

village view

by Andrea Leonard

If you were an eagle, soaring high in the sky and looking down on the earth, what would you see? If you were in a space craft, orbiting our planet, what would the earth look like, spinning around down there below you?

When you're in an airplane, a passenger looking down on our world on a clear day, what can you see?

You see acre upon acre of woodland, square mile after square mile of farmland, beaches, rivers, tremendous expanses of seas, lakes and ponds of all sizes and shapes. You see towns and villages connected by roads and highways.

If you have excellent vision and a discerning eye as you fly over this nation, you see the stripmining scars on hillsides of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and the Dakotas. You can tell which rivers are harnessed for power; the giant concrete dams flooding the upstream valleys are clearly visible.

You see the dams and dikes holding back the waters needed to feed the swamps, marshes and hammocks of Florida's Everglades, one of our largest and most beautiful national parks.

Without radar vision you can't see the details of the cities and what's happening there, for over each hangs a pall of smoke and soot, obscuring the clogged streets, the sewage spilling into the rivers, the trash littering the alleys and vacant lots.

Many more things you can't see today - but if you look again a few years hence, you might. If you and I and other concerned Americans who care about what's happening to the loveliest land on earth permit ourselves to be lulled into false security by environmental progresses already made, you could see worse things.

The great wild and beautiful St. John River - its headwaters in Aroostook County - separates the state of Maine from Canada for many miles. Finally, at the city of the same name, the St. John empties into the Bay of Fundy. It is threatened.

Power companies want to dam it for another hydro-electric plant; they want to build two dams on the New River that flows through the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina;

on the drawing boards are two dozen coal-fired electric power plants in the Colorado River basin.

If these dams are built, hundreds of acres of land will be lost to the floods. If the coal-fired plants are built, noise, dust, smoke, pipelines, transmission lines and quarrying will threaten approximately one-fifth of the nation's entire National Park System, plus Monument Valley and the Hopi and Navajo Indian Reservations.

Planned for New England are a dozen new nuclear power plants. The wastes from these plants will remain deadly for thousands of years.

Don't we need the power? Let's say the demand for power continues to increase and power companies are dedicated to supplying all that's asked for, regardless of the consequences. As long as there's a market for power, power will be provided at all costs.

Your attention please: there is also a demand for stopping short of all costs.

The people of these United States want power at the flick of a switch; but they also want air that's fit to breathe and water that's fit to drink and food that's not contaminated.

They want to preserve beauty of wilderness. They want to keep safe little villages with farms, churches, stores and schools in the valleys along the banks of rivers.

America does provide a market for more and more of everything that power produces... more cars, more appliances, more gadgets.

Americans are also in the market for recreation areas, open spaces unspoiled with industrial wastes, crystal pure lakes and streams where they can swim and fish, and for broad rivers where they can canoe and sail.

They're in the market for a world that hasn't been made uninhabitable with wastes and pollution. All the power-producing equipment conceivable will do people little good if life itself is wiped from the face of the earth.

That's why this year was the last the logging industry could float wood to market on Maine's Kennebec River. From now on, the logs must come over the road to the saw mills.

That's the reason the Willamette River in Oregon - which fifty years ago was so polluted no one would work near its banks, has been restored. It's been ten years flushing itself clean, but it is clean now.

That's the reason Weyerhaeuser Company recently gave 11,000 acres of land in North Carolina - land valued at \$6,000,000 - to the American Land Trust established by the Nature Conservancy.

That's why the Environmental Defense Fund was organized seven years ago to stop the use of DDT, and other toxic chemicals such as aldrin, dieldrin and chlordane. With approximately 10,000 new chemical compounds being introduced annually with no pretesting for carcinogens or other toxicity, it's somewhat reassuring to know someone's doing something to defend us!

We're a part of the environment and what some of us are doing to it is, many others of us fear, making it dangerous for each of us.

There's no denying the power demands exist. There are, however, alternatives to the destruction of the environment. They are still very expensive alternatives, yes; but flooding little towns and valleys where people have lived for untold generations is also expensive.

Restoring a mountainside to the way it was before it was stripped for the veins of coal lying close to its surface is expensive, too. Remaking mile upon mile of swampland in Everglades National Park, and the thirsting wildlife that fragile environment supports, is expensive, too - if not impossible.

Some of the best news is that costs of solar energy are dropping rapidly. The cost of solar cells capable of converting sunlight directly into electricity has dropped 26 percent in the past six months, according to the Energy Research and Development Administration, a government agency working on solar power.

That's a big drop; still, there's a long way yet to go. The price has dropped from \$21 to \$15.50 per watt; conventional energy now costs approximately 50 cents a watt.

As conventional power costs rise and solar power costs drop, we will see the figures merge; then the switch to solar energy will be instantaneous.

No longer will the oil-rich nations have us holding our breath waiting for the next embargo.

No longer will we need make the choice between the destruction of some of our most beautiful countryside or doing without certain conveniences.

No longer will we be asked to conserve energy, to husband our resources. As long as the winds blow and the sun shines, there'll be power enough to meet our needs.

Then the eagle will soar over the earth and rejoice. And you will look down from the airplane on a finer world than any of us has ever seen. And mankind will walk the land with a lighter burden upon his conscience.