Fact or Fiction?

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Folklore or Fact?

Folklore, though sometimes entertaining and amusing, has a very serious purpose. It is a socially sanctioned means of expressing concerns over critical problems, a vehicle for communicating our view of the world. Whether transmitted via fables, riddles, rhyming slang, jokes, copy machines, fax or e-mail, according to Alan Dundes of the University of California, folklore is a current and continuously evolving means of communication at all levels of society.[1] Most of us have a collection of folklore, whether it be verbal stories or written. I have some pertaining to environmental issues that I would like to share. One ground rule is that the item has to have appeared in print, so each one has at least one reference. However, my guess is that most of what follows is fact, not folklore.

Water

- The Nuclear Energy Institute in Washington, DC, reported that a student at Eagle Rock Junior High in Idaho urged fellow students to sign a petition demanding strict control or total elimination of the chemical "dihydrogen monoxide," which causes excessive sweating and vomiting; is a major component in acid rain; can cause severe burns in the gaseous state; can cause death when accidentally inhaled; contributes to erosion; decreases the effectiveness of automobile brakes and has been found in the tumors of terminal cancer patients. A total of 50 students were asked if they supported a ban of the chemical—43 said yes, six were undecided, and only one knew that the chemical was water.[2] So clearly, most of them did not know school chemistry nomenclature. More importantly, most of them believed it was their right to support this restriction of technological freedom even though they knew nothing about the subject.
- According to the *Omaha World Herald*, Washington lobbyist Peter Sparber put together a mailing list of people on record favoring a ban on pesticides and sent them a letter from a fictitious organization warning them about the need to stop the production of an ominous-sounding chemical he called "dihydrogen oxide." He said the substance was responsible for the deaths of 4,100 people in a recent year. When letters poured in scolding the evil producers of this terrible chemical (water), Sparber had proved his point and shown how easy it is to turn scientific illiteracy into environmental hysteria.[3]
- Call it fear of spraying. In one study, researchers spewed distilled water from planes over residential neighborhoods without telling anyone what the spray contained. The intent was to gauge public phobia of chemicals. Sure enough, the experimenters were soon deluged with complaints from frightened folks who claimed the spray was causing cows to abort, dogs to shed and children to get sick.[4]
- Ray[5] states: "Too often the rules and regulations which are made to apply uniformly throughout the country do not make good sense when applied to specific regions. Our country is not uniform in its environmental conditions." Her favorite example of that is the city of Anchorage, Alaska. Under the 1987 amendment to the Clean Water Act, city sewage plants were required to remove 30 percent of the organic material from the municipal sewage. With Anchorage, the trouble was that their sewage was very heavily diluted with rainwater, to the point that not only was there almost no detectable organic material there, but the amount was so small that it was impossible to comply with the regulation from EPA. So naturally, they asked for a variance. The word came back: "No, the law is the law—you will take 30 percent of the organics out of the sewage." So the

city officials thought about this a bit and found a solution. They made a contract with three different fish processing plants in the city of Anchorage, and required those plants to put all their fish guts and waste into the city sewage, and then they had enough organic materials so they could remove 30 percent of it. EPA was very happy.[5]

- Alaska's governor, Tony Knowles, petitioned the federal government in 1997 to allow Alaska to continue to use the state's original arsenic water quality standard since Alaska's standard was overridden when the EPA imposed the National Toxics Rule on the state, reducing the arsenic standard well below naturally existing conditions.[6] Said Knowles, "Under the federal rule, it would have been okay to drink a glass of water from an Alaska stream, but you couldn't pour any of that water back because of the level of naturally occurring arsenic." (Sound familiar?) The outcome was that the EPA agreed with Governor Knowles' request to allow Alaska to continue to use state, not federal, water quality standards for arsenic.
- Not too long ago, the little town of Washington, GA, had a not-so-little problem with the EPA. It seems the agency was threatening to fine the town $50,000 per day because its wastewater had not passed toxicity tests. According to *The Washington Times*, it wasn't any particular toxic pollutant the agency was worried about, but rather the simple fact that laboratory-grown water fleas don't reproduce as fast in the wastewater as they do in pure water. When the town officials hustled to Congress to find out why in the world the mating preferences of these amorous critters should be of any concern to water quality whatsoever, EPA officials were forced to drop their flea fine.[7]

