



# SEJ Journal

Winter 2008-09, Vol. 18 No. 4

## **In this issue:**

**Superfund: Toxic waste in your town?**

**Complex brownfields story produces results**

**The promise of nonprofit journalism**

**A morning with Wendell Berry**

A quarterly publication of the

**Society of Environmental Journalists**



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# SEJournal

Winter 2008-09, Vol. 18 No. 4

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

# features



pages 16-17



page 9



page 16

- A federal superfund site near you may hold a great story  
By Joaquin Sapien page 5
- A Seattle river engages public in pollution  
By Robert McClure page 7
- A media future? How nonprofit journalism offered me a new chance  
By Douglas Fischer page 8
- Newsroom cuts: Environment beat takes hit in 2008 recession  
By Michael Mansur page 14
- "Point of sorrow" — recounting coal's destruction in America  
By Michael Mansur page 16
- Inside Story: If pollution cleanup sounds too good to be true  
By Bill Dawson page 18

# columns



### COVER PHOTO

The Duwamish River, a major Superfund clean-up site, is at the center of much of Seattle's heavy industry. (November 21, 2007)

Photo by Paul Joseph Brown/  
*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

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- President's Report: Nation's energy future holds promise for e-journalists  
By Christy George page 4
- Science Survey: Epigenetics . . . Eeek!  
By Valerie Brown page 9
- The Beat: News convergence—the three E's of environment, energy and economy  
By Bill Dawson page 10
- The Biz: Change has most definitely come. Now what?  
By Bud Ward page 12
- Research News Roundup: Newspaper coverage of environment praised while health officials were unresponsive in cancer cluster cases  
By Jan Knight page 22
- Media on the move  
By Judy Fahys page 25
- Reporter's Toolbox: Here's how to join the tweetstream on Twitter  
By Amy Gahrn page 26
- Bookshelf Book Reviews page 28

# Nation's energy future holds promise for e-journalists

By CHRISTY GEORGE

A few days before the SEJ conference in Roanoke, I flew into Pittsburgh to hook up with cousins in Steubenville, Ohio, for a trip downriver. For two days, we followed the coal trail, passing coal-fired power plants, coal barges, more coal plants and places Sarah Palin had just left, after revving up crowds with cries of “Mine, Baby, Mine!”

In the dark, on my handheld Treo, I read up on the environmental issues posed by DuPont's Teflon plant in Parkersburg, West Virginia, as we searched for the elusive plant. Several friends, including conference co-chair Ken Ward, said the Teflon plant was a ‘don't miss’ sight. When we finally found it, its endless lights looked like a small city.

We spent that night in Charleston, West Virginia, within sight of the state capitol, where coal interests have held sway for a century. The next day, we drove back roads, expecting to see missing mountaintops everywhere, but they were all hidden behind gorgeous hills covered with brilliant fall foliage – just like the clear-cuts in Oregon are hidden by impressive stands of timber that peter out a few dozen feet back from the road.

All this set me up perfectly for the conference itself: the rural reporting day on Wednesday that focused on coal and climate change, the Thursday field trip to see mountain-top removal, the Friday morning coal plenary, the keynote by IPCC chair R. K. Pachauri, and Sunday's moving literary conversations with three of coal country's finest writers: Wendell Berry, Denise Giardina and Ann Pancake.

With climate change big-footing the environment story, the next chapter will be about the next dominant energy source.

For the first time in memory, environmental issues became part of the presidential debate this year — not just a position paper that quietly moldered on a shelf or on a candidate's website, but real questions asked during televised debates. And the questions were about energy. About coal.

McCain/Palin ad: “Obama-Biden and their liberal allies oppose clean coal.”

Not so. It's just that Obama thinks his goal of clean coal by capturing and sequestering, or storing carbon dioxide, may be impossible to achieve.

“If somebody wants to build a coal-powered plant, they can,” Obama said in a January interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle*, which Sarah Palin resuscitated two days before the election. “It's just that it will bankrupt them because they're going to be charged a huge sum for all that greenhouse gas that's being emitted.”

Obama's stand on nuclear power is similar – he's all for it, with a couple of small caveats like finding a safe place to store the waste and making sure plants are safe from terrorists.

“I don't think there's anything that we inevitably dislike about nuclear power. We just dislike the fact that it might blow up and radiate us and kill us,” Obama told the *Keene (N.H.) Sentinel*



editorial board in 2007.

Oh, and although he lost West Virginia, Obama won other mining states – Pennsylvania, Virginia and Nevada.

It helped enormously that Obama's opponent was John McCain, the only Republican candidate this election who has a track record of trying to do something about climate change. In fact, last year Obama signed on as a co-sponsor of the McCain-Lieberman Climate Stewardship Act.

Like earlier versions, it failed to pass Congress. But that general agreement on the big picture of climate change allowed the election-year debate to center on the details.

Obama sees new energy creation as the way out of the nation's economic crisis, by reviving a new wave of manufacturing, and new jobs. He told *Time* magazine that it will be his “No. 1 priority.” “There is no better potential driver that pervades all aspects of our economy than a new energy economy,” Obama said in October.

He's promised to implement cap and trade, back energy efficiency and conservation and invest \$150 billion over the next decade in renewable energy sources like solar, wind, geothermal and bio-fuels, which he pledges will make up 25% of the nation's energy mix by 2025.

Oh, and maybe just a little more oil and gas drilling...

What does this mean for SEJ? It means that our members are the most credible reporters around on the biggest political and economic story of the next four years.

What can you do about it? For starters, let your editors know. Don't hide your light under a bushel. Make sure you don't get aced out of coverage plans by the political desk. At the very least, this is a story worth double-teaming.

And if you don't have an editor because you're a freelancer, take heart in knowing that you've got immediate credibility with publications hoping to cover the energy story.

If you've been specializing in sprawl or salmon or Superfund policy, it's time to tackle the energy beat.

SEJ can help. Before Roanoke, I knew next to nothing about coal. Now, I know a little, and more important, I have a feel for the people of coal country – the miners, the coal company, the politicians, and the people who live in the hollows.

If you've never checked it out before, please go to [sej.org](http://sej.org) and spend some time with SEJ's Climate Change Guide. Joe Davis and Bill Dawson have created a compendium of information, including a new regional source Rolodex that will help you localize the climate and energy story.

Read the *SEJournal*. Apply to a climate coverage workshop – SEJ tracks them all. Tap the expertise of other SEJ-ers by using the [sej-talk](mailto:sej-talk@sej.org) listserv. And look for the connection between where you live, and where you get your energy.

How many times in Roanoke did we hear “whenever you flip a light switch, you're burning coal that *continued on page 13*

# A federal Superfund site near you may hold a great story

Want a chance to make a difference in your community? Think Superfund. Indeed, when the news media pays attention to toxic waste sites, a recent study has found that they are cleaned up quicker and better.

By JOAQUIN SAPIEN

The Center for Public Integrity's 2007 project, "Wasting Away: Superfund's Toxic Legacy," provides much more than motivation. It can help local reporters cover those sites in or near your community with depth that previously could be achieved only by wearing out a lot of shoe leather or consuming a lot of your employer's dough.

Most of us have a Superfund site somewhere near us. More than half the U.S. population lives within 10 miles of one of the 1,304 Superfund sites listed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as the nation's worst toxic waste dumps. So it's likely you can find an engaging story at one or more of these sites in your area.

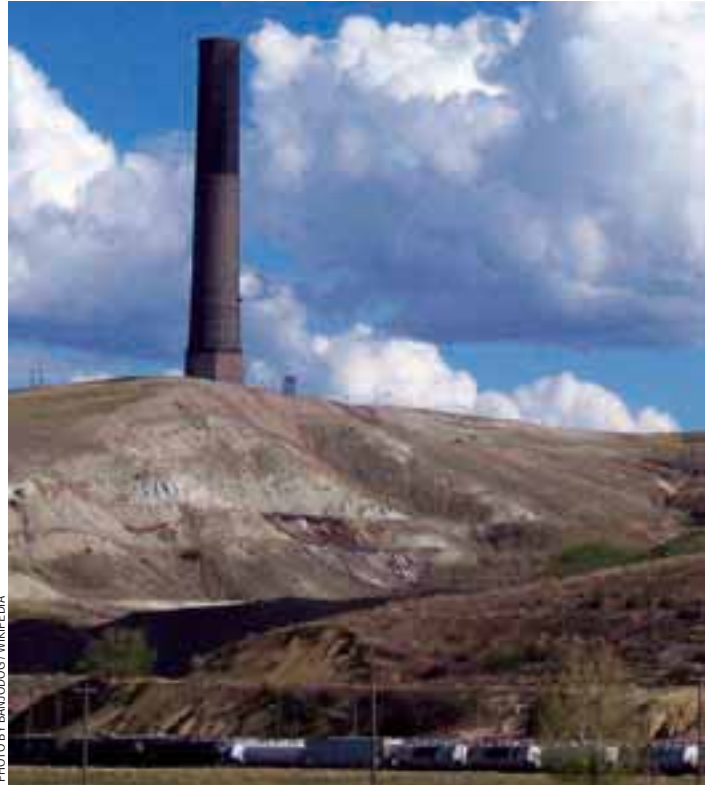
The Center's spring 2007 project found that nearly three decades after EPA launched the landmark initiative, it is desperately short of money, creating a backlog of sites that continue to menace the environment and, quite often, the health of nearby residents.

While the Center focused on investigating the Superfund program from a national level, each Superfund site presents an important opportunity for local environmental reporters to play a watchdog role.

In its investigation, the Center reviewed data, obtained from the EPA through more than 100 Freedom of Information Act requests, and interviewed dozens of experts inside and outside the agency.

Among the findings:

- Cleanup work was started at about 145 sites in the previous six years, while the startup rate was nearly three times as high for the previous six years before.
- During previous years, an average of 42 sites a year reached what the EPA calls "construction complete," compared with an average of 79 sites a year in the six years before. Construction complete is reached when all the cleanup remedies have been installed at a site.
- Superfund officials keep details about the program secret, meeting behind closed doors to rank which sites are the most dangerous and in need of immediate attention. The ranking is "confidential" because the agency does not want polluters to know which sites are priorities and which ones aren't. Some EPA insiders say the secrecy is intended to avoid provoking the public into demanding a solution from Congress.
- Four companies connected to some of America's worst toxic waste sites escaped more than half a billion dollars in



A major Superfund site in western Montana, the Anaconda copper smelter was demolished in 1981. Its 585-foot smokestack (30 feet higher than the Washington Monument) was left standing. Now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the site is also a Montana state park.

PHOTO BY BANJODOG/WIKIPEDIA

pollution cleanup costs by declaring bankruptcy, potentially passing the tab onto taxpayers. Analysis of court documents shows that these four companies, included on the EPA's list of 100 companies connected to the largest number of Superfund sites, could have owed the federal government about \$750 million to clean up their sites.

Here are four important questions to ask when you begin investigating your local Superfund site, with links to relevant information on the Center's website.

**Question One:** Where is the closest Superfund site to your hometown?

To find Superfund sites in your state, in a quick, accessible manner, go to:

<http://projects.publicintegrity.org/Superfund/AllStates.aspx>

**Question Two:** How dangerous is your site?

A key question to ask about any Superfund site is: What chemicals have contaminated the site? Can people be exposed to those chemicals? What is EPA doing to ensure that isn't happening?

The Center's website provides an in-depth profile for every site in the country, and includes information on exactly what contaminants have been found on-site. Here is an example:

<http://projects.publicintegrity.org/Superfund/Site.aspx?act=0902680>

To learn more about the individual chemicals listed, simply

The mission of the organization is to advance public understanding of environmental issues by improving the quality, accuracy and visibility of environmental reporting.

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click on the link titled "More Info" to go to a toxicological profile for the chemical. The profiles are written by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, which provides scientific analysis of Superfund sites to the public and EPA. These profiles outline the potential dangers of being exposed to specific chemicals.

While having a breadth of knowledge about the kind of contaminants that lurk at your local Superfund site is important, you will also want to know how people can be exposed to these pollutants. The EPA has developed a special designation for sites with dangerous materials that could reach and harm people: "human exposure not under control."

