

/THE LAST WORD

Is It Really Environmentalism Versus Biotechnology?

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Although we talk a lot about biotechnology and environmentalism, neither of those words has a very precise meaning. No wonder the dialogue in this area has been less than brilliant. Biotechnology is not an "it," not a discrete entity. Everybody has a different definition of biotechnology, and a different idea of where you draw the line between new and conventional biotechnology—and, wherever you draw the line, ongoing research guarantees that the line isn't in the same place today that it was yesterday.

Everybody talks about the environmental movement (singular)—but it isn't much of an "it" either. Environmentalism has grown tremendously as a political cause, and the number of environmentalists and organizations has grown along with it. When I joined the Sierra Club in the mid-60s, its membership was about 75,000—a great jump beyond what the club had been a few years earlier. Now the membership is around half a million. I hadn't heard of any other environmental organizations when I joined the Sierra Club—joining it and joining the movement were pretty much synonymous. Now we have all kinds.

I doubt that people who aren't closely involved with the movement understand how disparate these groups are; it takes a great stretch to call them a single movement at all. Some of them don't even get along together particularly well: There is a lot of tension, for example, between the mainstream organizations and some of the newer groups such as Earth First! and the Green parties.

Even within the mainstream there is great variety: big membership organizations such as the Sierra Club, smaller and more specialized groups such as the National Resources Defense Council, and think-tanks like the Worldwatch Institute.

The mainstream organizations—which represent the vast majority of active environmentalists—were late to become involved in biotechnology-related issues, and still aren't deeply involved. Ask a member of one of these groups what issues he or she is most worried about, and biotechnology is not likely to make the top twenty. The organizations that do follow biotechnology regulatory issues with full-time staff people—such as the Environmental Defense Fund and the National Wildlife Federation—probably would not have them if it were not for foundation support; the impetus comes more from the foundation's initiative than from expressed membership interest within the organizations.

The Foundation for Economic Trends is definitely not mainstream. But you don't need a license to call yourself an environmentalist, and Jerry Rifkin, who is a skilled media hustler, understands this well. If you say you are an environmentalist, the reporters will write that down and pass it along. In my opinion, however, Rifkin's relationship to the environment is about the same as that of the flagpole sitter to the flag.

I am not trying to say here that there is no tension between the environmental mainstream and the biotechnology industry, because there is: the average environmentalist is suspicious of technology and industry, and inclined to take a "don't do it" position when in doubt. But biotechnology simply isn't what the average environmentalist is most concerned about. And suspicion is not active opposition.

To further complicate things, many mainstream environmental leaders are on record as favoring certain applications of biotechnology: There is much support for the EPA's backing of bioremediation, and both the Worldwatch Institute and the World Resources Institute have published reports advocating the further development of biotechnology in ways that will contribute to environmentally sustainable growth. The Ecological Society of America's report expressing cautious support for biotechnology (along with some concerns) has been widely read—and very influential.

My hunch is that, in the years just ahead—as the boundary line between biotechnology and everything else becomes less and less clear and the environmental cause continues to grow—the range of attitudes toward biotechnology among environmentalists will become increasingly wide: More environmentalists will support bioremediation, biological substitutes for agricultural chemicals, and some "sustainable development" biotechnologies. At the same time, some mainstream organizations will continue to operate in an adversarial relation to science and industry, maintaining their concern about ecological impacts. Anti-biotechnology groups will remain precisely that. I also expect that the industry will continue to push enough environmentally dubious products to keep anti-biotechnology groups busy and happy and to make it difficult for other environmentalists to support the science as much as they would like to.

In short: more biotechnology, more environmentalists, more confusion, more environmental-biotechnology cooperation and more environmental-biotechnology tension—but no clear conflict between the two. There never has been any clear conflict, and it is one of the great misfortunes of our time that people on all sides have been encouraged to believe there is.