

**JOURNALISM CONCERNING  
RESOURCE MATTERS:  
CASE STUDY EXAMPLES IN CONTRASTING  
INTERPRETATIONS**

by

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**October 1998**

**STAFF PAPER SERIES NUMBER 131**

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and the Agricultural Experiment Station  
University of Minnesota  
St. Paul, MN**

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## CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Introduction .....	1
Accidental case studies .....	2
Possible sources of this wide range in journalistic quality .....	4
Possible common elements linking these cases .....	7
References .....	9

## INTRODUCTION

Some sources of persistent error in public thinking about resource matters have been identified and discussed elsewhere at some length (Webster 1998). At least five factors appear to contribute to belief that resource conditions are nearly universally bad and deteriorating further while in North America resource conditions are in fact generally good and improving further. These factors include a one-way interpretation of history of some resource matters; rhetoric displaced onto resource matters from other more threatening spheres (particularly thermonuclear war or accident); displaced feelings of personal fragility; organizational drift from reasonable original goods to goals more rigidly ideological; and misplaced or misunderstood religiosity now applied to resource matters. Interactions among these sources of persistent error were also identified.

These rather fundamental factors are reinforced at times by a more superficial factor, namely journalism of poor quality. Journalism like other enterprises covers a considerable quality range even in generally well-regarded outlets. Journalism concerning resource matters covers a particularly wide quality range. Some journalists appear to uncritically adopt *both* the resource sky is falling *and* a simple good guys versus bad guys orientation. These tendencies or orientations allow poor journalism to be positively awful in reporting on resource matters.

Vivid contrasts between good and poor journalism on resource matters occurred by chance recently in two different sorts of print media. Perhaps something can be learned from these contrasts. We can approach this as two small case studies as a means of exploring possible sources of an extremely wide range of journalistic quality.

### **ACCIDENTAL CASE STUDIES**

Two pairs of articles appeared recently in national magazines of some intellectual standing, and in national newspapers of recognized quality. There was vivid contrast within each pair. In each case, one article far exceeded the other in degree of insight, avoidance of stereotypes, and breadth of view. This contrast was particularly striking given the recognized quality of the outlets.

The June 1997 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* carried an insightful article. This article accurately and succinctly identified and corrected several public misconceptions concerning resource matters (Sagoff 1997). Following are misconceptions labeled by the author as myths. He did so on basis of informed discussion of relevant factual information.

Misconception no. 1: We are running out of materials.

Misconception no. 2: We are running out of food and timber.

Misconception no. 3: We are running out of energy.

Misconception no. 4: The (developed) North exploits the (developing) South (in global terms).

The author's overall point is that efforts to conserve resources are appropriate for moral reasons and (in some cases) effect of making society more civil and pleasant. Fear of running out of resources is simply a factually incorrect reason for conserving resources. This is a good and accurate article.

The June 1997 issue of *Harper's* carried an article that at best is an immoderate polemic on resource matters (Roberts 1997). It is specifically about land management by the U.S. Forest Service. The author widely misstates a considerable number of factual points. He then without any hint of proof alleges motives of avarice and greed leading to financial corruption. While despairing over influence of politics on resource management, the author proceeds enthusiastically to buy into "advocacy science," sanctimony, and political correctness by those who would have us completely abandon responsible timber management on U.S. public lands. This is an extremely bad article in a respected journalistic outlet.

The second pair of articles appeared on literally the same day in June in *The New York Times* and *The Christian Science Monitor*. Both articles discussed trends in songbird populations in North America.

*The New York Times* article was based on a North America-wide population survey organized and led by the Illinois Natural History Survey. It found considerable population increases for many kinds of songbirds over a very major part of North

America. A considerable part of this increase was attributed to expansion of forests particularly in northern United States. The one exception to this upward trend was some decline in birds characteristically favoring grassland habitats. This is a good article based on a good source. *The Christian Science Monitor* article discussed bird populations on a highly local-spot basis covering only a small aggregate area, and did so based entirely on anecdotal evidence. It suggested there is nearly universal decline in North American songbird populations. Contrast of conclusions on same topic (and same day) could not be greater. Contrast of source is also striking.