When the Center released its investigation, 114 Superfund sites fell into this category. EPA considers human exposure to be "uncontrolled" at a Superfund site when people might be able to come into contact with the contamination by venturing onto the site itself or simply being near it.

Another EPA designation to look for is "Groundwater migration not under control." These are where contaminants on a Superfund site could affect groundwater near the site.

Be careful. Superfund experts warned that some sites that are deemed "under control" clearly still had problems.

Richard Clapp, a professor at the Boston University School of Public Health's Environmental Health Department, gave us one example.

"The Lipari landfill is supposedly controlled, but there is definitely ongoing exposure there," said Clapp. "It is a huge landfill with a fence around it, and there are holes in the fence" that would allow children to pass through to play in the landfill.

If you can, be sure to check the site out yourself, and look for ways that people might be able to enter it. Don't endanger yourself, of course. Be familiar with how people might be exposed before you set foot near the place, and take steps to avoid that. It's important.

**Question Three:** Is your site being cleaned up? If not, what is the holdup? If so, who is in charge of the cleanup?

We found that dozens of Superfund sites lingered on a waiting list to be cleaned up, but it took years for them to get the necessary funding. In fact, the Superfund program is in such dire financial straits that EPA officials told us that they have had to delay needed work at some hazardous sites, use money left over from other cleanups — which itself is dwindling — and resort to cheap, less effective fixes.

Ideally the cleanup process is supposed to work something like this: EPA discovers the site and proposes it to the National Priorities List, the nation's list of the most contaminated areas of the country. Then the agency performs an immediate emergency removal of waste if necessary. Next, EPA drafts a plan to get the site permanently cleaned up. It then installs the necessary tools to remove the waste on an ongoing basis, until it is cleaned up enough to be deleted from the list.

If the EPA can find a financially viable polluter to perform this work, it is supposed to force the polluter to do so. This process can take decades, and it's important to know what stage your Superfund site is in, and how long it's been there. You can get a jumpstart on this by visiting the Center's profiles on each individual site. In some cases, the polluter or polluters takes on the site from the beginning, with EPA oversight.

Learning the Superfund vernacular can be an arduous process, but fortunately, the Center's website for "Wasting Away" includes

a bevy of helpful information to help get you started. See <http://projects.publicintegrity.org/Superfund/>

Each step in the cleanup process comes with its own set of documents that will help you track the site's cleanup progress. At most Superfund sites, the assessment of the damage is known as a "remedial investigation." That leads to a cleanup plan called a "feasibility study" that should examine different options for treatment, with price tags attached and some explanation about the efficacy of each.

This leads to a "record of decision" – the agency's final word on what will be required as a "remedy."

You should also contact the contractor being hired to carry out the cleanup. Sometimes the contractor can provide more details than the EPA can about what is happening at the site.

Also, we found that at least three companies linked by the EPA to hazardous waste sites are being paid by the government to clean up their own sites. Who knows? Maybe you will find a fourth.

When you get a cleanup plan, look for a price tag. Compare it to the other proposed cleanups. We found that cleanup managers were often forced to select the cheapest, least effective plans to clean up sites due to financial constraints.

#### **Question Four:** Who polluted the site?

When EPA discovers a site and lists it on the National Priorities List, the first step that it takes is to find a "potentially responsible party," a company that could be liable for the pollution and pay for the cleanup. There can be hundreds of potentially responsible parties at any given Superfund site. The Center's Superfund website profiles list as many polluters for each site as we could identify through EPA's databases.

If EPA can't find a potentially responsible party, it's supposed to clean up the site itself. Later, it can seek to charge the polluter for the cleanup. We found that the amount of money the agency recovered from these companies has fallen by half in the past six fiscal years, compared with the previous six years.

Once you identify the potentially responsible parties, or PRPs, you can see, using the Center's website, what levers of influence they are pulling in Washington.

The Center posted a searchable database that contains more than 10,000 trips taken by EPA officials and paid for by private companies. In total the trips cost more than \$12 million. The trips were taken between October 1997 and March 2006. Here is a link to the website:

<http://projects.publicintegrity.org/Superfund/TripsPage.aspx>

With a leaked document in one hand, and EPA's databases in the other, we were also able to determine who the top 100 Superfund polluters were. And we tracked down exactly how much money these companies spent lobbying and on campaign contributions.

Here is a link to the story on the top 100 polluters: <http://projects.publicintegrity.org/superfund/report.aspx?aid=849>

"Wasting Away" won a Society of Environmental Journalists award for outstanding online reporting; a Sigma Delta Chi award from the Society of Professional Journalists for independent non-deadline reporting in the online category; and an Association of Healthcare Journalists award for online journals.

*Joaquin Sapien is a reporter for ProPublica, a non-profit investigative newsroom in New York City. He was previously with the Center for Public Integrity.*



Debris near a Seattle park where a salt marsh is being restored—only about 2 percent of the original Duwamish River estuary remains.

## Tale of a Seattle river engages public in pollution

By ROBERT McCLURE

When the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 2000 declared Seattle's Duwamish River riddled with enough pollution to be considered a Superfund site, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* carried a splashy story. Then, as happens at many news outlets, we kept the story mostly on the back burner. Don't make that mistake.

We decided seven years later to check back in on the river's cleanup. Our series broadened public interest, bringing a standing-room crowd to a public hearing the day after our series concluded. People really care about these sites if they're well-informed.

And don't think you must cover your local Superfund sites in a massive project, either. The stories we turned up could have easily been rolled out as worthwhile weekends over the course of months or years. Among our stories:

- The four biggest polluters of the river directly disobeyed EPA orders in drafting a key document that would help govern the amount of cleanup cash that ultimately would be required. They estimated seafood consumption rates based on an Indian tribe that does not fish the river, and eats much less seafood than the tribes that do fish there. **Lesson:** Pay attention to routes of human exposure to toxic materials.
- EPA had just one civil investigator to track down polluters and make them pay for the cleanup – for all of Region 10. With help from a handful of EPA contractors, she was responsible – theoretically, at least – for tracking down hundreds of firms that had operated at the Duwamish plus "potentially responsible parties" at 98 other Superfund sites in the region. **Lesson:** Ask about staffing, particularly this function of making polluters rather than the public pay for cleanup.
- Even though officials had spent \$70 million so far, they remain unable to pinpoint the source of a ubiquitous class of contaminants called phthalates (THAL-ates) **Lesson:** Ask about potential recontamination; in this case the vehicle is stormwater runoff.
- Debate on the cleanup was shaping

*continued on page 20*

# A media future? How nonprofit journalism offered me a new chance



PHOTO COURTESY DOUGLAS FISCHER

My journalism career resurrected on April 14, 2008. That month I said good-bye to print journalism and took up editorship of a website covering climate change. I bid adieu to my ninth-floor newsroom, logged into a virtual newsroom and learned what an RSS feed is.

By DOUGLAS FISCHER

As with all proper born-again tales, the resurrection came with a sudden clarity of vision: The potential nonprofit foundations and the Web hold for journalism. I was blind, a reporter who refused to read blogs. And now I see.

I see what an optimist might describe as the productive foment of creation: Journalism branching out in every direction, moving in starts and fits and pure chaos as it reinvents itself.

Or maybe the more correct view is that old school media is out chasing its tail, wondering what mix of webcasts and video and blogs works, while other organizations and influences are taking off with the craft?

After all, while reporters in just about every print newsroom fret about buyouts and layoffs, staff at ProPublica are out doing top-shelf reporting on drilling and endangered species.

And during the '08 campaign, who among us did not ditch the *Washington Post* in favor of Drudge, Politico or fivethirtyeight?

Marla Cone, the veteran *Los Angeles Times* environmental health journalist and former SEJ board member, is now my colleague at web-based Environmental Health Sciences; she and I have been freed to go find big, interesting, untold stories in environmental health and climate and report them. Our outlets now are web feeds that go out daily to thousands of sites worldwide. We've got funding, a platform, and – thanks to the proliferation of blogs and websites across the Internet – the daunting task of getting our stories to stand out amid so much noise.

I won't waste ink dissecting the nature of this trend or how organizations like McClatchy or even SEJ can best react; such insight must come from sharper pencils than mine. Though I will second Bill Souder's insight, shared on the SEJ-Talk listserv, that this transformation is not looming: It has arrived.

Hearing journalists call this a "crisis" brings to mind a conversation I had once with a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor who studied industrial shifts. He said status quo companies never or rarely make the transition to new technologies. They simply can't see beyond their current model and miss completely the paradigm shift.

We were talking about PCBs, and how Monsanto couldn't see beyond chlorinated chemistry in the '70s when problems with the compound became apparent. But I'm thinking the same could be

said for newspapers today.

There's also the old saw: When others are frozen with fear, take a step.

Only I didn't so much take a step as get pushed.

I never intended to join the revolution; a year ago, I thought my journalism career was drawing to a close.

My newsroom at the *Oakland Tribune* was gradually turning sour – embittered by buyouts and a union fight and knowing that with every departure another beat would go uncovered. It was a dangerously contagious mood, and I began to wonder if the frustration and uncertainty of journalism made sense anymore. I'll admit that, with two small children, the money, hours and stability in the press office of a university or government agency were looking attractive.

Then my wife finished her degree at Berkeley, picked up a fellowship in Boulder, Colo., and I needed a job. *The Denver Post*, Dean Singleton's flagship paper, offered a spot on the editorial board. It was a plum post, full of responsibility and influence. But the terms were frustratingly disappointing.

I took a deep breath and told the editor his offer made me fearful for both my career and our profession. He countered this was the best he could do; that in an era of layoffs and cutbacks, I was lucky to have a job.

And so with little to lose early one Sunday, I called Pete Myers, a scientist who started Environmental Health Sciences in 2003. His daily aggregation of global science and journalism, often put together in those early days from a coffee shop in Charlottesville, Va., had become an invaluable tool as I covered the environmental health beat. We talked for a few hours about where he wanted to take his organization, the excitement he's hearing from funding sources, and the potential for us to reinvent journalism. Somewhere in there he offered me a job.

I got off the phone with my head spinning and e-mailed to clarify whether that offer was real or theoretical. Real, he replied immediately. Six hours later he asked *continued on page 24*



Pete Myers

PHOTO COURTESY DOUGLAS FISCHER



# Epigenetics ...

*Eeek!*



## Understanding chemicals' newly recognized future effects

By VALERIE BROWN

The word epigenetics is popping up all over the place. Writers have their choice of many metaphors to describe this emerging field in biology: it's a set of master switches; it's a musical score; it's a Lego construction; it's a string of traffic lights.

Whatever it is, it's scary for journalists, because it's complex. You have to become a bit familiar with molecular biology, where genetics overlaps with biochemistry.

"Epi" means over, above, atop. So whatever it is metaphorically, epigenetics is a phenomenon that transcends, regulates and expands the function of genes. Emerging knowledge of epigenetics is upending dogma that has dominated biology for more than 50 years. Epigenetics is shifting the focus away from genes and onto the apparatus that surrounds a DNA molecule.

The DNA double helix is commonly described as a twisted ladder. It contains four molecules called nucleotides that make up the rungs of the ladder. They cling to two twisting sugar-phosphate backbones, the sides of the ladder.

There are lots of places along the helix where other molecules, called epigenetic markers, can attach themselves. Common hitchhikers on the DNA molecule are known by their chemical monikers and include methyl, phosphoryl, and acetyl molecules. The most widely studied so far are methyl groups.

In addition, there are other structures, called histones and chromatin, around a DNA molecule that act sort of like a moving company – they help compress and package the long helix to the astounding degree necessary to fit inside a cell. Epigenetic markers can block or allow gene expression, and thus prevent or encourage disease. They're part of the timeless vocabulary of replication and reproduction.

For a fertilized egg to turn into an adult, genes must switch on and off in the staggeringly complex process of cell differentiation.

And since every cell in a person's body throughout his or her life has a complete set of genes, each cell must allow only certain genes to be expressed, or produce proteins. Liver cells allow different genes to function than nerve cells. Epigenetics apparently governs which genes get switched on and which don't, preventing mix-ups of cell types within organs and tissues.

