAC’s concerns that the pollution limits don’t protect human health. And if a standard gets overturned by a court, the result will be an older, less protective NAAQS will remain in effect until EPA goes through years of analysis to set a new one.

Whether, how, and when the presidential administration of either Republican candidate John McCain or Democratic nominee Barack Obama will address the disputed process will make for both interesting coverage and potentially big impacts on the health of the American people.

*Cheryl Hogue reports on national pollution issues for Chemical & Engineering News.*

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**Web notes:** <sup>1</sup>Letters sent from CASAC to the EPA administrator can be found at: <http://yosemite.epa.gov/sab/sabproduct.nsf/WebReportsbyYearCASAC!OpenView>

<sup>2</sup>Henderson’s testimony, which includes her contact information, is here: <http://oversight.house.gov/documents/20080520141503.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>Details about the new EPA process for setting air quality standards are available at: <http://www.epa.gov/ttn/naaqs/#review>

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# The roots of conservatives' environmental view

By BILL DAWSON

When the journalist and author **William F. Buckley Jr.** died last February, much was written and said about his seminal role in the growth of the modern conservative movement after he founded *National Review* magazine in 1955.

One of many testimonies to Buckley's achievements was an essay by **Robert B. Semple Jr.**, the associate editor of *The New York Times* editorial page, who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1996 for editorials on environmental issues.

Semple wrote of Buckley and his magazine:

“His views – an amalgam of Friedrich Hayek’s free-market economics, Russell Kirk’s cultural conservatism and Whittaker Chambers’s anti-Communism — were hardly original. What was pioneering was his insistence on giving conservatism as he saw it a voice and a forum. That was *National Review*, the magazine that Mr. Buckley founded in 1955. There he fanned a very small flame that, over time, gave the country the Young Americans for Freedom, who gave it Barry Goldwater, who in turn laid the groundwork for Ronald Reagan.”

Two decades after Reagan left office, conservatism in its various forms, as well as their cousin libertarianism, have many voices and forums in today’s media universe. This time around, *The Beat* checks in on a few of the most influential journalists and publications identified with the conservative and libertarian regions of the political spectrum to offer a sampling of their recent treatment of environmental matters.

One recurrent theme among right-leaning commentators – an argument that dates at least as far back as the immediate post-Reagan era – involves unfavorable comparisons of environmentalism with Communism.

Communism collapsed in the former Soviet Union and its client states in Eastern and Central Europe in 1989, ending the Cold War. Local environmentalists’ protests had a well-documented role in bringing about that historic change in a number of locations.

Not long afterward, however, journalists and others on the American right were warning that environmentalism could replace leftist totalitarianism as the world’s most potent enemy of liberty.

The journalist and author **Virginia Postrel**, then editor of the libertarian magazine *Reason*, wrote “The Green Road to Serfdom” in its April 1990 issue.

She called environmentalism “an ideology every bit as powerful as Marxism and every bit as dangerous to individual freedom and human happiness. Like Marxism, it appeals to seem-



PHOTO COURTESY RONALD REAGAN LIBRARY

President Reagan sharing a joke with William F. Buckley, Jr. at a private birthday party in honor of his 75th Birthday in the White House residence on Feb 7, 1986.

ingly noble instincts: the longing for beauty, for harmony, for peace. It is the green road to serfdom.”

**George Will**, the *Washington Post* columnist, chimed in with his own variant of that idea in 1992:

“Some environmentalism is a ‘green tree with red roots.’ It is the socialist dream – ascetic lives closely regulated by a vanguard of bossy visionaries – dressed up as compassion for the planet.”

Writing in the *Columbia Journalism Review* in 1995, the late journalist **Kevin Carmody**, a founding board member of SEJ, quoted Will’s “red roots” line in a wide-ranging examination of mainstream journalism’s role – along with the anti-environmentalist Wise Use movement, conservative think tanks, talk radio and others – in a “public debate about the environment (that) has lurched to the right.”

On May 22, 2008, Will presented an updated version of his 1992 argument, this time in a *Post* column ridiculing the Interior Department’s decision to classify the polar bear as a “threatened” species because of global warming: “Today’s ‘green left’ is the old ‘red left’ revised.”

A few days later, Czech President **Vaclav Klaus** visited Washington to meet with Bush administration officials and promote his book *Green Planet in Blue Shackles*, published in the U.S. by the Competitive Enterprise Institute, an activist think tank. CEI, long opposed to mandatory action against global warming, was instrumental in persuading President Bush to abandon his 2000 campaign pledge to regulate carbon dioxide emissions from old power plants.

A CEI press release featured this passage from Klaus’ book: “The largest threat to freedom, democracy, the market economy, and prosperity at the end of the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st century is no longer socialism. It is, instead, the ambitious, arrogant, unscrupulous ideology of environmentalism.”

The lead paragraph of *The Washington Times*’ May 30 story about his Washington visit echoed that theme: “Environmentalism,” says Czech President Vaclav Klaus, “is the new communism, a system of elite command-and-control that kills prosperity and should similarly be condemned to the ash heap of history.”

Klaus was also quoted as saying that “global warming is a religion conceived to suppress human freedom,” sounding another argument by some conservative commentators.

In April, for instance, CEI fellow **Iain Murray** had published an excerpt from his book *The Really Inconvenient Truths* on the British website *Spiked*, which included this passage: “Just as environmentalism has replaced Marxism as the central economic theory of the far left, so too has environmentalism begun to replace liberal Christianity as the left’s motivating religious force.”

Also on May 30, *Washington Post* columnist **Charles Krauthammer** declared in a column that he is a “global warming agnostic” and approvingly offered the “unscrupulous ideology” quote from Klaus’ book.

Krauthammer also compared climate-focused environmentalism both to leftist collectivism and to authoritarian religion:

“Just as the ash heap of history beckoned, the intellectual left was handed the ultimate salvation: environmentalism. Now the experts will regulate your life not in the name of the proletariat or Fabian socialism but – even better – in the name of Earth itself.

“Environmentalists are Gaia’s priests, instructing us in her proper service and casting out those who refuse to genuflect.”

*National Review Online*, or simply *NRO* as it self-refers, “receives about one million hits per day – more than all other conservative-magazine websites combined,” according to Wikipedia.

*NRO*’s extensive stable of blogs – 11 at this writing – includes one dedicated to climate change and related issues. Called “Planet Gore”, it was launched on Feb. 14, 2007, with a complaint that “the hyped-up rhetoric (about global warming) doesn’t always accurately reflect the complexity of the issue. That’s where ‘Planet Gore’ comes in.”

Readers were told that *NRO* had “gathered a team of experts to report and comment on the myriad scientific and economic issues surrounding the global warming debate. So check back regularly for informed news and views about climate change, alternative energy, environmental activism, and of course, Al Gore’s carbon footprint.”

Gore is a frequent target for jabs by contributing bloggers, who sometimes call him “the Goracle” (and, at least once, “the Boracle”).

In keeping with the blog’s first-day promise to keep up with the former vice president’s carbon footprint, there was a one-sentence blog post on Sept. 2, which was headlined “Al Gore’s Carbon Buttprint” and approvingly directing readers to a different, non-*NRO* blog. The linked blog post was titled “Obese People to Blame for Global Warming?” and illustrated by a photo of Gore in an especially hefty incarnation.

Other recent targets for “Planet Gore” contributors’ critical comments have included the wind power industry, energy businessman T. Boone Pickens’ wind- and gas-promoting energy plan, Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama, and his Republican opponent John McCain’s climate proposal.

**Chris Horner** (a CEI senior fellow who blogs at Planet Gore along with fellow CEI fellows Murray and **Marlo Lewis**) lamented on Sept. 4 “McCain’s misguided cap-and-trade scheme.”

“You know,” he added, “that Kyoto-style job-killer that is causing so much economic hemorrhaging in Europe?”

One key political figure who has drawn “Planet Gore” bloggers’ positive notice is McCain’s running mate, Sarah Palin, who has said she doesn’t attribute global warming to human causes. Quoting her Republican convention speech calling for more oil drilling, nuclear plants, “clean coal,” and alternative energy development, frequent “Planet Gore” contributor **Edward**

**John Craig** called the Alaska governor a “Planet Gore Pal.”

The strong opinion-journalism character of offerings like the *NRO* blog is seen in the world of conservative journalism as a selling point.

