

# IS THE *EH&S Profession* IN SERIOUS TROUBLE?

by *Richard MacLean*

The experience gained over the past 30 years in solving local pollution issues and addressing employee health and safety concerns properly positions U.S. government and industry to face emerging global environmental challenges...or does it?

## INTRODUCTION

The new millennium brings with it similar global environmental and human health issues that challenged us at the end of the 20th century: climate change, species extinction, decreasing habitats, and diminishing freshwater supplies. But does it also bring with it the knowledge and infrastructure required to solve emerging problems?

Today's environmental, health, and safety (EH&S) professionals are well trained, better educated, and brighter than ever before. Yet, scores of A&WMA members to whom I have spoken over the past few years have expressed concern that something is fundamentally wrong in our industry. There are outward manifestations of this growing malady. For example, a recent salary survey, conducted by a U.S. environmental trade magazine, found environmental professionals to be an overworked, ignored, and generally frustrated lot.<sup>1</sup> The typical reaction by nearly everyone caught up in the current economic downturn is, "So what? Things are rough all over and getting worse." Indeed they are, but there's more to this story than just the growing cynicism and negativity found by industry surveys.

Daniel C. Esty, associate dean at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, reported in a recent article what many in the industry have felt: "Sustainable development has been the rallying cry in the environmental realm since 1992. Yet for all its laudable goals and initial fanfare, sustainable development has become a buzzword largely devoid of content."<sup>2</sup> To be sure, concepts such as "industrial ecology," "design for the environment," and "supply chain environmental management," have inspired us, but after nearly a decade, we're still left thinking, "Where's the beef?" Our profession is stuck in a time warp between the success of the past and a future in which the solutions to global EH&S concerns will be pivotal for human survival.

If our profession is to successfully meet this critical challenge, we must increase our effectiveness and influence. But how and where do we begin? In the words of William Shakespeare, "What is past is prologue." Understanding how we got where we are today provides some insight into what

may be on the horizon. I have been working in the environmental profession "since the beginning" (i.e., the inception of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency), and have witnessed some major transitions over the past 30 years.

## Getting Focused in the 1970s

With the formation of EPA and the rise of public interest in the environment, business managers in the 1970s recognized the need to assign more resources to "make this issue go away." Because they did not foresee the true extent and financial impact of environmental issues, management did not assign their star performers to manage the issues. Very few employees had environmental experience and many that did were in transition jobs prior to retirement. I vividly recall attending conferences at the time and listening to unhappy folks who felt like outcasts, pushed aside into positions working on projects that they considered a waste of business resources. As the decade continued, these people retired and management realized that environmental issues were not "going away," but would instead involve serious future investments. A new breed of very focused and competent professionals began to emerge in business, government, and environmental organizations.

## The Rise of Professionalism in the 1980s

A series of major environmental disasters, revelations of massive site contamination, and escalating regulatory demands during the 1980s forced management to devote both significant resources and their personal attention to environmental issues. New positions, such as vice president of environment, were created and the management systems that are commonly used today were developed. The environment was a hot issue. Regulatory agencies and environmental organizations became staffed with dedicated, skilled employees. They had the commitment to do the right thing, even if it meant pushing the envelope and taking personal risks. It was a heady time for the profession and society memberships grew exponentially.

### **Loss of Innocence in the 1990s**

In the first half of the 1990s, the most significant environmental problems were largely resolved to the satisfaction of the public and the politicians. Environmental regulations were leveling off and environmental management systems had matured to the point that entry-level individuals could perform many of the functions that once required seasoned professionals. Many of the environmental leaders in our industry were reaching the pinnacle of their careers during the 1980s. They had become business professionals themselves, yet a “green wall” still separated them from management’s inner circle.<sup>3</sup> In effect, by dedicating themselves to EH&S issues, they had become isolated from manufacturing and business operations. Vigorously challenging the status quo was now becoming risky stuff and personal concern over retirement was looming on the horizon.

Joel Hirschhorn, one of the earliest visionaries and proponents for pollution prevention, summarized the loss of innocence in the 1990s from the bold days of the 1980s: “Implementers replaced visionaries. Implementers became incrementalists. Vision was replaced by practicality, negotiation, and compromise. Conceptualizers in government were replaced by bureaucrats. Dreamers in industry were replaced by managers. Rapid technological change and progress were replaced by words, newly named programs, and endless new phrases that people invented to feel good and important.”<sup>4</sup>

Budgetary strangulation and personal worry created a kind of “green arthritis,” causing progress to creak along with difficulty.<sup>5</sup> It was beginning to take all of an organization’s available resources just to focus on regulatory compliance, public relations, program maintenance, and incremental improvement.