During fetal development, epigenetic patterns are set up for life. Anything that interferes with the proper gene expression during this critical period of development can have permanent consequences. Plus, any transition in life when cells proliferate or rapidly switch genes on and off – puberty and menopause, for example – is also a high-risk time.

*... epigenetics is a long-standing natural structure that science has only recently recognized as a rich source of biological information, unnoticed in plain sight as long as all eyes focused exclusively on genes. In short, it's a game-changer.*

Epigenetic markers can be affected by food, pharmaceuticals and other chemicals. For example, pioneering work by Retha Newbold at the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) showed that diethylstilbestrol (DES), a powerful estrogenic chemical given to

millions of pregnant women between 1938 and 1971 to prevent miscarriage, altered cell behavior in reproductive organs of those women's daughters. This resulted in vaginal cancers when the daughters grew up. Further research by Newbold and John McLachlan of Tulane University suggested that the harm is passed on to subsequent generations.

The degree to which industrial chemicals in the environment may be influencing epigenetics is a hot topic. Work by Michael Skinner of Washington State University and David Crews of the University of Texas, Austin has supported and extended Newbold and McLachlan's evidence for transgenerational effects. Skinner and Crews exposed pregnant lab rats to high doses of vinclozolin, a fungicide widely used on wine grapes, potatoes and other produce. The vinclozolin damaged

*continued on page 24*

# SEEEJ ?

## News convergence — the three Es of environment, energy and economy

### How environmental journalism is re-defining the story of the century ... and vice versa

By BILL DAWSON

Should the Society of Environmental Journalists pitch an even bigger tent – perhaps with a new name, strategically chosen and skillfully marketed to seize this historical moment of economic distress? How about the Society of Environmental and Economic Journalists? How does the Society of Environment/Energy Journalists sound? Or the Society of Environment-Energy-Economy Journalists – SEEEJ, for short?

OK, I confess. Those are not serious suggestions. Still, along with the dramatic economic and political events of recent months, it seems that articles and blog posts blending environmental, economic and energy-related news coverage are turning up more and more often.

It's nothing new, of course, for mainstream and new media outlets alike to focus on the shifting nexus of environment, economy and energy. Economic and energy-related concerns have always been central to environmental issues.

Besides, journalistic attention to subjects like alternative energy and other green business ventures has been growing in the last few years as the climate issue gained new prominence.

As noted in the Summer 2008 issue of “The Beat,” *The Wall Street Journal* introduced its “Environmental Capital” blog in early 2007 to cover “the business of the environment.”

It was by no means the first newspaper blog to proclaim such a focus. The *St. Petersburg Times* launched a blog on climate change and energy issues in 2006 called “The Fueling Station.”

The *St. Petersburg* site proclaims the blog's mission: “Global warming, gas prices, 'green' living – how can you keep up with it all? The Fueling Station is your source for energy and environment news in Florida and beyond.”

Other news outlets that have established blogs working similar territory include *Fortune* with “Green Wombat,” *Salon* with “How the World Works” and *The New Republic* with “The Vine.”

Meanwhile, Web publications like *GreenBiz.com* and the U.K.'s *BusinessGreen.com* have built content-rich sites entirely devoted to green business ventures, as their names leave no doubt about.

As 2008 unfolded, there was ample evidence that journalistic mixture of the three E's was accelerating, due to a variety of intersecting and cascading developments.

To name a few: High gasoline prices. Pro-drilling sloganeering. Plummeting gasoline prices. Sweeping energy proposals by Nobelist Al Gore and energy magnate T. Boone Pickens. A stunning economic meltdown. A huge and hard-fought bailout bill with incentives for alternative energy and energy efficiency. An

historic presidential race dominated by the deepening economic crisis. A president-elect promising an economic stimulus package with a decidedly green cast. An official “recession” declaration from the federal government.

Visually, at least, the blending of environment, economy and energy in the U.S. news media was typified by the layout of a two-page guide to major issues in the presidential election that appeared in the Sunday, Oct. 26, paper edition of *The New York Times*. The left-hand page had three main sections, nestling against each other – “The Economy” on top, with “Climate” and “Energy,” side by side, beneath it.

A month earlier on Sept. 23, *The Times* produced a special section entitled “Business of Green” and launched its new business blog “Green Inc. / Energy, the Environment and the Bottom Line.”

“Green Inc.” editor **Tom Zeller Jr.** said the new *Times* blog would be “a daily churn of insights, observations and dispatches from that often contentious place where business, politics and the environment meet.” Featured contributors include reporters **Kate Galbraith**, formerly with *The Economist*, and **James Kanter**, previously blogging on the same “contentious place” for the *Times-owned International Herald Tribune*.

A persistent coverage theme for many news organizations throughout the fall was the September economic meltdown's relationship to government and business initiatives to create a greener energy system.

This was a media refrain already being noted by *Columbia Journalism Review's* **Curtis Brainard** in an Oct. 7 blog post headlined “From Green to Greenbacks / More Journalists Investigate Clean Energy as a Solution to (or Victim of) the Economic Crisis.” (In a subsequent item on his *CJR* blog, “The Observatory,” Brainard referred explicitly to a blended beat: “The energy and environment beat, in particular, will likely continue to gain importance and relevance as the 21st century unfolds.”)

“Will the Environment Lose Out to the Economy?” was the headline of a piece in *Time* by **Bryan Walsh**, datelined on the same day that Brainard's piece was posted.

Two days later, *The Guardian's* **John Vidal** and **Juliette Jowit** reported that “leaders of E.U. countries plan to use the global financial crisis as an excuse to renege on climate change commitments, according to sources close to energy negotiations in Brussels.”

Just a few days after that, **Dina Cappiello** of The Associated Press addressed the same question in a climate policy-focused story

headlined “Global Warming Getting Political Cold Shoulder in U.S. amid Economic Woes.”

Her lead: “The global economic crisis has thrown a political chill over one of the main initiatives under consideration in the United States to combat global warming: the so-called cap-and-trade plan.”

**Keith Johnson** of *The Wall Street Journal* had a blog post in early October that examined the impact of shrinking credit on alternative energy projects. The headline: “Green Meltdown: Credit Crunch Whacks Renewable Energy, Too.”

Impacts of the recession on environmental initiatives – effects that are feared, predicted or already being observed – were still in reporters' sights in late November and early December, several weeks after the election of Barack Obama.

A sampling of the stories being produced over just a few days:

- Nov. 20: *The Economist* published “Cooling Off/The Economic Slowdown is Having One Good Effect,” which examined the potential in California for a slowing economy to suppress greenhouse emissions.
- Nov. 22: *The Wall Street Journal* reported on reduced spending by several major utilities, including FPL Group's decision to “cut planned investment on wind turbines (in 2009) by close to \$1 billion.”
- Nov. 24: **Elisabeth Rosenthal** of *The New York Times* had a story headlined “Slump May Limit Moves on Clean Energy.” Her lead: “Just as the world seemed poised to combat global warming more aggressively, the economic slump and plunging prices of coal and oil are upending plans to wean businesses and consumers from fossil fuel.”
- Nov. 25: NPR's **Elizabeth Shogren** broadcast and Web-posted a story titled “Bad Economy Threatens Obama's Climate Fix.” She reported: “No one seems to doubt his commitment, but experts caution that keeping this pledge would be very challenging in good times and that the country's economic troubles make it much harder.”
- Nov. 26: **Alister Doyle** of Reuters, in an Oslo-dated story, took an advance look at the U.N.'s then-upcoming climate talks in Poland. The headline, echoing *The Guardian's* piece mentioned above: “Economy Offers Excuse to Avoid Climate Fight.”
- Dec. 1: Reporting from the site of the Poland conference, the AP's **Arthur Max** reported that Yvo de Boer, top climate official for the U.N., had said some green energy projects were already being postponed by economic woes, “stoking fears that a shortage of investment money will lead to cheap and dirty decisions on new power plants.”

Another common coverage theme, partly reflecting Obama's campaign pledge and post-election reiteration that he would fund cleaner energy projects, involved the question of whether a “Green New Deal” may be in the offing, which would simultaneously seek to improve the recessionary economy and mitigate climate change.

On Nov. 1, three days before the election, *Newsweek* writers **Christopher Dickey** and **Tracy McNicoll** argued in favor of just such a bold plan in a lengthy piece labeled “essay” and headlined “Why It's Time for a 'Green New Deal'.”

They concluded that while no governments will spend “trillions of dollars” on the basis of computer models' climate-change projections, they may “spend huge sums soon to kick-start their economies and create millions of jobs” with clean energy

measures.

In its December issue, published before the election, *Mother Jones* presented a multiple-article package titled “The New Economy” (the E and C in the logo were green, and the O was a picture of the earth), with the subtitle “Global Warming. Foreign Oil. Bank Meltdowns. Here's How to Solve Them All at Once.” It included articles by **Gore**, **Bill McKibben**, **Julia Whitty**, **David Roberts**, **Chris Mooney** and others.

*The Nation* published an article in its Nov. 24 issue by University of Massachusetts economist **Robert Pollin**, likewise arguing for a Green New Deal, under the headline “How to End the Recession,” and illustrated by a hardhat emblazoned with a green leaf and an American flag.

In its Nov. 8-14 issue, *The Economist* argued in an editorial that “a verdant New Deal would be a bad deal” – not because a vigorous fight against climate change and government spending to stimulate the economy are not needed, but because “combining the two by subsidizing renewable energy is, like many easy answers, the wrong solution.”

A prominent media advocate of a green stimulus, *New York Times* columnist **Thomas Friedman**, received considerable attention from other news outlets after his new bestseller, “Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution—and How It Can Renew America,” was published in September.

Such reports included a profile of Friedman by **Ian Parker** in *The New Yorker* and interviews by **Bruce Gellerman** of NPR's “Living on Earth” (“Green New Deal”) and **Kate Sheppard** of *Grist* (“Hot, Flat, Crowded, and ... Clean?”).

In the most recent of those pieces, the *Grist* interview, Friedman said he thought Obama's enthusiasm for addressing economic and climate concerns at the same time has grown since his election:

“I think honestly he's gotten more passionate about it. I hear the President-elect talking about green issues, climate change, green stimulus, green investment, with not only more passion, but with more regularity.”

That list of items cited by Friedman could almost serve as a checklist of some of the related opportunities that lie ahead for covering industries of special interest to local and regional audiences.

Some examples of this kind of reporting during the fall:

- “Business Blowing In/Port of Freeport Has Plenty of Work Unloading Turbines as the Use of Wind Energy Grows” in the *Houston Chronicle*.
- “Global Warming Will Bring Changes for Kansas Farmers,” an article from the Harris News Service with this lead: “For Kansas farmers and ranchers, global climate change represents both a threat to their livelihoods and a financial opportunity.”
- “Cow Tax? EPA Looking into Regulating Greenhouse Gases” in *The Palestine (Texas) Herald*.
- “Coal Industry 'Pensive' about Obama” by the AP.
- “Strange Brew: French Fries and Farmers” in Wyoming's *Planet Jackson Hole*.
- “Manufacturer Bemoans Demise of Incandescent Light Bulb” in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*.
- “Obama Expected to Tighten Coal Regulations” in *The Charleston Gazette*.

*Bill Dawson is assistant editor of the SEJournal.*

# Change most definitely has come. Now what?



Bud Ward

By BUD WARD

Journalists by their very nature love change. Change is news. Change is good. And now change is everywhere.

So, journalists, get ready for a feast, a veritable orgy of change coming your way.

Having taken over as the capstone of both principal presidential candidates' election campaigns, and most assuredly of that of successful candidate and President-elect Barack Obama, change is the Big Kahuna of 2009.

It just doesn't get any better than this.  
Or does it?

Change comes in different flavors. There's change that's to be welcomed, change that's to be anticipated, and change that's feared, albeit rightly or wrongly.

Journalists who have the environment as a significant part of their purview have all three on their radar screen.

