

## What's *your* problem?

Brian Martin

**F**orestry, nuclear power, whaling, wilderness. It is easy to list issues that have been important for the environmental movement. Enormous amounts of time and energy are devoted to research, training, lobbying, planning, canvassing, direct action and conferencing, and to developing strategies that will help achieve environmental goals.

But how are the issues picked in the first place? Are they the most serious environmental problems? The most urgent? Or simply the ones that grab people by the heartstrings?

In some cases a piece of writing catalyzes a movement. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) triggered mass concern about pesticides and Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975) led to a massive expansion in opposition to factory farming and animal experimentation. In other cases the issues gradually build up and get on the agenda as being important, as in the case of nuclear power.

Environmentalists, in choosing where to put their energy, are usually influenced strongly by the social context: friends, media, allies, symbolism. In most cases energy is put into existing campaigns. Once an issue becomes a focus of attention, for whatever reason, it is likely to remain one. But there is also an element of choice. Individuals and groups occasionally, though probably not often enough, sit down and plan where they should be heading and what issues they should be tackling.

Most of the attention is devoted to "interesting" or "important" issues. But how do we decide what's important?

The public outcry around environmental "crises" does not arise from objective conditions in the natural or humanly constructed environment, but rather reflects a number of essentially political processes including labelling, persuasion and social action.<sup>1</sup> Environmentalists cannot avoid responsibility for the choice of issues, as their own analyses and campaigns are key elements in turning "environmental conditions" into what are more widely recognized as "environmental problems".

The choice by environmentalists of what issues to pursue is part of the wider topic of strategy. Analysis of the past and present is important, as is the development of visions for the future. Strategy is concerned with moving from the present to a desired future, and it involves such tools as campaigns, issues, methods and organizational structures. There are various ways to enter into a discussion of strategy. Examining what are apparently "neglected" environmental issues is one of them.

The question of what environmental issues have been and are neglected is a contentious one. Each person will have his or her own favourites. Candidates include soil degradation, sewage disposal, genetic engineering and conventional war. Each of these and many others have received attention from environ-

mentalists, but in each case it might be argued that they have been *relatively* neglected compared to the attention they should receive.

My aim in this article is to draw attention to the processes by which environmentalists are drawn to focus on certain issues at the expense of others. My intention is to open up the issue rather than reach definitive conclusions. I will tentatively discuss five factors: personal involvement, entrenchment, campaign focuses, social class and lack of strategy. To provide illustrations I will use the cases of coal-burning and cars.

### Coal-burning and cars

The impacts of coal-burning include risks to coal miners, acid rain, respiratory disease, the greenhouse effect and the centralized political and economic power of the energy industries. Advocates of nuclear power have often claimed that it is cleaner, safer and cheaper than the burning of coal to produce electricity.<sup>2</sup> Environmentalists have contested the point, typically citing the unique hazards of long-lived radioactive waste and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Of course, value judgements are involved in the assessment of different categories of risk, and arguably the uncertainties are too large to permit a conclusive evaluation anyway. For my purposes it is sufficient to note that the social impact of coal-burning may not be drastically less than that of nuclear power. Yet environmental action against coal-burning has been far less than against nuclear power, which engendered its own worldwide social movement.<sup>3</sup>

The impacts of the car include direct casualties, air pollution, the greenhouse effect, heavy use of energy and mineral resources and disruption of communities.<sup>4</sup> The high cost of car-based transport systems is linked, in every society I am aware of, with social inequality.<sup>5</sup> The young, the old, the disabled and the very poor, who are unable or unwilling to drive, are severely disadvantaged in the automobilized environment. Finally, the vast economic and political power associated with automobilization is larger by far than anything associated with the nuclear power industry. It includes oil companies, automobile manufacturers, rubber companies and various government bodies concerned with road building and regulation of automotive industries.

