

## EDITORIAL

### The Implications of September 11 for Environmental Professionals

John H. Perkins

I originally intended to write this column during the week of September 10. Then came the horrendous crimes of September 11 in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. Plans for writing went into hibernation as I, like millions of people here and around the world, shared the deep shock and grief of the awful events.

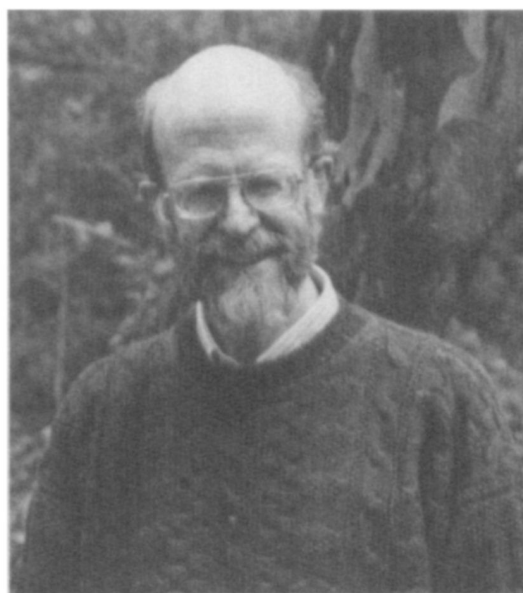
Very few people in the United States escaped direct loss or knowing someone affected personally by the tragedies. I was relieved, however, to learn that as of the 11th of October, NAEP knows of no member who was killed or injured in the terrorist attacks or who suffered such losses in their immediate families. If necessary, we will announce any changes in this situation in a future issue.

Even now, as people everywhere are starting to adapt to and build a changed world, it is difficult to know what to write. This issue of *Environmental Practice* must go to press in mid-October, but we have no certainty about what the world will look like in December, when this editorial appears in print. Is it possible to prepare some thoughts now that will still be useful when it appears?

Without doubt, American diplomatic and military responses to the deeds will be the central focus of the President and the Congress in the months to come. Many opinions will surface about what responses are appropriate, and, necessarily, the debates must be vigorous. Within the nation, and even within NAEP, sentiments will differ about what is to be done. Although some

may think the right responses are obvious, the deeds of September 11 have origins that are extremely complex. Even more daunting, it is likely that all possible responses will have consequences that were neither predicted nor desired.

For the moment, I will leave those issues aside and instead focus on a different set of questions: What are the implications of September 11, 2001, for the professional work of environmental practitioners? At this point, I'll suggest four points for us to ponder.



First, and most directly, some members of our profession have considerable experience in the management of debris removal from cities. Hurricanes, according to recent work, cause a predictable amount of solid waste debris in settled areas, and solid waste managers can perhaps lend their expertise to officials in New York and Virginia who will be dealing with substantial amounts of debris from the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

In a way, of course, it's weird to even mention this point. After all, solid waste managers faced with removal of debris from hurricanes never imagined rubble from terrorist attacks. It also seems unlikely that we

would actually plan for such solid waste problems in the future.

Nevertheless, solid waste management is one of the practical environmental problems emerging from the day. Although it may be necessary to remove debris expeditiously, it is also necessary to make sure that its ultimate resting site is as benign as possible environmentally. The fact that the debris also contains remains of the victims means that it must be treated with emotional respect. In addition, air and water pollution from the debris and the site of the former buildings should be contained as much as possible.

Second, the collapse of the World Trade Center towers may be the first catastrophe with the very tall buildings that began appearing around the world within only the last hundred years. At the moment, we don't anticipate other such skyscrapers falling to the earth in either planned or unplanned events. At the same time, we know that no building will last forever. Out of the grief and sadness of the World Trade Center, we should learn how to design and build large buildings with improved safety and stability and easier removal after their period of useful service.

The third area I suggest as relevant to environmental professionals is one that moves away from day-to-day practice into the realm of the context of our practice. Our abilities to make substantial improvements in the environmental arena over the past thirty years have depended upon the rule of law, citizen empowerment, and open government. In the months to come, restrictions of freedom in the name of increased security will be suggested and perhaps common. Yet when a restriction is imposed for one purpose, government can often use those restrictions for others.

Sometimes the application of a law designed for one purpose can even become a perversion of law in another realm. Take

just one hypothetical example. Will the need for security restrict the flow of information about environmental issues at military facilities or installations of the Department of Energy? If so, a law intended for appropriate purposes may become, sooner or later, the handmaiden for hiding facts that an administration does not want released. Environmental professionals have experience in the kinds of information flows needed to do their work, and they should contribute this knowledge to the processes of legislation that may arise in the near future.

Fourth and finally, those of us in education have a particular responsibility to our students in the years to come. We must become familiar with and be prepared to offer our students materials with which they can understand the context of environmental work as they begin their careers.

Perhaps the most powerful example of this is that many students begin their environmental work with a general course on in-

roduction to environmental studies and science. These courses have many different shapes across American colleges and universities, but most of them delve into the energy issues that are wrapped around so many other environmental problems. Oil and gas are of particular importance to energy issues.

It may be tempting for a professor to simply talk about energy issues in terms of BTU's, kilowatt-hours, or some other physical unit. Discussions about energy solely in terms of physical units, however, are not sufficient for providing the student with a rich education.

Students need also to learn about the intense struggles to control the production and distribution of the black goo that we pump from the earth. In particular, they need to know that the politics of oil are in a complex way embedded in the events of September 11, 2001, along with multiple other issues.

If professors and universities don't provide materials to let students see the links, then our country will turn out environmental professionals who don't quite understand the whole picture. If we want to truly memorialize those who so tragically and unnecessarily perished on that dreadful day, we owe it to ourselves and them to insure that these changes take place.

*Web sites of potential interest: [www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov) (provides updates of environmental issues around the WTC in NYC) and [www.ci.nyc.ny.us](http://www.ci.nyc.ny.us) (provides NYC information on the WTC).*

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