**Matt Labash**, a writer for *The Weekly Standard*, the magazine launched in 1995 by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp., was asked in a 2003 interview by *JournalismJobs.com* why he thought conservative media outlets had gained so much popularity.

Labash replied:

“Because they feed the rage. We bring the pain to the liberal media. I say that mockingly, but it’s true somewhat. We come with a strong point of view and people like point-of-view journalism. While all these hand-wringing Freedom Forum types talk about objectivity, the conservative media likes to rap the liberal media on the knuckles for not being objective. We’ve created this cottage industry in which it pays to be un-objective. It pays to be subjective as much as possible. It’s a great way to have your cake and eat it too. Criticize other people for not being objective. Be as subjective as you want. It’s a great little racket. I’m glad we found it actually.”

Certainly, strong points of view have been on display in *The Weekly Standard*’s recent attention to interrelated energy and environmental issues.

In an Aug. 5 item on the sole blog of the magazine’s website, for instance, *Weekly Standard* editor (and *The New York Times* columnist) **Bill Kristol** commented favorably on an *NRO* article:

“I’ve had the contrarian instinct for a while that global warming had peaked (both substantively and politically) as an issue. Al Gore’s Nobel Prize felt like a pretty good contrarian indicator. And now the (oil-)drilling issue is beginning to feel a little like tax cuts thirty years ago – key to, and emblematic of, a pro-growth, populist/capitalist/anti-declinist agenda.”

Such commentary is supplemented by the conservative-viewpoint reporting of *Weekly Standard* writers.

On Aug. 25 – four days before McCain tapped Palin as his running mate – an article by *Weekly Standard* senior writer **Stephen F. Hayes** featured interviews with both McCain and Palin on the question of oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Hayes reported that McCain had disclosed he was then reexamining his opposition to oil production in the refuge and that he would consult Palin on the issue.

An excerpt from the article, which assumed more significance after Palin’s selection for the GOP ticket:

“I continue to examine it,” (McCain) said. So does his staff. McCain’s campaign has been quietly studying the ANWR issue and discussing the potential consequences – good and bad – of a policy change.

But in our conversation on August 13, McCain added a new wrinkle. When I asked him if he had consulted Palin about ANWR, he said that he had not yet done so. He added, “I probably should,” he said. “I will.”

So I called Palin to ask what McCain can expect to hear. The answer is that Palin, who has been mentioned as a possible McCain running mate but has not been vetted, will make a straightforward case for drilling in ANWR. She says McCain’s willingness to take another look at ANWR is “very encouraging.”

“It bodes well for him as a pragmatic and wise and experienced statesman,” says Palin.

In 2002, *Reason*’s science correspondent, **Ronald Bailey**, was the editor of the CEI-published book, *Global Warming and Other Eco-Myths*. *continued on page 16*

## A self-made journalist's struggle

# The proof is in the information:

By BILL DAWSON



PHOTO COURTESY LOUIS SLESIN, MICROWAVE NEWS

A scientist and advocate fascinated by a complex and emerging environmental issue decides to begin independently publishing a newsletter about it.

Early on, it's a struggle. He distributes his work in newsletter form, mailing out copies to a small but dedicated readership.

He toys with new ways to expand his publication; eventually facing the internet world, he converts to the web.

Now this self-made journalist's struggle to inform must hold some important lessons for today's environmental journalists. This one, for instance: Win subscribers by proving yourself as a reliable provider of information.

This hybrid science-journalist – we should have told you earlier – is Louis Slesin, who has published *Microwave News* since the 1980s.

What follows is an interview with Slesin that explores how he got started, his struggle to sustain and some advice for journalists exploring and reporting on science and environmental issues, especially the issue of health effects related to EMF (electromagnetic fields).

**Q: Tell me a little about the genesis of *Microwave News*. Why did you decide to launch the publication? Did you have any experience in newsletter publishing? Had you previously worked as a reporter?**

**A:** It all started in the mid-1970s when I was in graduate school and read Paul Brodeur's two-part series in *The New Yorker* on the health risks associated with exposure to microwave radiation. By the time Paul published the articles in book form – *The Zapping of America* – I was working at the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) on the regulation of toxic chemicals and genetic engineering. One evening, Paul dropped by our office and left copies of the book. I grabbed one and read it. I was hooked. I was soon devoting more and more of my time to the issue and wanted to work on it full time.

I had no formal training in journalism or publishing. Luckily, my thesis advisor taught me the importance of writing clear and simple English, a skill that has served me well over the years. In 1980, I took the plunge: I left NRDC and launched *Microwave News*.

**Q: What were the biggest challenges in establishing the newsletter as a trusted source of news and an economically viable venture?**

**A:** Then, as now, the EMF (electromagnetic fields) issue was highly controversial. Many members of my target audience knew me from my advocacy work at NRDC and I had to convince them that I could be fair and accurate, reflecting the nuances and uncertainties in the field. This was especially true for potential corporate subscribers who had the deepest pockets. Another challenge was marketing. I am much better at research and writing than selling subscriptions. I could not afford to hire someone to help me build circulation. Instead, I decided to keep the overhead low and keep publishing while I built a reputation as a reliable source of information.

**Q: Many independent journalists supplement their journalistic income with other activities, such as teaching. Have you done other things to support yourself while producing *Microwave News*?**

**A:** The early years were tough and lean. I too did some teaching, but lecturers don't get paid very much and I decided that it wasn't worth it. Then, I made some editorial changes to expand readership. I started reporting on electromagnetic interference (EMI) —that is, the effects of the radiation on electronics and machines. (One example is a cell phone signal upsetting a cardiac pacemaker.) It was a natural extension of my reporting on human health effects. Unfortunately it didn't work. I learned the hard way that EMI engineers don't like to pay for information.

My next try was more successful. I started a second newsletter, *VDT News*, on the health risks associated with working at video display terminals. Computer operators were growing more and more anxious as clusters of adverse pregnancy outcomes were being reported among office workers. Many blamed the radiation emissions from VDTs. Since we were already covering this in *Microwave News*, we repackaged the information and added coverage of ergonomics (how to avoid repetitive strain injuries). A bit later, I started a clipping service. My cash flow improved, but there was a downside. Running multiple publications requires a different skill set than being a reporter and editor. You become a manager rather than a journalist. By 1995, the circulation of *Microwave News* had increased considerably and

... to inform ...

# Be reliable, accurate and fair

we were also attracting advertisers. This allowed me to close down *VDT News*.

**Q: Why did you convert from a printed newsletter to a web-based, non-subscription publication?**

**A:** Two reasons. First, I wanted to slow down. Twenty-five years of never-ending deadlines had begun to take a toll. And secondly, a web-based newsletter – with no printing and no mailings – has a much lower cost structure. I don't have a staff anymore, except for a college student who comes in now and then to help out. It's quite liberating.

**Q: You published the printed newsletter on a bimonthly basis. Items are posted on the website now much more often. How has reporting for the web changed the way you approach your work? Obviously, you can report with much more immediacy, but has something been lost, too?**

**A:** We used to try to cover all the major EMF issues. Now I focus on those developments that I think are most important. Another major advantage is that I can devote more time to a single story. Sometimes, I write items every day and at other times, a week or more will pass between posts.

A major loss is my paid subscription base. It's no secret that most web sites have a hard time generating income. One mitigating factor has been our track record. Lots of people continue to send us checks to keep *Microwave News* alive —nevertheless, I now must take on other projects to supplement my income.