There have been environmental campaigns on some car-related issues: against lead in petrol, against new freeways, in favour of bicycles. But, arguably, the effort hasn't been proportional to the scale of the problem. Environmentalists were crucial in the campaign against the supersonic transport,<sup>6</sup> whose projected impacts of sonic boom, resource use and possible effects on stratospheric ozone hardly compare with the ongoing consequences of the car.



## Reasons for neglect

**Personal involvement.** Some issues are remote from people's daily lives, making it hard to generate widespread concern. But the power of the media and the success of campaigns against whaling and sealing suggest that remoteness need not be a major obstacle.

Conversely, people may be too close to an issue. If people are personally involved in a particular technology or social practice, it may become harder to launch a major campaign against it.

Nuclear power poses no problems here, since it is run by remote specialists. Most people have no obvious day-to-day interaction with the technology, and the number of workers in the industry is relatively small. On the other hand, television is a technology that is an intimate part of most people's lives. This perhaps explains why no substantial opposition movement has arisen. Jerry Mander's 1978 book *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* could have triggered the formation of a large movement—but it didn't.

The car is like television. Most people don't even think of it as something that might be opposed or replaced. More than this, a large fraction of people are committed to their cars and to cars in general. This reflects the ideology of individualism which is dominant in Western societies. People have brought cars into their conception of human rights: people believe they should be able to drive wherever they like, whenever they like. Governments that impose speed limits to save lives are seen as oppressive, as are environmentalists who try to impose restrictions on off-road vehicles.

The cult of the automobile<sup>7</sup> is clearly seen in advertisements for cars (cars that whisk drivers into a paradise), in demolition derbies, in chase scenes in movies and television, and in the ritual of washing the car. In the face of this sort of popular commitment, the task of challenging automobilization's dominance is daunting.

A closely related issue is the belief that activists must be pure. Campaigning against the car seems hypocritical if you drive one, just as campaigning for animal liberation is harder if one is not a vegetarian. And personal guilt is insidious: after studying the arguments against cars, it is harder to feel all right about having one, and often easier to push the issue to the back of your mind. Guilt-tripping in action groups can also play a role, where holier-than-thou attitudes are used by purists to put themselves in central positions and alienate those with different views or behaviours.

Coal is pretty much like nuclear power: most people don't have first-hand involvement. They simply plug into the ever-available electricity supply system. A campaign against coal might trigger more consciousness of personal involvement,

but that is not the current obstacle. Personal commitment is found in coal mining communities where the workers and their families are tied to an industry and way of life. The difficulties that companies and governments have had in closing down coal mines testify to the depth of that commitment. Environmentalists would not relish confronting it either.

**Entrenchment.** Coal and cars are entrenched technologies.<sup>8</sup> They are sponsored by powerful economic and political interests, and are intertwined with wider technological and social systems. Coal is in many places vital to the electricity production and distribution system, which itself involves a powerful economic and political bureaucracy.

One approach would be to replace coal with another similar energy source, maintaining the present electricity grid and associated patterns of use. The only prospects here are no more attractive than coal: nuclear power or, in the future, fusion or large-scale solar electricity. Another approach, which most environmentalists would favour, is a soft energy path with less electricity consumption (via energy efficiency and reduction in unnecessary uses) and more local self-reliance.<sup>9</sup> In the future, grids might be powered locally through wind, hydro and solar cells.

The second approach is a difficult one. It requires a long-term process of change, and a long campaign to bring it about. This is true of any fundamental challenge to an entrenched technology. The trouble is that long-term campaigns are not nearly as exciting to most environmentalists. Like anyone else, they like to see results quickly, so they tend to avoid big campaigns against entrenched technologies.

Nuclear power wasn't all that well entrenched when the movement took it on. But even that struggle has been an enormous one—and it's not over yet. To challenge coal and the present electricity system would be still more difficult.

The other thing to remember is that coal and cars do provide benefits to people: electricity and (auto)mobility. The entrenchment of these technologies and people's commitment to them grow out of their monopolization of the way to do something that people want. To tackle such entrenched technologies some attractive campaign focuses are needed. But that raises another difficulty.