## Change ... and Obama

There's the change certain to come from a new Obama administration taking the reins in Washington, D.C. It's not too early to anticipate profoundly different approaches from those of the Bush administration in the federal government's approach to and management of environmental issues. Some of these will take place in the halls of Congress, but far more – and no less importantly – in the halls of Executive Branch regulatory agencies ranging well beyond just the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of the Interior. From the Agriculture Department through Commerce/NOAA, State and Treasury, a virtual 180-degree change is likely to ripple across the land and across dozens and dozens of environmental and natural resources programs, with implications globally, nationally, regionally and locally.

Keeping track of those changes won't be easy for a substantially depleted Washington press corps feeling the pinch, like those in their home offices, of pink slips and buy-outs. Whether and how well Washington's still-booming specialized press corps and the "new media" can fill the void and provide meaningful grist for hyper-localization-crazy home-town media remains a big unknown.

## Change ... and Climate Change

Part and parcel of the change the Obama administration will bring to town and to the international arena are the ongoing changes scientists are daily documenting in our global climate. These ongoing changes aren't susceptible to the daily peaks and

valleys of the Dow Jones Industrial Average or NASDAQ, and their march onward seems for all practical purposes unreceptive to much else that constitutes "news" on any given day.

With a more sympathetic White House and, one guesses, House and Senate, the greatest change on the climate change front may come not in how the climate itself is affected, but rather in the shift in emphasis from climate science to climate policies. Think here of "solutions," a seemingly irresistible, though perhaps hopelessly optimistic, catch phrase.

Reporters covering the climate change issue by no means should take the passing of the climate doubters' denials as a given. They and other opposition to regulation of carbon dioxide emissions – both in the scientific and in the policy arenas – in fact may be emboldened now that their adversaries are in charge not only of the workings of science, but also the workings of the federal infrastructure.

The shift to moving forward on suitable climate policies – the economics, the costs/benefits, the public health implications, the energy tradeoffs, the regional and local implications – will take place in the context of a collapsed financial system which itself appears likely to dominate Washington, Obama, front-page news, and citizens' pocketbook realities for months to come.

Reporters failing to consider climate change – and what to do about it – in the context of the sagging global economy are deluding themselves and, more importantly, their audiences.

## Change . . . and Journalism

If it were just the nature of change coming from a new administration and from climate change that were dominating the bandwidth of journalism listservs, environmental reporters would have more than enough to keep them busy.

Fact is, however, that on many of the most viable and sentient listservs (including that of SEJ), it's the nature of change in journalism that also commands attention.

As well it should.

The changes under way, and seemingly (and frighteningly?) accelerating, lie at the heart of how the reading, listening, and viewing public in the future will come by the important scientific, political, and policy information they need to keep the machinery of a democratic society well-oiled. Consolidations of ownerships, reductions in traditional revenue streams, losses of subscribers and "eye balls," parings of news holes, eliminations of foreign and state capital bureaus, "dumbing down," and pink-slip-induced brain drains – these and more are the stuff of environmental and other journalists' nightmares.

The variety of “change” here – with one’s employer, in one’s newsroom, as it applies to one’s chosen field/profession/trade – in many ways involves more, and more immediate and intense, unknowns than even the changes in Washington or in the climate. They’re the kinds of changes that can directly, and soon, affect or even drive decisions on things like options for the kids’ education, the family’s mortgage, the summer vacation, or the credit card balance.

Change. And changes. They’re not just coming. They’re here. Dealing with all of them, and with their attendant unknowns, will define how and how well environmental journalists do their job as they and their audiences enter this new period of uncertainties. And how they do their jobs in the midst of this unprecedented period of change, uncertainty, and anxiety will in turn determine how the American public gropes and copes with its responsibilities to be informed as citizens of a democracy.

Perhaps Bob Dylan said it best with “The Times, They are A-Changin’.” The best environmental journalists and their editors cannot only survive those changes, but in fact steer them and benefit from them. That’s the challenge. Take it?

*Bud Ward is an independent journalism educator and founder/former editor of Environment Writer. He now is editor of the Yale Forum on Climate Change & the Media.*

*The President’s Report  
continued from page 4*

came from Appalachia?” I assumed my electricity back home in Portland comes from hydro-power – cleaner than coal, but problematic for the salmon in the Columbia and Snake Rivers. But wouldn’t you know my power company, Portland General Electric, gets some coal from a mountaintop removal site in Kirk, W.Va., according to [ilovemountains.org](http://ilovemountains.org), which features a coal connector tool by zip code.

In time, perhaps SEJ will come to stand for the “Society of Energy Journalists.”

*Christy George, SEJ board president, is special projects producer for Oregon Public Broadcasting.*

For SEJ Members  
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on the sej-talk listserv  
Where journalists meet and talk

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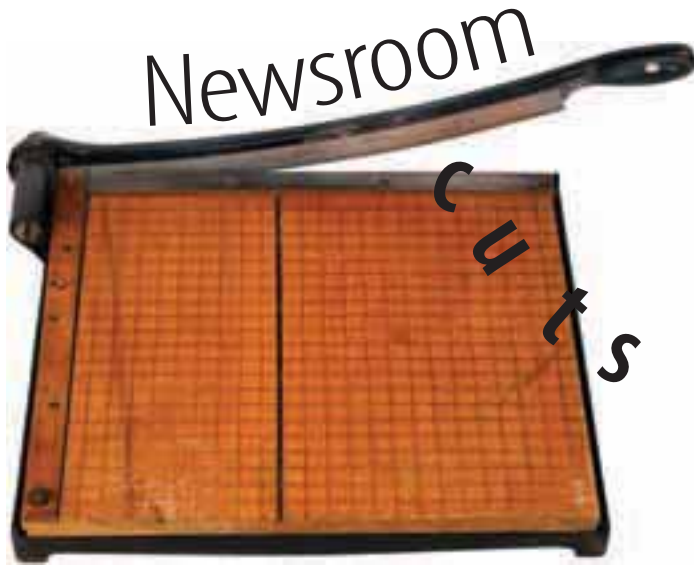
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I’ve got SEJ’s back for 2009



## Environment beat takes hit in 2008 recession

Across the nation this fall, widespread layoffs hit newsrooms as the U.S. news industry reacted to falling advertising revenues, shrinking foundation support and concerns over the future business model for news in America.

By MICHAEL MANSUR

The trend didn't spare the environment beat, as veteran journalists on the beat were laid off in the deep recession of 2008.

CNN, the Cable News Network, cut its entire science, technology, and environment news staff, including Miles O'Brien, its chief technology and environment correspondent, as well as six executive producers.

Peter Dykstra, former SEJ board member, and the team's executive producer, and Diane Hawkins-Cox, a senior producer on the team and a Grantham Prize juror, were among those leaving CNN.

CNN officials described the network reasons for the cuts as more internal to CNN than a reflection on the beat or the importance of such issues as climate change or dangerous endocrine-disrupting chemicals in food.

"We want to integrate environmental, science and technology reporting into the general editorial structure rather than have a stand-alone unit," said CNN spokesperson Barbara Levin. "Now that the bulk of our environmental coverage is being offered through the Planet in Peril franchise, which is produced by the Anderson Cooper 360 program, there is no need for a separate unit."

But others wondered if the cuts might result in less coverage of such important issues during a crucial period of change in Washington, as the Obama administration sets direction on the coming four years.

"It's disheartening," said Christy George, who is president of the Society of Environmental Journalists and has worked closely there with Dykstra. "For the last year or two, television has, in general, been making a commitment to beefing up its environmental coverage."

George added that issues such as clean energy have moved to center stage in global political and economic discourse, and President-elect Barack Obama recently reaffirmed his commitment to tackling climate change.

"There is going to be a lot to cover in science, technology, and environment," George said, "and it's not going to be enough

to just cover the politics of it to keep people informed."

Bud Ward, an SEJ founding member who covers the environment beat for the *SEJournal*, said it didn't appear that the environment beat was being singled out for cuts, nor was it being set aside from the massive layoffs that have hit the news industry in recent weeks.

"Losses of senior and experienced reporters with years of beat expertise don't augur well for the needs of the public to be informed," Ward said. "Many of these environmental and science issues are complex and sometimes controversial, particularly now as we are about to enter a period of profound changes in political and policy directions from Washington, internationally, and from many state houses.

"Climate change is just one of the many sweeping science issues demanding just the kind of journalistic expertise we now see being pushed out the door," Ward added. "These are difficult and trying times made even more challenging by the loss of this kind of veteran reporting know-how."

Other notable news troubles recently: the Tribune Company declared bankruptcy; *The Philadelphia Inquirer* defaulted on \$85 million in debt; venerable newspapers, including the *Rocky Mountain News* and *The Miami Herald*, reportedly have been put up for sale; and the New York Times Co. said it would borrow up to \$225 million against its new 52-story newspaper headquarters off Times Square in New York City.

The job-loss result: More than 15,000 of the newspaper industry's 100,000 or so workers were laid off in 2008, according to estimates. More layoffs are anticipated in 2009.

The hard times also pinched others in the broadcast industry. National Public Radio announced in early December that it would lay off 64 employees and not fill at least another 20 slots, as its foundation funding had dwindled.

*Michael Mansur, SEJournal editor, writes for The Kansas City Star.*

# 2009 CALL FOR ENTRIES



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PHOTO BY DENNIS DIMICK, CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE.

Samples Mine in West Virginia, from the SEJ conference field trip— “Almost Level 1: Cutting Down Mountains for Coal.”

# ‘Point of sorrow’ —recountin

On the final day of the SEJ annual conference — author, think

Ann Pancake and Denise Giardina, for some

By MICHAEL MANSUR

Wendell Berry introduced his reading — called “Speech Against the State,” which he penned earlier in 2008 for a rally in Frankfort, Ky., against abusive coal mining in Kentucky — by saying that “mountaintop removal is the ecological equivalent of genocide. It’s that bad. It’s that big a sin. It’s permanent damage to the world for the sake ... of the briefest possible utility. Coal is of use only in the moment it’s on fire. Whereas the forest and soil destroyed in order to get it out is a ... permanent good to us and everything else in creation.”

In the speech, Berry recalled his early awakening to the horrors of strip mining when native Kentucky lawyer and writer Harry Caudill spoke in the Knott County courthouse of “the gleeful yahoos who are destroying the world, and the mindless oafs who abet them.”

Today, Berry said he hopes for a turning sentiment against the coal companies, as he noted a tenfold increase in the number of protesters there that day in Frankfort.

“Surely they (the members of this government who represent coal corporations) will notice, more to their dismay, that many of this increase are young people. If this General Assembly and this Administration give notice as usual that they

are blind by policy to the ongoing destruction of the land and people they are sworn to protect — and if you, my friends, all other recourses having failed, are ready to stand in the way of this destruction until it is stopped — then I too am ready.”

Berry, Pancake and Giardina discussed the psychological wreckage for those who live with mountaintop removal, the media’s coverage of it and the need for stories to galvanize the world against the destruction.

“There are two ends of this problem for writers,” Berry said, “and I think journalists ought to be aware of both of them. It is possible to braid up this suffering into a public statement like my speech here. And that’s necessary to be done. It’s the approach to the problem that I have to take. I don’t live in the coal fields; I



Wendell Berry

PHOTO BY KATE LUTZ





The picture is made up of 27 separate exposures merged into one, by Dennis Dimick, executive editor, **National Geographic**.

# Coal's destruction in America

Farmer Wendell Berry joined two native-West Virginia writers, capturing inspiring, humorous and splendid moments.

live down river. The stories I'm authorized to tell are different than ones that Denise and Ann are authorized to tell ..."

"But you have to see," Berry said, "and this is most moving, that the public statement can be unbraided into thousands of stories so that there is a public suffering that means nothing if it isn't understood as compounded of an almost infinite private suffering..."

Berry read from a recent newspaper account of the coal industry asking for more lenience from regulators. "The (rule) revision would be to minimize the debris as much as possible but would also let them skirt the 100-foot buffer requirement if compliance is determined to be impossible..."

Then Berry said: "Harry Caudill once told a jury — he was defending some poor soul against a corporation — that the law was the only net ever devised to hold the little fish in and let the big ones out....This is a good example of that. Minimize and possible and impossible are utterly worthless as law."