**Q: Now I'd like to ask a few questions about the issue that you're a respected journalistic leader in covering possible human health effects related to electromagnetic fields and non-ionizing radiation from sources such as utility power lines and cell phones.**

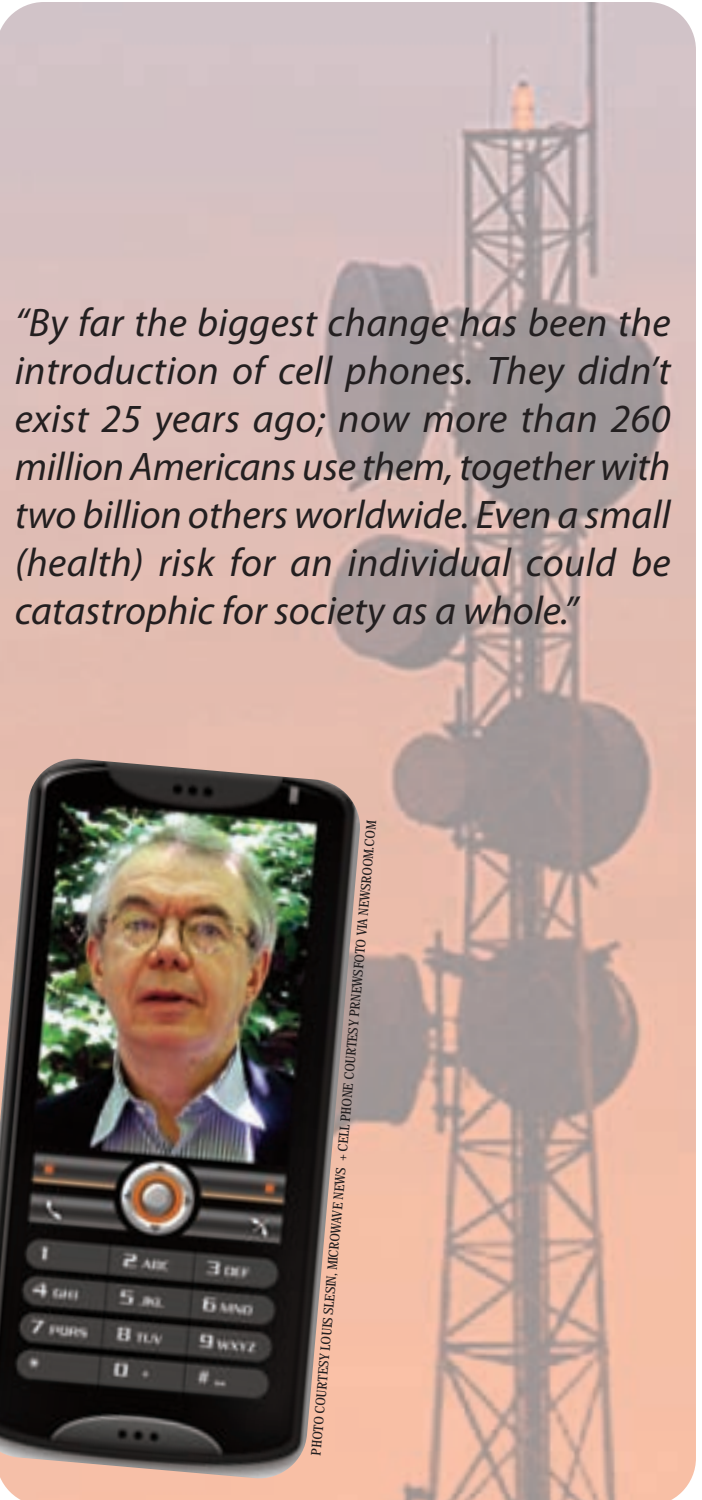
**First, is it possible to summarize the basic trajectory of this extremely complex issue over the period when you've been writing about it – the evolution of scientific understanding and regulatory response? For newcomers to the issue or those who know only a little about it, what are the most important things to know and understand?**

**A:** When I started out, most people had never heard of EMFs, and many sources dismissed the possibility of any ill effects. Some of my early interviews were very short. That changed. For instance, in 1993, *USA Weekend*, *USA Today's* Sunday supplement, asked its 33 million readers about their health concerns. At the top of the list were electromagnetic fields! We had come a long way.

Back in 1980, the possibility that EMFs from power lines could lead to childhood leukemia was a curiosity. Today those initial concerns are supported by lots of other studies. What is still missing, however, is a widely accepted biophysical explanation for how this happens.

By far the biggest change has been the introduction of cell phones. They didn't exist 25 years ago; now more than 260 million Americans use them, together with two billion others worldwide. Even a small risk for an individual could be catastrophic for society as a whole.

**Q: This interview is taking place not long after some events related to cell phones' possible link to brain tumors**



*“By far the biggest change has been the introduction of cell phones. They didn't exist 25 years ago; now more than 260 million Americans use them, together with two billion others worldwide. Even a small (health) risk for an individual could be catastrophic for society as a whole.”*

PHOTO COURTESY LOUIS SLESN, MICROWAVE NEWS + CELL PHONE COURTESY PNEWSPHOTO VIA NEWSROOM.COM

were covered in the mainstream media.

In May, three prominent neurosurgeons told CNN's Larry King they don't hold cell phones next to their ears.

A health columnist for *The New York Times* reported on that interview in June in a background piece that became the newspaper's most-emailed story for a time. Then there were news stories in July when the director of the University of Pittsburgh's Cancer Institute warned the staff there to limit their cell phone use out of caution because of unpublished data from the 13-nation Interphone research project. Do you think these developments indicate that the subjects you cover in *Microwave News*, particularly with regard to cell phones' possible risks, will become a more prominent media and public concern?

A: The EMF issue waxes and wanes. Cell phone tumor risks are in the public eye at the moment. This is not the first time: The story was first on Larry King in 1993 and even hit the front page of *The New York Times*. Soon afterwards it went into hibernation for the next 15 years as a result of government ambivalence, industry obstruction and press indifference.

Q: What are some important things that environmental journalists who haven't covered this issue – but may plan, or be assigned, to do so – should know about the Interphone study?

A: The Interphone project is a 13-country epidemiological study designed to investigate the possible link between cell phones and various types of tumors. It's now approaching its 10th anniversary and has cost more than \$15 million. A draft of the final paper was completed close to three years ago, yet the team members have been unable to reach a consensus and submit their results for publication: Some of them look at the data and see a risk, while others say there is nothing to worry about. It will be a difficult story to write and will require lots of legwork. One piece of advice: Read the entire paper, not just the abstract.

Q: In a previous interview, you said: "Today, it is close to criminal that the U.S. press has not reported recent findings on long latency tumor effects associated with cell phones. As I reported any number of times in *Microwave News*, it's front-page news in Europe – in Switzerland, England, Scandinavia – and it's not even in the back pages in the United States. It is

totally ignored." Why do you think that difference in coverage exists? Are things perhaps changing in the U.S. media with some of the recent developments I mentioned earlier?

A: The story lags in the U.S. because no one is applying pressure for change. Consumers Union is silent, as are environmental and labor groups. Another important factor is that no research is going on in this country, and that means there are few new findings being reported and therefore few news pegs. The media are loaded with ads for cell phones and I wonder whether this could be influencing the coverage. Americans love their cell phones and do not want to believe they could do any harm.

Q: What advice would you offer to journalists who are setting out to cover health questions related to electromagnetic radiation? Any advice for environmental journalists thinking about launching a newsletter/web site publication, whatever the subject?

A: Whether you are writing about power lines or cell phones, make sure you have the time to do enough research to get the necessary context. And don't lose sight of the fact that the EMF community is extremely polarized: Get a variety of viewpoints and be prepared to navigate around people's vested interests and personal biases. Before launching a new venture, check to see if there is a market for the product. People may be interested in what you want to do, but will they pay for it?

Bill Dawson is assistant editor of the SEJournal. Louis Slesin's web site is [www.microwavenews.com](http://www.microwavenews.com)

### ***The Beat, Conservative Views continued from page 13***

In 2005, however, he had concluded – in an article titled "We're All Global Warmers Now" – that "anyone still holding onto the idea that there is no global warming ought to hang it up."

He followed that with a 2006 article – "Confessions of an Alleged ExxonMobil Whore: Actually no one paid me to be wrong about global warming. Or anything else" – in which he conceded he may have been "too skeptical (about manmade climate change), demanding too much evidence or ignoring evidence that cut against what I wanted to believe."

Bailey's evolving thinking on the subject was highlighted in an article in *Reason's* July 2008 issue, which comprised a transcript of a debate sponsored by the magazine on climate-change policy.

One of the three debate participants, Bailey said anthropogenic global warming is "a real problem," then explained that he favors a carbon tax, rather than a cap-and-trade approach, as "the least bad way" to regulate climate-changing emissions.

"As a good libertarian," he added. "I thought I would like cap and trade. The problem is I've been watching the European attempt to do this, and it's a complete disaster."

Bailey has continued to explore climate-related policy issues in some of the articles he regularly writes for *Reason Online*.

On July 1, he examined differing policy approaches, concluding that the carbon taxes he favors are "a political pipe dream" and that a cap-and-trade approach is likeliest to prevail.

