

Environmental Pollution And Control

Second Edition

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by

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Preface

The objective of this book is to package the more important aspects of environmental engineering technology in an organized manner and present this mainly technical material to a nonengineering audience. This book originally began as a set of class notes for a course offered at Duke University by the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering. The course is designed for nonengineering students and has been a popular elective for over 13 years. Although the course has no prerequisites, we assume that the student has a high school level knowledge of chemistry and mathematics. Calculus is not used.

We do not intend for this book to be scientifically and technically complete. In fact, many complex environmental problems have been simplified to the threshold of pain for many engineers and scientists. Our objective, however, is not to impress nontechnical students with the rigors and complexities of pollution control technology, but rather to make some of the language and ideas of environmental engineering more understandable.

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Durham, NC
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Contents

1. Environmental Pollution	1
What is Environmental Pollution?	1
The Roots of Environmental Pollution	4
Conclusion	5
Problems	5
2. Water Pollution	7
Sources of Water Pollution	8
Elements of Ecology	10
Biodegradation	13
Aerobic and Anaerobic Decomposition	14
Effect of Pollution on Streams	17
Effect of Pollution on Lakes	26
Effect of Pollution on Oceans	30
Conclusion	30
Problems	31
3. Measurement of Water Quality	35
Sampling	36
Dissolved Oxygen	36
Biochemical Oxygen Demand	39
Chemical Oxygen Demand	44
Total Organic Carbon	45
Turbidity	45
Color and Odor	46
pH	46
Solids	47
Nitrogen	49
Phosphates	52

Bacteriological Measurements	52
Viruses	53
Conclusion	53
Problems	53
4. Water Supply	57
The Hydrologic Cycle and Water Availability	57
Groundwater Supplies	59
Surface Water Supplies	60
Water Transmission	64
Conclusion	65
Problems	65
5. Water Treatment	67
Coagulation and Flocculation	69
Settling	69
Filtration	70
Disinfection	71
Conclusion	72
Problems	73
6. Collection of Wastewater	75
Estimating Wastewater Quantities	75
System Layout	77
Conclusion	81
Problems	81
7. Wastewater Treatment	83
Wastewater Characteristics	84
Onsite Wastewater Disposal	84
Central Wastewater Treatment	89
Primary Treatment	90
Secondary Treatment	94
Tertiary Treatment	102
Conclusion	106
Problems	107
8. Sludge Treatment and Disposal	113
Sources of Sludge	113
Sludge Treatment	114

Sludge Stabilization	114
Sludge Thickening	118
Sludge Dewatering	119
Ultimate Disposal	123
Conclusion	127
Problems	127
9. Nonpoint Source Water Pollution	129
The Runoff Process	130
Control Technologies Applicable to Nonpoint Source Pollution	131
Agriculture	132
Silviculture	132
Construction	133
Mining	134
Urban Stormwater Runoff	137
Conclusion	139
Problems	139
10. Water Pollution Law	141
Common Law	142
Statutory Law	144
Pretreatment Guidelines	147
Drinking Water Standards	148
Conclusion	150
Problems	150
11. Solid Waste	153
Quantities and Characteristics of Municipal Solid Waste	154
Collection	155
Disposal Options	161
Litter	163
Conclusion	164
Problems	164
12. Solid Waste Disposal	167
Disposal of Unprocessed Refuse	167
Volume Reduction Prior to Disposal	174
Conclusion	177
Problems	177

13. Resource Recovery	179
Source Separation	179
Solid Waste Separation Processes	180
Size Reduction	180
General Expressions for Materials Recovery	181
Screens	184
Air Classifiers	184
Magnets	185
Other Separation Equipment	185
Energy Recovery from the Organic Fraction of MSW	186
Conclusion	189
Problems	189
14. Hazardous Waste	191
Magnitude of the Problem	192
Waste Processing and Handling	193
Transportation of Hazardous Wastes	194
Resource Recovery Alternatives	197
Information Clearinghouses	197
Materials Exchanges	197
Hazardous Waste Management Facilities	198
Siting Considerations	198
Incinerators	200
Landfills	203
Conclusion	206
Problems	206
15. Radioactive Waste	209
Radiation	209
Radioactive Decay	210
Alpha, Beta and Gamma Radiations	214
Units for Measuring Radiation	216
Measuring Radiation	218
Health Effects	219
Sources of Radioactive Waste	220
Nuclear Fuel Cycle	221
Other Sources of Radioactive Waste	224
Radioactive Waste Management	224
Conclusion	227
Problems	228