In response to a question about the importance of story, Berry said, "A story I've always liked to tell is of the French writer Andre Gide. This is in one of his journals. He was in Tunis while that city was being bombed in World War II. He was old,

couldn't sleep. I think he had a skin condition that troubled him. He couldn't submit himself the indignity of trying to save his old life. So he'd sit in his room and watch the bombing."

"Then he would wander out in the morning and watch them trying to rescue the people who had been buried under the debris. And he made the point I think always needs to be made. Thousands of sufferings, he said, make a plateau. It's like that bed of nails you know that you can lie down on. But one death, one instance of suffering, one Lear, one Hamlet, he said, is the point of sorrow."

Berry said he didn't understand the Christian movement that preaches that the Lord is returning so there's little need to worry about such earthly issues.

"I don't understand this reaction to the rapture," Berry said. "It is fact we don't know the day or the hour. It could come at any time and when it comes it could solve a lot of problems...But if the end is at hand, you need to get your ass in gear and be found doing right when it comes."

*Michael Mansur, SEJournal editor, writes for The Kansas City Star.*

Four reporters from Bergen County Record take on a two-year investigation

# If pollution cleanup sounds too good to be true, maybe it is

Delving into a complex Brownfield development projects produces multiple stories and big results for New Jersey crew of reporters.

By BILL DAWSON

*The Record*, based in northern New Jersey's Bergen County, has established a stellar record of investigating lingering environmental problems related to old waste-disposal practices in its coverage area.

In 2006, a team of staff members from the Bergen County *Record* received the first Grantham Prize for Excellence in Reporting on the Environment for "Toxic Legacy," a series about decades-old contamination from a Ford Motor Co. plant.

The Grantham judges declared: "Ten journalists spent eight months investigating the actions of Ford, government officials and even the Mob in exposing residents of the woodlands of northern New Jersey – many of them low-income Native Americans – to these dangers."

The same series received the Second Place honor for investigative reporting in the Society of Environmental Journalists' Annual Awards for Reporting on the Environment.

In early 2008, a group of newspaper staffers were named as finalists in the Pulitzer Prizes' local reporting category for what the judges called "their probe of how plans to build a luxury community atop old landfills became entangled in questionable state loans and other allegations of favoritism."

In October, selected articles from the same continuing series, "Meadowlands for Sale," earned SEJ's top recognition for investigative reporting – the Kevin Carmody Award.

The SEJ judges' description of the project:

"When New Jersey politicians promised to create a sleek, new wonderland of upscale development out of a long-neglected urban wasteland, the staff of *The Record* in Bergen County began digging. The result was a series of investigative stories that exposed how the EnCap project was an enormous tangle of political favors, giveaways, and secret, taxpayer-backed subsidies for a catastrophically risky venture. The promised cleanup of old landfills never happened; in fact, almost 2.5 million cubic yards of contaminated material were dumped to create the project's base. 'Instead of cleaning up the dumps,' *The Record* reported, 'EnCap re-created them.'"

The newspaper's primary EnCap team was:

- Jeff Pillets, a senior writer based in the newspaper's Trenton office, who now devotes his time to investigative stories but wrote

mostly about government issues when work on the project started.

- John Brennan, a senior writer working out of the main newsroom who covers sports business.

- Richard Whitby, a news assignment editor who served as line editor on most of the stories.

- Tim Nostrand, the team leader, who is *The Record's* assistant managing editor for projects.

Nostrand responded to questions from *SEJournal*.

**Q: EnCap was chosen for the initial phase of the project you investigated – a golf course proposed to be built atop closed landfills – in 1999. Groundbreaking occurred in 2004. What prompted *The Record's* decision in mid-2006 to launch an investigation? Did it grow out of prior coverage by beat reporters or others?**

A: Before we embarked on our investigation, just about everybody in a position of power was praising EnCap as a model of public-private partnership and smart growth. On paper, it held great promise: Hundreds of acres of landfills and despoiled wetlands would be transformed into a bastion of the good life – condos, hotels, golf courses – all within minutes of New York City. The old garbage dumps that had been leaching poisons into the Meadowlands for generations would be properly closed, and the whole shebang would be done without using tax dollars, paid for instead by the golfers, condo owners and other ultimate users of the project.

The few locals who were opponents were derided as crackpots; even environmental-advocacy groups were on board.

It was also difficult to envision the immense scope of the project until work had begun in earnest. I remember driving down the New Jersey Turnpike, which bisects the site, and seeing the mountains of construction debris and other fill that were being brought to EnCap and being struck at how massive it was. That gave life to the questions that formed the heart of our inquiry: Did it make sense that people would someday want to live here? If not, did any of the underpinnings of the project hold up? What safeguards are in place to protect the taxpayer, the environment and the people who would be living here?

This project would be an exception to the rule that most good

journalism comes straight from beat reporting. None of the members of the team had the Meadowlands as a beat. Senior editors made the decision early on that this massive development, and others in the Meadowlands, were worthy of special attention.

**Q: At the outset in 2006, did you envision a reporting effort that was as far-reaching and long-running as this investigation became? In October of this year, nearly two years after your first articles appeared, the newspaper published eight stories on the subject.**

A: No. We knew our work was going to take some time, but none of us had any idea that EnCap was going to be a big part of our lives for the next two years. But we built a project structure that had flexibility: We'd spend time at first getting acquainted with the subject, splitting time between that effort and our regular responsibilities. As our knowledge and understanding deepened, and our questions got more profound, we were able to devote more time to the investigation, while still tending to our other, regular duties. Brennan, in particular, was effective at this multitasking.

We also broke the typical project mold on this one, deciding at the outset that we would write stories as they developed, and not wait to pop a big, tree-killing project all at one time. We covered the story as breaking news when warranted, and as we became more knowledgeable, we broke off enterprise and investigative pieces on elements of the project as they became clear.

Ultimately, though, it must be said that this has been quite a story. From its shaky financial underpinnings, to its questionable environmental credentials, to most recently, questions about criminality and the involvement of underworld elements, EnCap has been the story that keeps on giving.

**Q: Were there certain discoveries that your reporters made along the way, or other developments such as actions resulting from your reporting, that were especially influential in propelling the story and keeping it alive?**

A: Yes, pretty much in the order above. First, by wading into the mind-numbingly complex financial structure for the deal, we were able to determine that, in fact, the public treasury was very much at risk in EnCap's financing. A full third of the remediation costs were being paid by what was essentially a state loan backed only by future sales taxes generated at the built-out project. A further round of refinancing would have allowed the developer to cash out while leaving local taxpayers on the hook if the project faltered. It was this reporting that prompted the governor to ask his inspector general to investigate.

We then moved on to the environmental questions, and our reporting detailed how behind-the-scenes arm-twisting and regulatory sleight of hand made mincemeat of the project's initial claims of sound environmental stewardship. In sum, we were able to prove that, as with the project's finances, EnCap's insider lawyers and lobbyists were able to wring concession after concession from government at all levels. Bottom line here:

Rather than cleaning up the landfills, EnCap was likely to leave them more contaminated than ever, under millions and millions of tons of imported construction debris and other tainted fill.

Our work has now moved squarely into questions about whether laws were broken and the degree to which EnCap has served to once again open North Jersey's most iconic physical feature to mob dumpers. Federal and state prosecutors say they are conducting a joint investigation of the project.

The bottom line is that EnCap failed not because of any change in economic fortune or unforeseen difficulty but because our stories lay bare the shaky assumptions that were holding the project up.

**Q: In 2006, *The Record* was honored for investigative reporting in a series on the long-lasting impacts from the dumping of paint sludge and other toxic chemicals by Ford Motor Co. Do the two series – on Ford and EnCap – have any instructive points of similarity or contrast in terms of how they came about and how you executed them?**

A: There are indeed commonalities between the two stories, and some big ones at that. Both involve New Jersey's past environmental sins, which were profound and ubiquitous, and the difficulties that arise in attempting to remedy them. In both cases, valuable habitats had been used as dumping grounds and left to fester. Ford dumped its paint sludge and other castoffs in an uplands watershed; EnCap was rising in the region's iconic wetlands that had been a dump since the days of the area's first settlers.

More important, though, both stories underline the point that cleaning up after ourselves is very difficult for our society, much more difficult than many in positions of power would have us guess. When those efforts are hampered by insider dealing, short-sightedness, and lack of oversight, the effort becomes downright impossible.

**Q: Clearly, with two major investigative projects winning national recognition in three years, *The Record* seems to have a serious commitment to time-consuming, labor-intensive investigative reporting. Staff cuts by many newspapers have led to reductions in this kind of journalism, or fears that it may be reduced. What lies behind *The Record's* apparent decision to swim against that current and devote considerable resources to investigations? Has your newspaper also recently experienced a shrinking news staff, like so many others?**

A: We have a long-standing tradition of investigative reporting at the paper, and it persists even amid the staff reductions that we, too, have experienced. Our leadership team knows that we need to bring value to our readers and to differentiate ourselves, especially in a tough time that's made even tougher by unprecedented levels of competition for readers' time. They also know that, in a time of cynicism and mistrust of government, there's a great opportunity for a newspaper to be a voice that can be trusted to sort things out without bias, precondition or agenda.

*continued on next page*



John Brennan



Richard Whitby



Jeff Pillets



Tim Nostrand

PHOTOS COURTESY BERGEN RECORD

*Tale of a Seattle River*  
*continued from page 7*

up so that local governments and The Boeing Co. seemed likely to advocate a cleanup level that would rule out any subsistence fishing. But tribes and environmentalists were pushing for a higher cleanup level. **Lesson:** Ask about the ultimate cleanup goals; are they in dispute? Are they adequate to protect public health and the environment?

• Our series wrapped up with a look at a whistleblower from a second Superfund site, adjacent to the Duwamish, who had been railroaded out of his job as a result of reporting danger to cleanup workers. **Lesson:** Don't forget to look for the compelling human stories.

One thing I wish we'd done better was to convey just how difficult it is for poorly funded government officials to keep up with the demands the process places on them. (For more on the series see [www.seattlepi.com/specials/duwamish](http://www.seattlepi.com/specials/duwamish).)

The Duwamish is a little unusual for a Superfund site. It's a big section of a river that runs through a broad swath of southern Seattle. So it has the potential to affect many people.

Many Superfund sites are more compact, and pose a risk for fewer people. However, those people tend to be the poor, and often are racial minorities. Remember we are obligated to be watchdogs especially on behalf of those folks. And I'm pretty sure you'll produce some compelling journalism along the way.

*Robert McClure covers environmental affairs for the Seattle Post-Intelligencer.*

*If pollution cleanup sounds too good to be true*  
*continued from previous page*

**Q: The EnCap saga is highly complex, with many dimensions – financial, legal, governmental, environmental. Was it particularly challenging to present all of those elements in a comprehensible way and show how they fit together? On the Web page for the series, along with an archive of all the EnCap articles, there's a very useful “5-Minute Read” that summarizes the story and tells where things stand now. When and why did you decide to present such a summary?**

A: One insider called EnCap the most complex deal he had ever worked on. But our strategy helped immensely here. We took our time and waded through the material, relying mostly on our own common sense to sort things out. When something didn't make sense, we asked questions about it until we got an answer that did.

We tried mightily in all our stories to limit the toll on the reader, to boil things down to an essence and make them easy to understand.

The “5-minute read” element was added this year, at the suggestion of our publisher, to a Web page that already held a list of the stories. That page also was home to some videos and other web-only components we had developed.

**Q: How important an element is environmental reporting in the mission of *The Record*? The EnCap materials on your**



ENCAP PROJECT: The \$470-million first phase of the EnCap project of creating two golf courses, nearly 3,000 housing units and a 350-room hotel on former landfills in the meadowlands in Lyndhurst and Rutherford, N.J. Photo by Thomas E. Franklin / *The Bergen (NJ) Record*

website are accessible through an Environment page that has equal standing, in the site's design, with News, Sports, High School Sports, Business and Education, along with several other topics, which suggests the environment is a high priority there.

