

Growing with environmental care

The World Bank's annual report on development strategy shows its full commitment to environmental causes. When will that go so far as to link assistance with prudent population policies?

THE World Bank's conversion to the cause of sustainable development appears to be complete, to judge from its *World Development Report 1992*, the fifteenth in an annual series, issued earlier this week. Lewis T. Preston, the bank's president, says the main need now is "to integrate environmental considerations into development policymaking". But the bank's traditional optimism has not evaporated: the document insists that "continued and even accelerated" development can be sustained. Unlike other pronouncements on these issues, the Brundtland report for example, the bank has taken care that its case is sustained by evidence. Indeed, there is such a wealth of data on the nexus between development and environment that those packing their bags for next month's conference in Rio de Janeiro would be well advised to put a copy in their luggage.

Two particular issues deserve attention, of which the most immediate is the positive correlation between prosperity and many important aspects of environmental quality. That is not, of course, a surprise. Only rich countries can afford safe public water supplies, of course, but the data also confirm that urban air is less polluted (by dust and sulphur dioxide) in richer countries. That merely shows that environmental protection and improvement is a consumer purchase (often, of course, by governments on behalf of their taxpayers). The point is neatly illustrated by a graph showing the sulphur dioxide concentration in urban atmospheres as a function of the average per capita income of the countries concerned. The most polluted cities are those in countries with an income of about \$1,200 per head per year. Countries poorer than that produce little pollution anyway, richer countries can afford to clean up the air.

The implications for the future of the World Bank's policies are plain. Development used to be an objective in its own right. With the addition of the goal of environmental protection and improvement, increasing the prosperity of the poorest half of the world becomes an even more compelling need, for otherwise the poor will not be able to afford the measures they need to take. The logic is compelling, simple though it may be. The fly in the ointment is that the goal may be, for many countries, unattainable because the poorest countries include those in which the rate of population growth is greatest. Whatever assistance they are given, the argument goes, they will continue to grow more quickly than the economic resources at their disposal, with the consequence that they will never be able to comply with seemingly environmental requirements.

That is yet another reason why the bank is driven to the emphasis on population growth that marks this week's document. What, other than exhortation, can be done? Commendably, the bank has accepted the only forceful analysis of the problem — that the causes of rapid population growth include the insecurity of poor families whose calculations of their future all too often require them to suppose that half their offspring will probably be dead by puberty. Who can blame peasant families for producing more offspring than are strictly necessary when, in such circumstances, they can only fear that there will be nobody left to execute the most primitive life insurance policy in the world, filial regard for older generations?

So it makes entire sense that the World Bank now plans that a greater share of its resources should go on humdrum projects such as the provision of safe water supplies. Not only are these desirable in themselves, but by reducing the incidence of infant deaths, they may be the quickest way of giving poor populations the sense of security in the future than the rich enjoy. The education of women is the second prong of the World Bank's efforts in this connection — again an intrinsically desirable goal whose side-effects include the abatement of population growth. So far, so good. The snag, so far, is that the bank does not go so far as to say that policies on population growth will be a necessary qualification of requests for development assistance. For how much longer can it persist with that gentility? □

Anti-environment Bush

President George Bush has sided with industry against his own environmental chief on an air pollution issue.

US INDUSTRY won a round in an environmental fight last week when President George Bush decided to allow companies to exceed their pollution permits by as much as 80,000 pounds of toxic chemicals a year without first giving public notice. The president's decision is, perhaps, more important for its symbolic value than for any actual effect on pollution, for the decision is certain to be challenged in court.

The heart of the issue is an argument over the interpretation of the US Clean Air Act of 1990, which the head of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) says requires public notice (and with it inevitable cost and delay) from companies wanting to dump or spew into the environment more pollut-