16. Solid and Hazardous Waste Law	231
Nonhazardous Solid Waste	232
Hazardous Waste	233
Conclusion	239
Problems	239
17. Air Pollution	241
Types of Air Pollutants	244
Gaseous Pollutants	244
Particulate Pollutants	245
Sources of Air Pollution	247
Primary and Secondary Pollutants	249
Health Effects	252
The Respiratory System	254
Effects on Vegetation	260
Effects on Domestic Animals	262
Effects on Materials	263
Effects on Atmosphere	264
Conclusion	264
Problems	265
18. Meteorology and Air Quality	267
Basic Meteorology	267
Horizontal Dispersion of Pollutants	269
Vertical Dispersion of Pollutants	269
Effect on Water in the Atmosphere	275
Atmospheric Dispersion	276
Cleansing the Atmosphere	282
Gravity	282
Surface Sink	282
Precipitation	282
Conclusion	283
Problems	283
19. Measurement of Air Quality	287
Measurement of Particulates	288
Measurement of Gases	292
Reference Methods	294
Grab Samples	295
Stack Sampling	296

Smoke	296
Conclusion	297
Problems	297
20. Air Pollution Control	299
Source Correction	299
Collection of Pollutants	300
Cooling	301
Treatment	301
Settling Chambers	302
Cyclones	302
Bag (or Fabric) Filters	303
Wet Collectors	304
Electrostatic Precipitators	304
Comparison of Particulate Control Devices	305
Control of Gaseous Pollutants	306
Control of Sulfur Oxides	307
Control of Moving Sources	309
Conclusion	313
Problems	313
21. Air Pollution Law	315
Air Quality and Common Law	315
Tort Law	315
Property Law	317
Statutory Law	318
Conclusion	320
Problems	321
22. Noise Pollution	323
The Concept of Sound	324
The Acoustic Environment	329
Health Effects of Noise	330
Conclusion	334
Problems	335
23. Noise Measurement and Control	337
Sound Pressure Level	337
Sound Level	338
Measuring Transient Noise	340

Noise Control	343
Industrial Noise Control	343
Community Noise Control	343
Noise in the Home	345
Conclusion	345
Problems	346
24. Environmental Impact	349
Environmental Inventories	350
Environmental Assessment	351
Evaluation	357
Problems	358
25. The Environmental Ethic	359
Causes of the Problem of Our Incompatibility with	
Nature	361
Religion as the Cause	361
Social Structure as the Cause	363
Science and Technology as the Cause	365
Resolution of Environmental Conflicts	366
The Future of the Environmental Ethic	370
Problems	371
Appendix: Conversion Factors	375
Glossary and Abbreviations	379
Index	387

Chapter 1

Environmental Pollution

The pictures from the Apollo flights proved that not only was the earth round; it was a very finite blob. Somehow the sight of this lonely spaceship, floating friendless in the blackness of space, brought home the fact that the earth and its natural resources are indeed all we have, and that we best start worrying about the future of the earth.

It's not possible to assess what effect this view from outer space had on it, but we have seen in the past decade the formation of a new philosophical force—the environmental ethic, which questions many of our “accepted” ground rules, such as the sanctity of growth and expansion, and the freedom to exploit resources.

This ethic is closely tied to the science of environmental pollution control, for only by defining, analyzing and solving the problems of waste production can the ethic be translated to constructive action.

Before embarking on the nuts and bolts of environmental pollution control, it might be well to discuss just what is meant by environmental pollution, and to suggest the reason why it suddenly has become a critical factor in our struggle for survival.

WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION?

“We believe all citizens have an inherent right to the enjoyment of pure and uncontaminated air and water and soil; that this right should be regarded as belonging to the whole community; and that no one should be allowed to trespass upon it by his carelessness or his avarice or even his ignorance.”

This resolution, adopted in 1869 by the Massachusetts Board of Health, is the ideal of pollution control. Over a hundred years ago, there-

2 ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION AND CONTROL

fore, pollution was already recognized as evil, and this resolution was an attempt to define the problem. Unfortunately, this definition is only an ideal, since total elimination of pollution would effectively require the elimination of modern civilization. The definition of pollution must therefore be more realistic if it is to be of practical value.

It is important to understand that pollution can be defined in many ways, and the specific definition used in a specific case can be important. For example, if an industry spewing forth contaminants to water and air can convince the public and the regulatory agencies that by their definition they are not polluting, pressure to force them to clean up might never materialize, even though the results of the inadequate waste disposal are obvious. Many professions are directly involved in environmental pollution, and all have defined pollution to fit the specific need. It may be instructive to review a few of these definitions, and to comment on the rationale employed.

