

Malign environmental neglect

The US Administration's indifference to environmental issues will not be removed by a few speeches at wildlife picnics.

To show that he really does want peace, President Reagan a few weeks ago made a point of praising Russian music (Tchaikovsky, to be exact). Now he is hopping around wildlife refuges to demonstrate his concern for the environment. But few are likely to be impressed by this born-again environmentalism, coming as it does so near to the elections. Indeed, what Mr Reagan may really have accomplished in his week-long carefully-planned show of concern for environmental protection is to remind the electorate of the opportunities lost by his administration to do something about some very real environmental issues.

The three and a half years of obstructionism that the administration has brought to bear on environmental policy should be seen as an opportunity lost by the administration's own supporters, not just its critics. At the last election four years ago, there was something in the view that environmental regulation had got out of hand. But instead of seizing the chance to rationalize environmental policy — particularly by instituting a more sensible approach to ordering hazards so that the response might be vaguely proportional to the risk — President Reagan, through a combination of simplistic campaign rhetoric about "big government" and a basic lack of interest in the substance of environmental issues, set the tone for the neglect that followed. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) — the pragmatic creation of a Republican president — was put in the hands of ideologues and time-servers who presided over its thorough demoralization. Although it would have been possible to find competent knowledgeable professionals who nonetheless shared Reagan's political philosophy, EPA (and the Department of the Interior) instead became the dumping ground for political hacks.

This approach succeeded, to be sure, in preventing new regulations (such as those covering acid rain). It also failed to do anything whatsoever about the Keystone Cops mentality inherited from previous administrations which sends EPA racing from one "disaster" to another, sometimes pushing for control of minuscule hazards (benzene in gasoline) while ignoring others a thousand times more serious (asbestos in schools).

Even after the political hackery within EPA was cleaned out with the departure of Mrs Anne Gorsuch Burford and almost all of her senior staff, obstructionism persisted. William Ruckelshaus, the new administrator, came in with a sterling reputation and a plateful of ideas for reshaping the agency's regulations along conservative but pragmatic lines. Most interesting was his concept of involving local citizens in decisions on how to balance the need for industrial emissions controls with the consequent loss of local jobs. But Ruckelshaus has found that the president's promise of his personal backing has been worth very little. Ruckelshaus was left last year with egg on his face when his efforts to strike a deal with Canada over control of acid rain was blocked by the ideologues within the administration, unconcerned about scientific details.

Symbolism has its place in government, and last week's round of visits to national parks and wildlife areas cannot be dismissed out of hand. If nothing else, it may create an expectation for substantive action that will have to be fulfilled. President Reagan will have his chance on two issues in the next few months: the reauthorization of the hazardous waste "superfund" and the possibility of reopening talks with Canada on acid rain. Failure to take a strong stand on either will surely disappoint those who have

been encouraged by recent gestures. But symbolism cuts both ways, as Mr Reagan learned from the outrage that met the appointment two weeks ago of Mrs Burford to head a national advisory committee on oceans and the atmosphere. The timing was particularly bad, coming the night before a painfully prepared meeting with four conservative environmental leaders. The meeting almost failed to take place. The four, Mr Reagan's natural allies, all heads of old-line conservation groups, most of whose members are hunters and fishermen, spent the entire meeting lambasting the President for the Burford appointment, of which Mr Reagan was apparently ignorant. Malign neglect abounds. What is needed now is some decisive action or even decisive symbolism from the top to change the tone of the administration and to permit competent professionals, such as Mr Ruckelshaus, to do their jobs. □

Miracles do not happen

A group has invited trouble by claiming that science has nothing to say about miracles.

THE presidents of the Linnean Society and of the Bible Creation Society of the United Kingdom, Dr Sam Berry and Mr E. H. Andrews, together with a vice-chancellor, a fellow of the Royal Society and other worthies, last week startled readers of the London *Times* by intervening in a theological dispute which has riven the Anglican community in Britain — the propriety of installing as Bishop of Durham a man who professes himself (on television) to have an open mind on questions such as the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection. Briefly, the Linnean president and his fellow-believers say, "it is not logically valid to use science as an argument against miracles", and "the belief that miracles cannot happen is as much an act of faith as... that they can happen".

Nobody can sensibly complain that scientists of various kinds are often religious people of one persuasion or another, or quarrel with the conclusion of Barry *et al.* that the "laws" of science are "only generalizations of our experience" and that "faith rests on other ground". But it is a travesty of something to assert that science has "nothing to say" about miracles.

Take an uncontentious miracle, such as the turning of water into wine. This is said to have happened at a wedding feast, when the supply of wine was unexpectedly exhausted. The only published account has it that jars of drinking water were found to have been transformed into wine in the socially embarrassing circumstances that had arisen. The account is now firmly a part of the Christian legend, but that is not the same as saying it is the account of a phenomenon. Obvious alternative explanations abound. As scientists, the signatories would not have given a favourable referee's opinion of such an account for a scientific journal. And far from science having "nothing to say" about miracles, the truth is quite the opposite. Miracles, which are inexplicable and irreproducible phenomena, do not occur — a definition by exclusion of the concept.

Ordinarily, the point would not be worth making. The trouble with the publication from Berry *et al.* is that it provides a licence not merely for religious belief (which, on other grounds, is unexceptionable) but for mischievous reports of all things paranormal, from ghosts to flying saucers. □