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### The Scientists' Institute for Public Information

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# THE SCIENTISTS' INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC INFORMATION

BY ALAN MCGOWAN

Now, more than ever, the help of scientists is needed

Virginia Brodine, vice-chairman of the SIPI Board of Directors; and Alan McGowan, newly elected president of SIPI.



The Scientists' Institute for Public Information (SIPI), publisher of *Environment*, held its tenth annual meeting March 9-11, in Berkeley, California. Members of SIPI and its thirteen affiliated committees throughout the country attended, and this tenth anniversary meeting was the occasion of a general stock-taking and consideration of future activities. We asked Alan McGowan, newly elected president of the institute, to give us his impressions of the meeting, and his own views of the role that SIPI should play in coming years.

S.N.

SIPI's 1973 annual meeting was an exciting and important event, marking a decade of life for the organization and revealing a high level of commitment and activity by our local committees around the country. Many of the activities of the local groups are described in more detail elsewhere in this magazine and show the scope of SIPI's work. Reports given by the committees at the Berkeley meeting indicate that SIPI has accumulated a wealth of experience and is entering its second decade ready for new calls on its services that are already being heard. *Environment* readers are well aware of the pervasive nature of environmental problems; from the discussions at our meeting it is clear that a great many people are actively working in their communities for solutions to these problems.

I have recently been involved with a number of groups and agencies, among them the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Institute for Environmental Education, and the federal Office of Environmental Education. It is clear to me from these activities that there is a great number of people who are pressing for the solutions to a variety of social problems, including environmental problems, and there

are a great many more people who are waiting for a suitable vehicle to express their concerns. Because the wave of publicity associated with Earth Day has receded, we sometimes have had the feeling that interest in environmental problems was ephemeral, only a passing fad for most people. But the numbers of people involved and the intensity of their concern prove this feeling false and indicate the leadership role that SIPI and its affiliated committees can and should play in the coming years.

As readers of this magazine well know, environmental problems are deeply rooted in our society and stem from the very nature of our economy, the way in which it grows and changes, and from the nature of our social institutions. Although there obviously is a great deal of science and technology associated with solutions to these problems, the basic nature of the solutions is deeply rooted in our society, and its social, political, and economic institutions. The solutions will be political in the sense that they will have to result from the collective action of large numbers of people effecting changes in social institutions. While we don't try to prejudge what actions should be taken, we do want to provide information which must be widely disseminated if useful action is to be undertaken at all.

Thus, while SIPI is not itself an activist organization, its members are interested in providing information which is needed by those persons actively engaged in the political process. Our business is to provide objective scientific information to be used by the public. We are not, however, interested in informing for its own sake, in providing just a general sort of adult education in science. We are deeply concerned with the environmental problems that plague our society and seek to provide the best information in the most effective way to those people and groups actively struggling with these problems. Thus, we mean to provide information not only to voters in general, but also to citizen action groups, governmental agencies, labor unions, and businesses which are grappling directly with environmental problems.

On our tenth anniversary, we look back to the science information effort, out of which SIPI grew, as the model we still follow. This initial effort was to inform the public about the hazards of radiation from nuclear weapons testing. It was this kind of information which alerted people to the existence of a problem and sent them in search of the solution which was finally found: the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Although we did not advocate such a treaty, and certainly did not lobby for its ratification, the information we pro-

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## The separate actions of local information committees have often been of significant national importance.

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vided helped people wrestle with the problems posed by nuclear testing and alerted them to the necessity of finding some kind of solution. More recently we have provided information about the civilian nuclear power industry, information which has been widely used by citizen groups, public interest law firms, and local governments which are confronting the difficult decisions regarding the construction of nuclear power plants. Although we neither defend nor oppose such plants, we do feel that it is the responsibility of the scientific community to inform those who are affected, and we try to carry out that responsibility in the most effective way possible. As long as the serious safety problems of nuclear power remain unresolved, this will remain an area of informational activity for SIPI.

It became quite clear at our meeting that more and more of our activities can and should take place in cooperation with other groups. Labor unions, for example, are greatly in need of the kind of technical information we possess, as they are increasingly struggling with the problems of the workplace environment and the hazards which are created for working people by modern technology. The environmental pollutants which affect us all often begin as local hazards in a factory before entering the general environment. Workers are often, therefore, acting as guinea pigs for the public at large. SIPI has decided to help provide information to labor unions, and working people in general, as they struggle with their environmental problems. Some of our local committees have already been very active in this kind of endeavor, and I expect that in coming months SIPI will be increasingly concerned with conditions in the workplace environment, particularly in those industries which rely on advanced technology.