**Campaign focuses.** "Big" issues are often better tackled by specific campaigns than by frontal assaults. The issue of reactor accidents provided a key early focus for concern about nuclear power. Gradually this widened to other environmental concerns, especially waste disposal, and to some extent to political and social issues, notably proliferation of nuclear weapons and loss of civil liberties in a nuclear society.

Even after many activists fastened onto the wider implications of nuclear power, the original environmental concerns remained important because they involved many people who

## Fatal addictions

We're an addiction-prone species, no doubt about it. Our worst addiction is rarely thought of in those terms, but it's an indisputable case: the internal combustion engine.

Like all addictions, it's bad for us. After war and population, the internal combustion engine is undoubtedly the worst polluter human ingenuity has contrived. But suggest to the commuter groaning in rush-hour gridlock that she give up her car, and the response will be negative. You may be advised courteously that there's no alternative, or less courteously that you mind your own blankety business.

Acid rain and greenhousing are only a fraction of the environmental work done by our beloved enemy. Extracting oil from the earth devastates everything in the vicinity: air, water and soil are poisoned even in the normal course of events.

It's to satisfy the appetite of the internal combustion engine that we perpetrate such outrages as the Exxon oil spill—only the most sensational of a long series of spills which for years received no publicity.

Oil spills, oil well blow-outs, marine disasters, the potential destruction of fish stocks ... in spite of all this, both federal and provincial governments provide multi-billion dollar subsidies for such projects as Hibernia.

Disposal of the corpses is yet another environmental headache. Some of the metal can be recycled, but a good deal has to be incinerated, contributing to acid rain. Old tires can be chopped up and recycled for highway construction, but it doesn't seem to be happening; they moulder in heaps behind garages, and are surreptitiously dumped on roadsides or in streams, to befoul the water.

Finally, of course, something we've all known and refused to acknowledge for years: cars and trucks and motorbikes are the worst killers and cripplers since time began. Why don't we get more furious about traffic deaths? Because we love our cars so much that we resist the least shadow of criticism, even though they're killing our kids. Even war can't compete in the killing stakes. Far more deaths took place on American highways than on the battlefield in either World War II or the Vietnam War.

Car addiction is a religion. The test of religious faith is whether you're willing to put your money where your mouth is. We're more than willing. We think it a privilege to go into debt for our addiction. We die for it, the way the early Christians went to the lions, sacrificing ourselves under its wheels by the thousand. We bankrupt and cripple ourselves for it. The real god of the 20th century is Juggernaut.

The car is the most potent element in our economy, perhaps its most important social factor. But it is clear that the planet can no longer afford Juggernaut. Somehow the car must be de-glamorized, demoted from its role as sex symbol and costly plaything, and confined to a purely functional role. Not a god but a beast of burden, a utility.

No more luxury cars or muscle cars. Just the cheapest possible transportation, with the lowest possible gas consumption. Rail transport instead of monster trucks. Public transit and commuter trains instead of the daily drive to work. Bicycles.

It's a daunting task, guaranteed to create hatred against any government courageous enough try it.

We've sold our souls to the internal combustion engine, and somehow we're going to have to buy them back, before it turns our beautiful earth into a complete hell. □

—Victoria Branden



would not have been attracted or convinced by the wider critique. Thus the environmental hazards of nuclear power have provided a lever for opposition to a technology that many activists might have opposed just on the basis of its politics, namely a technology fostering and fostered by centralized political and economic power.<sup>10</sup>

There is also a danger in some campaign focuses, for they can divert attention away from more central issues. The concern about fallout from atmospheric nuclear weapons tests in the 1950s and early 1960s helped stimulate large-scale support for the peace movement. But when the fallout problem was largely "solved" by the partial test ban treaty in 1963, this contributed to a decline of support.

Specific campaign focuses of use in challenging coal or cars seem to be lacking. Concern about pollution from cars has been co-opted into regulations on exhausts, while concerns about safety have been diverted through campaigns blaming drivers for accidents. The main exception has been campaigns against certain freeways. Some of these campaigns have led to limited gains, but they have not led to any wider challenges to the car.

