near future. A plea last autumn by Deputy Premier Roman Malinowski for "close cooperation" with Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic to save 60,000 threatened trees in the western province of Jelenia Gora, where pollution and insect pests have a synergetic effect, seems to have been a broad hint that Poland's neighbours might help bear some of the cost of setting right the damage to which their pollution contributes.

By February this year, the State Environmental Protection Inspectorate produced what was described in official circles as a "pessimistic" report concluding that, in many cases, irreversible environmental changes were already under way. Surface waters, especially rivers, seem to be in a particularly bad state, with only 1 per cent of the total length of Poland's rivers in the first category of cleanness (fit for human consumption) while the Vistula has second category water (fit for agriculture) only near its source. More than 60 per cent is below even the third category (little more than sewage). These figures were known to specialists in Poland as early as 1976, but have not been publicly released until now.

Now, there is growing public recognition of the health hazards of pollution black spots. In Plock province, there has been a call for "comprehensive investigations" into the high morbidity rate, particularly among children under two years of age. Last month a 10-man environmental subcommittee of the Sejm (Parliament) visited Katowice, where it declared itself "shocked" by the workers' housing estates, with "windows only a few metres from sources of pollution".

Recently, moreover, a leading ecologist, Professor Henryk Zimny, has argued that pollution control is cost-effective, a factor the new environmental body will doubtless find valuable when negotiating funding. Some 600,000 million zloty, says Professor Zimny, are lost annually to the Polish economy for lack of pollution control. If only 10 per cent of this sum could be spent on protective measures in the immediate future, these losses could be halved.

Vera Rich

US nuclear power

NRC divided on emergency plans

Washington

THE beleaguered nuclear power industry narrowly averted a major political setback last week by persuading the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) to rescind a threat to close two power plants at Indian Point in New York. NRC had warned last month that the plants would be shut down because the Federal Emergency Management Authority (FEMA) considered emergency evacuation plans for the area to be inadequate (see *Nature* 12 May, p. 101).

Had NRC not changed its mind, the Indian Point reactors would have become the first operating plants to be closed down on the basis of deficient emergency plans. The commissioners decided by three votes to two to keep them open because a new report by FEMA said the plants' operators had stepped up planning efforts and promised to hold an emergency exercise within the next 60 days.

The close vote reflected sharp disagreements among the five commissioners. Mr James Asselstine, who voted to close the plants, said that nothing in the new report from FEMA indicated that a satisfactory emergency plan had yet been devised for Indian Point. In these circumstances, the decision to rescind the shutdown threat "made a mockery" of NRC's own rules.

Mr Victor Gilinsky, the other commissioner to vote for closure, complained that despite the uniquely high population in the vicinity of Indian Point, it was the only nuclear site that had consistently failed FEMA's tests of emergency preparedness.

But Mr John Ahearne, a commissioner who had been expected to recommend a shutdown but who changed his mind "reluctantly" after reading the new FEMA report, said enough progress had been made over recent weeks to suggest that a satisfactory emergency plan could be devised in the near future. A principal obstacle — the reluctance of a nearby municipality to participate in emergency planning — seemed to have been overcome by an undertaking by the State of New York to take over the county's emergency functions.

The commission's decision was being closely watched by the nuclear power industry and its opponents as a test of NRC's attitude towards the strict new evacuation regulations it introduced after the Three Mile Island accident in 1979. In a number of recent cases, notably at the Shoreham plant in Long Island, municipalities opposed to nuclear power have attempted to prevent reactors from operating by refusing to participate in emergency planning.

Another significant victory was scored by the industry earlier last week when the Supreme Court upheld the authority of NRC to disregard, in hearings on the licensing of nuclear plants, the possible impact

on the environment arising from the long-term disposal of nuclear waste. The Natural Resources Defense Council had challenged the commission's assumption that a method for disposing safely of long-term wastes would eventually be found.

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, said the Supreme Court, in a unanimous decision, had found no reason to fault NRC's prediction that uncertainties surrounding the development of a permanent waste disposal depository were unlikely to affect the outcome of any individual licensing decision. In reaching this conclusion, she said, NRC was making decisions "within its area of special expertise, at the frontiers of science". In such circumstances, a court should be at its "most deferential".

At issue in the case was a table contained in the generic rules issued by NRC to aid licensing hearings for individual reactors. The table, S-3, consists of a numerical compilation of the estimated resources used and effluents released by fuel cycle activities supporting a year's operation of a typical light water reactor. In compiling the table, NRC decided to assume that the permanent storage of waste would have no significant environmental impact.

Peter David.

Kestrel under threat

THE Mauritain kestrel (above) is one of several bird species in Mauritius threatened with extinction: the surviving population is said to be numbered in single figures. Mr Robin Brown, of UK Central Television, is forming a committee to create a bird sanctuary covering the Black River Gorge in the south west of the island. The project has the support of the Mauritian Prime Minister and is backed by local businessmen and conservation groups. □