Another need has unfortunately appeared in recent months as the present federal administration has made clear its intention to dismantle much of the machinery of social programs and scientific research which has been built up over the last generation. Because we are in the business of providing scientific information relevant to social issues, we are well aware of the deficiencies in federally supported research, which in-

cludes essentially all academic research in the sciences. In the past we have identified large areas of knowledge, particularly in the biological and social sciences, which are still grossly inadequate to gain even a general understanding of the effects of modern, large-scale technology on the natural environment and on human society. The heavy emphasis for many years has been on the development of the technology itself, and little effort has been devoted to understanding its effects. This misallocation of research support is one reason that, despite considerable expenditures, many pressing problems like those of the environment seem no closer to solution, and in fact in some cases have worsened.

A general abandonment of federal support for science and remedial social programs, however, is exactly the wrong thing to do and simply makes the situation worse. If some programs are found to be wasteful they can be phased out, but needed programs must replace them. SIPI will have to inform the public that this in fact is not being done. We shall have to make public the consequences of the drastic restrictions in scientific research and training, and in environmental education. In order for the public to be given adequate scientific information on socially relevant issues, the type of relevant research we have been struggling for must be continued and expanded.

In a similar vein, one of the most important instruments in eliciting information about the environmental impact of federally supported activities, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970, faces constant pressures for erosion or abolition. The act requires the preparation of environmental impact statements, which are made available for public comment, and which have become a very important source of information about the large-scale enterprises which are likely to affect the environment. It is extremely important that the public be adequately informed of the nature of this act and the contributions it has made to the struggle for environmental solutions. We will attempt to do this in the coming months, so that this important source of information can be protected and strengthened.

The challenge before us is great. SIPI and its affiliated committees will be en-

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## SIPI has decided to provide information to labor unions about the workplace environment.

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**Alan McGowan, president of SIPI; and Zelda Leslie, SIPI's executive secretary.**



**Margaret Mead, past president of SIPI; and Donald Dahlsten, vice-chairman of the SIPI Board of Directors.**

From left to right: Alan McGowan, president of SIPI; Margaret Mead, past president of SIPI; Barry Commoner, chairman of the SIPI Board of Directors; Zelda Leslie, executive secretary of SIPI; Glenn Paulson, secretary of the SIPI Board of Directors.



Members of SIPI listen to reports from science information groups: (back row, left to right) Stan Deutsch, New York Scientists' Committee for Public Information; Selina Bendix, Northern California Committee for Environmental Information; Emily Harris, Northern California Committee for Environmental Information; Alwyn Scott, Wisconsin Committee for Environmental Information; Peter Besag, president of the Monterey Bay Committee for Environmental Information; (front, left to right) Reveira Wilcove, Rochester Committee for Scientific Information; Michael McClintock, member of the SIPI Board of Directors; Susan Zolla, member of the Environment editorial board; Peter Hunt, member of the SIPI Board of Directors; (at right) Kurt Hohenemser, St. Louis Committee for Environmental Information; (facing group) Barry Commoner, chairman of the SIPI Board of Directors.



gaged, as they have been in the past, in a wide variety of specific activities, producing reports, articles, public lectures, information for the mass media, testimony before federal and local government hearing bodies, and attempting by every means to bring needed information to the public at large. Our great strength has been our affiliates, autonomous groups with firm roots in their local communities, tied together by a common purpose. Their separate actions have often been of significant national importance. At the founding conference of SIPI, in 1963, Margaret Mead said:

"We are really building the structure of a new relationship between scientists and the community, a structure that has never existed before." Over the last ten years that structure has been tested and developed. Never has it been more needed in our world than now. □

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**ALAN MCGOWAN**, newly elected SIPI president, is scientific administrator, Center for the Biology of Natural Systems, Washington University (St. Louis); trustee and vice-president, Institute for Environmental Education.

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## SCIENCE INFORMATION GROUPS

The following are the affiliates of the Scientists' Institute for Public Information, with brief reports of current activities of each. For further information write to the group in your area; if you are interested in forming a new group, or in affiliating an existing group with the institute, write to SIPI, 30 East 68th Street, New York, New York 10021.

**Colorado Committee**  
for Environmental Information  
Dr. E. A. Martell, President  
325 Norton Street  
Boulder, Colorado 80303

Now principally engaged in educating the public regarding Project Rio Blanco, a planned underground nuclear explosion to free natural gas reserves, and related programs. Continues to provide information about plutonium contamination from the Atomic Energy Commission's Rocky Flats facility, which affects planned housing developments in the Denver area.

