

Humans and ecosystem management

Oliver Houck, Professor of Law, directs the Tulane Environment Law Program and works in natural resources, coastal, wildlife, and water pollution control law. He has served as U.S. Attorney in Washington, D.C., and as General Counsel to the National Wildlife Federation. His essay "Are humans part of ecosystems" (Environmental Law 28:1-14) was derived from his "Distinguished Visitor" lecture at the Northwestern School of Law of Lewis and Clark College. It is a humorous presentation of his perspective of ecosystem management. Obviously, the author contends, humans are part of ecosystems but not their measure. Current government planning is dangerous if it intends to put humans back into the definition of ecosystems and predicates management goals not on a natural system but on human needs and desire. The measuring of eco-

systems and management goals must be done by species other than humans. The bottom line is to assess the needs of nonhuman species.



To make his point, the author relates how his beloved dog got into the Puppy Chow, which was in a paper bag behind a door that was inadvertently left open. This dog could chew through tougher material than paper and just about ate herself to death. After the dog and her owners spent an anxious night at the veterinarian, the management of the dog food became more rigorous and was certainly not based on dog desire.

The analogy is that perfectly nice and lovable human beings are over their eyeballs into Puppy Chow all the time: subdivisions in floodplains, shoreline condominiums, and sundry desirable activities that lay thick blankets of smog over beautiful vistas. Needed are flexible systems that keep humans out of the chow. The best measures of ecosystems are representative species that indicate natural conditions. The role of humans is the management of ecosystems and themselves toward this goal.