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MOBILIZING PEOPLE POWER

BY

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It is no longer difficult to point to substantial evidence that achieving a quality environment depends in a large and increasing measure upon public awareness, interest, support, and participation.

In our day, in our kind of society, every form of American enterprise depends on public sufferance -- if not on active public support -- for its existence. Sooner or later, every organization, institution, and movement stands arraigned at the bar of public opinion. In a recent article in the Christian Science Monitor, George B. Hartzog, Jr., director of the National Park Service, said, "All decisions made in a political environment are ultimately validated or rejected by the public. When an administrator in government gets reversed, it is because somewhere along the line you failed to have your action accepted by the people. And it is the people who are going to reverse you, although it may be in the person of a Congressman or a Cabinet Secretary."

Success in "Achieving a Quality Environment," the topic of this morning's three panels, will be won only with strong public desire and public effort. The public

To my mind, the first and most conspicuous problem in reaching new elements in our society is lack of identification on the part of "city people" with groups interested in environmental quality. For example, it would probably never occur to the usual city resident to seek out the local chapter of any organization represented at this conference. We have somehow failed in semantics and in human contact with those who live in urban areas, failed to communicate real concern for the problems of their physical environment.

The second problem -- and the cause of the first -- is that the urbanite does not identify his problems as environmental problems. He knows he can't swim in the river at his doorstep because the river is polluted, but he fails to connect this fact with the setting and enforcement of water quality standards. He sees that the trees on his block are dying, but he misses the relevance of the work of architects, planners, and municipal agencies to save some greenery and provide some open space in the city. He knows that when it rains his newly developed area is a sea of mud, his basement is flooded, his street impassible, but he does not connect this discomfort with failures to achieve land-use planning and erosion control.

To the average urban dweller protection of man's natural environment means something which has to do with the Grand Canyon, the fisherman, and the bird watcher but has little or no relevance to the city dweller and his daily problems of existing in a metropolis. If he thinks about these things at all, it is in terms of his vacation plans or the amount of his tax dollar that is being spent to support camp grounds, clean up the oil slick off the California coast, or build a dam in the West.

Because most city people see environmental quality as something "out there," unconnected with urban physical discomforts, and therefore do not identify with organizations working for environmental quality, there is a third problem in mobilizing the

"opt out" of the decisions to be made in this field because they neither know what they can do to change things nor accept the premise that something can be done through legitimate channels in the decision-making process. I am eager to hear from Panel C-3 how the activism of youth is going to be mobilized toward survival.

(2) To mobilize people power we need to involve more people in the decision-making process as we reach new elements in our society.

We must not think of arousing large numbers of people to concern and action on a broad range of environmental matters as raising an army that will defend every ounce of water, every inch of ground, and every bit of sky against misuse by the uninformed. As we involve large numbers of people in the choices to be made, as we give people the facts and show them how to express their wishes, we must be prepared to accept the fact that the people's choices may not always coincide with those of the committed environmentalist. We must avoid the mistake of assuming that the "right" and the "wrong" of environmental choices are so obvious that decisions will always be what we would like them to be.

The "public" (as people in the private sector are usually called) must be more than an unthinking tool in the hands of professionals in resource management, or of pressure groups representing single purpose interests, or of politicians making the final decisions. The public must become more astute about what motivates it. People must get the facts, try to understand the complexities of the problem, make up their own minds, and then act to make their views known.

It is important that those of us who, because of involvement in citizen-based organizations, have learned something of how to be politically effective share our knowledge of techniques with others without apprehension that it may be used to

of other leaders in other communities who have met and overcome some of the common problems.

* We have a growing supply of investigators. But there is a shortage of readable and responsible interpreters -- those who can effectively play the mediator between specialist and uninformed laymen. This is the role I see for institutions and organizations such as yours and mine in the years ahead. Vital public support for environmental management can be enhanced by a combination of bringing the ideas of the experts down to the level of the citizen's grasp and bringing the sentiment of the citizens up to the plane of management's possibilities.

These three urgent needs seem to me to be the essence of mobilizing people power --

(1) the need to reach new elements in our society, (2) the need to involve more people in the decision-making process, and (3) the need for a broad spectrum of the population to acquire an environmental education.

If we are truly willing to help all elements of our society acquire a conservation education and share in the decisions about environmental quality, I have a few suggestions to offer as we go about trying to interest urban dwellers, young people, and minority groups.

* We who are concerned about environmental quality must go to those we are trying to reach. We must go to them where they live and we must speak their language. We will need to seek out the leaders of urban groups, the spokesmen for the ghettos of the inner city, the heads of labor unions, the community action board, the precinct leader, the official of city government. As in any other new contact it is important to learn as much as we can in advance: What are their goals? What motivates them? What do we have to offer that will be useful to them? For to accept an idea, people

- (3) Be prepared to show how the doer will benefit from the action. To accept an idea or a point of view, people must see clearly how it affects them.
- (4) Be ready and willing to provide sufficient information and assistance to those whom you want to take action. One of the biggest blocks to more citizen action on resource problems is the feeling the average citizen has that he is incompetent to express opinions on scientific and technological matters.
- (5) Be clear about what you want people to do. People do not buy ideas separated from action. Unless a means of action is provided, people tend to shrug off appeals for support.
- (6) Tailor your plans to fit the experience and skills of those whose action you are encouraging.
- (7) Be realistic about what can be accomplished. In the beginning try to do something that has a reasonable chance of success. People become disenchanted unless they see measurable progress.
- (8) Keep the channels of communication open. Once individuals or organizations have been enlisted it is important to keep in contact in order to maintain interest.
- (9) Make the doer feel he is not alone but a participant in a large and worthwhile effort.
- (10) Praise the efforts of others -- and publicize their names and/or their organizations.

To summarize: Mobilizing people power is essential to success in achieving environmental quality. To increase people power we must catch the attention of city