A: New Jersey – and northern New Jersey, in particular – has a long history of industry and the pollution that goes along with it. Polls and other evidence show that it ranks high on the reader-interest list, but it's also intuitive that that would be the case in a state with such a history and where people have a deep mistrust of government. As noted earlier with our Ford series, the commitment to solid, watchdog reporting on the environment is a long-standing one at *The Record*.

**Q: Not to oversimplify a complicated story, I hope, but it seems that EnCap, at its heart, is a brownfields controversy – admittedly, a very big one. Are there any journalistic lessons from your EnCap investigation that would provide helpful tips to reporters elsewhere looking at brownfields projects or similar issues in their own areas?**

A: Brownfields development presents all sorts of opportunity for watchdog journalism. It's a classic case of the gap between fervent wish and harsh reality: Wouldn't it be great to replace relics of our industrial past with new, clean development that will help a crowded region accommodate a burgeoning population? But doing it correctly involves great cost, given the degree of contamination in many of these sites, and a strong oversight by government.

That was especially true of EnCap. The Meadowlands itself may not have been the site of heavy industry, but it was the place to which the castoffs of North Jersey's industrial past were brought and dumped.

Our work was guided by some basic principles. We used public-records laws to amass mountains of paper on the project, everything from the financial instruments to the structure of the environmental oversight of the project. We then trusted ourselves to wade through the complexity and get down to basic concepts. We challenged everything, even though just about everybody in government was telling us that there was no story here.

Some specific questions are likely to translate to other situations:

How is the project funded?

To what degree is government financial support involved?

How risky are the assumptions that underlie that support, and the project in general?

Who takes the loss if those assumptions are not realized?

Who's minding the store on the environmental front and can they be trusted?

With EnCap, the state essentially handed oversight to the developer and its consultants and contractors. If that's the case with your project, what controls does government have in place?

One final observation: EnCap stands as a monument to that time-tested tenet of enterprising journalism: If something doesn't smell right, it probably isn't.

*Bill Dawson is assistant editor of the SEJournal.*

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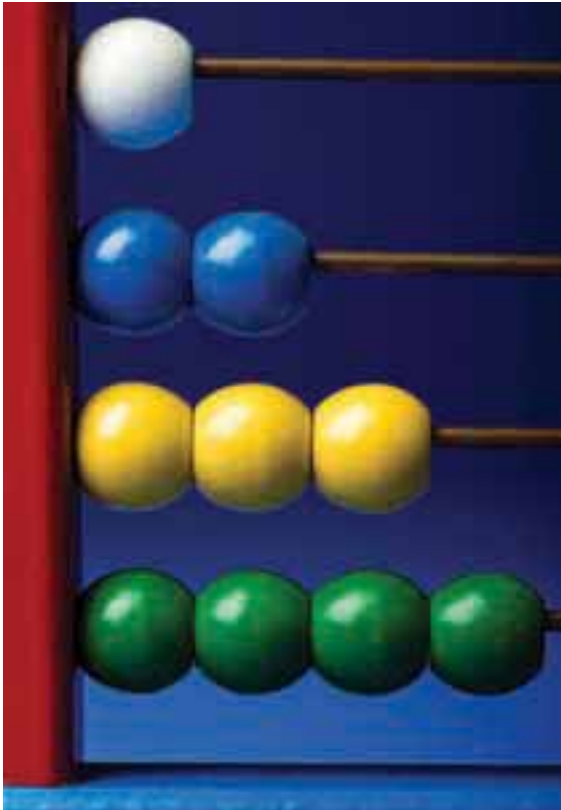
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## Newspaper coverage of environment praised while officials were unresponsive in cancer cluster cases

Survey respondents give local news positive marks overall for covering complex aspects of environmental issues.

By JAN KNIGHT

Local newspapers are more apt than local television newscasts to provide information about some of the more complex dimensions of environmental issues, according to a recent study of results from an Ohio telephone poll.

But the poll results also suggest that newspapers and TV newscasts may complement one another to satisfy audiences who both recognize the varied dimensions of environmental problems and know which media are more likely to address these dimensions, according to Daniel Riffe, Stephen Lacy and Daniel Reimold, the study's authors.

In the survey, respondents ranked local news media performance on five dimensions of environmental coverage. Specifically, respondents were asked whether local TV news and local newspapers had done a good job of informing them about (1) the causes of environmental problems, (2) the victims of the problems, (3) who was responsible for the problems, (4) solutions to environmental problems and (5) the cost to remedy environmental problems.

Nearly two-thirds of the respondents ranked both mediums most positively for their coverage of the victims and causes of environmental problems and slightly lower but still positive for their coverage of who was responsible for the problems.

In contrast, more than half of the respondents gave both mediums less-than-positive ratings for their coverage of environmental solutions and remediation costs, including about a third who gave them "somewhat poor" or "very poor" ratings for their coverage of these aspects. Within this group, though, respondents gave higher marks to newspapers than television news for

reporting on solutions and costs.

Overall, then, the results showed that both mediums are doing their best work when they cover the victims and the causes of environmental problems and their poorest when covering the solutions to and costs of environmental problems, with newspapers nonetheless doing a better job than TV newscasts.

A total of 916 randomly selected Ohio residents aged 18 or older completed the survey out of 2,317 people contacted, for a 40 percent response rate. Most of those who completed the survey were female (58 percent) and white (86 percent), and 39 percent had achieved a high school degree and 24 percent had completed college. The respondents' median age was 49.

The researchers were surprised that respondents ranked both mediums' coverage of the causes of environmental problems so positively because causes comprise "one of the more complex types of [environmental] reporting." And, research suggests, journalists often do not report on causes of environmental problems even though causes are salient to audiences, so the researchers had expected respondents to rank coverage less-than-positive on this dimension.

That respondents ranked newspapers more positively than TV newscasts on coverage of the solutions and costs related to environmental problems may be because newspaper staffs and news holes are larger than those for television, giving them more resources to cover these dimensions in depth, the researchers suggested.

They concluded that this difference holds a boon because, "rather than competing for reader and viewer attention," the

“distinctive traits” of television and print journalism may work together to provide environmentally knowledgeable audience members with depth and the lesser-informed with complementary information.

For more information, see Daniel Riffe, Stephen Lacy and Daniel Reimold, “Papers Lead TV in Covering Complex Environmental Issues” in *Newspaper Research Journal*, Volume 28, No. 4 (Fall 2007), pp. 77 – 87.

### Newspaper content probed for lessons on health officials’ treatment of citizens during cancer cluster investigations

Based on a study of newspaper content, researchers have concluded that health officials need to do more to ensure that they treat individual members of the public fairly during health investigations and to communicate their concern more clearly.

In news reports on cancer cluster investigations in seven U.S. communities, health officials generally appeared to be unconcerned about residents’ worries and to be disrespectful, untrustworthy or biased, the researchers found. Further, only about 26 percent of 330 news stories studied indicated that residents had been given the opportunity to express their views to health investigators.

Researchers John C. Besley, Katherine A. McComas and Craig W. Trumbo based their findings on a content analysis of one local newspaper in each of the seven communities, ranging from Oak Ridge/Kingston, Tenn., to Marin County, Calif. They focused

on coverage of public meetings about the cancer cluster investigations dating as far back as Jan. 1, 2000.

Cluster investigations are challenging for health officials and residents alike because of the uncertainty associated with them, the researchers noted: It is difficult to establish whether clusters exist and, even when found, to establish their cause. An added challenge stems from public perception. Research suggests a strong correlation between whether health officials appear to be fair – that is, neutral and respectful of individuals – and residents’ attitudes toward and engagement with the process.

In this mix, the study’s authors added, it is “important not to forget the value of understanding media content” because research has established that journalists pay attention to officials’ treatment of people who are impacted by health risks, including observing whether fairness norms are met and that “the procedures governing decisions allowed citizens to have a voice in the decision making.”

For more information, see John C. Besley, Katherine A. McComas and Craig W. Trumbo, “Local Newspaper Coverage of Health Authority Fairness During Cancer Cluster Investigations” in *Science Communication*, Volume 29, No. 4 (June 2008), pp. 498 – 521.

*Jan Knight, a former magazine editor and daily newspaper reporter, is a former assistant professor of communication at Hawaii Pacific University in Honolulu, where she continues to teach online courses in writing and environmental communication. She can be reached at jknight213@aol.com*

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Today I spend about half my job mining the Web daily for the best, most interesting and relevant journalism on climate change. I grapple with the same questions as everyone else: Who's a journalist? Do I post a good story, even if the publication carries a tinge of advocacy? When does a blog post carry the same weight as a reported article?

The other half of my job is what I find most rewarding. Marla and I are pushing each other, trying to fill the gaps in coverage and get great stories to our readers. I want to beat not just the major papers, but ProPublica and NRDC and RealClimate.org.

We're feeling pressure, no question: Our funders expect us to be out there furthering the public discourse, expanding coverage on key areas, distributing accurate and unbiased information to the public. In that respect my job is no different from my task at the *Tribune*.

The downside, of course, is that I no longer have a voice in a mass-media publication. I've gone from reaching 750,000 at a sweep to maybe tens of thousands. Worse, you have to be interested in climate change to find my stuff.

Jim Detjen, founding president of SEJ and director of the Knight Center for Environmental Journalism at Michigan State University, is quite concerned about this polarization of news. "We're losing the middle ground," he told me. "To some degree, it's the same thing we're seeing in society."

The good news is that's changing.

In mid-November *The Denver Post* ran an A1 story investigating water quality problems caused by fracturing rock deep under oil and gas drill sites. It was a piece any journalist would want to own, offering damning evidence that the government's health assurances favored industry over the public.

It was a story the *Post* or *LA Times* of yesteryear would own. Except that the byline on that story belonged to ProPublica's Abrahm Lustgarten.

That's our business model: Use our funding to do quality reporting on important topics that mainstream outlets aren't covering. Then get those stories in those papers – and inspire other reporters to find local or similar angles.

I can't say this is the answer to journalism's woes. Not even close. Nonprofit, foundation-funded journalism won't absorb all the reporters fleeing old-school institutions. Funding is limited. There is the polarization of news that worries Detjen and other deep-thinkers. And there's that question of bias and credibility that dogs any upstart and that can only be overcome with long, hard, good work.

But I'm excited to still be a journalist. Excited to have the opportunity to do big journalism on interesting topics and get it out there, even if the "there" is rather limited right now.

That'll change, too, I'm certain.

*Douglas Fischer edits DailyClimate.org, a website published by Environmental Health Sciences. He has been a member of SEJ since 2000.*

male descendants' reproductive anatomy and fertility in three succeeding generations.

A striking aspect of the Skinner team's work is their demonstration that female rats can sniff out the damaged males, and invariably spurn them. This means that transgenerational changes to epigenetic patterns affect reproductive fitness, and therefore natural selection. Philosophers and historians of science find this interesting, since it seems to rehabilitate Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, the 18th-century biologist who believed characteristics a parent acquired could be inherited by offspring. Darwinists scoffed Lamarck's theory into oblivion a long time ago, but epigenetics gives it a new, plausible twist in that epigenetic patterns set before birth can apparently be inherited.

Epigenetic effects on reproductive fitness are also of pressing interest to wildlife biologists, ecologists and the like. If a wild population of a species was exposed to an influence that, like vinclozolin, impaired male fertility for several generations, that population would likely crash unless the females had access to males from another unexposed population.

There's some chance that epigenetic problems can be fixed. Experiments by Duke University researcher Randy Jirtle with bisphenol A (BPA) reveal that nutrients commonly found in foods can dramatically alter epigenetic patterns. Jirtle dosed pregnant mice with BPA, a known estrogen mimic. Their pups had yellow fur and got really fat. Jirtle then repeated the experiment but gave the pregnant rats folic acid, vitamin B12, choline and betaine. Their pups reverted to normal coat color and metabolism. These nutrients occur in food and are easily available in supplements.

Before you rush out to Supplements-'R'-Us, here's a note of caution: epigenetic markers can cut both ways. In many cancers, methyl molecules are stripped from locations where they normally occur. Vitamin D is known to promote methylation. But some cancers feature methylation in places along a DNA helix where it's usually absent, indicating that indiscriminate consumption of substances known to affect epigenetic markers is not a good idea. Not yet, anyway.

