



Sign of the Times?

The Truth About Toxics

BY DR. PETER MONTAGUE

The *New York Times* baffled many of its readers last April with a five-part front-page series entitled "What Price Cleanup?" The series hammered home one main message: America's environmental protection programs have gone awry, wasting billions of dollars on non-problems, such as low levels of toxic chemicals in our environment, because Congress has ignored scientific experts, responding instead to public panic. Said the *Times*, "The toxic waste program stands as the most wasteful effort of all" because "many of the [chemical dump] sites pose little if any danger."

They repeated this theme in various ways, quoting unnamed "experts" who asked whether the nation is "wasting billions of dollars regulating substances that might pose little risk." One expert they did quote was Dr. Richard Goodwin, whom the *Times* identified as a "private environmental engineer," who said we're wasting money on toxic dumps. The *Times* failed to mention that Goodwin is a consultant to the incineration industry who has conducted a campaign to have toxic incinerator ash exempted from federal and state laws.

In case any doubts lingered, the *Times'*

last article offered "principles" that could put America's environmental programs back on track:

- Requiring cost-benefit analysis for a regulation before it is issued. (The *Times* seems not to know that President Reagan signed executive order 12291 in 1981 requiring just such cost-benefit analyses, which are conducted routinely by government regulators today.)

- Increasing spending on problems now regarded as more important, like protecting endangered plants and animals, and reducing financing for less dangerous problems like cleaning up toxic waste sites.

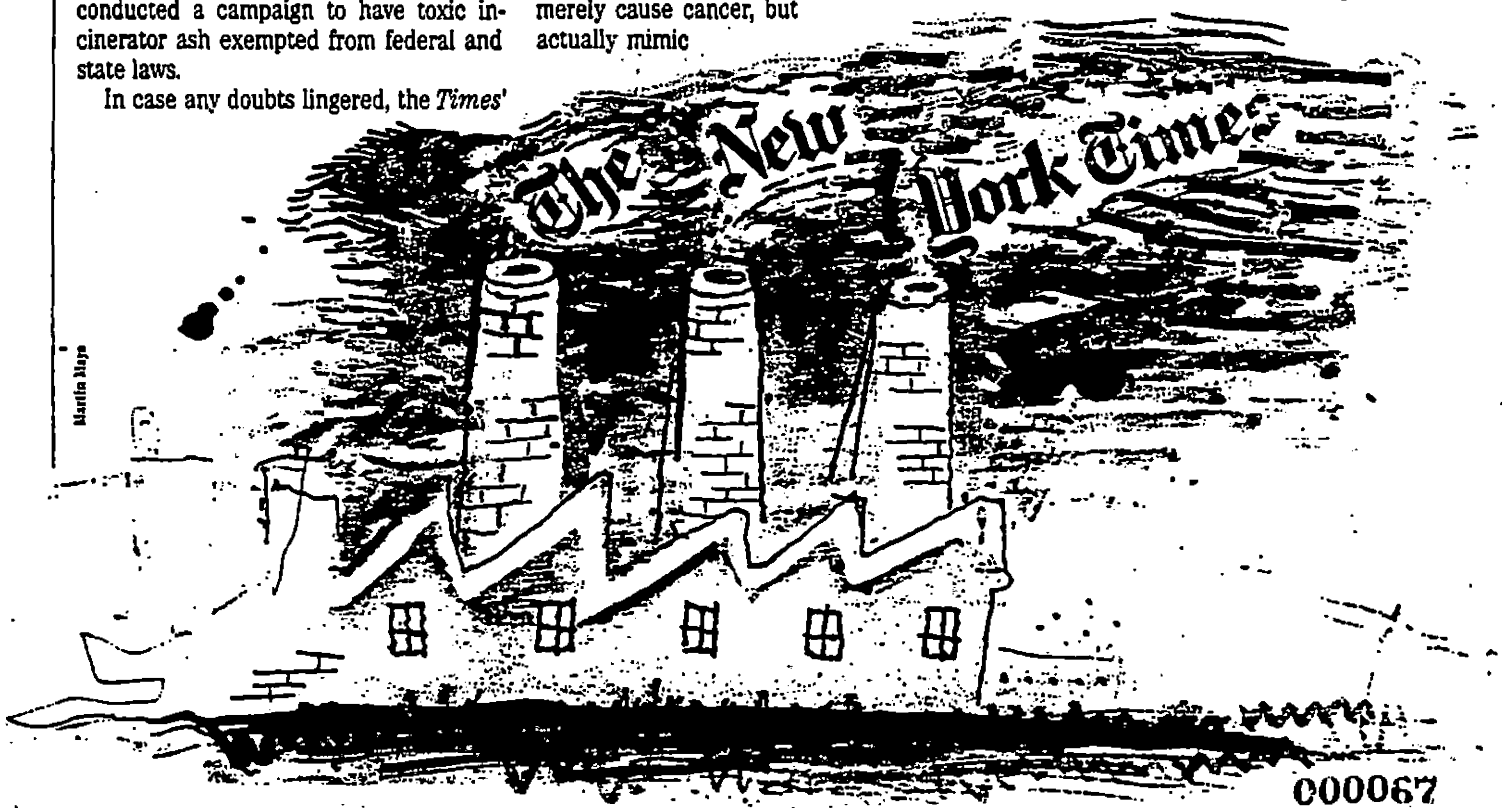
- Giving businesses and cities more flexibility in deciding how to comply with an environmental standard—a principle so vague as to be nearly meaningless.

