

IN BRIEF

Environmental warfare action

The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), an environmentalist organisation, has gone to court in an effort to block ratification by the United States of an international treaty prohibiting some types of environmental warfare. NRDC lawyers have argued that since the treaty, which is now being considered by the United Nations General Assembly, would exclude only environmental modification techniques which may have "wide-spread, long-lasting or severe effects", it would not outlaw use of such techniques as cloud seeding and other potentially more damaging environmental modification efforts. If the treaty is ratified, NRDC asserts, it would serve only to "legitimise the use of weather modification and defoliants as weapons of war".

Similar criticisms have also been ex-

pressed by countries including Japan, Sweden, Pakistan and Yugoslavia. NRDC is seeking a novel way to block US ratification of the treaty: it is arguing that the National Environmental Policy Act requires the State Department to file an environmental impact statement setting out the risks and benefits associated with the treaty, and until such a statement has been published, NRDC is seeking an injunction to prevent US ratification.

Windmill site chosen

A small town in New Mexico has been chosen as the site for the world's largest electricity-generating windmill. The Energy Research and Development Administration (ERDA) last week announced that a 200 kW wind turbine generator will be constructed next year in Clayton, a small town with about 3,000 inhabitants in a windswept

region of the Great Plains. The turbine, which will be field-tested for two years, will be the first wind turbine to be constructed in more than 30 years for generating electricity for public consumption in the United States. It will be followed in the early 1980s by two 1.5 MW generators in other, as yet unannounced, locations. Designs for those two generators are now under development by ERDA and, when constructed, they will be the largest wind generators ever built.

Bomb at Swedish plant

A 25 kg bomb at the Ringhals nuclear power station on Sweden's west coast was discovered last weekend after a Goteborg newspaper received an anonymous letter. The bomb was apparently too far from the reactors to have damaged them but could have damaged power lines and transformers.

THE media are providing news of the furbish lousewort (*Pedicularis* sp.). This is a scrophularious plant that is not yet on the endangered list, but is about to receive its diploma in this category, come 1977. Louseworts were so named in England because it was alleged that "the cattell that pasture where plenty of this grass groweth become full of lice". It seems that about 30 furbish louseworts were discovered in the juggernaut pathway of a new federal electric power dam in a remote corner of northern Maine. Such an event sets up two groups: good guys (lousewort lovers) and villains (power dam protagonists) on opposite sides of a "two-valued orientation". The law does not permit a compromise of moving lousewort clusters to another niche in Maine.

Nostalgically I recall that more than twenty years ago I wrote a short article deploring the march of high tension lines through the wild Ramapo mountains, a home of white-tailed deer, mountain laurel, rattlesnakes and blueberries, only 30 miles north of New York City. Like most protesters, I was then, as now, a great consumer of electric power. I am also a lover of the more common louseworts, whose curly fronds rise in reddish sprouts from the wet mud as soon as the snow melts in high mountain meadows. Later they will unfold their small luminous pink flowers called "elephant heads".

It is important to preserve endangered species, but whether we can preserve their present habitats may be doubtful. Sometimes the niche is at greater risk than the species, which can be transferred elsewhere, as with

some of the noble silva of California. The giant sequoia is indigenous in only a few groves on the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada. Yet its lovers have carried it to distant parts; it towers above native trees on the shores of the Vierwaldstättersee in Switzerland. Specimens of its cones

Endangered species

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and branches first reached Europe in 1853, and now two giant sequoias in the garden of a palace in Spain are presumably the tallest trees in Europe. If cherished, they can increase in stature for two thousand years. The coast redwood, a similar species, is probably regarded widely as being endangered, but actually it is only the large specimens that are at risk; the species itself is vigorous and thriving. A two-day hike through the Cali-

fornia coast range near Big Sur impresses one that there are probably, and fortunately, more redwoods (small ones) than people in California.

Surely the skills of horticulturists and plant scientists should be increasingly summoned to preserve endangered plant species. Cloning, asexual propagation and transplanting can all be used. The problems are different for animals. Much praiseworthy effort is currently taking place in zoos to save rare and dwindling species of animals, but, when preserved, where will they live? The inherent behaviour of an individual species towards people may either favour or endanger its survival. In the 1920s, the ornithologist Dawson said that there were 20-odd giant condors left in the USA and that one of their principal enemies was "scientists". If the 1920 figures were correct, the numbers of this bird have not since diminished, but it seems to have lost its ecological niche because of human intrusion, and, perhaps, diminution of food supply. Its smaller relatives, the vultures, are in contrast highly adaptive and proliferative. They even eat carrion on the roads in the form of dead animals killed by highway traffic. But the shy and lonely condor will have none of such contact with the doings of humans.

No regrets have yet been voiced over what we are told is the impending extinction of the smallpox virus. Doubtless this little piece of DNA helped, years ago, to keep the human population curve from ascending too steeply. But admirers of smallpox will find few sympathisers.