So epigenetics is a long-standing natural structure that science has only recently recognized as a rich source of biological information, unnoticed in plain sight as long as all eyes focused exclusively on genes. In short, it's a game-changer.

Keep your eyes on phrases like "fetal origins of adult disease," "transgenerational effects," and the ever-unnerving "endocrine disruption." Emerging knowledge of epigenetics will challenge and clarify our understanding of all these phenomena.

*Valerie Brown is a freelancer who changed careers from professional musician to science writer in midlife. After that, even parsing epigenetics seemed easy. For a much more detailed discussion of epigenetics and links to further resources, see her article "Environment Becomes Heredity" at <http://www.miller-mccune.com/article/environment-becomes-heredity>.*

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## Media on the Move

By JUDY FAHYS

Some SEJ members are branching out with new projects. Others are stepping up to accept accolades for their environmental journalism.

**William Souder** has a new book deal for *Days of the World, Years of the World: The Life and Legacy of Rachel Carson* that will explore the life and work of the groundbreaking author who helped transform the conservation ethic into the environmental movement. The publisher is Harmony, which has slated publication for 2012, the 50-year anniversary of *Silent Spring*. Souder's most recent book, *Under a Wild Sky: John James Audubon and the Making of The Birds of America*, was a Pulitzer finalist in 2005.

**Jim O'Neill** is the *Bergen (NJ) Record's* new environmental reporter, now covering what he sees as the big story of the next decade. A 20-year veteran reporter, he is returning to the fold after a year's hiatus as director of public affairs at Columbia Law School. O'Neill also has worked at the *Providence Journal*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Dallas Morning News* and *Bloomberg News*.

Long time SEJ member **Terri C. Hansen** won the Native American Journalists Association 2008 Media Award, Best Environmental Story in a Daily/Weekly, for her piece, "Northwest Coastal Nations at Risk of Climate Change Disruptions," that ran in *Indian Country Today*. Encouraged by SEJ stalwart Christy George, she wrote about the impacts of climate change on tribal nations. She also won NAJA's 2008 Media Award for Best News Story in a Monthly/Bimonthly for her story, "Tribal Victory," in *High Country News*.

And **Craig Saunders** reports that he has started teaching in the editing program at George Brown College in Toronto.

Freelance writer and engineer **Diane McDilda** has started a new part-time position in the University of Florida Office of Sustainability. She is the author of *The Everything Green Living Book* and *365 Ways to Live Green*.

Meanwhile, the *Yale Forum on Climate Change & The Media* ([www.climatemediaforum.yale.edu](http://www.climatemediaforum.yale.edu)), edited by SEJ honorary member and co-founder **Bud Ward**, has won a grant from the McCormick Foundation to train Midwest broadcast meteorologists on covering climate change science.

Photographer **Roger Archibald**, *SEJournal's* photo editor, presented a paper, "The Camera As Prosthesis," at the Second Global Conference on Visual Literacies: Exploring Critical Issues, at Mansfield College, Oxford, United Kingdom last summer. To learn more about his work, see the web page: [www.inter-disciplinary.net/ci/v1/v12/s1.html](http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/ci/v1/v12/s1.html).

**Dick Russell** was part of a web-based documentary film, "The Warning," based on interviews with authors Robert Kennedy Jr., Naomi Klein, Joe Conason, *continued on page 27*



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Here's how to join the tweetstream on Twitter

## Joining the world of Twitter, the social networking system that allows short messages, can plug you into a new world of sources.

By AMY GAHRAN

By now you've probably heard about Twitter, the social media service that allows you to publish posts of 140 characters max.

**What Twitter does, in a nutshell:** Allows you to receive posts ("tweets") from other Twitter users whom you choose to "follow." Likewise, other Twitter users can choose to follow you. When you follow people on Twitter, their tweets show up in reverse chronological order in the "tweetstream" that scrolls down the Twitter home page when you're logged in. The effect is somewhat like an ongoing Headline News version of what's happening in the minds and worlds of people you know or find interesting.

### THE VALUE OF TWITTER

Twitter's biggest payoff is that it allows you to gather a personal posse who can support you in powerful, flexible, speedy ways.

Also, if you're choosy about the people you follow, Twitter can be quite an effective radar screen for news or relevant issues.

Twitter can help you engage people on a personal level, and demonstrate your interest in them. This is something that many journalists resist — but that can benefit journos and their work significantly.

Twitter also can help you spread the word about your efforts, driving traffic to online, broadcast, mobile, or print venues — or even live events.

### WHY THE 140-CHARACTER LIMIT?

Communication via Twitter is so tightly constrained because it's meant to work at the lowest common denominator of digital media: plain text messaging on bare-bones cell phones.

While Twitter is accessible by smart phones, e-mail, RSS feeds, and other channels, its simplicity gives it surprising power and portability. Specifically, it "plays nice" with a remarkable number of other services and tools — which means you can use Twitter to connect with people almost anywhere.

### HOW TO GET STARTED

1. Go to Twitter.com and click the big green "Get Started — Join!" button.
2. Choose a username. Keep it as short as possible — characters count! Your first Twitter username also should represent you as a

person. For instance, JaneDoe or Jdoe would be much better than GazetteEnvironmentReporter. Then choose a password, give them your e-mail to confirm, and pass their anti-robot test.

3. Configure your account. You do this under the "settings" tab. Under the "notices" tab, select "show me all @replies," making it possible for other Twitter users to get your attention even if you're not already following them. Don't worry that people will spam you — that's really not a big problem, and you can block people who try. It's far more valuable to be open to connection.

Do NOT "protect your updates." This is an option under the notices tab that many journalists might be tempted to click, because they often want to be private. But you'd sacrifice most of the value of connection that Twitter offers. Take a deep breath. Put yourself out there. Expand your comfort zone.

Do check the boxes for "E-mail when someone starts following me" and "E-mail when I receive a new direct message."

Complete your profile (including a link and one-line bio) and post a picture (icon). This is very important if you want people to follow you.

Under the "devices" tab, register your cell phone so you can tweet via text message if you want to. But for now, set "device updates" to "off" so you don't receive text messages from Twitter.

4. Find just a FEW people to follow, at first. To start, just follow five to 10 Twitter users you know or find interesting. To follow someone, just click on their username, which is a hyperlink that takes you to the page showing their recent tweets. Click the "follow" button under their icon at the page top. You'll see their recent tweets on your home page when you log in to Twitter.

5. Post your first few tweets. When you're on the Twitter home page, you'll see at the top a box under the heading "What are you doing?" That's where you type in your tweets. Click "update" to send. But don't just say what you're doing. Contribute interesting observations, thoughts and questions to attract followers.

6. Reply to someone. Twitter supports rudimentary conversation.

Of all the tweets coming in from the people you're following, pick one that you like and move your cursor over it. When the box

is highlighted, you'll see a little arrow curving up and to the left. Click that.

Then you'll see that person's username preceded by an "@" sign appear in the posting box at the page top. After that, type a response to that post. Make sure it's something you wouldn't mind other people (even strangers) seeing; this is public.

When you send this tweet, that user will see it under their "replies" tab. That user will know you're trying to engage in conversation, and might respond in kind.

You can quickly find responses to you by clicking "@Replies" in the right-hand sidebar.

7. Tell people you're on Twitter. At first, just tell other Twitter users who are within your comfort zone — perhaps some of the people you've chosen to follow. But as you get used to this medium, you might want to post your Twitter ID on your personal blog (You have one, right? You should!), bio page on your employer's site, with your byline, in your e-mail signature file, etc.

8. Give it time. If you're not used to social media, Twitter can seem rather alien at first. Usually after playing with it regularly for three weeks, something just "clicks" and it suddenly seems to make sense and offer value. So don't give up on it too fast.

*Amy Gahrn is a journalist, media maven and info-provocateur who lives in Boulder, Colo. This Reporter's Toolbox is adapted from her blog. More tips on Twitter and more from Amy: Contentious.com/category/tips*

*Media on the move  
continued from page 25*

Naomi Wolf and Chris Hedges, about what they see as the frightening direction American democracy has been taking. The other is a new book, *On the Trail of the JFK Assassins*, to be published in early November.

Meanwhile, **Debra Atlas** reports she's added a newspaper to carry her weekly articles on innovative, environment-related consumer products. "I'm now syndicated!" she says.

The National Academies of Science in September announced the recipients of its 2008 Communication Awards, including **Bob Marshall, Mark Schleifstein, Dan Swenson, and Ted Jackson** of *The Times-Picayune* in New Orleans for "Last Chance: The Fight to Save a Disappearing Coast," which was published in March 2007. Judges said "Last Chance" was "an outstanding newspaper series that combines superb storytelling with the latest science in its call to action to save Louisiana's wetlands." The winners were to be honored during a ceremony on Nov. 13 at the Arnold and Mabel Beckman Center in Irvine, Calif.

And, finally, **Catherine V. Schmitt** has moved up from part-time science writer to full-time communications coordinator with Maine Sea Grant at the University of Maine in Orono.

*Judy Fahys is environment reporter at The Salt Lake Tribune. Contact her with your news of your latest award, book project or job change at fahys@sltrib.com.*

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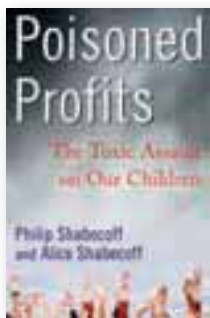


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A clear, accessible account of how regulators failed to protect the public

### **Poisoned Profits: The Toxic Assault on Our Children**

**By Alice and Philip Shabecoff**  
Random House, \$26

Reviewed by Kathleen Regan

When is a crime a crime?

Evidence grows daily that our air, water and food are becoming increasingly contaminated with chemicals and that these chemicals are related to a rise in both chronic and acute diseases among children. When someone deliberately puts a contaminant in milk powder, resulting in illness and death, that's clearly a crime. When someone deliberately manufactures a substance for some other purpose, but that substance also causes illness or death, the answer is not as clear.

*Poisoned Profits: The Toxic Assault on Our Children*, Alice and Philip Shabecoff's new book, casts the issue of chemical manufacture, use and disposal as a crime story, with chapters titled for example, "Indictment," "Evidence" and "Witnesses for the Defense." This strategy, while clever, cannot hide the fact that the book should properly be called a polemic, not a crime story. This sometimes gets in the way of the strong message and most powerful parts of the book.

The Shabecoffs' discussion of the ways in which chemicals differentially affect children and fetuses is clear, detailed and disturbing. Children are not small adults in terms of how much toxic input their bodies can tolerate. Understanding the difference between the effects on children and adults is critical to understanding just how poisonous some substances can be. The book points out how current evaluation methods of toxicity fail to capture this but also how changing analytical technologies are bringing us ever closer to better diagnostic tools.

*Poisoned Profits* also provides a clear account of how the dismantling of our regulatory framework, begun during the Reagan administration and enthusiastically expanded under George W. Bush, protects chemical manufacturers' shameful activities. Examples range from the evisceration of the EPA, to the practice of putting chemical industry executives in charge of watchdog agencies, to many other changes made to favor industry over public health. The Shabecoffs shine needed light on the sorry state of protection for the public. These practices continue even as I write this review. *SEJ*'s own *EJToday* cited recent news reports that an FDA report finding the controversial chemical bisphenol A safe was written by the plastics industry and that the White House changed a new EPA lead emissions rule at the last minute to protect polluters.

Perhaps the most cynical aspect of government's failure to protect public health is the court's practice of allowing companies to settle with injured families and communities by blackmailing

them. Companies will pay only under the condition that the families promise not to take their cases to the public or even to talk about them at all. Corporations use the claim that they are protecting trade secrets, but the effect is that there is no accretion of knowledge and experience for a concerned public to learn from and on which to act. This of course only serves to protect manufacturers, not citizens.

The Shabecoffs also directly address the issue of our role as consumers of the products that threaten our children. They discuss values at length and are not afraid to pose hard questions about lifestyles and personal economic decisions. Do we want a weed-free lawn, a perfumed car, a spotless carpet so much that we're willing to poison our children? There is no way around the fact that companies make products because we buy them. We buy them because we like them. We are adults and we can exercise our judgment. It is entirely appropriate to challenge our consumption patterns.