Environmentalists all across the country are scratching their heads, wondering why the *Times* would choose to whitewash toxic chemicals just now. After all, evidence accumulated during recent years indicates that many toxic chemicals don't merely cause cancer, but actually mimic

hormones, especially estrogen, the female sex hormone. Hormones are chemical switches that trigger cascades of chemical reactions inside the bodies of all birds, fish and mammals. Hormones control growth and development, sexual cycles, moods and behavior. The *Times* itself reported this emerging view of toxic chemicals as hormone mimickers a year ago, under the headline, "New Effect of Pollutants: Hormone Mayhem."

People in industrialized societies all carry a burden of toxic chemicals within their bodies from everyday exposure to pesticides, solvents, paints and industrial poisons discharged into the environment. As a result, toxic chemicals that mimic hormones are present in some Americans at levels that are 10 to one million times higher than our naturally-occurring hormones. It seems reasonable, therefore, to wonder whether such chemicals are affecting us.

This new view of toxic chemicals emerged from wildlife studies around the Great Lakes, where fish, birds and mam-





mals have had their reproductive systems damaged by exposure to low levels of pesticides and industrial poisons discharged into the environment. Some species failed to reproduce while others exhibited unusual sexual development such as female sex organs in male herring gulls and female pairing in birds, resulting in unfertilized eggs.

The wildlife studies gave rise to studies of laboratory animals subjected to low levels of hormone-like chemicals such as DDT, PCBs and dioxin. When it became clear that these laboratory studies were confirming damage to the reproductive systems of various mammals, scientists wondered whether humans might be adversely affected as well.

In 1992, a study of women living within a mile of toxic dumps in 20 counties in New York State revealed a 12 percent increase in the rate of major birth defects in their children, compared to children of women living further away. (This study

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did not pinpoint any particular chemicals.) That same year, a study of breast tissue from 40 women with breast cancer showed unusually high levels of DDT, PCBs and other chlorinated chemicals, compared to breast tissue from women not having breast cancer. The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences has now undertaken a much larger study of breast tissue from women with breast cancer, to see if the earlier findings can be confirmed.

In sum, accumulating scientific evidence indicates that low levels of many toxic chemicals are more dangerous than they once seemed, certainly for wildlife and perhaps for humans as well. It seems like an odd time for the *Times* to begin a campaign to convince the public that toxic chemicals are benign.

There are two theories being argued now among environmentalists. One is simply that, as owner or past owner of

several paper mills in Ontario, Canada (which are notorious sources of chlorinated toxins, including dioxin), the *Times* itself has been accused of major pollution. So it might serve the *Times's* self-interest to try to make toxic chemicals seem safe. It is true that two Canadian Indian tribes have sued the newspaper for \$1.3 billion, claiming damage from dioxin in fish and waters downstream from a paper mill the *Times* used to own.

The second theory is that the *Times* is helping the petrochemical industry and the federal government, both of which would very much like the public to accept increasing contamination by toxic chemicals. As Dr. Barry Commoner pointed out in 1991, the petrochemical industry discharges roughly 200 million tons of hazardous wastes directly into the environment each year. At \$100 per ton, it would cost \$20 billion to incinerate all these wastes. But after-tax profits for the entire industry in 1986 were only \$2.6 billion, so the petrochemical industry simply cannot afford modern waste treatment and must continue to discharge massive quantities of poisons directly into the environment, if the industry is to survive in its present form.

The federal government has a related problem. After spending more than \$12 billion dollars since Superfund began in 1980, the government has managed to clean up fewer than 100 chemical dump sites. Furthermore, the extent of the problem is enormous. There may be as many as 439,000 contaminated sites, plus six million underground storage tanks, 15 to 25 percent of which are already leaking. Since cleanup efforts have largely failed, the government has two choices: to either excavate contaminated sites and store the toxic soil in immense steel-reinforced concrete buildings (thus creating an embarrassing monument to technical failure), or convince the public to accept low levels of toxins in their soil, air, water, homes and bodies. According to this view, the *Times* is just doing its part to help convince the public that industrial poisons are our friends. **E**

DR. PETER MONTAGUE is founder and director of the Environmental Research Foundation, and editor of Rachel's Hazardous Waste News, both based in Annapolis, Maryland.

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