

Maritime Consultative Organization (IMCO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the Scientific Committee on Problems of the Environment (SCOPE), and a joint paper by the USSR Ministry of Oil Refining and Petrochemical Industries and British Petroleum.

The Symposium was attended by a wide range of participants from the oil industry, industry generally, international organizations, and the academic world. It was formally opened by H.I.H. Prince Abdol-Reza Pahlavi and Mr Maurice F. Strong, the Executive Director of UNEP. Mr Strong has for a long time actively encouraged the major industries to coordinate their responses to United Nations environment activities on a global scale, and this is the purpose of IPIECA. The capacity of IPIECA to coordinate the environmental views of the oil industry, and the effectiveness of UNEP's coordinating role in the UN, will soon be put to test in ways that are being discussed.

JAMES W. FEATHERSTONE
Executive Secretary of IPIECA
110 Euston Road
London NW1, England.

BIOLOGICAL DECOMPOSITION: A SYMPOSIUM OF THE BRITISH ECOLOGICAL SOCIETY, HELD AT THE NEW UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER, COLERAINE, NORTHERN IRELAND, 14-18 APRIL 1975

For five days last spring, a gathering of some 100 scientists from a dozen countries assembled in Ulster to discuss the different approaches to, and the results obtained in, the field of organic-matter decomposition as studied by chemists, microbiologists, and plant and animal biologists. This is almost certainly the first occasion on which such a meeting has included such a wide range of expertise by incorporating those working on land, in fresh water, and in marine waters. The meeting constituted one of the British Ecological Society's series of Easter Symposia, which are published by Blackwell, of Oxford, and it is intended that the published papers will appear before the end of 1975.

Why is there such special interest in the study of organic decomposition? The subject is important both theoretically and in a practical context. Ecologists have only recently come to appreciate what a high proportion of the organic material produced by plants does not end up as green food for herbivorous animals but contributes, instead, to a 'decomposer industry' which, in terms of the number and variety of organisms involved, greatly exceeds the herbivores. Its raw material forms part of the humus of soils and muds, and contributes great quantities of detritus and dissolved organic matter to all natural water-bodies. The relative proportions handled by these above two major food-chains may well exceed 90 to 10 in favour of the decomposers.

As a result, not only is there a lot of undecomposed material around, but some of it is surprisingly persistent; for instance, some carbon compounds in temperate soils were shown in Dr Stout's New Zealand study to be over 1,000 years old.

The decomposition of organic matter liberates plant nutrients (nitrate, phosphate, and potash) and is an essential process in the maintenance of fertility. But the too-rapid breakdown of humus also leads to loss of nutrients and harmful physical changes in soils. As is so often the case in applied ecology, good management involves the maintenance of a dynamic balance. Thus, apparently academic studies can have important bearing on the crafts of agriculture and water-body management.

Another important applied topic which was treated in some detail in the Symposium was that of the breakdown of man-made materials, including plastics, oil, and industrial

wastes. The importance of studies in this field hardly needs emphasis for readers of *Environmental Conservation*.

In order to mitigate the effects of increasing transport costs especially for younger scientists, a special motor-coach was hired for the journey between London and Coleraine by way of the short sea-crossing from Cairn Ryan in Scotland to Larne. This was joined by members of the Symposium at points along the motorways as well as by some Continental delegates *via* London and Manchester. The twelve-hours' trip through some splendid scenery in the Lake District, Galway, and Antrim, constituted a memorable part of the occasion, and discussions on the scientific content of the Symposium continued throughout the return journey. An evening visit was made to the columnar basaltic 'Giant's Causeway' and another to the new Limnological Research Station on Lough Neagh—a centre for important research on eutrophication problems in the lake, which is Britain's largest inland water-body.

AMYAN MACFADYEN, Professor of Biology
School of Biological and Environmental Studies
New University of Ulster
Coleraine
County Londonderry
Northern Ireland.

INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF SCIENTISTS ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT (HESC), TO BE HELD IN KYOTO INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE HALL, KYOTO, JAPAN, 17-26 NOVEMBER 1975

This promising event, which our Japanese hosts have been planning for several years, was conceived as a follow-up to assess the general usefulness and effects of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, which took place in Stockholm in June 1972. It is being organized by the Science Council of Japan, 22-34 Roppongi 7 chome, Minato-ku, Tokyo, 106 Japan, who, according to the Prospectus, are 'doing all that is possible to see that the Congress makes an important contribution toward the advancement of the study of environmental problems.'

Although it 'is not intended to cover all aspects of environmental problems', the programme for Kyoto is of a widely general nature, the main aims being '... the deepening of a common awareness of the facts related to the problems of the human environment, the sharing of knowledge of achievements made so far in studies undertaken, the examination of measures already taken for environmental protection, the formulation of subjects for future studies, and by these means to begin the interdisciplinary international cooperation of scientists, necessary for the pursuit of such studies... HESC will meet in plenary sessions and section meetings' and the official language will be English. Altogether the occasion should be a most enlivening and enlightening one—especially in view of the long and sometimes bitter experience which the Japanese have had with the twin problems of population and pollution.

Anyone who may plan to travel from Europe to attend the Congress or otherwise be in Japan at that time, is advised to get in touch immediately with the undersigned, as attempts are being made to get together a three- or four-weeks' tour in such a manner that the cost to individuals would be quite drastically reduced below the normal air-fare even though hotels and side-visits (including Bangkok, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Singapore, and probably Canton-Kwangchow in mainland China) would be included.

NICHOLAS POLUNIN
15 Chemin F.-Lehmann
1218 Grand-Saconnex
Geneva, Switzerland.