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January 3, 1973

Dear Maurice:

See 900 P+P Hudson River studies

In this letter I shall attempt to respond, at least in part, to questions I understand you have had relative to the Foundation's Quality of the Environment program and to its proposal to participate in a study of the Hudson Basin. I regret that my recent illness precluded my being involved in earlier discussions with you. I have had a number of talks with John Knowles, Ralph Richardson and other members of the staff since Williamsburg and I hope I have a correct understanding of your questions. At any rate, a partial explanation by letter may reveal my biases and be helpful in permitting us in our next conversation to focus on the points of greatest interest to you.

In the Quality of the Environment program, as in any other, the Foundation attempts to use its limited resources in ways which make use of the Foundation's unique capabilities, not just its funds. Among these unique capabilities, as they relate to problems of the environment, are the following:

1. Professional expertise. Among the major foundations the RF has a unique combination of biological, medical and social scientists plus some other talent. And, the Foundation is able to obtain assistance of other authorities almost at will. This permits the Foundation, for example, to understand and assist with problems such as agricultural nutrients and waste products, the study of biological systems, development of plant resistance to major pests, or organization of efforts to produce safer pesticides.

2. During the past 50 years the Foundation has been perceived by many as an organization of an essentially apolitical character capable of

working at the interfaces of science and social action, and at any level from that of the common man to those of government leaders or heads of international agencies.

3. It has the freedom to try to determine the nature of problems, the alternative approaches to their solution, and even to invent and test new institutional forms where required. It has been able to assist in arranging for men, money, and problems to be brought together in any appropriate way on a sustained basis (an example would be the international institutes and the Consultative Group).

The Foundation can initiate its own activities, assist others to do so with funds the Foundation provides, or organize programs which organizations with less flexibility can then support.

It should be mentioned that the Foundation does not undertake activities which can be done as well or better by other organizations; it prefers to support existing institutions whenever possible, or to create new ones if need be.

I am sure you understand and probably agree with the list of capabilities and operating procedures of the Foundation given above. I mention them only so that you understand that we also recognize them.

Now to comments or questions which were relayed to me.

Scope of Foundation Interests as they Relate to Problems of the Environment

The Foundation staff have had and expect to continue an interest in any and all problems of the environment which offer to the Foundation opportunities to make uniquely useful contributions.

We are, of course, concerned with international problems, with global systems, and with survival of the world community, hopefully with an improving rather than a deteriorating quality of life. In this connection, the Foundation has only begun to get its global bearings, since the Quality of the Environment program was initiated just three years ago and during that period has had a change of leadership with the untimely death of Dr. Will Myers in July 1970.

We have contributed modestly, nevertheless, to global studies undertaken by groups of competent authorities and would expect to continue to do so. We would expect for the time being that the Foundation's contributions to global studies would continue to be modest because other organizations generally can support them. However, if it becomes apparent, as we suspect it may, that the Foundation could play a useful role in helping to organize international networks of activities, as we are trying to do in agricultural research, then I would hope that the Foundation would do so.

We will continue to seek opportunities to discuss environmental issues with appropriate authorities of both developed and developing countries, to assist in arranging for international apolitical discussion of environmental problems, and of course to follow closely the new UN initiatives.

Initial Emphasis on Domestic Problems

Most Quality of the Environment efforts to date have focused on problems of this nation. There are several reasons for this.

1. U.S. problems are acute because of affluence of its people, its high and rapidly increasing usage of energy and non-renewable resources, the poor quality of many of its water bodies and air envelope after years of neglect, and other problems associated with urban sprawl, inner city decay and rapid mobility of people.
2. It has been felt that Foundation officers would need to understand environmental problems of their own country to a substantial degree to qualify as participants in significant international activities.
3. It was clear that while U.S. scientific, political and other leaders were becoming aware during the 1960's of the seriousness of environmental abuses, they were having difficulty dealing with those problems having biological or social components. Indeed, this seems true for many of the world's problems; man has not yet learned to cope with biological variability in systems. We have not been able to masterplan in biology as the physical scientists can do (as in the space program) with physical constants.
4. It was felt that a strong domestic component in the QE program would help to balance the international thrusts of Conquest of Hunger, University Development and Population programs.

While there has been, for these reasons, an initial concentration on problems of the U.S., it has not been the intent of the officers (or of the trustees, to my knowledge) to maintain it as a strictly domestic program.

In the U.S., the Foundation has been assisting important institutions (mostly public universities) to move effectively into the environmental field on an interdisciplinary basis, some for the first time. One weakness of some American public universities (and probably elsewhere) is the lack of mechanisms by which they could develop goal-oriented environmental research, the results of which would be important to the action agencies of states which these public universities serve. In both Canada and the U.S., of course, agricultural faculties have for decades been concerned with research directed to state or provincial needs but some other faculties have not had this tradition. The Foundation has made a series of grants to universities to allow them to engage on an interdisciplinary basis some environmental problems of their states provided the university itself contributes significantly to the studies and provided additional funds are made available by the state or other public sources.