The ecologist, trained to perceive life through a wide-angle lens, looks at pollution as something which upsets the equilibrium of a system. Typically, water pollution is defined as "anything which brings about a reduction in the diversity of aquatic life and eventually destroys the balance of life," or "any influence on the stream brought about by the introduction of materials to it which adversely affect the organisms living in the stream." These definitions have value to ecologists since ecologists are more concerned with the effect of outside forces (people) on a stream or lake than with the direct benefits the watercourse might have to man. This is not to in any way belittle this approach since, in the long run, if we cannot adjust our civilization to be compatible with the ecosystem, we will undoubtedly lose the conflict.

In contrast to the ecologists who consider to be pollution any man-made addition which is not ecologically compatible to the existing environment, the engineers consider these additions as pollution only if and when they precipitate an immediate adverse effect. Engineers pride themselves on being realists, able to analyze problems and present clean and neat solutions. Engineers have thus proposed definitions of pollution which are, to them, more rational than the "clean as possible" approach suggested in the first paragraph or the "no change" thinking of many ecologists. All of the engineering definitions have as a core the well-being (economic, physical, social) of humans.

For example, some engineers suggest that since pollution control costs money, the benefits derived from a clean stream (or atmosphere) must be weighed against the benefits derived by spending the money on hospitals, roads, etc. The implication is that pollution is not bad in the absolute, but that as long as we don't start killing more people by cholera, typhoid,

emphysema, etc. than we do on the highways, it is logical and prudent to build better highways and neglect pollution control.

Other engineers define pollution as "an impairment of the suitability of water (or air) for any of its beneficial uses, actual or potential, by man-caused changes in quality." Again the benefits to humans are emphasized, and pollution control is dependent on a favorable benefit/cost ratio.*

The Engineers Joint Council (composed of representatives from the various professional engineering associations) has defined air pollution as "the presence in the outdoor atmosphere of one or more contaminants, such as dust, fumes, gas, mist, odor, smoke or vapor, in quantities or characteristics, and of duration such as to be injurious to human, plant or animal life or to property, or which unreasonably interferes with the comfortable enjoyment of life and property." Although this long-winded definition seems to cover all bases, it avoids classifying emissions from remotely located power plants as pollution, since the smoke is not apparently harmful and certainly having the power to run the air conditioners and electric can openers enhances man's comfort. What is missing is an admission that air is not a wastebasket, and that a defense of such emissions is untenable, regardless of their unmeasurable acute effect on plant or animal physiology.

Probably the most widely accepted of the engineering definitions of pollution is "unreasonable interference with other beneficial uses." By this definition, if the greatest beneficial use of a water course is waste discharge, then the use of the stream for swimming and fishing might be "unreasonable." Value judgments are therefore required as to what uses a stream, lake, or air over a city might have. If reasonable men decide that it is reasonable to use a lake as a septic tank and air as a wastebasket, then we are doomed to such a "reasonable" existence.

In all fairness, however, it must be noted that this type of thinking is changing. Engineers are becoming more aware of their social responsibilities, and very few will still espouse the use of a stream as an open sewer even if this might be the most economically sound beneficial use.

The World Health Organization (WHO) thinks of air pollution as anything "harmful to humans, animals, plants or property." The WHO mosquito control programs using DDT sprayed from airplanes would qualify as air pollution under this definition.

Others argue that pollution occurs when an additional user of a scarce

* The benefits and costs are both estimated in dollars, and the ratio calculated. If the B/C ratio is greater than one, the benefits exceed the costs and the project generally should be undertaken. On the other hand, if $B/C < 1$, the project generally should be abandoned.

4 ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION AND CONTROL

resource "will cause others to have to incur additional costs or suffer disutilities associated with congestion." Although economically sound in the classic sense, this concept views air quality, for example, as being acceptable until some detrimental effect is noted, an argument which presupposes that all effects of pollution are known, a blatantly false supposition. Further, the blotting out of a sunset with smoke cannot be calculated in dollars and cents.

We could go on quoting definitions of environmental pollution, but the point has been made. Not everyone views environmental pollution in the same light, and not everyone agrees on the short- as well as long-term effects. It should be clear, therefore, why some people feel that the pollution problem is not taken seriously enough, and why at the same time others feel that governmental agencies have become too strict with regard to the control of industrial and municipal discharges. Perhaps we cannot define pollution to everyone's satisfaction, and probably there is no need to do that as long as we remember that there are many definitions (and hence opinions) of environmental pollution.