### **The Transition Era Begins in 2000**

By the end of the 20th century, the “old” issues of pollution control and regulatory compliance had largely become part of the status quo. Ironically, some of the grumbling that is now voiced is a direct result of the tremendous success over the past 30 years. Compounding this reality is the fact that the business management landscape has changed. Today, most environmental professionals work for mid- to lower level managers, usually less than 45 years old. Most of these managers have never personally experienced a serious environmental, occupational health, or safety event. In other words, few in this new generation have been fired, disciplined, or arrested for environmental incidents or violations. EPA and the Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) were started in 1970 and 1971, respectively, which was so long ago now that these new managers have no first-hand knowledge of the way it used to be. Bhopal and Love Canal are just events from a distant past.

Elliott Laws, president of safety, health, and environment at Texaco Inc., believes that the current state also has a lot to do with how Wall Street views the contribution of

EH&S professionals to the bottom line: “The unfortunate truth is that the absence of Wall Street recognition makes the life of corporate EH&S professionals all the more difficult. When EH&S priorities are viewed primarily as a cost burden, we are less aggressive in getting involved in business planning. As humans, our tendency is to shrink or withdraw from where we are less welcome. When we are less aggressive in our insistence on EH&S spending and programs that minimize risk and emphasize nontraditional opportunities, we are less successful in fully integrating EH&S into business-unit decision-making.”<sup>6</sup>

### **DOES THIS REALLY MATTER?**

Indeed, all professions face a degree of uncertainty and dissatisfaction as the demand for their services shift with economic, technological, or supply-and-demand swings. So, what is the issue here? In stark contrast to the marginalization of the profession today, there is a growing awareness of global environmental and human health concerns. These issues are not prominent on management’s radarscope, and there is a very real danger that recent developments in both the economy and international terrorism will drive them off the screen entirely. Environmental professionals realize that the long-term “battle to save the planet” will make past EH&S challenges seem trivial in comparison. We, as environmental professionals, serve as the “front line of defense” in preventing or solving potentially devastating global EH&S issues.<sup>7</sup> These issues, however, have not yet reached the critical in-your-face stage that triggers the widespread public support that would lead to successes paralleling those of the past three decades.

It is the classic dilemma of human nature: no obvious and immediate crisis, no concern, and no action. We worry, of course, because we know that protecting the global environment is not about movie stars saving cute critters. The solutions for problems that will eventually manifest themselves in 20 years must begin now. Therein lies the heart of conflict. If we were all specialists in vacuum tube engineering in the 1940s, we may not have liked the evolution of the times, but we would have at least realized that our services were no longer needed in the transistor world. Get over it! Today’s environmental professionals are caught between the old command-and-control paradigm that brought us to where we are today and some future, as yet undefined, state. We are truly in a transition state and transitions are never comfortable. The current general malaise within the environmental profession has potentially slowed forward progress. If the patient (i.e., the planet) is very ill, there is little hope for recovery when the doctor is also sick.

### **THE WAY FORWARD**

In a perfect world, we would anticipate and gradually implement the precautions needed to avoid these problems in the first place. Because the stakes are high and the time spans are

long, we need to have fully-functioning systems and people in place. Clearly, new skills will be needed, but what is being seen today is that many of the very best environmental professionals are eagerly accepting (indeed, aggressively seeking) positions that are totally unrelated to the EH&S profession. This talent migration will, no doubt, yield benefits as these professionals take with them a knowledge and sensitivity of sustainable development. But the profession as a whole appears to be in a funk, without strong leadership and inspiration, as it wallows through this period of uncertainty.<sup>8</sup>

For one thing, we do not even know for sure if this is a chronic problem or just a hiccup brought on by the current business downturn. There has never, to my knowledge, been a systematic evaluation of the state of the EH&S profession along the lines suggested by this article. From a personal standpoint, the most compelling evidence is the feedback I receive from scores of senior professionals, whose experiences essentially mirror these observations. Anecdotal information from contacts may not be a statistically sound method for measuring the issue, but it is nonetheless compelling.

Professional organizations see the symptoms of the problem in the form of diminishing memberships and lower attendance at professional meetings. A&WMA's Executive

Director Dick Scherr has been keenly aware of these trends and over the past two years has instituted a series of initiatives to not only better position A&WMA, but to inspire others to meet the challenge. According to Dick, "The need for professionals to focus on improvement and stewardship of the environment is not going to go away. But we have passed the end-of-pipe treatment crisis stage and are in the process of integrating our services into the fabric of government, industry, and society. During this transition, we are struggling with the challenge of determining where we as professionals fit in, as almost every government and business organization continues to integrate environmental improvement into everyday thinking. Clearly, the traditional skills in our field will be insufficient in the future. As professional societies, A&WMA and its sister organizations must help identify and provide the new skills and tools that EH&S professionals will need to continue to play a critical role in environmental stewardship."<sup>9</sup>

#### **A UNIQUE PARTNERSHIP**

To fully examine this issue, a systematic examination of the current state of the EH&S profession is needed. Fortunately, one is underway in the form of a unique partnership between

the Center for Environmental Innovation (CEI), a university-based, nonprofit research center, and the prestigious Wharton School in Pennsylvania. Several professional organizations are sponsoring the initiative, including A&WMA, the American Industrial Hygiene Association (AIHA), the American Society for Safety Engineers (ASSE), the Environmental Law Institute (ELI), the National Association for Environmental Management (NAEM), the National Association of Environmental Professionals (NAEP), and the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA).

