

The University and Environmental Research

The bandwagon of saving the planet from environmental pollution and from suffocation is well occupied now. Being on it is rather like being against sin, and, as in the case of sin, the universal practice is to point the finger at other people. But in the case of pollution few have so far approached the sinners' bench to confess. The universal enthusiasm for preventing environmental pollution and the equally universal reluctance to admit responsibility for it raise a serious question as to whether the problem is really understood.

The concrete actions necessary to limit man's effects on his environment through his own consumption and behavior will strongly affect us all in what is likely to be—at least initially—a very painful way. For we are all involved—not just the engineers who design the automobiles and the manufacturers who make them and the salesmen who sell them and the oil companies that produce gas to run them, but the consumers who buy them on the basis of large size, rapid acceleration, and all the other characteristics that increase the contribution to environmental pollution.

What can the university do about protection of the environment? At its best it may be able to contribute something not available elsewhere—a critical look at problems and at proposed solutions. It can, for one thing, gather a group of which not all members are expert on the specific problem to be examined, but some, instead, in the disciplines which are its constituents. Such a nongovernmental, nonindustrial group can offer critical and expert appraisal of complex problems in a way that perhaps no other organization can. This can be of particular value to government agencies and to industries which want information but have learned to be a bit wary of the judgments or solutions they produce themselves, given the institutional bias which they will tend to have toward those problems about which they know the most.

But some words of caution. If such a study group consists only of scientists, technologists, and production people, it will almost certainly overlook some of the most important factors and come to the wrong conclusions. Unless expert social scientists are available—not only economists to examine the economic balance, but political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, and so on—the study will be done in too narrow a context. Although it will give the right answers to its own questions, it will prove to have overlooked questions more important than those it asked.

—Harold Brown
President, California Institute of Technology