WHOSE ENVIRONMENT?

THE pollution of the English coast by a large part of the 120,000 tons of oil carried by the Torrey Canyon (see page 3) raises a string of questions about the contamination of the environment which have not yet been given the attention they deserve. The accidental loss of oil tankers is not, of course, the only kind of hazard which needs to be considered. Accidents at nuclear power stations could easily create more serious situations, and over a still greater area. There are also many kinds of chemical plants at which accidents could seriously damage the immediate environment. The passage of years inevitably entails that the scale of hazards like these should steadily increase. There is also a tendency for the inherent difficulty of dealing with contamination to become greater as technology becomes more clever. After all, it is considerably more difficult to separate strontium from calcium than, say, oil from the beaches of Cornwall.

Increasing scale tends to bring with it increasingly tortuous legal problems. Ever since people have been worrying about the accidental release of radioactivity, it has been plain that an accident in one country could bring harm to another. This characteristic of contamination by radioactivity is not strictly a new development, as has been demonstrated frequently in past centuries by repeated rows about the pollution of the lower reaches of the Rhine by industrial enterprises upstream. The pollution caused by the oil from the Torrey Canyon is similar in this respect, if only because a vessel on the high seas must legally be considered as a sovereign appendage of the sovereign state with which she is registered. If the ship had remained afloat, she would have been prevented from discharging oil so near the coast of England under the terms of an international agreement to this effect, but shipwreck is plainly a special circumstance. No amount of treaty making can keep oil inside a sunken tanker once the holds are broken open. It would be the same, of course, with the hypothetical discharge of radioactivity from a nuclear reactor. Here, too, there is no point in saying after the event that it should never have happened. More constructive policies are necessary.

In the first place, there is a clear need for acknowledged means of compensation for those who are directly damaged by accidental pollution of the environment. This has been recognized since the beginning of the development of nuclear energy, with the result that there has grown up a sensible code of practice for regulating third-party insurance. Is there any reason why the same should not be done with the risk of oil pollution following the loss of ships at sea? It is true that it might usually be harder to trace a source of oil pollution than a reactor accident, but the most serious accidents would be at the same time the most conspicuous and the easiest to trace. They would also be the rarest occurrences of this kind, so that the cost of adequate insurance need not be prohibitive. Certainly there is no reason to fear that international lawyers would be unable to deal competently with the problem. Indeed, if the problems of arriving at a workable international convention on third-party insurance proved to be too time-consuming, it would always be possible for nations to act unilaterally, and to impose a levy on arriving and departing ships that would be enough to pay the premium on a sensible insurance policy.

Insurance by itself is not enough, however. There is also an urgent need for means of remedying pollution which match in scale the kinds of accidents now possible. One of the most striking features of the attempts which have been made to keep oil away from British beaches in the past two weeks is that they have been pathetically puny in scale. Ships have been spraying oil at sea with detergent much as if they were doctors trying to control plague with aspirin tablets, or engineers required to contain landslides with picks and shovels. The trouble is that there is no tradition of dealing with problems of pollution on a scale commensurate with the kinds of accidents which can now happen. But accidents are not the only occasions on which steps like these are necessary. A great many rivers are at present too heavily polluted, and most industrialized nations could usefully employ means of removing gross pollution from large quantities of water. It is the same with the atmosphere and with other parts of the natural environment. Methods of cleansing it on a huge scale are likely increasingly to be necessary, more or less as a routine. In other words, if there were more self-conscious care for the environment as a whole, it would probably be easier to deal with occasional accidents. It is to be hoped that this will be acknowledged before many more tankers sink at sea.

SCIENCE OF SCIENCE

NOBODY should reproach the Science of Science Foundation for the name with which it is now saddled. It is memorable, to say the least of it. It trips well off the tongue. And it suggests a broad field of interest which coincides more or less accurately with the interests of a growing band of devotees. It is true that the same name may sometimes suggest too grandiose a conception of the place which science and technology should occupy in modern society, and too solemn a notion of the importance of the studies which can be carried out in the name of the science of science. It is now, for example, plain that much that has been written in the two past decades about the relationship between science and national prosperity is less important and