On July 29, he took a stab at estimating potential costs for realizing Gore's challenge to produce all electricity in the U.S. from carbon-free, renewable sources within 10 years.

And on Aug. 12, he discussed a side-effect of state mandates for more renewable production of electricity – "a land rush in the Southwest as would-be renewable energy producers vie for the best spots, especially for locations suitable for producing solar energy" and resulting conflict "between the energy and conservation wings of the environmentalist movement."

Bill Dawson is assistant editor of the SEJournal.



### **Correction:**

The photo caption on page 31 of the Summer 2008 issue of *SEJournal* misidentified SEJ member JoAnn Valenti as director and founder of NTBG. Valenti facilitates NTBG's Environmental Journalism Fellowship Program, which she co-founded.



## Making the move from a newspaper to “writing for hire”

By ABBY LUBY

I’ve been working as a freelance reporter for almost two years and there are great advantages to being your own boss and calling the shots.

But “writing for hire” can be tricky and I’m still learning the ropes.

Many of my first stories for a local newspaper were on environmental issues where I live in Westchester, New York, a suburb of New York City. Among the most challenging articles were (and are) about the Indian Point Nuclear Power Plant, just a few miles from my house.

Writing accurately is time consuming and there are no real shortcuts for getting the bona fide facts. You interview people, get background and quotes, read the research, talk to more people. By the time you’re ready to craft a story you’ve amassed several thousand words, including lots of stuff you didn’t ask for. A very small percentage of all of that will end up in your story. The real shocker: once you see the byline and get the check, the amount of work required might plunge your hourly rate to that which you might not have initially accepted.

When I started to freelance and wanted to impress editors I didn’t know, I spent the extra time to make sure my stories were clear and concise. But as time went on I needed to find a way to work efficiently enough so I could make a decent hourly rate. Time is money, no doubt, and although it took me a while, I learned that the most important thing with any assignment was to make sure from the get-go that I understood exactly what the editor wanted from my story. Whether I pitched a story idea or one was assigned, I made sure to connect with the editor first – before that very first interview, before notes were penned on the pad.

I found that emailing, although preferable for most editors, didn’t entirely work for me and, if possible, I would try to follow up on the phone. It allowed an exchange of ideas and maybe more stuff percolated up that might change the original gist of the story. This seemed to save time and agitation that can come with doing re-writes. Generally, that means more work and sometimes not more money.

Early on when I didn’t talk to my editor, I would write a story I “thought” the editor wanted. Many times, after the first read, they came up with a different spin. It meant re-working and re-reporting the story. More interviews, maybe more research. Sometimes, it meant a lot more work, and if I didn’t ask for a re-write fee, editors often didn’t offer it.

Most publications have boilerplate freelance contracts, some have contracts specific to each assignment. If I’m signing anything these days, I check for re-write fee clauses and a kill fee, a lower fee paid in the event that they don’t use the story.

If no contract is involved, initially negotiating a “per-story rate” with an editor who is stressed under deadline requires a bit of finesse. While you need to be amenable, you can’t forget that

you’re doing this to make a living. At first I agreed to write articles at the rate offered in order to get a foot in the door with the publication. But later on, when I had a more clear idea of the work required to complete the assignment, I would explain how much time I expected to spend and would ask for a higher rate.

Sometimes it worked; sometimes it didn’t. I learned that I needed to decide if writing for a publication on their terms was worth it for me. If not, I had to learn to move on.

There are many ways to save time. Here are a few examples:

— I used to think I had to talk to as many people as possible to get the best story. But with a little research I was able to whittle down my interview list to the essential folks.

— I’ve also learned to keep my interviews short, getting only the information and quotes that I need. Now, when it seems difficult to cut short an interview (some persons, once they have the ear of a journalist, pour out all sorts of information) I politely interrupt, begging off because of a deadline, something everyone understands.

— I’ve improved my organization. Being organized is a ‘must,’ so you can quickly get your hands on a phone number or email address. In the last two years I’ve amassed a rather extensive source list. Electronic rolodexes help, but I have the old-fashioned metal rolodex with paper cards with as much cross referencing as possible. For me, it just seems faster to flip through the cards. Also, actual paper files with notes and contact information from previous stories that you may revisit are great to keep on hand.

One of the greatest things about freelance writing is setting your own schedule, especially if you’re a parent or work another part-time job. The downside is that working alone can make you feel isolated.

When I first started freelancing I had just left a full-time job at a weekly paper where I enjoyed the camaraderie and support of the staff. After leaving I missed that connection and for me, today, having a similar amount of human contact kind of keeps things in balance. Now I try to have lunch with a friend once a week, take an exercise class – mainly to counter the long hours of sitting at the computer. I also try to interview as many people (as time allows) in person and connect with other journalists in professional groups at regular meetings when I can. It helps tremendously – there are a lot more of us out there than you think.

*Abby Luby is a freelance journalist for The New York Daily News, The Real Deal and writes regularly about the Indian Point Nuclear Power Plant for the North County News. She is a regularly featured art critic for the Stamford Advocate/Greenwich Time and writes features for Valley Table Magazine, among other area publications.*

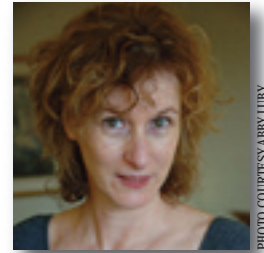


PHOTO COURTESY ABBY LUBY

# Might the suburbs in your area become the next slums?

By ROBERT McCLURE  
Photographs by Roger Archibald

Are Peak Oil, the subprime mortgage mess and generational shifts ending Americans' love affair with the suburbs?

That's what some high-profile urban planning types are postulating. It's easy to understand how high gas prices could spur such thoughts. Plus, say those who have studied the demographics of housing, Gen Xers were never as enamored with the 'burbs as Baby Boomers – and now, even empty-nester Boomers are casting a favorable glance toward the center city.

Meanwhile, the sea of "For sale" signs spawned by the mortgage meltdown threatens in some areas to make suburbs start looking more like slums, wrote Christopher B. Leinberger, a scholar at the Brookings Institution, in *The Atlantic* earlier this year.

Leinberger described a starter-home development in North Carolina where more than half the homes were in foreclosure: "Vandals have kicked in doors and stripped the copper wire from vacant houses; drug users and homeless people have furtively moved in." At an upscale subdivision in California, he wrote that gangs have arrived on the scene, and "graffiti, broken windows, and other markers of decay have multiplied."

Not all the hallmarks of this trend are so glum, though. I got interested in the back-to-the-city trend recently while chewing the fat with the head of a Seattle builders' group. He said his members, while not entirely avoiding outlying areas, increasingly are opting for infill development in close-in neighborhoods.

Increasingly, homebuyers "don't want to do that drive-'til-you-can-afford-the-mortgage thing," said Sam Anderson, executive director of the Master Builders Association of King and Snohomish Counties. They're looking for alternatives to all that time behind the wheel.

In my own neighborhood, about two miles from downtown Seattle, that's meant stately old homes – as well as some of lesser quality – being bulldozed in favor of townhomes. And they're expensive townhomes: \$500,000 or so for maybe 1,300 square feet. It's getting harder to park a car.

But that's not the only thing changing, in my neighborhood or others. We're growing denser in many places, with all the lifestyle changes that implies. Not all that is going to the central city, either. It looks like some of that density is headed for the 'burbs.

Reporters covering this story, Leinberger said in an interview,



A housing development in Urbana, Md northwest of Washington D.C., southeast of Frederick, Md and adjacent to Interstate 270.

should bear in mind that patterns may not be the same from city to city. It's not a matter of all Americans ending their love affair with all suburbs, he said.

"This is a transformation of some suburbs, and some suburbs will become slums," he predicts. "It will be a tale of two suburbs. The ones that are car-dominated will have trouble."

On the other hand, suburban areas served by mass transit, and particularly rail, are likely to prosper, Leinberger says. Look for walkable, urban neighborhoods – read that: dense neighborhoods – to spring up outside traditional center cities, he says, citing the Reston Town Center development near Washington D.C. as one example.

"Reporters should realize that, all around you, decisions are being made about how to grow," says Arthur "Chris" Nelson, Presidential Professor of City and Metropolitan Planning at the University of Utah.

Nelson, who is appearing on a panel at this fall's SEJ annual conference in Roanoke, Va., calculates that about half of all the development on the ground by 2025 will have been built since 2000.