A problem here is the symbolism of the issue. The public often rallies to protect cuddly animals or preserve beautiful wilderness. Conversely, when a hazard is portrayed as super nasty, such as radiation or certain pesticides, widespread concern can be generated. For the car, symbolic entry points are hard to find. Although the car itself is perceived by some as an ugly blight on the landscape, advertisers have positioned cars in the collective psyche as sleek, powerful and glamorous, even wild and free.

**Social class.** It is well known that environmental issues have been especially taken up by members of the middle and upper classes. Members of these classes are more highly represented in social debate due to their access to the cultural resources that can be used to struggle within the system: education, communication skills, contacts, familiarity with bureaucratic and political systems.

Working class groups have been highly active on a number of environmental issues in some countries. In Australia, the Green Bans remain a potent symbol and the labour movement has played a leading role in the anti-nuclear



power movement. But these are exceptions to the usual pattern.

What is of concern here is that *some* environmental issues mainly reflect the specific interests of middle-class individuals. The campaign against the flooding of the Franklin River mobilized much of middle-class Australia. The Tasmanian workers, by and large, supported dams. This has been a familiar pattern in the United States, where capitalists are able to use the threat of job loss to mobilize workers against environmentalists.<sup>11</sup>

The environmental movement has been bitterly attacked by both the right and the left for its middle-class interests.<sup>12</sup> The question here is whether class factors are responsible for neglect of some environmental issues. Coal mining communities are working-class, and they suffer the accidents and illness of a dangerous occupation. Coal-fired electricity-generating plants are often situated in working-class areas. By contrast, acid rain, to which coal burning contributes heavily, threatens wilderness areas, such as forests and lakes, which are allegedly more of concern to middle-class environmentalists. Acid rain, no doubt, has received more attention because of this class factor.

It should also be mentioned that "middle-class environmentalists" have on occasion played vital roles on issues of special interest to working-class people. A minority of scientists, often identified with the environmental movement, have helped to expose the occupational hazards of substances such as polyvinyl chloride and asbestos. It is simplistic for others to dismiss the whole environmental movement because of its class composition, but it is also dangerous for environmentalists to ignore the role of class in affecting their own directions.

**Lack of strategy.** For many environmental groups, action usually means reaction. A group springs up because of a planned development, a new government policy or a perceived threat. In many of the larger groups, underpaid and overworked staff deal with so many demands and issues that they seem to have little time to think, let alone plan a long-term strategy.

Closely related to this is the role of impulse. Campaigns are often launched because one or two or a few people decide something must be done. While it is good that action occurs, energy is often poured into what happens to get started. Symbolic features enter in strongly here. Gradually encroaching

problems such as soil erosion seldom trigger campaigns the way a high-rise development does.

The movement as a whole suffers from a short-term perspective. Without conscious attention to long-term goals, it can only be by chance that individual campaigns lead in desired directions over a period of decades. Without an overall strategy, all sorts of valuable initiatives may be overlooked because they are not recognized at the time.

In the case of the car, two sources of challenge could have been jogging and cycling groups. Campaigns could have been mounted to change city planning so that walking, jogging and cycling would be attractive options for a large number of people for both transportation and recreation.

What happened was that jogging was adapted to the car. Individualist solutions prevailed: joggers fend for themselves in a world built around the car, sometimes driving considerable distances in order to jog around a park.

Cycling posed more of a challenge, since cyclists need hard surfaces for fast riding. The demand for cycle paths has been a key one by many cycling groups. But often town planners have built only recreational cycle paths. Commuting is still dominated by the car in most places.

Because the environmental movement had not identified cars as a major issue, it did not have a strategy that could grasp the opportunities raised by enthusiasm for jogging and cycling.

In the case of coal, the overall direction is given by the soft energy path. But this has not led to alliances with groups in coal-mining areas.

