Letters

Boycotts

Your thoughtful Editorial on 'boycotts' (July 1984) was timely. I wish to pick up your point that a fundamental problem with them is 'that they rarely strike at the root of the problem'. It is obvious that this is so in the case to which the Editorial was mainly directed—saving rain forest. But where the problem is that a government, an organisation or an enterprise is seeking short-term economic gain or other immediate objective (such as a complacent electorate) that is contrary to the long-term needs of conservation, rational management or ethical progress, a well-planned and focussed boycott can be effective. Thus an array of industries aggressively pursuing short-term gain, and a government that is backing them, may respond best to actions that also affect such gains. That is why the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) mounted a boycott of Canadian fisheries products, with considerable success, in protest against the continuation of the commercial killing of seals when the government agency responsible for sealing and fishing refused to give any attention to widespread doubts both about the management of this activity and its humaneness.

The shame is that organisations whose members are concerned about the future of our planet and our species are with increasing frequency finding that boycotts may be their only remaining means of action. They recognise that innocents will be hurt by them; they also see that there are both predictable and unpredictable side-effects of all our actions, and our inactions.

The commonest cause of the prolonged frustration that leads to boycotts is the immense and unyielding power of the global market. Jack Westoby's observation, which you quote, is most appropriate if it is understood to blame both those governments that permit the multinationals and other enterprises to operate in destructive ways within their countries and those that permit and facilitate such operations, under their jurisdictions, within other countries or in the commons, such as the ocean. This is why, although attention is now focussed with respect to whaling on Norway, eventually the central target for boycotts and other citizens' actions will be Japan. The Japanese whaling/fishing/food industry, helped and protected by the Japan Fisheries Agency, with the complicity of other agencies of government, has financed and facilitated outlaw whaling, evasion of International Whaling Commission regulations, and bribery of weak governments.

Japan has announced that it will continue commercial whaling even after the moratorium is in effect, from 1986, and its industry has also started to catch sperm whales despite the fact that quotas for this species are already all set to zero. Years of strenuous efforts to persuade a change in behaviour, to exert legitimate pressures from other governments, to offer compromises such as the current three-year delay in the implementation of the moratorium have been to little avail. Since Japan controls virtually the entire world market in whale products it is practically certain that citizens' action through the withholding of their purchasing powers will intensify in the coming 12 months. There will be no lack of people now looking for the vulnerable points in the Japanese external economy, to be needled until that Government, and the industries it is supporting, are made to understand that people everywhere really do care about wildlife trade in general and whales in particular.

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What can we do?

'"The elderly batchelors in Rome" are nearly as great a menace to the world as nuclear warfare.' There lies much truth. The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) is the core organisation working for population limitation (and freedom for women in reproduction).

Most of the rest of our problems stem from this: it is our own excessive numbers and use of resources which inhibit any real rise in the quality of life, except for the fortunate minority in some western lands.

Our own species squeezes out animals and plants, hence FFPS, WWF and IUCN etc. Our own species causes the deforestation, the overfishing, the erosion, the probable greenhouse effect and many other forms of pollution. Our