There's pent-up demand among buyers, Leinberger says, for walkable urban neighborhoods. About a third of Americans would like to live in such a place, surveys show, but fewer than 10 percent of neighborhoods qualify.

Nelson echoes this, predicting a surplus of 22 million large-lot homes – homes on one-sixth of an acre or more – by 2025. That's equal to about two-fifths of all the homes on the ground today. Builders, though, are starting to pay close attention to the likes of Nelson, who predicts "fundamental changes" in the way cities are built.

PHOTO COURTESY ROGER ARCHIBALD, NATURALARCH.COM

Suburbs still have their defenders, to be sure. Probably the best-known is Joel Kotkin of southern California, who argues that many if not most Americans will continue to prefer the 'burbs for the reasons they have all along: clean, quiet streets far from the grime and hubbub of the city.

"My basic point is we've got another 100 million people coming – where are they going to go?" Kotkin said in an interview.

Even in cities, the desire for a more-suburban lifestyle can be found, Kotkin says, citing the example of neighborhoods in Queens and Brooklyn that have recently sought downzonings.

Leinberger is sometimes painted as the polar opposite of Kotkin. But if you listen carefully, you can hear them both saying that at least some of the growth in jobs and development will be happening outside of central cities. Which suburbs survive and which become slums will help to shape the very face of our society.

A big question will be how the Gen Ys, a.k.a. the Millennials, will react as they start putting down roots in coming years. Some hypothesize Millennials are culturally more like the 'Boomers than their immediate predecessors, Gen X. If that's true, will they, too, head for the hills when it comes time to plunk down cash for a nest?

What's happening in your town? It's probably an engaging story. Possible spinoffs include: Changing commute times; greenhouse-gas production; the effect on the nuclear family; opportunities to preserve open space that once seemed sure to fall prey to sprawl. You can probably think of more.

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#### Resources:

- See how walkable neighborhoods in your town are: <http://www.walkscore.com/>
- Arthur "Chris" Nelson: (801) 581-8253 or [acnelson@utah.edu](mailto:acnelson@utah.edu)
- Christopher Leinberger: (202) 797-6215 or [cleinberger@brookings.edu](mailto:cleinberger@brookings.edu)
- Joel Kotkin: <http://www.joelkotkin.com/index.htm>. (818)766-6588 or [JKotkin@JoelKotkin.com](mailto:JKotkin@JoelKotkin.com)

*Robert McClure covered growth in booming South Florida during the 1980s. He is currently an environment reporter at the Seattle Post-Intelligencer.*



An island of arable land survives in a landscape of urban sprawl in Glendale, Az., northwest of Phoenix.



*PA* A suburban development of homes on spacious lots adjacent to a golf course in Centreville, Va., west of Washington, D.C. and due south of Washington Dulles International Airport.

# BEST ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM OF 2007-2008 HONORED

Ethanol production and food shortages, energy and climate, energy and politics, asbestos and toxic trailers, land use/abuse were among the topics explored in the best environmental journalism of 2007-2008, according to judges in the seventh annual contest sponsored by the Society of Environmental Journalists.

Thirty-three entries in 11 categories—including the new Rachel Carson Environment Book Award—have been designated as finalists in the SEJ Awards for Reporting on the Environment, the world's largest and most comprehensive awards for journalism on environmental topics.

Reporters, editors and journalism educators who served as contest judges pored over 234 entries to choose the finalists representing the best environmental reporting in print and on television, radio, the Internet and in student publications. This year, the judges also chose the best environmental journalism book of 2007.

SEJ announced the winners Oct. 15 at a gala ceremony in the Hotel Roanoke and Conference Center on the first day of SEJ's 18th annual conference. The Rachel Carson Environment Book Award winner received \$10,000. The student entry received \$250, with up to \$750 in travel assistance to the annual conference. Each of the other winning entries received \$1,000. For links to most stories, visit <http://www.sej.org/contest/index4.htm>

## KEVIN CARMODY AWARD FOR OUTSTANDING INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING, PRINT

Judges: Randy Lee Loftis, Jane Kay, Heather Dewar

**1st Tim Nostrand, John Brennan, Jeff Pillets, Richard Whitty, *The Record*—Bergen County, NJ**

*When New Jersey politicians promised to create a sleek, new wonderland of upscale development out of a long-neglected urban wasteland, the staff of The Record in Bergen County began digging. The result was a series of investigative stories that exposed how the EnCap project was an enormous tangle of political favors, giveaways, and secret, taxpayer-backed subsidies for a catastrophically risky venture. The promised cleanup of old landfills never happened; in fact, almost 2.5 million cubic yards of contaminated material were dumped to create the project's base. "Instead of cleaning up the dumps," The Record reported, "EnCap re-created them." Led by senior writers Jeff Pillets and John Brennan, The Record demonstrated the power of relentless and fearless journalism.*

**2nd Ben Elgin, *BusinessWeek*, "Greenwashing Coverage"**

**3rd Fiona Harvey, Stephen Fidler, Chris Bryant, Jonathan Wheatley, John Aglionby, *The Financial Times*, "The Green Gold Rush"**

## OUTSTANDING BEAT/IN-DEPTH REPORTING, RADIO

Judges: Erik Anderson, Tom Clynes, Alma Martinez

**1st Mark Whitaker, BBC, "Danger Fuels"**

*As radio journalist Mark Whitaker notes in his report, "the people who die unnecessarily from indoor air pollution are those with the least powerful voices in the world." Whitaker's piece gives voice to their stories. The two 26-minute reports are creatively and thoughtfully organized, with descriptive writing that*

*brings detail and color to the scenes. Whitaker deftly incorporates ambient sound and other audio-paintbrush tools to help the listener experience and understand the indoor pollution problem. His compelling and important work captivates from the beginning, and keeps giving reasons to stay with the story for its length.*

**2nd Jason Margolis, William Troop, the staff of PRI's *The World* c/o Bob Ferrante, executive producer, PRI's *The World*, "Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve."**

**3rd Daniel Grossman, WBUR, "Meltdown: Inside Out."**

## OUTSTANDING BEAT/IN-DEPTH REPORTING, TELEVISION

Judges: Liz Roldan, Deborah Sherman, Kerry Sanders

**1st Peter Bull, Center for Investigative Reporting, "Hot Politics"**

*This judging panel found "Hot Politics" to be among the most thoughtful, well-researched documentaries broadcast in a long time. Hot Politics examines the politics over three presidential administrations and their failure to act to prevent global warming. The judges couldn't stop watching as Frontline showed how Presidents deceived the public and manipulated the media about the greenhouse effect. Hot Politics is simple and clean, yet thorough and far reaching; managing to reveal a fascinating power play while our earth's atmosphere warms unchecked by the day.*

**2nd Dan Rather, Wayne Nelson, Chandra Simon, Resa Matthews, Elyse Kaftan, HDNet, "Dan Rather Reports: Toxic Trailers."**

**3rd Vince Patton, Todd Sonflieth, Nick Fisher, Michael Bendixen, Oregon Public Broadcasting, "Oregon Field Guide."**

## OUTSTANDING BEAT REPORTING, PRINT

Judges: Stuart Leavenworth, Hannah Hoag, Robert Ourlan

**1st Seth Borenstein, The Associated Press, "Climate Changes,"**

*The mounting scientific consensus on climate change was clearly the environmental story of 2007. Borenstein's beat reporting helped propel it onto front pages. Borenstein shuttled to Paris and Brussels to break news about findings by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. He then translated those findings into clear, compelling stories that brought home how global warming is affecting billions of people across the globe. Finally, he followed his IPCC coverage with enterprising stories on sea level rise, extinctions, state-by-state carbon emissions and the accelerated melting of the Arctic.*

**2nd Peter Aldhous, *New Scientist*, "International Beat Reporting."**

**3rd Asher Price, *Austin American-Statesman*, "Austin Environmental Reporting."**

## OUTSTANDING EXPLANATORY REPORTING, PRINT

Judges: Bill Allen, Thomas Henry, Elizabeth Bluemink

**1st Dennis Dimick, Tim Appenzeller, James Balog, Paul Nicklen, Bill McKibben, Joel Bourne, Robert Clark, Jamie Shreeve, Glenn Oeland, Lynn Addison, Kathy Moran, Laura Lakeway, Neil Shea, Karen Lange, Bill Marr, Elaine Bradley,**

