

EDITORIAL

Professional climatologists were in the minority at the World Climate Conference (Geneva, February 12–23), being superseded by scientists of climate-sensitive activities such as agriculture, fisheries, forestry, hydrology and urban planning. The Conference pointed out that the resilience of society to climatic stresses has decreased in the last decades as a result of population pressures and agricultural practices so that even if the present climatic regime were to remain unchanged, societal impacts would become more severe. The President of the Conference stated that we must learn to regard the climate as we do water – as a natural resource – which is at the same time a common resource on which depends the well-being of all mankind: thus the impact of man's activities on the climate must be better evaluated. While climatic variability and climate changes are natural processes, superimposed on these natural processes is "greenhouse" warming of the atmosphere due to increasing CO₂ mostly from the burning of fossil fuels and other industrially produced substances such as the chlorofluoromethanes.

But what are the alternatives if the burning of coal, wood and liquid fuels is to decrease? The alternative generally accepted as being the most viable, atomic energy, was discussed in detail as were the problems presented by the dangerous aspects of nuclear technology. Such aspects have been underlined again by the events at Harrisburg. Harrisburg, in one week, achieved what up to then had not been accomplished in most countries – a genuine questioning of the indispensability of nuclear energy and a call for a revaluation of the risks involved; a public consciousness of the price of further economic growth; and the increasing demand for energy.

Harrisburg will undoubtedly be regarded as being the crossroads in the history of the peaceful use of atomic energy. In the pre-Harrisburg period due to the wide divergence of opinion on fundamental aspects of the problem the scientific community had omitted to objectively inform policy makers of all possible consequences and much had been accepted on blind "scientific trust".

From now on, alternative energies, previously not really seriously considered as possible alternatives, will hopefully be given more active government support and energy conservation studies and alternative energy projects be financed on a wider scale. This could mean, for example, a revision of the short-sighted decision taken by the Energy Council of the European Commission to put reservations on the budget previously foreseen for such projects.

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The whole dilemma is adequately illustrated by recent events in Switzerland where a proposal was made to substitute hydro-electric power for atomic energy – a viable alternative for Swiss requirements. Understandably, this proposal was even as strongly objected to by environmentally concerned citizens as had been the proposal for nuclear reactors.

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The eighth session of the Law of the Sea Conference is in progress in Geneva. Following seven sessions totalling more than 54 weeks of discussion, most states now feel that the Conference has arrived at the point where it has to take a definite position, even at the cost of painful decisions. If nothing can be achieved this time, then the Conference runs the risk of being overtaken by other events which could make it impossible to reach accord at a later date.

We feel that the positive reaction to our publication of the Draft Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources more than vindicates our decision to print this text.

We have reported in several issues on the discussions taking place within the ECE on environmental topics to be submitted to a high-level meeting. Following a round of difficult negotiations and agreement on some of the texts under discussion (see page 77), the ECE Plenary Meeting convened at the beginning of April in Geneva but soon broke down over the position of the Socialist countries in insisting that any agreement be signed separately by each of the nine Member States of the European Community. Otherwise, the European Community will be regarded as having only one vote. On this note of discord it was agreed that the Plenary should meet again on 23 April. A possibility exists that the Brezhnev proposal for a high-level meeting will be strangled in a political tug-of-war.

The mood was one of resignation at the European Council Meeting of Ministers with responsibility for the environment on 9th April. As a result of national and economic interests there appeared to be no possibility for effective future action and the meeting therefore took the form of a very general discussion. With regard to the important field of toxic substances (see pages 92 and 110), the firm line taken by the Commission against the US Environmental Protection Agency gives reason to suppose that the long awaited Sixth Amendment (to the 1967 EEC Directive on dangerous substances) will be finally adopted in June – although in view of the past difficulties in reaching final agreement on EEC directives any such prognostication must be regarded with some skepticism.