With regard to specific problems in which the Foundation has become interested, there have been quite a number, including: (a) animal wastes; (b) conversion of cellulosic crop residues to protein-rich feeds through bacterial action; (c) regional approaches to handling nitrate, phosphate, or other problems; (d) reduction of movement of nitrogen from agricultural fields to waterways; (e) studies of small but complete ecosystems to develop understanding of food chains and factors affecting them; (f) study of eutrophication of lakes; (g) means of biological removal of nutrients from secondary sewage effluent.

These are only a few examples but I hope they demonstrate that the Foundation generally has begun with those environmental problems with which it perhaps can deal better than most other foundations or funding agencies.

In most Foundation grants, there has been provision for the training of young people, particularly to enable those with competence in specific areas to work more broadly with environmental issues. We are looking for new ways to train outstanding leaders for environmental programs or of institutions concerned with environmental matters.

To the extent possible, the Foundation has sought opportunities to link research competence of the highest order with agencies and individuals

having responsibility for public action programs. And, in each area of interest the Foundation has used panels of authorities as consultants to assist the Foundation and others to identify what it is important to know, to understand, and to do.

The Hudson Basin Program

During our discussions and travels over the past three years, we have been told repeatedly that the most difficult environmental problems facing the U.S. today are: (a) the establishment of a creditable knowledge base for use in planning for the future, and (b) organization of concerted efforts by municipalities, counties, states, and the research community on problems of joint concern.

Research in the U.S. related to environmental matters is fragmented though some synthesis has been achieved in certain fields. This is certainly true for the Hudson Basin and the Metropolitan New York-New Jersey area.

In some regions of the country organization of research efforts or of action programs is relatively simple. For example, alternatives for the management of the Willamette Basin in Oregon are being developed by Oregon State University in cooperation with the University of Oregon and action agencies, with partial support from the Foundation. No problem there; they are institutions with the clear obligation to help. However, when one deals with the Chesapeake Bay, the Delaware River, the Great Lakes, or the Hudson Basin, the organizational problem becomes much more complicated. There are many institutions and none has a clear mandate to exercise leadership.

During the past three years the Foundation has been told repeatedly that one of the most helpful contributions it could make to improvement of the environment in this country would be to bring its capabilities to bear on problems of regional nature.

We have also concluded from many discussions -- and it must remain a judgment -- that the Foundation should assist individuals, institutions and agencies in the Hudson Basin (the Hudson River, its tributaries, the New York metropolitan area and parts of New Jersey) to (a) quickly marshal the knowledge relevant to problems of the region; (b) identify the gaps and weaknesses in knowledge or understanding; (c) set priorities for future activity; and (d) if justified, assist the institutions of the region to establish a mechanism for sustained joint efforts by research institutions

and action agencies. We have been told that unless the RF, with its freedom of action, assists these institutions to identify a model by which they can work together on a sustained basis, it probably will not be done at all. As a matter of fact, the Foundation has received criticism from some quarters for taking so long (two years) to come to a decision. For this reason we hope for Executive Committee approval in February of the request for the initial cooperative study.

At any rate, our consultants have supported a first thrust in the Hudson Basin Because: (1) many of the nation's most important environmental problems will reach a crisis stage first in this region; consequently, solutions worked out here will provide guides useful elsewhere; (2) consisting as it does of the New York urban complex and its hinterland (the Hudson and Mohawk river valleys), the Basin is a geographical unit in which a group of scientists and others would be compelled to face simultaneously all the environmental interactions with which people must be concerned; (3) the Hudson Basin is relatively less complicated politically than regions such as the Chesapeake, Delaware or Great Lakes; (4) it offers both urban and rural dimensions to environmental problems; (5) as institutions of this region are helped to identify a mechanism by which they can work together over the years with public support, a model should emerge having applicability elsewhere (some consultants feel such a model would have applicability for Europe).

At this time, neither the Foundation nor others can be certain of the nature of the continuing scientific effort -- in cooperation with communities and action agencies -- needed. Consequently, the Foundation now is concerned only with bringing together the information on which a reasonable decision on continuation can be made a year or so hence. However, a distinguished group of citizens soon will be looking at the nature of a mechanism (a research center? an institute? a program?) which could provide a means for continuing coordinated activity.

The Hudson Basin region is not easy to define. The boundaries of the watershed, of course, are clearcut. Sources of some air pollutants are external to the area. In spite of difficulties of defining the region, some means is needed to focus the attention of all concerned on the problems of the 15 million people who live there, to see that the right questions are asked on their behalf, and that the action agencies and communities are assured a more comprehensive and creditable source of information.

Mr. Maurice Strong
Page 7

With regard to the magnitude of the Hudson Basin Program, it is intended that it will be one of several major concerns of the Foundation's staff and of the many cooperators in the region who would be involved. Dr. Richardson would need to give considerable time to it during the first year. While it would be a significant new activity for the Foundation, it must remain exploratory for the moment with any decision on a longer-term program to be reserved for a later date. The Foundation would of course continue its interests in other environmental problems, national and international, as explained earlier. My own view is that the Hudson Basin Program, while not expensive, could be the most significant single Foundation contribution to date in the environmental field.

I look forward to discussing the environmental program with you and hope that this letter will at least provide some information on which further discussions can be based.

With best wishes for the New Year.

Sincerely yours,

Sterling Wortman

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