**Abby Tipton, Alice Jones, Mary Jennings, Emily Krieger, Juan Velasco, National Geographic, “Changing Planet: Where Energy and Climate Collide”**

*An explanatory masterpiece that weaves together many angles on climate-change effects, causes and potential solutions. Excellent and comprehensive reporting with a global perspective gives this topic a breath of fresh air. Most notably in this set of stories, the superlative writing - clear, tight, flowing and authoritative - demonstrates an elegant power rarely reached in explanatory journalism.*

**2nd Beth Daley, The Boston Globe, “The 45th Parallel: Warming Where We Live”**

**3rd Jacques Leslie, Mother Jones, “The Last Empire: Can the World Survive China’s Headlong Rush to Emulate the American Way of Life?”**

#### **OUTSTANDING ONLINE REPORTING**

**Judges: Debbie Schwartz, Bruce Barcott, Seth Gitner**

**1st Alex Knott, Richard Mullins, Joaquin Sapien, Kevin Bogardus, Anupama Narayanswamy, Ben Welsh, Diane Brozek Fancher, Helena Bengtsson, Peter Newbatt Smith, Leah Rush, The Center for Public Integrity, “Wasting Away: Superfund’s Toxic Legacy”**

*This reporting team used a range of storytelling techniques that sent the judges clicking immediately, searching in locales for friends and family. In particular, the EPA database and use of a custom video player added elements not seen in any other entry—good storytelling tools in online reporting.*

**2nd Mark Neuzil, Ron Way, MinnPost.com, “Ethanol in Minnesota”**

**3rd Michael P. Burnham, Greenwire, “Everglades: Farms, Fuels and the Future of America’s Wetland”**

#### **OUTSTANDING SMALL-MARKET REPORTING, PRINT**

**Judges: Roger Witherspoon, Cheryl Wittenauer, Tom Palmer**

**1st Tim Thornton, The Roanoke Times, “Sampling the State of An American Treasure.”**

*The series provided important information about the dominant form of land conservation in Virginia. It was informative, ground breaking, meticulously researched, extremely well written and accompanied by stunning photographs and excellent graphics. The combination showed exactly how significant that form of conservation is — and how difficult to attain their stated goals. Rather than present a he said - she said of pros and cons, Thornton et al walked you through the mind of a farmer who was proud of his land but fearful of binding the financial hands of his grandchildren — fears which Thornton showed were justified. A great job all around.*

**2nd Peter Friederici, High Country News, “Facing the Yuck Factor”**

**3rd Kera Abraham, Monterey County Weekly, “Land to Sea: Grappling with Pollution and Resource Management”**

#### **OUTSTANDING STORY, RADIO**

**Judges: John Miller, Laurel Neme, Simran Sethi**

**1st Shawn Allee, Chicago Public Radio, “Ethanol: Food Versus Fuel?”**

*This piece featured a variety of experts and demonstrated great breadth and insight on the wide-reaching implications of corn ethanol. The topic is now widely broadcast. The fact that Shawn Allee reported on it a year back further demonstrates his strong reporting skills.*

**2nd Craig LeMoult, WSHU Public Radio, “Stratford Cleanup”**

**3rd Rebecca Williams, The Environment Report, Michigan Radio, “Frogs: A Love Story.”**

#### **OUTSTANDING STORY, TELEVISION**

**Michele Gillen, Gary Chittam, Dan Noyes**

**1st Paul Rogers, Christopher Bauer, Shirley Gutierrez, Josh Rosen, Sheraz Sadiq, KQED San Francisco, “Quest: Condors vs. Lead Bullets”**

*Judges found the Quest piece on the Condors to be mesmerizing and haunting with amazing storytelling and excellent use of video.*

**2nd Kerry Sanders, NBC News, “Arctic Ice Melt for the North Pole”**

**3rd Sidharth Pandey, NDTV 24x7, “Mined to Death”**

#### **OUTSTANDING STUDENT REPORTING**

**Judges: Geri Zeldes, Sam Vigil, Jude Isabella**

**1st Gavin Off, Columbia (Mo.) Tribune, “Lessons in Leniency”**

*“Lessons in Leniency” is a case study in documentary research. Gavin Off waded through thousands of pages of state department records obtained through Missouri’s Open Meetings and Records Law, and found the state’s Department of Natural Resources had a pattern of levying financial penalties that punished Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations or large animal farms for water pollution. And as the cover letter to his article mentioned, Gavin’s report influenced Missouri’s Legislature to table a bill on behalf of the CAFO industry to take away regulatory authority from counties and give them to the state. Bravo to Gavin for making an impact!*

**2nd Kristin Phillips, Scienceline - www.scienceline.org, “The Venice of New York”**

**3rd Katherine Harmon, Columbia (Mo.) Missourian, “Murky Waters”**

#### **SEJ’S RACHEL CARSON ENVIRONMENT BOOK AWARD**

**Judges: Marla Cone, Mark Neuzil, Elizabeth Grossman**

**Winner Callum Roberts, Island Press, “The Unnatural History of the Sea”**

*Callum Roberts has written one of those books that you tell your friends about shortly after you’ve read it. One could imagine that a history of fishing might make ponderous going, but Roberts is such a skilled writer and he tackles a complicated subject so well that the reader is pulled along easily. In The Unnatural History of the Sea, he entertains us with fascinating tales of explorers, whalers, fishermen and even pirates, and his words bring even the lowliest forms of marine organisms to life. You can’t love what you don’t know, and Roberts teaches us to know and love the oceans and everything that inhabits them. We decided that this book, with its striking depth and breadth, stands out for its storytelling, its research, and for its potential to bring this important subject to a wide audience. And although Roberts describes the disastrous state of the oceans, from the death of coral reefs to the collapse of Chesapeake Bay, he gives us hope that it’s not too late to save them. At the end of this book, he reminds us of the throngs of salmon swimming in Alaskan estuaries, the packs of hammerheads circling the Galapagos and the “mighty boils of tuna” in the Humboldt Current, all “remnants of the seas of long ago.” “There are still places in the world . . .,” Roberts wrote, “where it is possible to find something of the miraculous in nature.” In the spirit of Rachel Carson, who sounded an alarm that drove the world to action, we award Callum Roberts’ The Unnatural History of the Sea SEJ’s first annual book award.*

**Hon. Men. Alan Weisman, St. Martin’s Press, “The World Without Us”**

**Hon. Men. Peter Heller, Free Press, “The Whale Warriors”**

# E-beat questions: Favoring sources? What about TV envirocasts?



By JAN KNIGHT

## ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS CROSSES BEATS, AND THE BEAT INFLUENCES THE COVERAGE, PRELIMINARY RESEARCH SUGGESTS

Studies show that news beats shape news content: Reporters from different beats tend to focus on different angles of the same story, and some reporters may become so embedded in their beat's culture that they present their sources in a positive light or use sources' definitions of problems without question.

To determine whether this holds true for environmental news, **Michael McCluskey**, an assistant professor in the Ohio State University School of Communication, examined environmental coverage from four different beats – the environment, business, politics and general assignment – appearing in nine newspapers in western Washington state. He also surveyed environmental groups in the region, asking them about their organizations' goals and the size of their memberships, staff and budgets. He compared the survey results to 498 news stories appearing in the nine newspapers from 2002 through mid-2004, selecting news articles if they mentioned at least one of the environmental groups surveyed.

He found that environmental journalists were somewhat more likely than journalists on other beats to present environmental groups positively and they were significantly more likely to mention activists' solutions to environmental problems. He also found that environmental journalists wrote more about grassroots environmental groups than political and business reporters, who tended to focus on "institutionalized" organizations, or those with longevity and more resources.

Meanwhile, environment reporters were more likely than reporters on any other beat to write about environmental groups with public relations expertise. Political and general assignment reporters were more likely than environmental journalists to write about groups whose staffs and/or members possessed journalism experience.

Topic coverage also varied by beat, the researcher found, with environmental journalists writing more about groups with goals to protect water and wildlife habitat but writing less about groups that focus on lobbying and fighting sprawl.

The findings did not clearly indicate that environmental journalists were writing for their sources. Rather, the researcher

suggested, the results made sense, given that stories about sprawl and lobbying fit neatly into political and/or business coverage, while stories about water and habitat protection "reflect the type of rehabilitation efforts that fit squarely on the [environment] beat."