The idea of overall strategy does not mean that there has to be a central committee telling everyone what campaigns to work on. That is hardly compatible with the strong commitment to participation in many environmental groups. Rather, overall strategy is something that every individual and group can work on. By regularly analyzing and discussing ideas about dominant social structures, crucial issues, present resources and interests, and local political factors, I believe a more informed choice of campaigns can be made.

Some of this already goes on, often using the tools of nonviolent action training for developing analysis and strategy.<sup>13</sup> But too often strategy and tactics are developed within unexamined assumptions about what issues are important. In addition-



tion, in some activist circles there is a belief in "spontaneity" and "commitment" which is thought to imply (I'm not sure how) that careful analysis of structures and campaigns is unnecessary or undesirable.

Commitment and passion are vital for environmentalists. But committed and passionate action directed at the nearest target is often wasteful and sometimes counter-productive, and may only serve to help those involved feel good that they are doing something. It is my belief that tying commitment and passion to a careful analysis can lead to more effective action.

Environmentalists need to devote more attention to developing long-term strategy—part of this involves the choice of issues on which to focus. If environmentalists mainly react to what are perceived as pressing issues, they are responding in large part to initiatives by industry, government and the media.

There are many considerations in developing a long-term strategy, including environmental significance, the possibility of success, public education, forging alliances and attracting supporters. It is not my aim here to say that environmentalists should or should not be focusing more on coal-burning, cars or any other particular issues. It may be that these are worthy of concern but too difficult to challenge and hence not good targets. My point is that coal-burning and cars, among other issues, seem to have been relatively neglected for reasons other than a careful assessment of options.

None of the factors that I have discussed is a definitive reason for neglecting an issue. Personal involvement can make it harder to oppose a technology, but widespread household use of pesticides has not stopped the mounting of powerful campaigns against pesticides. Entrenched technologies are harder to challenge, but this has not stopped campaigning against factory farming and nuclear weapons. Campaign focuses have been found for even apparently remote issues, such as logging of rainforest in Brazil.

Environmentalists, through their choices and campaigns, help determine what issues come to be considered crucial environmental problems. All too often environmentalists simply accept the issues that are on the agenda because of previous campaigns, media attention, a recent disaster, or compatibility

with the interests of particular social groups. What is needed is more attention to long-term strategy, including a questioning of assumptions underlying the choice of issues on which to campaign. □

*Brian Martin has long been active in the radical science, environmental and peace movements. He currently teaches in the Department of Science and Technology Studies at the University of Wollongong, Australia.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Armand L. Mauss and associates, *Social Problems as Social Movements* (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott, 1975); Malcolm Spector and John I. Kitsuse, *Constructing Social Problems* (Menlo Park, California: Cummings, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> Petr Beckmann, *The Health Hazards of NOT Going Nuclear* (Boulder, Colorado: Golem, 1976); Bernard L. Cohen, *Before It's Too Late: A Scientist's Case for Nuclear Energy* (New York: Plenum, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> Jim Falk, *Global Fission: The Battle Over Nuclear Power* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> Alisdair Aird, *The Automotive Nightmare* (London: Arrow, 1974); Terence Bendixson, *Instead of Cars* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> Ivan Illich, *Energy and Equity* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1974).

<sup>6</sup> Mel Horwitch, *Clipped Wings: The American SST Conflict* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1982).

<sup>7</sup> James J. Flink, *The Car Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1975).

<sup>8</sup> David Collingridge, *Technology in the Policy Process: Controlling Nuclear Power* (London: Frances Pinter, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> Amory B. Lovins, *Soft Energy Paths* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> Andre Gorz, *Ecology as Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1980).

<sup>11</sup> Richard Kazis and Richard L. Grossman, *Fear at Work: Job Blackmail, Labor and the Environment* (New York: Pilgrim, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> Edith Efron, *The Apocalypics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984); Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "A Critique of Political Ecology," *New Left Review*, No. 84 (March/April 1974), pp. 3-31.

<sup>13</sup> Virginia Coover, Ellen Deacon, Charles Esser and Christopher Moore, *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1981).