Change the Name

- People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals has called on Fishkill, NY, to change its name to "Fishsave." Fishkill is a 300-year-old Dutch town. In Dutch, the name means "channel or creek."[8]
- Continuing on the subject of fish, Sen. Warren Magnuson, of Washington, introduced a bill in Congress to change the name of the genus salmonella, a disease-producing microorganism, to "sanella," because his state conceivably could have its salmon industry impaired by the association of a disease-producing organism with the same name as the fish.[9]
- Citing the threat posed to their children's safety, a Grand Rapids-area parents group is calling for the removal of arsenic from the periodic table of elements. "Our school children, some as young as the fourth grade, are being exposed to this deadly element in their science classes," said the president of the Grand Rapids Parents Association. "We insist that this poison be removed from the periodic table and replaced with a safe, nontoxic element." To date, the group has raised more than $4,500 for the development of a replacement element, "nickelodeum"—a springy, child-safe play foam with an atomic number of 33.[10]

Bad Smells & Toxins

- During February 1997, at Washington's Reagan National Airport, someone reported smelling a "noxious gas" in a terminal. Evacuation was ordered. Hundreds of people fell ill. A hazardous-materials crew in protective suits combed the building and found the culprit—rotting bananas in a trash can.[11]
- In 1985, a Bell South facility in Orange County, CA, had a sudden outbreak of fainting episodes. The building was evacuated, hazardous material and fire department teams combed the building seeking a cause, and affected workers were taken to local hospitals for treatment. Examinations of both the building and the workers did not reveal any noxious chemicals or measurable physical damage to the workers. Ultimately, it was determined that a disgruntled employee had started a rumor about a dangerous chemical loose in the building.[12]
- A judge of the equal-rights division of Wisconsin's Department of Industry, Labor and Human Relations ruled in 1991 that "offensive body odor" could indeed be a handicap under the state's Fair Employment Act.[13]
- A recent article in *Reason* described how one woman hung her mail on a clothesline for weeks before reading it to allow the "toxins" in the ink to dissipate.[14]
- When a quantity of toxin is fed to animals, the effect depends upon the amount given. For a certain toxin fed to a given species, a certain amount, called the LD_{50}, is the amount that is fatal to 50 percent of the animals that receive the dose. Toxicologists also use other values, such as the LD_{10}, the amount that is a fatal dose for 10 percent of the animals that receive it. The degree of toxicity is expressed by such parameters. At a meeting of toxicologists in Cambridge, MA, there were a number of greenies present. After hearing about LD_{50} for this chemical, and LD_{50} for that chemical, LD_{50} for this species, LD_{50} for that species, one of the greenies chimed in, "Well, if the LD_{50} is such a problem, why not get rid of that chemical?"[15]

Miscellaneous

- Taking the floor of the U.S. Senate each day for more than a week, Orrin Hatch, the senator from Utah, took out his "Top 10 List of Silly Regulations" and, doing his best impersonation of David Letterman, shared with his colleagues one account after another of a federal bureaucracy gone awry.[16] He told them how Uncle Sam requires buildings to be inspected for asbestos, even if they were built after the asbestos ban took effect and therefore contain no asbestos. He told them about how one company was prosecuted for "conspiring to knowingly transport hazardous waste" after the company had discharged wastewater that contained 0.0003 percent of methylene chloride—decaffeinated coffee has a higher percentage. He also told them how the U.S. Coast Guard attempted to fine the owner of a van $5,000 for "polluting the waters of the United States" after the van had been in an accident, leaked two gallons of gasoline and the local fire department flushed it into a nearby drain. The senator's point was that government regulations, although perhaps well-intentioned, have simply passed the point of sensibility. Many of the regulations have become way too picayune and are slowly choking the

lifeblood out of the small businesses that form the backbone of our nation's economy.[16]

- Although not environmentally related, this story is one of my favorites. In 1993, a New York City transit bus was hit by a garbage truck on 125th Street. Within a month, 18 people filed lawsuits against the city, claiming injuries received when they were hurled down in the bus. The accident was not caused because the bus driver was diverted by the allure of a quarter that had gotten jammed in the fare box. There were no coins in the box; indeed, no passengers were on the bus. The bus had gone out of service and was parked. But the 18 claimants did not know that. They all claimed they had been passengers and had hobbled home before the police arrived. Their scam, which often succeeds, was the result of knowing that the city would typically settle rather than bear the expense of trying to prove they weren't there.[17]

Fantasy

Here's one I'll bet will never happen. The television picture on the evening news closing in on a swimming pool, and the voice-over saying, "Do you realize that there is enough water in this pool to drown 100,000 people?"[18]

P&SF

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