But the book fails to distinguish between consumer products that may be dangerous versus substances that are part of the waste stream or are by-products of other processes. For the first category we can seek alternatives. Consumer demand is a powerful incentive for manufacturers of consumer goods. And consumer advocacy might be the best way to combat this kind of contamination. But waste disposal, secondary chemical production and products for which the manufacturing process itself is the problem need to be regulated and controlled differently. Individuals cannot be expected to understand everything about the making of things on which we all depend. Government protection, through good laws and intelligent enforcement, is the only protection we have. And in fact many of the most egregious cases cited by the Shabecoffs are the result of improper industrial waste and by-product disposal. The latter is, I think, a crime, and the Shabecoffs' indictment does not overstate the truth.

*Poisoned Profits* suffers from uneven writing. It wobbles between a strident exhortation to action and a sober report on a grave and urgent public health issue. But it calls attention to some of the worst dangers facing our most vulnerable citizens and it is written in a way that is accessible to everyone.

*Kathleen Regan is working toward a master's degree in environmental sustainability and food production from the University of Hohenheim in Stuttgart, Germany. A former researcher at Marine Biological Lab at Woods Hole, she wrote a chapter for the 2007 book, Creating a Climate for Change.*



Physician probes failure to protect humans from mercury poisoning

### **Diagnosis: Mercury Money, Politics & Poison**

**By Jane Hightower**  
Island Press, \$24.95

Reviewed by Jennifer Weeks

Jane Hightower is the kind of doctor you'd want if you had

mysterious, debilitating symptoms that didn't fit conventional diagnoses. Starting in early 2000, Hightower, a San Francisco internal medicine practitioner, began to see patients with clusters of puzzling symptoms that included fatigue, fainting, aches, trouble concentrating and hair loss. Batteries of tests started to show a common factor – elevated blood mercury levels.

Hightower's patients were affluent, health-conscious Californians who ate large quantities of seafood, mainly big predatory species like tuna, sea bass and swordfish. Paradoxically, she deduced, that's what was making them sick.

Mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants and other industrial sources wafted into the air, fell into the oceans, and accumulated in fish, concentrating as the heavy metal moved up the food chain. Humans who ate a lot of seafood were at risk for mercury poisoning.

Logically, Hightower assumed that regulators must have set a safe level for blood mercury, but that's where things got complicated. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said that 200 micrograms per liter was safe, but the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recommended 5 mcg/l. That meant a 132-pound woman could safely eat 28 6-ounce cans of chunk light tuna per week under the FDA standard, but only two-thirds of a can under the EPA limit. Facing divergent standards like this, Hightower took a logical route: she told patients to stop eating fish, which typically cleared up all or most of their symptoms within six months.

Hightower didn't stop there: She talked to ABC's 20/20 show, published articles on fish consumption and mercury poisoning symptoms in her patients, and tried to find out why regulators were all over the map on mercury hazards. This book is the result, and it turns up some truly weird ideas about mercury and human health.

Hightower reviews the history of medical attitudes towards mercury, which doctors long saw as a sort of cure-all because of its unique chemical properties. For example, bichloride of mercury was mixed into the walls of Stanford University's Lane Hospital in the 1870s because it was seen as such a good antiseptic (that building is now in a landfill somewhere). She analyzes mercury poisoning episodes in Japan, Canada and Iraq in the 1960s and '70s in an effort to make sense of current policies and regulatory standards. One startling finding is that FDA's position on safe levels of mercury consumption as of 2000 was based on data from Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist supporters in Iraq, where several thousand people were poisoned by mercury-tainted grain in the early 1970s.

Hightower shows that many prominent researchers on this issue have received funding from the seafood and energy industries, and dissects the California court ruling that canned tuna did not have to carry mercury health warnings under that state's Proposition 65 law. As she makes clear, money and industry pressure have helped to confuse the public about what types and quantities of fish are safe to eat.

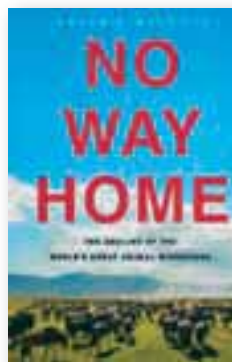
The Bush administration's controversial Clean Air Mercury Rule – which would have allowed power plants, the largest domestic sources, to engage in mercury emissions trading – was struck down by courts in 2008, so Congress and EPA will have to start over on regulating these sources in 2009. And as a 2006 Institute of Medicine study concluded, consumers are hearing a lot of uncoordinated and inconsistent advice on seafood and health

from government agencies and private groups. In sum, mercury health risks are a big piece of unfinished business awaiting the Obama administration.

As Hightower points out, fish contain omega-3 fatty acids that reduce the risk of heart disease, so balancing benefits and risks from seafood is a complicated mission for consumers – especially when federal agencies still don't have a consistent message on this issue, and FDA does not enforce what Hightower says is an excessively weak standard for mercury levels in fish. The more fish you consume, she writes, the lower contaminants in your diet should be, so consumers need to educate themselves about which species contain the most mercury.

"Even as recently as November 2006, I had a physician in his sixties consult me about his own blood mercury level of 25 mcg/l who knew nothing about any advisory from EPA, FDA . . . or a host of other acronymic agencies," Hightower writes. After a year of controlling his mercury intake, his fatigue, memory loss and tremors had abated. Doctors like Hightower can help patients take the right steps, but better regulations would be much more effective.

*Freelancer Jennifer Weeks (jw@jenniferweeks.com) is based in Watertown, Mass.*



Threats to animal migrations hold more dire consequences

## **No Way Home: The Decline of the World's Great Animal Migrations**

**By David S. Wilcove  
Island Press, \$24.95**

Reviewed by Tom Henry

From one of America's leading wildlife experts comes *No Way Home: The Decline of the World's Great Animal Migrations*, an engrossing collection of stories about how nature's superhighways have been impacted by human activity.

Princeton University ecologist David Wilcove writes lovingly about the awe and beauty of migration while giving readers a look at the challenges for monarch butterflies, dragonflies, salmon, songbirds, bison, cranes, loggerhead turtles, wildebeests, whales and other forms of life wired to roam.

The prognosis is grim due to the footprint of the Earth's human sprawling population and the resulting habitat loss it has generated, compounded by climate change, pollution and other factors, from dams to skyscrapers to cell phone towers.

Wilcove articulates his theme with sound, level-headed reasoning backed by 19 pages of source citations.

His writing has the heart and passion the book needs, well beyond the dryness of a scientific journal yet devoid of emotional, flowery rhetoric – all at an appropriate tone for the layman. There's little embellishment. The facts speak for themselves and are presented clearly and authoritatively.

*Author of The Condor's Shadow: The Loss and Recovery of*

*Wildlife in America*, plus numerous scientific and mainstream press articles on wildlife conservation, Wilcove suggests the Earth is on the verge of losing some migration spectacles it has experienced for thousands of years.

In the case of salmon, extinction is not around the corner. "But it seems increasingly clear that the only migration most salmon will make in the future is the journey from the fish farm to the canning factory," he wrote.

What's at stake? More than tradition.

Migrating birds control populations of plant-eating insects. Salmon transfer nutrients from rich seas to nutrient-poor rivers when they swim upstream to spawn, die and, ultimately, decompose in riverbeds.

Wilcove notes how a bird launching itself into a night sky – something done billions of times every spring and fall – may seem like "an act of faith or courage."

Yet it's sheer instinct.

"That instinct tells the bird it is time to go, time to venture hundreds or thousands of miles to some other place where living conditions will be better for the next few months, as has been the case for generations upon generations of its ancestors," he wrote. "The bird travels without any knowledge of what may have happened to its breeding grounds, its wintering grounds, or any of the places in between since the last time it made the journey. It just goes," Wilcove continued. "In that respect, perhaps migration is an act of faith after all, a hardwired belief that there is somewhere to go and a way to get back."

*Tom Henry is a journalist with 27 years of experience at Michigan, Florida and Ohio newspapers who created The (Toledo) Blade's environmental beat in 1993. He began writing a weekly environmental column for The Blade's Sunday news analysis section in early 2007.*

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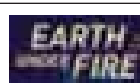
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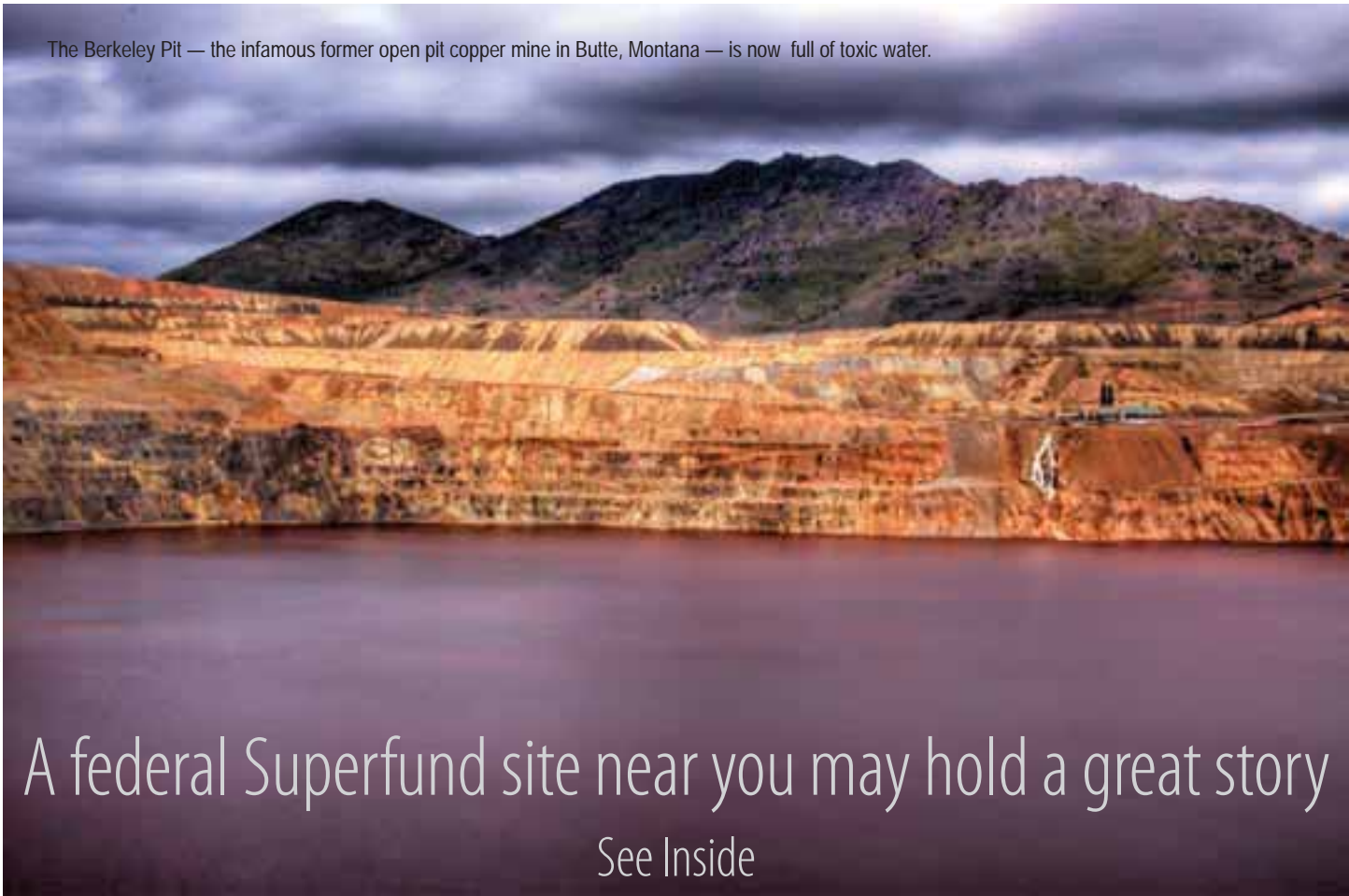


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