

Book reviews

Proceedings of the Twenty-seventh Arctic and Marine Oilspill Program (AMOP) Technical Seminar, Two Volumes, Emergency Sciences and Technology Division, Environmental Technology Centre, Environment Canada, Ottawa, Ont., 2004, 1061pp., paperback.

These proceedings contain the peer-reviewed papers presented at the long-running annual Canadian conference on oil spills. With long shorelines and an extensive arctic land mass, Canada's environmental emergencies branch has conducted research for many years on the impact of oil spills on the environment. They have presented much of this research along with other papers by scientists from around the world at an annual seminar.

These proceedings contain the papers presented at the 27th annual conference held in Edmonton, Alberta, in July 2004. The presentations cover a wide range of topics from the behavior of oil spills to measures for shoreline protection and cleanup.

Moving into a newer area were presentations in a session dealing with counter-terrorism. There were seven papers on counter-terrorism topics contributed by members of Environment Canada, Canada's defense research and development branch, the USEPA and The University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey.

The two volume proceedings set contains 60 papers authored by scientists from eight countries in addition to Canada. Session topics and the number of papers in each section follows:

- Physical and chemical properties and behavior of spilled oil (7)
- Containment and recovery (4)
- In situ burning (1)
- Activity updated and contingency planning (5)
- Detection, tracking, and remote sensing (3)
- Spill modelling (6)
- Special session on counter-terrorism (7)
- Technical seminar on chemical spills (6)
- Shoreline protection and cleanup (6)
- Biological effects of oil and oil biodegradation (4)
- Oil spill treating agents (2)
- Poster presentations (9)

The conference organizer and Chief of the Emergencies Science and Technology Division of Environment Canada was M.F. Fingas. He was the first author of 10 papers and co-author of six others. Dr. Fingas is a prolific researcher who also serves as one of the editors of this journal.

Gary F. Bennett

*Department of Chemical and Environmental Engineering
University of Toledo, Mail Stop 305, Toledo
OH 4306-3390, USA*

Tel.: +1 419 531 1322; fax: +1 419 530 8086
E-mail address: gbennett@eng.utoledo.edu

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Kendra Okonski, Julian Morris (Eds.), Environment and Health: Myths and Realities, International Policy Press, Islington, Great Britain, 2004, ISBN: 1-905041-00-4, 239pp., paperback, L12.99.

As an editor of scientific publications, I am continually annoyed by articles in the popular press touting "gloom and doom" scenarios that may result from real or imagined chemical releases. The barrage of press releases by populist environmental groups decrying current environmental conditions is never ending.

This book debunks the myths that involve many of the topics of these releases. In it, ten scientific experts challenge "...the conventional wisdom that human health problems (cancer, disease and even death) are being caused and exacerbated by modern industrial society. The book offers an overview by scientific experts of the available scientific evidence concerning the impact of pesticides, dioxin, nitrates, radiation, endocrine disruptors, global warming and the precautionary principle of human health."

The press release accompanying the book summarizes the contents of the eight chapters thusly:

- "On balance, synthetic pesticides are beneficial to humanity, enabling better nutrition and health, and environmental

protection. Consumers and society have been distracted from measures, such as more consumption of fruits and vegetables, proven to reduce cancer (chapter 1).

- The effects of “gender-bending” chemicals, endocrine disruptors, on humans have not been established by science, but scientific evidence refuting the idea has been under-reported by the media (chapter 2).
- Dietary nitrates (caused by agricultural fertiliser runoff) pose no threat to human health. They do not cause “blue baby syndrome” (which is prevented by following simple hygiene rules), cancer or other health effects (chapter 3).
- Expenditures to prevent low doses of radiation are unnecessary and a wasteful use of society’s resources, especially since natural radiation levels are far higher and cause no human health problems (chapter 4).
- Fears over dioxin poisoning are now totally unjustified, and no unequivocal epidemiological evidence exists to link dioxin to cancer, reproductive or immune effects (chapter 5).
- Vector-borne diseases are extremely complex; and global warming alone is unlikely to cause these diseases to spread to new regions or to exacerbate malaria in endemic regions. Eliminating malaria altogether is a far more important priority.
- Overall human mortality from heat waves caused by global warming is not likely to increase. In fact, cold weather causes far more deaths than hot weather. The effects of warmer temperatures are generally beneficial in the medium term and for most of the world (chapter 7).
- The precautionary principle reflects a general “chemophobia” in society, but is not a reliable guide for decision-makers. In fact, the precautionary principle may increase, not reduce, risks because it does not sufficiently direct scarce resources to the most serious risks (chapter 8).”

I feel that pressure groups have had a beneficial result on environmental protection by focusing attention on true environmental problems. As a result, industry and governments have “cleaned up their act” as governments passed regulations governing emissions. But, in this process, we often have gone too far in certain instances in regulating industrial practices to the detriment of society as the cost of these controls far exceed health or environmental benefits.

G.F Bennett

*Department of Chemical and Environmental Engineering
University of Toledo, Mail Stop 305, Toledo
OH 43606-3390, USA
Tel.: +1 419 531 1322; fax: +1 419 530 8086
E-mail address: gbennett@eng.utoledo.edu*

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M. Mihkel Mathiesen, *Global Warming in a Politically Correct Climate: How Truth Became Controversial*, iUniverse Star, New York, NY, USA, 2004, 202 pp., US\$ 17.95, paperback, ISBN: 0-595-29797-8.

Writing this book review is difficult for two reasons: (1) I want to quote far too extensively from the writer’s work and (2) I agree with him so thoroughly that I find it difficult to be objective. That is fine if one accepts the author’s contention that the press feels it is all right to omit arguments opposite to their point of view.

I will begin with a rather long quote from the chapter entitled “The Choreography of Catastrophe”:

“Since the early 1970s, we have been treated to one impending environmental disaster after another. One by one, threatening scenarios were surprisingly brought to the attention of the unsuspecting public. Throughout these three decades, there were never two or more simultaneous calamities. The organized limelight was trained on one issue at a time.

In retrospect, all except the first of these environmental campaigns seem to have followed a nearly identical pattern, as though they had been scripted and choreographed.

First, there is a dramatic press release from an environmental interest group, a bureaucracy such as the EPA or NASA, or a public statement by a high-profile politician to the effect that a new discovery indicates the likelihood of an environmental catastrophe.

The discovery is rarely new; it tends to have the quality of a dusted off shelf item deemed ready to be unloaded on the public. The ‘discovery’ comprises at least one clearly recognizable grain of truth, and the disaster scenario provided hypothetically links a human activity with the predicted undesirable outcome, which threatens humans, nature, or the whole planet. The culprit is always something to do with economic growth and increased human well-being, which ends up translated—for the sake of simplicity and misguided emotional content—to industry profiting by polluting. Typically, the scientifically tenuous hypothesis is described in very simple terms, which helps gain greater credibility with media, politicians, and the public.

The second step includes political activity and intense media reporting, characterized not by balance and critical analysis, but rather by elimination of any language in the conditional tense present in the original press release, which serves to enhance the emotional response and intensify political action. The political action results in the commissioning of expensive, objective studies and/or proposed legislation.

A period of political debate follows, along with press reports, on further research results on issues related to the grain of truth of the issue, while facts not consistent with the disaster scenario remain studiously ignored.

The third step comprises the enactment of legislation before the commissioned study results are available. When the results finally are ready for publication, they are largely