The investigation will employ a two-phased approach. In phase one, the program will quantify the issues and gain insight into possible solutions. In phase two, the program will more fully explore possible solutions with the management of business and government agencies and also examine which problems extend to areas outside the United States. Five data-gathering techniques will be used: a study of current literature; surveys sent to the members of collaborating professional organizations; internet surveys; telephone surveys; focus group sessions; and face-to-face interviews.

Project manager Dr. James Leemann, adjunct professor at Tulane University and former DuPont safety, health, and environmental manager, describes the need for this investigation: "Until we understand these perceptions and strive to overcome the differences, it will remain increasingly difficult for the environmental, health, and safety function to excel in providing the necessary value to society. Through an understanding of the current state of the profession, we can identify practices that can be used to sustain a vigorous professional workforce. We will also clarify the profession's expectations and the value perceived of the EH&S function within companies and organizations."<sup>10</sup>

Phase one will extend into mid-2002, and by this time next year, the issues we face as EH&S professionals should be defined and an initial list of possible solutions prepared. Since A&WMA is directly involved in this effort, regular program updates will appear in *EM*.

## CONCLUSION

Like Rodney Dangerfield, EH&S professionals don't seem to be getting any respect, as they continue to be marginalized to the sidelines and ignored by the public, politicians, and business executives. These are certainly harsh words that I cannot back up with concrete evidence. But, as with any patient facing an illness, the profession must first admit that there may be problem before finding a cure. Let's face it: Things are not getting bigger and better at an ever-accelerating pace. Regardless of who is at fault, it is our problem. Your leadership at A&WMA is already hard at work on this issue. However, EH&S professionals cannot solve this problem by themselves; others must be involved. If management, the public, and the politicians do not see that there is a problem (and they don't seem to now), they will not spend any time, effort, or resources on it.

## What Can I Do?

If you or your organization is interested in supporting the CEI-Wharton School research investigation, contact Dr. Leemann at [leemann1@earthlink.net](mailto:leemann1@earthlink.net), or visit [www.Enviro-Innovate.org](http://www.Enviro-Innovate.org).

Government leaders and business management will obviously be preoccupied with other major issues. And so should they be. But that is not an excuse for us to fall into a status quo state and complain about our lot in life as cutbacks continue and the work mounts. A true resolution to these issues must address communications among all stakeholders, and if our profession is not experienced enough to communicate these issues adequately, nothing will happen. Recognize, however, that the answer does not solely rest with improved communication.

For the past decade, I have heard countless speakers and authors, myself included, call for EH&S professionals to "become more businesslike" and "communicate in the language of business." Although I have noticed some improvements, we still seem to be losing ground. We must recognize that the problem is much more complicated and challenging than any of us anticipated. We need systematic research and creative solutions if we are to excel. It is time to act. ☺

## REFERENCES

1. Hensel, J. 2001 Salary Survey; *Environmental Protection* September 2001, pp 14-24.
2. Esty, D.C. A Term's Limit—Many Flocked to the Banner of Sustainable Development, But it Lead them Nowhere; *Foreign Policy* September/October 2001; available on the World Wide Web at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/issue\\_SeptOct\\_2001/esty.html](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/issue_SeptOct_2001/esty.html).
3. Shelton, R. Hitting the Green Wall: Why Corporate Programs Get Stalled. In *The Role of Upper Management, Environmental Management and Business Strategy: Leadership Skills for the 21st Century*; Piasecki, B., Ed.; John Wiley & Sons: New York, NY, 1998.
4. Hirschhorn, J. Why the Pollution Prevention Revolution Failed—And Why it Ultimately Will Succeed; *Pollution Prevention Review* 1997 7 (1), 14.
5. For more information, see MacLean, R.; Friedman, F. Green Arthritis; *Environmental Forum* November/December 2000, pp 36-49; available in PDF format on the World Wide Web at <http://www.Competitive-E.com>.
6. Laws, E.P. When Will Wall St. See EHS Benefits?; *Environmental Forum* May/June 2001, 18 (3), p 14.
7. For an excellent summary of global environmental issues, see Brown, L.; et al.; *State of the World 2000*; The Worldwatch Institute: New York, 2000.
8. For an interesting discussion of this phenomena, see Frankel, C. Twilight of the Champions; *Tomorrow* September/October 1997, pp 28-30.
9. Personal communication. September 28, 2001.
10. Personal communication. September 3, 2001.

## About the Author

Richard MacLean is president of Competitive Environment Inc., a management consulting firm established in 1995 in Scottsdale, AZ, and director of the Center for Environmental Innovation (CEI), a university-based nonprofit research organization. He can be reached via e-mail at [maclean@competitive-e.com](mailto:maclean@competitive-e.com). For access to electronic files (in Adobe Acrobat format) of this and his other writings, visit the Web site [www.Competitive-E.com](http://www.Competitive-E.com).