Environmental journalists write stories "that involve environmental groups possessing different resources and pursuing different types of goals than writers on other beats," the researcher concluded. "Those contextual factors – more stories about grassroots groups and groups with experienced PR practitioners" may be contributing to a pattern of coverage distinct to the environment beat, which suggests the need for more study, he wrote.

He cautioned that his findings were preliminary because of the study's narrow focus on the U.S. Northwest and the relatively small range of environmental groups surveyed.

For more information, see Michael McCluskey, "Reporter Beat and Content Differences in Environmental Stories" in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, Volume 85, No. 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 83 – 98.

## WEATHERCASTERS PLAY A KEY BUT OVERLOOKED ROLE IN EXPLAINING SCIENCE, WITH SOME DEVELOPING "ENVIROCASTS," STUDY SHOWS

The TV weather report is an understudied aspect of journalism, yet weathercasters often are the most, and sometimes the only, scientifically trained members of broadcast news staffs, a recent study suggests.

**Kris Wilson**, a senior lecturer for the Emory University journalism program in Atlanta, recently reviewed prominent communication journals to find very little research about weathercasters. This ignores the important role that weathercasters play as communicators of scientific and environmental information, Wilson suggested. Weathercasters do more than relay meteorological news and have covered a wide range of stories, including explaining the latest global warming findings and interpreting radar images of Columbia space shuttle debris as it fell over Texas. Weathercasters also may be the most graphic-savvy members of broadcast news staffs, providing explanatory images of forest fires, criminology techniques and other science-based stories for main

news segments.

As a step toward correcting academic inattention to weathercasters, Wilson surveyed 217 randomly selected U.S. TV weather reporters representing 127 markets in 48 states to learn more about what they do. According to the survey results:

- 93 percent of respondents said their TV stations did not employ science or environment reporters, a finding that matches results of surveys conducted by David Sachsman, James Simon and JoAnn M. Valenti and confirms “that [weathercasters] may be the only science-trained member in the newsroom and called upon for scientific expertise,” Wilson stated.

- About 20 percent of respondents said they regularly reported environmental news, for an average of three environmental stories reported per month among this group.

- Forecasting weather takes up 36 percent of a weathercaster’s day, while community service – visiting schools and speaking to community groups – comprises 15 percent of a typical day. During community visits, weathercasters address current issues in the news and explain the role of science in society and thus “may be a place where significant science communication occurs,” Wilson wrote. About half of a typical weathercaster’s day is spent preparing graphics for the weathercast and, as noted, they might also prepare graphics for science-related stories presented during newscasts.

- The main weather segment is longest in the smallest markets – 3 minutes and 35 seconds on average – and shortest in the largest markets, or 2 minutes 51 seconds, offering smaller markets more opportunities for increased coverage of the environment. However, TV weather staffs are larger in larger markets, indicating that they too have opportunities to provide environment and science news, Wilson suggested.

- More than half of the female respondents – who comprised only 15 percent of those surveyed – said they reported the weather on weekends, compared to one-fifth of their male counterparts who report on weekends. Those working weekends performed reporting duties on other days, offering another “untapped opportunity for increased science reporting in general and for an increased profile for women weathercasters specifically,” the researcher observed.

Wilson noted that efforts to provide sciencetraining for weathercasters are increasing, including those offered by the nonprofit National Environmental Education and Training Foundation (NEETF), established by Congress in 1990 to increase environmental knowledge in the United States.

Quoting a NEETF official, Wilson wrote that the foundation

considers weathercasters “the single largest cadre of trained scientists in the media today” with “particular promise for providing the viewing public with organized information on environmental systems and causal relationships important to public understanding of environmental science.”

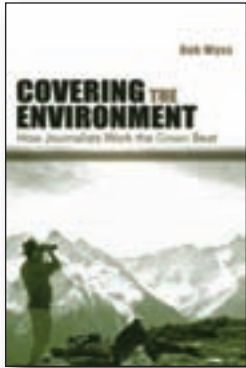
In its first project, NEETF worked with Bob Ryan, chief meteorologist at WRC-TV in Washington, D.C., to increase audience understanding of the Chesapeake watershed. Ryan and others are transforming weathercasts into “envirocasts,” Wilson wrote, concluding that the “days of television meteorologists doing little more than predicting the weather may be numbered as the forecasts of the future increasingly will include tips for viewers on how to dodge environmental threats and manage their health.”

For more information, see Kris M. Wilson, “Television Weathercasters as Potentially Prominent Science Communicators” in *Public Understanding of Science*, Volume 17, No. 1 (January 2008), pp. 73 – 87.

*Jan Knight, a former magazine editor and daily newspaper reporter, is a former assistant professor of communication at Hawaii Pacific University in Honolulu, where she continues to teach online courses in writing and environmental communication. She can be reached at [jknight213@aol.com](mailto:jknight213@aol.com)*

**“ ... [weathercasters] often are the most, and sometimes the only, scientifically trained members of broadcast news staffs, a recent study suggests.”**





“E-journalists will benefit from this text aimed at students.”

**Covering the Environment:  
How Journalists Work the Green Beat**

**by Robert Wyss**

Routledge, 2008, 311 pages, \$39.95

Reviewed by: Bill Kovarik

*Covering the Environment* is the essential backgrounder about the story of the century.

It is a captivating book with strong insights into the people who are now working the most important job in media history.

Although intended as a textbook for university students, it is valuable for professionals at any level who want to understand this beat. And it might also serve as a thoughtful holiday gift for a difficult editor.

Author Robert Wyss has brought a great deal of his own writing skill to bear from his 35 years as a newspaper reporter, and readers of his book will quickly realize that environmental reporting goes far beyond news and numbers, involving real people working a demanding and frequently thankless job.

The book begins with reporter Mark Schleifstein's struggle to bring serious hurricane coverage to the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*. The stories he wrote in 2002 with John McQuaid, as many SEJ members know, won two Pulitzer Prizes and probably saved tens of thousands of lives in 2005. However, they were written under a cloud of suspicion and at a price of a few serious newsroom arguments. The predicted disaster, with a high loss of life, finally shocked the industry into taking the environmental beat more seriously, Wyss said.

The book also describes Natalie Pawelski reporting from Yellowstone for CNN; Ron Nixon investigating clear-cut logging for the *Roanoke Times*; Ken Ward Jr. of *The Charleston* (West Virginia) *Gazette* covering a controversy over mining impacts on a school; and Dan Fagin uncovering cancer clusters on Long Island for *Newsday*.

Each of these real world examples is tied to an important thematic lesson. Among the themes are risk communication, understanding science, interviewing scientists, reporters tools and dealing with regulators.

The book gives insights from Christy George of Oregon Public Broadcasting about the value of the first and last questions in interviewing scientists. An example of reporting tools is Jim Bruggers of *The* (Louisville) *Courier-Journal* discussing computer-assisted reporting in air pollution stories. Another example of long-form narrative is provided by Peter Lord's

*Providence Journal* series about the human side of lead poisoning.

These strong personal narratives make the material come alive. With an admirable internal logic, Wyss' writing itself shows readers an awareness of the human dimensions of any writing work.

The book also notes some of the failings of the press in communicating risk. For instance, in the 1989 controversy over the pesticide Alar, the book notes that author and researcher Sharon Friedman found only a fraction of Alar reporting had used any risk analysis to put the threat into perspective.

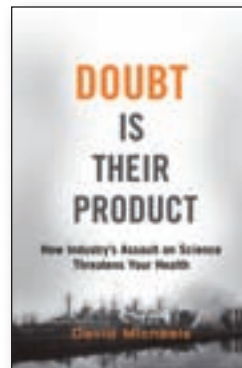
*Covering the Environment* outlines other serious controversies, such as the debate over advocacy versus objectivity and instances when science may have been misrepresented for apparently political reasons. Wyss handles this at arms' length and with insight, but his stance probably won't please everyone.

This is as it should be.

As he writes: “Journalists must determine what is news. They cannot delegate what should be on the public agenda to any one group, be it science, government, or political and environmental advocates.”

Perhaps most memorable is this piece of advice: “Do not be intimidated.”

*Bill Kovarik is a professor of communications at Radford University in Virginia and co-chair of SEJ's 2008 conference.*



“Using politics and science, industry battles regulation.”

