

THE ROLE OF THE ECOLOGIST /Eric Hopkins

INTRODUCTION

The community at large tends to be misinformed as to what ecology is and what ecologists do. Participants at the meeting who have read the following contributions should be in no doubt as to the semantics. Some ecologists do hold ideals (who does not?) among them the wish to avoid foreseeable disasters.

'In the disturbances caused by scarcity of food, the mob goes in search of bread, and the means it employs is generally to wreck the bakeries' (attributed to Jose Ortega y Gasset 1930, by G.W. Cox and M.D. Atkins Bulletin, Ecological Society of America, 56(3) 2, 1975.)

'On the one hand 'popular ecologists' : 'Naïve as they look, and indeed are, the ecologists and their fellow travellers bid fair in history to relegate Karl Marx to the status of a small-time bungling amateur at the task of triggering world revolution' (M. Nicholson 'The Ecological breakthrough', New Scientist 72, 460-3, 1976.)
On the other hand some fashionable work by ecologists tends to deflect able minds from the real problems which surround us and which demand our urgent attention.

Here the concern is with the setting of objectives at the outset of a study, and with the execution of such a study, prior to the acceptance of findings and adoption of a management scheme.

The State government departments concerned with environmental management and with development projects have specific legal roles. Companies should be encouraged to recognise their environmental responsibilities at an early stage (Kelly, D. 1976. State Agreement Acts, 64-94 Proceedings, Environmental Assessment Workshop, Dept. of Conservation and Environment.)

Ecologists may be directly employed by the proponent company or by its consultants, or may in turn be consultants to a larger consulting company. What do these groups of people have to offer?

The general brief for environmental assessment requires documentation of plant and animal species and of the ecosystems. Some project briefs have specified lists of vascular plants and vertebrate animals; a few have required invertebrates. The kind of study which results in an understanding of ecosystem

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dynamics has generally only been commissioned by a government agency. Is this inevitable?

There are clearly problems of detail involved in costing out a study. What criteria should proponents use in comparing estimates? What part should ecologists play in determining the level of detail necessary?

WORKING PAPERS

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