

Poisoned Profits by Philip Shabecoff and Alice Shabecoff

Introduction

The toxification of the environment by industrial and commercial activity has been a fact of modern life for decades. But this plague of pollution is so insidious, like the slowly heating pot of water that boils the unsuspecting frog, that its true dimensions have crept up on us largely unheeded. So has its impact on the health of our children.

There have been warnings, of course. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* sounded what should have been an arousing alarm nearly half a century ago. Scientists, physicians and environmentalists have told us of the danger. Some initial but ultimately ineffectual steps were taken by government to slow the tide of poisons into the environment.

For most of us, however, the threat has seemed abstract, a problem for other places, other families other children. Preoccupied with what we regard as more immediate concerns, we tend to ignore the degradation of our habitat and its toll on our children, or assume that someone else—the government, the medical community, industry—is correcting the problem. It is a false assumption.

As we looked around, we found that a surprisingly large number of children were suffering from chronic illnesses. In one of our grandson's neighborhoods alone, a quarter of all the young boys, by our count, were afflicted with some sort of cognitive or behavioral problems of varying degrees of severity. And, as we began to probe more deeply, to study the data, we found what we consider to be clear, alarming evidence that there has been a steep increase in the incidence of a variety of serious chronic childhood illnesses over the past half century. These include childhood cancer, asthma, birth defects, and a range of neurological problems. The data also underscored that Americans were experiencing growing difficulty conceiving children.

This sharp rise in chronic childhood increase has been paralleled by an increase in the volume and range of toxic substances into the environment that we perceive as astonishing in magnitude. These substances pervade our habitat—our air, our water, our soil, our homes, our schools and our places of work. They come not only from toxic waste sites, industrial sites, power plant smokestacks, automotive tailpipes and pesticide

sprayed fields, but also can lurk in our food and many if not most of our commonplace consumer products such as cleaning products, cosmetics, plastic bottles, and clothing. As far as we are concerned, the link between these substances and chronic childhood illness is inescapable. There is not a human on earth who is not exposed to toxic pollution. But it is the children who are most vulnerable.

We undertook this book because we felt it our duty to do whatever little we could to end this toxic assault on our grandchildren—and all children. While we may try to rationalize and ignore the impact of toxic contamination of the environment, we cannot ignore the health and welfare of our children. Perhaps the information we present here will persuade some Americans of the seriousness of the problem and the need to act.

Over the long run, the toxification the environment will probably be understood as as serious a threat to human welfare and the future of life on earth as most of us now understand global warming to be. Warnings about human-induced climate change and its consequences have been issued periodically by the scientific community for several decades now. Only recently, however, have a majority of Americans been persuaded of the reality of the threat and the urgent need to address it. We hope and believe there also will be an awakening to the dangers of an increasingly poisoned environment. It cannot happen too soon.

As we gathered material for this book, it was quickly apparent that any solution to the problem must not only involve industrial and commercial activity and a scientific and medical response, but also adjustments to our economic system and a change in the direction of current politics. All of society will have to be involved in protecting the children. As we try to demonstrate, the roots of the problem permeate the institutions and systems of American life.

We have cast our book as a crime story and adopted the voice of a prosecutor presenting a case to a jury and pointing at those responsible for the toxic assault on our kids and those who abet them. We do not mean that these crimes are the kind punishable under our current criminal justice system, although in some cases they may be. Our terms are a metaphor, not a factual allegation. What we are saying is that what is happening to our children as a result toxic substances in the environment is criminal in the sense that it

is reprehensible and should not happen. We are saying that those who assault the health of children with chemicals or heavy metals or nuclear wastes should be held accountable for their actions and made to stop. But is not just those who make and sell these poisons and products that contain them who are on trial. It is also the government officials, from the highest level on down, who do little to stop halt and even cooperate in the crime against our children. It is members of the scientific community who see no evil, either because they are in the pay of the polluters or convince themselves, contrary to evidence, that there is no harm. It is all of us who remain passive while our children grow ill who are also in the dock.

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