

# Perspective



## The Ever-Changing Problems of Natural Resources

HORACE M. ALBRIGHT, *Chairman of the Board, Resources for the Future, Inc.*

**T**HE PROBLEM OF NATURAL RESOURCES was challenging human ingenuity long before the first man flung a stone to knock down his dinner, and it will continue to be a challenge as long as there are people on earth. The question is as changeable as it is persistent. Gains in population, alterations in living habits, and advances in technology bring new situations calling for new approaches and methods. With resources there is constant need for checking up on where we are.

It is difficult to see just what is happening to our resources, and it is hard to be objective about what we do see. Of course, reasonable people agree that we should so use our resources as to meet fully the requirements of the present while also giving thought to the needs of coming generations. But once we go beyond this laudable generality there are real conflicts of interest. For example, there are many who feel that since the normal pattern of our society gives plenty of leeway to day-to-day economic interests an extra push needs to be given to saving scenic and material values for the future. There are others with just as sincere an interest in the country's future, who say that it would be unwise to stint ourselves today, perhaps imperiling wages and profits, for the sake of locking up resources that may be obsolete 100 years hence.

Within each of the two groups there are further conflicts. Development of scenic and recreational resources are not always compatible, even in long-range terms, with water or agricultural development. What is good for the oil industry may be bad for coal. For both commercial and security reasons there are tugs between using domestic materials or importing them.

On top of all this are some fundamental differences in the way different people look at things. Perhaps, the most important—certainly the most vociferous—of these controversies is the running argument between those who believe that sometime soon the human race will have to

put brakes on its rising levy on natural resources and those who are confident that science can find new ways out. This contest is stimulating to watch though I sometimes doubt if it cuts as deep as some of the other conflicts I have mentioned. Both sides usually agree on a surprising range of things that must be done.

Of one thing I am sure: Much of our difficulty lies in the fact that we do not yet know nearly enough. There is much to be learned in the field of physical science and biology. In economics and the social sciences generally we are still further in the dark.

When more of the basic facts are known, some of the needless controversies will subside and we will move ahead faster toward developing and conserving our natural resources. A start has already been made. Two meetings in particular come to mind as milestones.

One was the great White House conference of 1908 under the leadership of Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot. Ideas took shape there, especially in the fields of forestry and soil and water conservation, and later were turned into effective programs. The results have left their mark on the way we think and act today.

The second of the meetings came nearly 50 years later—the Mid-Century Conference on Resources for the Future, held in December 1953. There, the emphasis was on free exchange of ideas rather than on action, but the scope of the discussions showed how thinking has broadened.

Resources for the Future, Inc., which sponsored the Mid-Century Conference, has received a grant from The Ford Foundation for research and education in the field of natural resources. I hope and believe that by working in close cooperation with private and public organizations already in this area, Resources for the Future can help shed light on dark places and thus contribute to the fuller, better use of natural resources now and in the years to come.