### **POSSIBLE SOURCES OF THIS WIDE RANGE IN JOURNALISTIC QUALITY**

Such a wide range in journalistic quality at essentially the same point in time is surprising when all examples are in well-recognized outlets of generally high standards. The range is so wide that variation in skill and perception of individual writers seems unlikely to be the whole story (though perhaps one of several factors). Other, more nearly institutional factors may be involved. What might some of them be?

The songbird population case is perhaps the more simply explained of the two cases of paired articles. These would seem to be at least two superficial but important factors that help to explain range of quality. The first is having a major scientific source for one article (i.e., the Illinois Natural History Survey), and entirely anecdotal evidence for the other. The second is the geographic scope of observations (large regions for



one article, small spots for the other). A major scientific source, and large geographic scope, seem almost certain to give more stable and reliable results in a wide range of situations of which trends in songbird populations are one.

There may also be an additional and more underlying reason for the range of quality. It relates to multiple effects of habitat changes on wildlife and aquatic populations — and how they are interpreted in some circles. Almost all habitat changes cause some populations to go up and others to go down as parts of natural adjustment. Public discussion often tends to focus almost entirely on decreases, with increases ignored — as if the human species including journalists had become averse to good news. This odd sort of interpretation would seem to suggest perverse conditioning of the sort mentioned in the introduction and discussed at length in an earlier article mentioned there. In this specific case having a major scientific source for one of the paired articles broke through the perverse conditioning if that is what it is.

The articles in *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's* are not to be as neatly analyzed in terms of factors causing such a wide range of quality. There would seem to be a more generic explanation rooted in some sort of differential evolution of the two magazines. The two were at one time widely considered two of much the same kind and of equal quality. Indeed, at one time *Harper's* may have published the more insightful things related in some part to resource matters. A particular case in point was a series of columns or essays by John Fischer on topics related to metropolitan

and regional governance. These columns or essays eventually became major ingredients for an interesting book titled *Vital Signs U.S. A.* (Fischer 1975). More recently *Harper's* seems to have declined in quality while *The Atlantic Monthly* has advanced. This can be sensed, though not neatly proven, in an overall sense. Possibly readership and the advertising market for this type of moderately intellectual magazine has evolved in such a way that there is room for one-plus but not two.

Differential evolution has clearly occurred in articles related more directly to resource management. This can be particularly see in gradual sustained improvement in resource-related articles appearing in *The Atlantic Monthly*.

- Several years ago there was an article that was essential equivalent of the article in the June 1997 issue of *Harper's* (Knize 1991). It was equivalent in terms of the same sort of overstatement, the same sort of unsubstantiated accusations, and the same sort of swallowing whole of "advocacy science." This represented a kind of equality of an undesirable kind of between the two magazines (though not at same point in time).
- Significant improvement occurred more recently but still sometime ago via several insightful articles concerning what can and what cannot be accomplished concerning endangered animal species. These articles in effect suggested greater concentration of efforts where major accomplishment is possible, and less tilting at windmills where it is not (Mann and Plummer 1992, 1995).
- Improvement continued with an article by Bill McKibben (1995) that correctly described a very considerable renaissance of New England forests, an "explosion of green" as the author put it. (He then reached a non sequitur that putting all of it in a national park was the only appropriate course. His primary

descriptive point was quite correct, however — and indeed applies as well to northern areas other than New England).

- A recent part of this continuing improvement is an article in the January 1997 issue by Gregg Easterbrook concerning Norman Borlaug and the Green Revolution he did much to bring about. The author laid considerable emphasis (as did Borlaug) on the role of intensive agriculture in *both* feeding people *and* in allowing other land to be left relatively undisturbed. This is an insightful and nuanced view of resource management.
- The article by Mark Sagoff in the June 1997 issue is the latest step in this pattern of continuing improvement.
- In addition to these articles directly related to resource matters, *The Atlantic Monthly* in the 1980s published two insightful articles concerning metropolitan settlement patterns. The first dealt with such patterns nationally (Leinberger and Lockwood 1986), the second with the specific case of Los Angeles (Lockwood and Leinberger 1988). Ten or fifteen years earlier a person might have expected to have such articles in *Harper's* rather than *The Atlantic Monthly*.