THE ROOTS OF ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION

Early man spent his entire existence surviving. The procurement of food and shelter for the family took all of his time.

When farming and hunting advanced to the point where not all of the available time was devoted to the necessities, man had time to specialize. Some people became carpenters, or potters, or politicians.

With increased specialization, man began to better his life style. This had two effects: the population and the per capita consumption of goods both increased.

Until the 16th century, man was still not very proficient in producing food or controlling disease, and famines and plagues held the population within bounds. But with the industrial revolution and the birth of modern medicine, the world population began to climb wildly (Figure 1-1). The earth is now crowded with people, and all of them consume resources, and create waste. The waste must be returned to the earth in some form, and often this process destroys or alters the ecology.

Overpopulation is not, however, the only danger. In economically developed countries, consumption of both manufactured and natural resources has increased tremendously within the last few decades. In fact, the problem with pollution in many countries today is mainly that of over-consumption, while population growth is responsible for only about one tenth of the increase in the use of natural resources (and the related pollution).

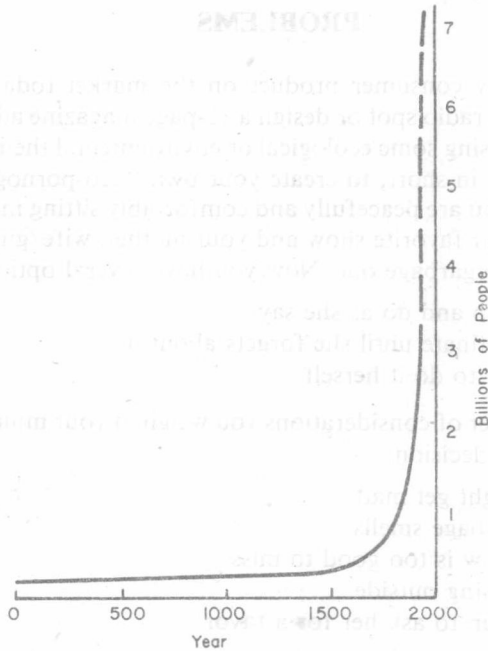


Figure 1-1 The world's population.

The consumption spiral seems to have no end, except when we finally run out of resources. This is clearly unacceptable. One solution is to drastically alter our habits as consumers.

As long as there is no tax on the use of natural resources (there is in fact a reward for using some, such as the oil depletion allowance), the education of consumers is a reasonable alternative. Unfortunately, this runs counter to human nature, and the prognostication is not good.

It is safe to state that the root of our environmental pollution problems is the tremendous leap in human population, accompanied by an even greater increase in per capita consumption of raw materials.

CONCLUSION

Although environmental pollution is difficult to define, we do know that we are perilously close to permanently spoiling our home. We must immediately control population growth and strive either to limit consumption or develop better means of recycling our resources.

We can only hope that people of the world will soon embrace the environmental ethic, before we permanently foul up our spaceship.

PROBLEMS

1.1 Choose any consumer product on the market today and write either a 15-second radio spot or design a 1/2-page magazine advertisement for the product, using some ecological or environmental themes inappropriately. You are, in short, to create your own "eco-pornography."

1.2 Suppose you are peacefully and comfortably sitting in front of the tube watching your favorite show and your mother/wife/girlfriend yells at you to take the garbage out. Now you have several options:

- a) Jump up and do as she says
- b) Procrastinate until she forgets about it
- c) Tell her to do it herself

There are a number of considerations you weigh in your mind in order to make the correct decision

- 1. She might get mad
- 2. The garbage smells
- 3. The show is too good to miss
- 4. It's raining outside
- 5. You plan to ask her for a favor

Give these 5 considerations numerical values from 0 to 3 and calculate the Benefit/Cost ratio for the proposed project. For example, if you feel that risking her wrath is not very important, you can rate it as 1, and use this in the cost side of the ratio. Using this technique, make a decision about the garbage.

1.3 "A polluted stream is simply one that kills fish and plant life." (Mill & Factory, Nov. 1966). Do you agree with this definition of pollution?

1.4 Using a dictionary and/or thesaurus, list synonyms for "pollution." Do you agree they are all synonymous?

1.5 Find an example of "eco-pornography" in a current magazine, cut it out, paste it on a sheet of paper, and on that paper explain why you feel it is an example of "eco-pornography."