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Is this the best use of energy and land?

By Walter C Patterson, Editor, Your Environment

How fares the environment, Britain 1973? Think of the fundamentals; land, water, air, energy. We in Britain are used to having at least a fair share of these fundamentals. Sometimes and in some places we find the quality doubtful, but at the moment most of us are far from badly-off. Does that mean that all is well, that we can shrug our shoulders and go about our business? Alas, no. If we are to leave our children a habitable country we cannot simply sit and wait. We must understand what we value, and act to perpetuate it.

Consider decisions now being pondered. What, in this island, shall we do with our precious land? Shall the concrete continue its relentless advance? Shall we 'reclaim' the most productive wetland in southern Britain and turn it into a hideously expensive wasteland? - now to be known as Maplin, because uneasy official consciences do not even realise that it was the wild birds, the 'fowl', that made Foulness.

Shall we dedicate even more space to roads and their insatiable vehicular inhabitants? In the towns the roads overrun the houses and the irreplaceable open spaces, in the countryside they sterilize the fertile acres. In the National Parks the mining companies, funded by public money, look for minerals to mine. Is this what we really want to do with our land?

Many in Britain will suffer water shortages this year, and next, and next. And yet we pour it away by the ton, in homes and factories, each Briton flushing eleven gallons daily down the loo, often to emerge untreated from a council pipeline, as our inland and coastal waters grow less and less able to cleanse themselves. And while we waste the water we prepare to flood more of our land, in Devon and Suffolk and Northumberland, and even to dam up Morecambe Bay and the Wash, to keep our taps running, Should we not perhaps think about shutting the taps a little?

When officials mention Britain's air they always proudly cite the Clean Air Act, and its beneficent effects. But the Clean Air Act applies to the domestic hearth; it does not control the factory. The Alkali Inspectorate still carries out its consultations with industry in cosy secrecy. All too often neighbourhood protests about filthy air can be countered by the truthful assertion that the plant complies with Inspectorate requirements. If Inspectorate requirements do not produce breathable air, it may be time a breeze blew through the Inspectorate.

The ultimate resource, as we are all now realising, is energy, With coal, oil, natural gas and nuclear power Britain looks fortunate But unless we look closely at our energy resources, and plan their intelligent long-term use, we may find ourselves in trouble. We may see our North Sea oil and gas pumped away for US users, while the Scottish coastline bears the brunt of random runaway industrialisation. We may devote almost all our energy research to fast breeder reactors, only to find them too hazardous for use.

We need to recognise and confront questions of energy policy, of land-use policy, of policy concerning the quality and supply of water and air; and we need to acknowledge that this island is finite, and cannot support unlimited numbers. If the people of Britain make their choices, and make them clearly enough, the politicians will have to listen. The problems we sidestep now will be too large for our children to sidestep.

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