

reducing genetic variability and removing pests and "weeds" when any ecologist knows that stable ecosystems are always complex.

The book also contains a few side-swipes at the United States Department of Agriculture, one of Ehrlich's favourite *bêtes-noires*. I asked him to expand on his dislike. "The USDA is essentially an arm of American agribusiness. The best example is that in spite of enormous evidence that the kind of pesticide usage we have is simply a shuck—that is it doesn't help the farmer, it doesn't help the consumer, it basically only destroys the world and makes a profit for the petrochemical industry—in spite of all that, the Department of Agribusiness continued until very recently to fight every possible progressive step. They also had a very big share of the responsibility for the starvation of many people in the US; for a long time they were in charge of handing out food for the poor, and of course they only gave out surpluses which turned out to be things like lard." But although it has been such a backward organisation for a very long time, Ehrlich does allow that the USDA has done some outstandingly good things, notably the pioneering

don't give a damn who eats or doesn't eat; their only concern is how to increase their sales."

Yes, but how should we achieve a more ecologically...? "My professional opinion of what could be done if a very broad view is that by putting perhaps five times as much money and energy into agriculture and disease control for the next 20 years, we could transition to sensible systems that would allow us to get today's results with half the energy and ecological threat. It's going to be an extremely sticky and expensive transition; you can't just stop what you're doing now and start doing something else. At the moment, for instance, we are hooked on pesticides like a junkie is on heroin; but that doesn't mean it wouldn't be worth all the time and effort it takes to get off heroin to get off pesticides. And during the transition to the new agriculture, yields are certain to decrease, which is why ecologists are so wild for population control. We are **already stretched to the breaking point**, and every person we add makes this hideous choice, between present and future needs, more difficult. We know that a lot of the things we are doing—like overfishing the oceans, with yields finally starting to

people. This comes as neither a surprise nor a disappointment to me: if you look at the history of significant social movements, you find that a relatively small group of people began it. If we can get 10 million people really concerned with ecological clean-up and population control in this country we'll get both, because most people never do anything anyway: only Richard Nixon has the ability to listen to the silent".

And what are the chances of getting the 10 million? "Good. Excellent. As a matter of fact, you can't miss; the only question is when do we get them. As long as we continue on the course we're on things are going to get worse and worse. They may not be worse tomorrow—they may be better next year—but if you look at the general trend **it's going to be downhill from now on**. And when things get far enough downhill it will guarantee another round of 'enthusiasm' to swell out the present ranks of, I should guess, a hundred thousand to our ten million." And then? "Well, we might just continue on down the drain. It could be too late to stop the slide already; and if it's going to take, say, another 10 years to get the 10 million then it's going to be a sure thing too late. That's why it's a matter of when,

changed first? "Well, if you mean the present *real* political system, obviously it will have to change. If you mean the present *theoretical* system—easy. I don't believe in the Great American Dream, that everything has to come out all right; nobody can be sure it's possible to have any kind of viable mass democracy in a technological age. I would like to think—along with all 'liberals' I suppose—that if everybody were educated in the fact that it's very important that they pay a lot of attention to the issues of the day, not only in the short term but in the big picture, then the greater interest of the people will make the system work. At the moment, most people are so ignorant that they actually think that Congress is back there working for their own good. It may not work to get people educated and involved, but we've never tried it". One idea that Ehrlich finds attractive is that everybody gets one vote as a birthright, and then "earns" himself extra votes by his degree of concern and interest in society.

There remained two questions I've always wanted to put to Ehrlich. The first concerned his feelings at being a celebrity, something for which many of his fellow scientists dislike him and use as

much it is doing for pollution control. We call that ecopornography. I would say there is a very close correlation between the degree of culpability of a company, and the amount of advertising they put out over the radio and TV, telling you how much they are doing. The technical term for that in this country is bullshit. In fact, most large polluters have probably spent more on ecopornography than on attempting to clean themselves up. And of course, by definition most of them will never do anything. I mean, the obvious answer in Detroit is fewer, smaller, larger-lasting cars. But can you see X Motor company saying, 'Ah-ha, we're going to halve our production, make only tiny cars and guarantee them for 35 years'? Not likely—there are too many people whose living depends upon automobiles, making them, pumping gas, building highways. Like the changeover in agriculture, you need good planning. Eventually, it's clear we are going to have to turn back our levels of technology; but meanwhile, in the next 30 or 40 years, there are plenty of problems in the world those guys in Detroit could turn their skills to—if only we had planning."

The sort of "transition" that Ehrlich wants to see are dramatic enough to make one wonder if the present political systems in the United States can accommodate them. Will the system have to be

missed from it, and sit around enjoying ecologically healthy sports like drinking wine made from vines grown on rocky ground. And I prefer to think of myself as a realist rather than a pessimist. I'm like a doctor trying to give somebody a prognosis. If a doctor says to you that lump is probably cancer and it's probably going to kill you in two years unless you have it cut out, you don't say to him 'c'mon doc, don't be a pessimist.' I'll be only too delighted to switch to optimism when somebody shows me the numbers that can make me optimistic. Until then I'll go on saying that at the moment things look very pessimistic."