An analysis identifying more specific factors resulting in a wide range of quality would be more satisfying in an important sense. This differential pattern of evolution, however, does seem to be what led equivalent magazines to go on quite different paths.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> More recently this record of progressive improvement of *The Atlantic Monthly* has been called somewhat into question, or (hopefully) suffered an only temporary regression. Articles in two successive issues departed from the path of progressive improvement. In the November issue the author went into what can only be called a rant against nearly everything Chinese with environmental matters as his starting point (Hertsgaard 1997). While making some sense at the very end, he earlier came close to suggesting that the Chinese had a duty to remain poor for the sake of minimizing so-called greenhouse emissions. In the December issue several authors attempted to rebut Mark Sagoff's article in which he had correctly identified several entirely alarmist misconceptions concerning resource matters (Ehrlich et al. 1997). The core of their argument was that resources absolutely had to become progressively more scarce since the earth is finite and population is increasing. These authors apparently understand neither that renewable resources do in fact grow (as in the case of forests) nor that improved and intensified exploration regularly locates additional deposits of nonrenewable resources when they are sufficiently needed to be worth the trouble (as is the case of minerals and petroleum). The latter point (and related efficiency in use of resources) is perhaps best

## POSSIBLE COMMON ELEMENTS LINKING THESE CASES

Possibly there are some common elements linking these cases even though they are distinctly different cases. Common elements appear to relate particularly to ability of some journalists and publications to do important *specific things much better* than can other journalists and publications. Some of this may be differences in native ability. More may be matters of training and institutional arrangements and guidance.

- Some journalists and publications appear able to distinguish between sources of various degrees of reliability much better than others.
- Some journalists and publications appear able to keep their personal values (for example, concerning resource matters) separate from reasonably objective reporting much better than others.

Much more than just two paired case studies would be needed to determine conclusively if differences in these abilities follow consistent patterns. But these cases do suggest and illustrate marked differences in journalistic ability. Such large differences among generally high quality magazines and newspapers are surprising.

It seems possible that courses on environmental issues for journalism students at some colleges may directly contribute to difficulties. This seems particularly likely

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stated by Wilfred Beckerman (1995). There is a case for conserving on use of materials of many kinds. That case turns around holding down amounts of waste to be disposed of, and minimizing negative effects on the harried lives of long-distance commuters. It relates hardly at all to direct scarcity of resources. Hopefully, these two articles are only a temporary departure from progressive improvement in resource-related articles in *The Atlantic Monthly*.

concerning ability (or inability) to keep separate personal values and reasonably objective reporting. Many people intensely interested in environmental issues view them in quite moralistic terms. Some teachers of subjects related to environmental issues also do this. And they may affect at least some of their students in long-lasting ways, making objectivity harder to come by than would otherwise be the case.<sup>2</sup>

It would seem that raising standards of objectivity *should* be a concern of the organized journalistic profession, including processes used to accredit schools of journalism. There would appear to be both room and need for improvement even toward the upper end of the journalistic spectrum.

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<sup>2</sup> A possible example is a faculty member in journalism in a respected university hoping new owners of a major newspaper will be "outrageous" and "outlandish" concerning environmental matters. "Community leaders have varying reactions to sale of Star Tribune" Dave Nimmer, assistant professor of journalism at the University of St. Thomas and former managing editor of the Minneapolis Star: "*I hope they impose in Minnesota some of the passion they have displayed reporting environmental issues in California. The Star Tribune is a good newspaper and I read it every damn day, but I'd like these guys to come in and take some more chances and be a little outrageous and outlandish once in a while.*" (*Star Tribune* 11-15-97).

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