**Doubt Is Their Product:  
How Industry's Assault on Science  
Threatens Your Health**

**by David Michaels**

Oxford University Press, \$27.95

Reviewed by Jennifer Weeks

News flash (not): Manufacturers of dangerous products fight off regulations by stirring up doubts about what the science really shows.

This theme won't surprise many journalists, or anyone who has watched “A Civil Action” or “Erin Brockovich.”

*Doubt Is Their Product* is an up-close look at what Michaels calls the product defense industry and its tactics.

Recognizing that it's hard to beat something with nothing, the tobacco industry created its own scientific research organizations in the 1950s to cast doubt on studies that showed health risks from smoking. The book's title refers to a 1969 corporate memo that stated, “Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the ‘body of fact’ that exists in the minds of the general public. It is also the means of establishing a controversy.”



Other companies that made asbestos, chromium, synthetic dyes, vinyl chloride, leaded gasoline, and diacetyl (the compound in artificial butter flavoring, which can cause a devastating disease known as popcorn lung), have followed suit.

Many early doubt campaigns were steered by the conservative public relations firm Hill and Knowlton (there's a potential book topic). But since the 1970s the product defense industry has expanded. Michaels describes several consulting firms that specialize in helping manufacturers defend their products against proposed health and safety regulations. They do this, he asserts, by hiring well-trained toxicologists, epidemiologists, statisticians, and other specialists whose work is designed to cloud the debate.

"The scientific studies these firms do for their clients are like the accounting work that some Arthur Anderson company accountants did for Enron (until both companies went bankrupt)," Michaels writes. "They appear to play by the rules of the discipline, but their objective is to help corporations frustrate regulators and prevail in product liability litigation."

It's not easy for journalists or the public to figure out whose science is more credible, but Michaels spotlights some standard product defense methods:

— Re-analyzing raw data from incriminating studies, with subtle changes to the assumptions and methods that reduce estimates of risk and make statistically significant differences smaller.

— Publishing rebuttal studies in industry-funded journals, which appear credible because they are "peer-reviewed" – by sympathetic corporate consultants. As examples, Michaels cites *Regulatory Toxicology and Pharmacology* (funded by tobacco, chemical, and drug manufacturers) and the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*.

— Funding policy analysis groups with names like the Council on Water Quality and the Foundation for Clean Air Progress, which make recommendations to Congress and the public that cite industry-funded scientific studies.

Delving further into the doubt industry's methods, Michaels points out some features of misleading public health studies. Since most cancers that are caused by chemical exposures usually take 30 years or more to develop, researchers can make health effects seem minimal by analyzing subjects' exposures over shorter periods. Selecting a small group of subjects makes it harder to show statistically significant increases in disease risks, and mixing subjects with different exposure levels together dilutes what may be high risks for those who receive the heaviest exposures.

The book also shows how corporations have used political strategies to skew the regulatory process. Thanks to laws initiated by cigarette manufacturers, corporations have access to data from federally funded studies that agencies used to write regulations (making it easy for company scientists to reanalyze the data in misleading ways). Under the Data Quality Act, industry can challenge scientific studies issued by government agencies as not meeting proper scientific standards.

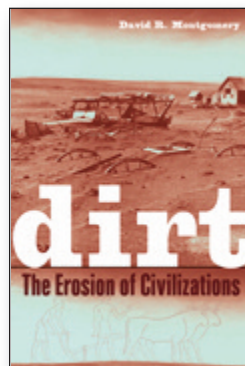
Michaels, who served in the Clinton administration, echoes other critics who argue that President George W. Bush's administration has systematically undercut the role of science in government policy. But he doesn't let Democrats off the hook, although he argues that corporate influence is at an all-time high under Bush.

As one reform, Michaels suggests that corporate executives should be legally responsible for ensuring that the scientific information their firms provide to regulators and the public is accurate (this already applies for financial information, under a 2002 law widely known as Sarbanes-Oxley).

Michaels also recommends a dozen ways to improve the regulatory process. Some are specific, such as requiring full

disclosure of all sponsorship of federally funded scientific studies. Others are broader – for example, unifying control over toxic exposures, which is currently split among EPA, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and the Mining Safety and Health Administration (MSHA). Readers can find supporting materials and news updates on the home page for the Project on Scientific Knowledge and Public Policy at GWU, which Michaels directs ([www.defendingscience.org](http://www.defendingscience.org)).

*Jennifer Weeks is a freelance writer in Watertown, Massachusetts.*



"Everything about dirt,  
but you'll have to dig for it."

## ***Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations***

**by David R. Montgomery**

**University of California, 2007  
Reviewed by Susan Moran**

Despite my attempts at gardening, I never fully appreciated worms until I read David R. Montgomery's *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations*. Nor did I know how much time and ink Charles Darwin devoted to the squirming creators of soil.

By carefully observing worms in his final years of life, Darwin, Dr. Montgomery writes, discovered and illuminated their role in the buildup of topsoil and thereby "helped open the door for the modern view of soil as the skin of the Earth."

In *Dirt*, the author also explores a profound and problematic truth: ecological suicide is nothing new and that we don't appear to be learning from past mistakes.

The book is chock full of reports on how civilization after civilization has grown, prospered and finally collapsed. In every case the demise was at least in part due to neglect of the soil. In the United States, warnings of destructive agricultural practices date back to founding fathers George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

The problem is, Montgomery's writing is as dry as dirt and as repetitive as sizzling days in Arizona's summers, making it tough to put the many disjointed factual nuggets and flashes of wisdom into a cohesive and useful message. This can't just be blamed on the pressures of academia to produce impenetrable writing. Montgomery is a professor of geomorphology at the University of Washington. But Jared Diamond is also a professor. Montgomery follows thematic currents similar to those in *Diamond's Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, but without the alluring human stories and mind-bending insights. It is unfortunate that such a critical topic, vital to the future of humankind, is treated as an uncoordinated fact dump by Montgomery.

Still, the author's tome is important and timely. For those who want to better understand some of the causes of and potential solutions to the global food shortages and soil crisis, *Dirt* is worth navigating — at least speed-reading. It is replete with more information than prime Iowa bottomland has topsoil.

Montgomery offers three overarching and interlinked crises to choose from when contemplating the end of life as we know it: climate change, fresh water shortages, and soil degradation. Oceans of ink have been spilled on the first two topics but relatively little attention has been paid to the slow but inexorable degradation of our ability to grow food. The author jumps into this void with *Dirt*.

Soil — or dirt as Montgomery calls it to tweak our irony — is complicated stuff. First, it is stratified, with the topmost layer being the most important for agriculture. It has an intricate micro and macro structure that leads to its ability to hold water and avoid erosion. And finally, its chemical makeup — in particular the amounts of the macronutrients nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium — affect how well crops can grow. Mess with any of

these attributes and good cropland goes south. And it has, starting at the time humans gave up the hunter-gatherer spear and took up the plow about 10,000 years ago.

But it's not all a downhill slog to doomsday. Montgomery points to some ancient and increasingly popular practices of no-till and conservation tillage farming, as well as polyculture (versus monoculture) and organic farming, as antidotes to conventional chemical fertilizer-based agriculture that is stripping the precious skin of the Earth. This is especially applicable in times of steep oil and natural gas prices. Montgomery's *Dirt* leaves the reader with a vexing question worthy of a whole new book: How do we feed a mushrooming world population when fossil fuels run out?

*Susan Moran is a freelance writer and adjunct journalism professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Her husband, J. Thomas McKinnon, a chemical engineering professor at the Colorado School of Mines, contributed to this review.*

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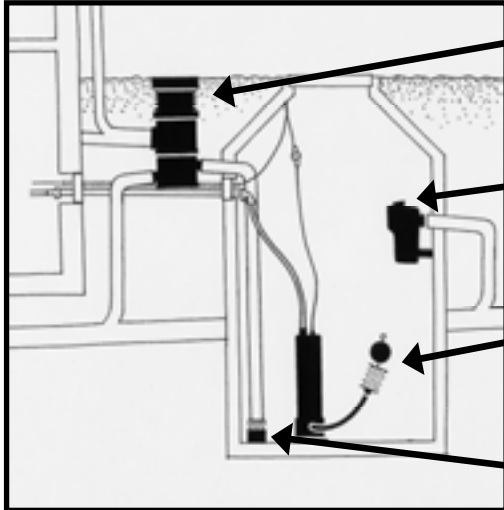
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