Nuclear Garbage Proposal for the Marshall Islands

In the Spring issue of this Journal we discussed* an outrageous proposal to use one of the Marshall Islands Atolls as a gigantic dump for solid wastes from the western United States, suggesting that if this were permitted it would only be the beginning—that the beautiful Marshall Archipelago could ultimately become a garbage dump for the world.

Now, before that proposal is safely dead, an incredible next step is the subject of serious discussion between US officials and the Head of Government of the Republic of the Marshall Islands. This new proposal is to use Erikub Atoll, one of the smaller but centrally-situated Marshalls†, as a depository for high-level nuclear waste from the US and possibly also Japan. Erikub is one of the atolls with some intact native forest remaining—enough to be suggested by a recent MacArthur Foundation-sponsored survey as a site for the preservation of natural biological diversity in the Marshalls. Erikub is currently uninhabited, but is used for copra production by the people of nearby Wotje Atoll.† It is also considered a site of traditional cultural and religious significance to those people.

The irony of this situation is that these discussions are taking place at the same time as the US Government is being asked by the Marshallese people to spend scores, if not hundreds, of millions of dollars to clean up nuclear waste produced by the atomic-weapons testing 40 years ago on Bikini Atoll, not far away in the same Marshall Archipelago.†

This time the enormous economic power of the US (and possibly also Japan) will be just as irresistible to the Marshallese as US military might, and the claim that the testing was for the good of humanity, were in the 1940s.

After 30 years and more of groping and desperately trying to find a safe and acceptable solution to the nuclear waste problem in the US, the authorities contemplate arranging for the problem to go away by making pollution in another part of the world so economically attractive to a poorer people that they will accept the risks which are refused by the people of the US.

Dumping of this material in the World Ocean is considered so undesirable that even the dumping of low-level waste, such as the topsoil from Bikini Atoll, is prohibited by international agreement. What is apparently not realized—or perhaps is being ignored—is the fact that the ground-water bodies in atoll islets are effectively part of the sea-water system, with a constant flux from the freshwater lens in an islet into the sea and lagoon. Nuclear pollution, as soon as the containers disintegrate, will leak and be washed into this ground-water by rainfall, and be diffused out into the sea-water—to pollute the fish that the Marshallese, and even the Japanese and Russians, catch and eat.

Pollution of the ocean is now being perceived as a reality, so that strong public pressure is being brought against it. When general awareness develops that pollution of any kind which is or becomes soluble, occurs on a coral island is effectively marine pollution, it will be stopped. However, as with nuclear and toxic-waste pollution everywhere else, by the time realization and public pressure develops, cleaning up has become prohibitively expensive or practically impossible. Public awareness appears always to be too slow—'too little and too late'. We seem determined to make our planet uninhabitable for our descendants.

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* 'Garbage Dump in the Marshall Islands?', by Dr F. Raymond Fosberg. *Environmental Conservation*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 78–9 with 3 maps. Spring 1989.—Ed.

† *See* Fig. 2 on p. 78 of our Spring 1989 issue.—Ed.

UNEP's Oceans and Coastal Areas Programme Activity Centre

The environmental problems associated with the potential impact of expected climate changes may well prove to be among the major environmental problems facing the marine environment and adjacent coastal areas in the near future. Therefore, the Oceans and Coastal Areas Programme Activity Centre (OCA/PAC) of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) launched, coordinated, and financially supported, a number of activities designed to assess the potential impact of climate changes and to assist the involved governments in identification and implementation of suitable response measures which may mitigate the negative consequences of the impact.

In 1987, Task Teams on Implications of Climate Change were established for six regions covered by the UNEP Regional Seas Programme (Mediterranean, Wider Caribbean, South Pacific, East Asian Seas, South Asian Seas, and South-East Pacific) with the initial objective of preparing regional overviews and site-specific case-studies on the possible impact of predicted climate changes on the coastal and marine ecological systems, as well as on the socio-economic structures and activities of their respective regions. The establishment of two additional Task Teams (for the West and Central African region and for the Eastern African region, respectively) is now in process.

The regional studies have been planned to be presented to intergovernmental meetings convened in the framework of the relevant Regional Seas Action Plans, in order to draw the countries' attention to the problems associated with expected climate change and to prompt their involvement in the development of policy options and response measures that would be suitable for their region. The site-specific case-studies were planned to be presented to national seminars.

The preliminary results of the regional studies (overviews) of the Task Teams have already been considered by meetings convened under the Mediterranean, Caribbean, South Pacific, South-East Pacific, and East Asian, Seas Action Plans. One site-specific case study (Delta of Nile) was presented at a national seminar already in December 1988. Two additional seminars have been planned for 1989 (Delta of Po and Thermaikos Gulf).

A special intergovernmental meeting was convened in mid-1989 in the Marshall Islands, for the 19 island States of the South Pacific to consider their policy options, suitable response mechanisms, and additional site-specific case-studies that are yet to be developed. Also, a detailed case-study on the Maldives has been prepared with the assistance of the South Pacific and the Mediterranean Task Teams, and will probably lead to a large-scale country-wide project.

When once the initial objective of the Task Teams (impact studies) has been achieved, they will concentrate on