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Why John Pekkanen gave up eating liver

This week's lead story on the political impact of ecology is largely the work of John Pekkanen of our Chicago Bureau. When he first started looking into the subject six months ago, he recalls, "ecology hardly existed as a voting issue. But the rapidity with which it has gained momentum is astounding."

Pekkanen's own awareness of the environment problem dates back to his boyhood in Old Lyme, Conn. The air was clean there, and so was the Connecticut River where he went swimming. "The lower part of the river was still okay to swim in, but farther north it was polluted. A few years later, the whole river became unsafe." The idea for the present story came to him in the living room of friends near Washington, when the wife spoke quietly of losing two children through miscarriages. For medical reasons further pregnancies were impossible. "She had been deeply affected by it at the time, but now, four years later, she could say, 'I'm glad we didn't have any children because I would feel guilty about bringing them up in a world without a future.' I realized then that I shared this feeling of dread about the prospects of my own two children. If other people felt the same way, and I had no reason to believe they didn't, then a considerable political movement was in the making."

Plunging into the subject, Pekkanen was "deeply shaken" by what he heard from scientists and other experts. "I remember sitting with a biologist at a UNESCO conference dinner who told me flatly that he hadn't eaten liver in ten years. That is where, he explained, an animal detoxifies poisons such as pesticides, and that is where the poisons accumulate. I smiled weakly and thought about all the liver I'd eaten in the past, convinced it was good for me." Meetings like this left him with more than a sense of dismay. "I discovered the high caliber of the people who are leading the environmental crusade." But understanding the problem did not make Pekkanen any more optimistic. "Among other things, I was told that unless we found a solution to air pollution, we would all be walking the streets in gas masks ten years from now. We put gas masks on my two-year-old daughter Sarah and on Photographer Mike Mauney's wife Lucy, and shot a picture meant to be symbolic of what's ahead. I hope reality never catches up with it. But I'm not sure."



SARAH AND LUCY

Ralph Graves
RALPH GRAVES
Managing Editor

LIFE

Ecology Becomes Everybody's Issue

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