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## VERTEBRATES...AND THE CONFLICTS IN PUBLIC IMAGE

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A few words about words.

A word is a trigger of a thought. It is a symbol which turns the switch of action. It can build rocket ships or cut diamonds. It can levy taxes or drop bombs. But to us, the real power of words is found in their ability to unlock one of the greatest resources of all--human thought.

A single word can start the mind racing to find a multitude of associations--drawing out background, stored information--and weaving a pattern of thought. At times these word-inspired thoughts are actually packaged in the brain in an extensive network of association, facts and impressions. This can be called an image.

This image, then, is a mental representation, a conception. If I say the word "environment", our minds may be searching, waiting...even wondering how to form any concept of this general term. But suppose I add to the word to form the phrase: "Environmental Impact Statements". My thoughts readily begin to form a specific, packaged impression or image. It has been built of words I've read or heard...plugged into experiences and thoughts I've filed away since I was born.

An image, of course, would be perfect except for a few information processing problems we humans have. First, it is sometimes difficult to recognize incomplete and inaccurate information. And some of it slips by to help form the image. Second, there's the problem of losing some valuable information previously stored in the brain...due to loss of memory, so to speak. Third, and one of the most serious problems, is attaching relative importance to the various pieces of information within the image. When conflicting information is received, which side receives the emphasis?

There's a topic on the program of this Vertebrate Pest Conference I'd like to use as an example. It involves the monk parakeet. When I say this name, how does the image form in your mind? Is it built with information from newspaper stories, or research reports? Information from a colleague? I can actually remember the first time I heard of the monk parakeet and the image my mind created with only one fact--the name. Everything else was association--my lifelong experiences and thoughts of parakeets searching to link with a wild guess as why this one has been named, "monk". I can tell you truthfully that this first impression was difficult to dismiss, even when more reliable information arrived later. That's the trouble with images. They form without our conscious consent. And as information to support our first impression comes in, the pattern readily accepts it. Conflicting information, however, is not processed that quickly. For our images give way to change very slowly.

People everywhere, of course, have formed strong images relating to our environment, nature and the animal world. We all take supporting information every day and the images grow. We've been doing it since we were children. The lovely poetry in a children's book on how a woodchuck passes his winter days...sleeping, sleeping, waiting, waiting, for the early spring. These thoughts have made a blueprint on our minds. They have seeded the information to develop the powerful resource of an image. Consider, then, the beauty prose which paints a mental picture of nature in all its splendor. These writings draw us to nature as a pattern; wild, free and self-sustaining. Do you remember the images? The power of your thoughts? We've grown up with an appreciation of this beauty. Tasted it, experienced it. More than that, we've thought about it. Now, our combined image has a strength of 10 million men. But wait, there's another side to the story. How about the image we call to mind of the narrow, teeming streets of London and the early 1800's. The London of "Oliver Twist". This is an image of man...his struggles, his bitter fight for a chance at beauty. If there's nature in this image, it is the absence of nature. Today, the pictures of plague and the ills of man bring us to strong feelings and the power will help man rise up to hope and freedom. It is my belief that this image in "Oliver Twist"--man's struggle as a creature within nature--is on a collision course with the powerful images of nature we've developed since we were children.

There is a major war just beginning between two opposing philosophies in the world concerning vertebrates. One side, armed with the evidence of man's contributions to civilization, favors management of vertebrates completely for the benefit of man. The opposition quotes growing evidence of civilization's threat to the beauty and even existence of higher animals. These forces would halt man's growth of civilization at any point where it endangers a "free nature" in the environment.

Both viewpoints, of course, are unacceptable. There have been many conflicts in the past...oil versus fish...handbags versus alligators...birds versus field crops...an airport versus the Everglades. But, these controversies are only preliminaries to wider problems ahead. Many factors are bringing the match and powder together. But most significant is the trend to decentralize man's population centers. The cities, once spreading into rural areas, are now leap-frogging over open areas to snuggle right in the middle of nature. Transportation and other support systems can place factories, sports arenas and residential areas not on the edge of town, but 20 miles; 100 miles from the edge. It is essential, urban planners say. Major city centers are decaying, population growth is squeezing, fires and crime and poverty are spreading. It is murder, environmental forces say. It rips trees and grass, destroys the homes of waterfowl and animals of the field. It poisons the land, sends ribbons of concrete across meadows, fills lakes and streams with broken earth.

Vertebrates stand in the middle of this confrontation. No fight can be as bitter as the eventual meeting of the following two images: the shimmering fishes at play in the pond, and shivering figures of a large family gathering for not enough food in a room too small in a city broken under its own weight.

The images do not represent the problem. Taking away the fishes won't help the family. But try as they can, logical men cannot dispel the images from the minds of industry, planners, environmentalists and the man on the street.

As fantastic as it seems, the images of nature are so inflexible that a television topic of the 1980's could well be: "Let's stop poisoning rats". And coming on fast is the opposition--the plans and growth of man that, if not altered, would eventually confine most all vertebrates to reservations. When these images finally meet, pest control will be under giant floodlights of public opinion. Now it is impossible to tell where the control of vertebrate pests will be after the smoke clears. It may depend on how we conduct ourselves.