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The Role of DDT In Saving Lives

RECENTLY a high official of the World Health Organization (WHO) warned against hasty banning of the insecticide DDT. His reason: DDT saves millions of lives in tropical portions of the world by controlling malaria and other insect-borne diseases.

There's an immense irony here — in fact a double irony.

Those who would ban DDT are attacking a chemical that has done as much to preserve human life as any single item in man's vast health arsenal. During 1953 in India more than 800,000 lives were claimed by malaria. Today, in good part because of DDT, malaria is rare in India. The island of Ceylon doubled its population in less than a generation after the introduction of DDT controlled malaria.

The same story has been repeated all around the earth's tropical and subtropical belts.

Yet these are the very areas where population continues to increase at a runaway rate, where living standards are lowest, and where the ultimate threat of mass starvation because of overpopulation is the greatest.

In a coldly rational sense it can be argued that DDT the great life-saver is contributing, like so many other of the miracles of modern public health, to the greater misery of an overpopulated world. And that this, rather than the recent findings that DDT is wiping out certain beneficial forms of animal life, is the real case against DDT.

But no society that values human life can accept that argument. The WHO official — a citizen, incidentally of tropical Brazil — was right to argue against any condemnation of DDT that might lead to loss of its use in tropical countries.

Intense research is going on to develop substitutes for DDT in home, garden and agricultural uses in the temperate climes of the United States and Europe. These substitutes may prove to be biologic agents, not insecticides.

If DDT is as injurious to the environment as recent evidence suggests, then equally intense research is needed to develop insecticidal substitutes for DDT in tropical public health work.

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