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Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Matt. 7:19.

Ecological Conflict

. . . PCBs and phosphates

The discovery that cereal in packages manufactured from recycled paper was contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) is rather like the government's sudden discovery that the substitutes for phosphates in laundry detergents were more of a health hazard than the phosphates.

The proper response is not to stop recycling paper any more than it is to remove bans on detergents with phosphates. There are other alternatives.

If the source of the PCBs, as the Food and Drug Administration says, is chemically treated "carbonless" carbon paper, widely used in business forms, it would seem that this paper could be eliminated from the recycling process. If that is impractical, it would seem that container manufacturers could be prohibited from using recycled paper to fabricate packages for food products.

Similarly, if the substitutes for phosphates are health hazards, part of the answer might be a greater dependence on plain soap, where practical. Housewives have used soap satisfactorily for hundreds of years.

There is some snuspicion that the Environmental Protection Agency might have been panicked by detergent manufacturers in its quick turn-around on phosphates. Caustic soda, one of the phosphate substitutes, seems less of a menace than phosphates at the moment. At any rate the damage that phosphates are doing to the nation's waterways is an immediate, serious environmental hazard.

There is no perfect solution to every conflict between ecological and technological priorities. No one has every pretended that our technology could be made responsive to environmental concerns at no cost. There is a cost to everything. The question is what is the least costly choice in human terms when priorities must be balanced.

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