**Fresno Committee for Scientific Information**  
Dr. David Frank, Chairman  
Department of Chemistry  
Fresno State College  
Fresno, California 93710

Conducts public lectures and debates on a variety of environmental issues. Studies on local predator control programs, land use in foothills, use of herbicides for forest management.

**Minnesota Committee**  
for Environmental Information  
Dr. Karim Ahmed, Chairman  
P. O. Box 14207, University Station  
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55414

Past activities have resulted in extensive public discussion of local nuclear power projects and the establishment of a now-autonomous environmental library which serves the community extensively. Future activities will emphasize providing information to complement activities of Minnesota's Public Interest Research Group and Sierra Club regarding a state environmental policy act, pesticides and herbicides, consumer and worker health issues.

**Monterey Bay Committee**  
for Environmental Information  
Dr. Peter Besag, President  
Monterey Peninsula College  
880 Fremont  
Monterey, California 93940

Conducting a survey of ambient noise levels in downtown Monterey, which will monitor changes in noise level over time; beginning a study of solid-waste disposal and of local land-use planning; provides expert testimony at state hearings and local zoning hearings on land use.

**New York Scientists' Committee**  
for Public Information  
Carolyn Konheim, Executive Director  
30 East 68th Street  
New York, New York 10021

Maintains twelve subcommittees on a very broad range of issues, works with local media and government agencies on many issues. Information on the effects of a lower-Manhattan expressway has had major impact. Conference planned on environmental effects of second-home development; studies relating to governmental activities directed at lead poisoning, electric space heat; film series, on the nature of human races, for local cable television.

**Northern California Committee**  
for Environmental Information  
Dr. Richard Garcia, Chairman  
P. O. Box 761  
Berkeley, California 94701

Publishes *Enfo*, which provides a calendar of environmental activities in the San Francisco Bay Area; conducts a garden clinic which teaches environmental principles and practice; cooperates with city of Berkeley on solid-waste management and ornamental plant care; subcommittees conduct periodic studies on a wide range of issues.

**Rochester Committee**  
for Scientific Information  
Dr. Robert E. Lee, President  
5236 River Campus Station  
Rochester, New York 14620

Publishes periodic, detailed, bulletins on recycling, mercury in fish, hexachlorophene, phosphates in detergents (including opinion survey on various detergents, review of water quality improvement as result of ban on phosphates); publishes environmental guide to individual action; conducts contest on "How to Improve Lake Erie."

**St. Louis Committee**  
for Environmental Information  
Alberta Slavin, President  
438 North Skinker Boulevard  
St. Louis, Missouri 63130

With support of the Office of Environmental Education conducts two major programs: development of educational materials for high school students (first unit book, on cosmetics and grooming aids, is completed), and preparation of twice-monthly column on environmental issues for trade union newspapers. Provides testimony for federal and local hearings, monitors local media; developing study of lead poisoning causes and prevention.

**Stanford Committee**  
for Environmental Information  
Dr. H. R. Hulett, President  
Stanford University Medical Center  
Stanford, California 94305

Principal activity at present is examination of radiation exposure and release standards at the Stanford University campus.

**Staten Island Science Information Committee**  
Mrs. Gail K. Schneider, President pro tem  
Institute of Arts and Science  
75 Stuyvesant Place  
Staten Island, New York 10301

Maintains library on Staten Island history and environment, is active in air pollution issues and land-use planning.

**Westchester Scientists**  
for Environmental Information  
Mr. Peter S. Hunt, President  
P. O. Box 393  
Purchase, New York 10577

Study of gypsy-moth control program has persuaded county to abandon plans for massive pesticide spraying; reports on solid-waste programs, hazards of nuclear power plants in populous areas, problems of suburban areas; conducts public meetings, maintains speakers' bureau.

**Western Montana Scientists' Committee**  
for Public Information  
Dr. Arnold Silverman, Chairman  
590 Daly Avenue  
Missoula, Montana 59801

Student-directed study of air pollution in Missoula valley; study of planned large-scale strip-mining for coal in eastern Montana. Conducts lecture series and maintains library, will shortly begin publication of weekly newsletter; members have investigated environmental effects of Indochina war (film on this subject available for rental from Thorne Films, 1229 University Avenue, Boulder, Colorado).

**Wisconsin Committee**  
for Environmental Information  
Dr. Alwyn Scott  
114 North Carroll Street  
Madison, Wisconsin 53703

Ongoing examination of the U.S. Navy's proposed Project Sanguine, a last-ditch communication system employing extremely low-frequency radio (several reports issued); investigation of computer modeling techniques such as those used in *The Limits to Growth* study. □