

SEJ Journal

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The 'unreadable' thing John McPhee on the craft of writing

By HOWARD BERKES

You might think writing comes easy to John McPhee.

He's been at it more than 40 years, after all, producing 27 books, writing for *The New Yorker* since 1964 and teaching writing at Princeton since 1975. And, oh yes, he has that Pulitzer Prize. All those years and words and accomplishments ought to add up to confidence – even hubris, perhaps – when turning a sea of complex detail, facts and characters into smoothly flowing narrative.

Well, John McPhee is just like the rest of us who write. He struggles, especially at the beginning. He's not good company when he's struggling. And he's shy, especially about approaching people for interviews.

McPhee spoke about writing, among other things, in a recent NPR interview (www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5508293) in his boxcar of an office on the roof of Princeton's Geology building. The room is spartan but bright, with a high ceiling. It actually occupies a turret. Stand between McPhee's desk and his computer table and

McPhee: Notes from the field

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peer out the window at just the right angle, and Trenton is visible in the distance. That marks the location of the Delaware River, arguably the center of McPhee's universe. In fact, he'd been fishing from a canoe on the Delaware before we arrived this June to interview him.

It's clearly a writer's room, a working writer's room, with bound notes crammed in boxes, piles of used pocket-sized notebooks and enough dictionaries to fill a small but well-stocked bookstore. The mother of them all, the back-breaking unabridged Oxford English Dictionary, sits open on a plank on a waist-high refrigerator. Reference books line the bookshelves along with the collected published works of his writing students, an impressive and weighty collection itself. Scattered about the room are artifacts of a writer's life: a photo of a birch-bark canoe, geologic maps of the West, a hazmat placard and a basket filled with chunks of coal from Wyoming's Powder River Basin. "Don't touch them," McPhee warns us. It took him

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Inside Story:

Top TV reporters say don't fear the technical

By MIKE DUNNE

In one case, it was taking a recurring story one step further.

In two stories, a phone tip prompted the reporters. Another was a big story for a big anniversary – one that would affect every person on the planet.

The finalists for the Society of Environmental Journalists annual television reporting award came to their stories in different ways. But each finalist found compelling ways to tell their stories, focusing on how events affect people and the environment in which they live.

Environmental stories are often technical and difficult to tell – especially in a medium as ephemeral as television. But the finalists agreed that educating yourself and making sure you understand the science and technical material behind the story is the key to engaging viewers.

The large market finalists are:

- WBAL-TV of Baltimore and reporters John Sherman and

Beau Kershaw, "Dirty Secret." The series of stories looked at New Earth Services, a facility near Chesapeake Bay designed to compost chicken and crab wastes. Instead of being an answer to pollution, the stories found the facility funneling nitrogen, phosphorus, ammonia and bacteria into the bay. The state of Maryland not only failed to oversee operations – it actually funded the business. The stories resulted in fines, a closure and a moratorium on new composting facilities. WBAL-TV's story was also a finalist for the Grantham Award.

- WBZ of Boston and Kristen M. Setera, "Car Inspection Corruption," an investigation into whether a Massachusetts official rigged state auto emission tests so more cars would fail and mechanics would buy a software package in which he had an interest. The official was fired.

- Cable News Network's "Melting Point: Tracking the Global Warming Threat," by producer Brian Rockus and correspondent

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A remembrance of SEJ family: past, current and future

By PERRY BEEMAN

Today is the perfect day to write my last column as SEJ president.

Why? Because the flurry of activity is so typical of what goes on behind the scenes at SEJ. What an honor it has been to view the workings of this esteemed organization from this vantage point.

This morning, SEJ staffers scrambled to arrange for even more rooms at the Sheraton in Burlington, because our annual conference is selling at a remarkable clip.

Just when you wonder how a group like ours can survive with the huge changes in the journalism world, we just get stronger.

While Executive Director Beth Parke arranged for more bunks, former SEJ President Jim Bruggers, with his freedom-of-information hat on, was drafting a letter protesting the jailing in Sudan of widely respected American reporter Paul Salopek, who was on assignment for *National Geographic* while on leave from the *Chicago Tribune*. I gladly signed the letter, which immediately went off to the embassy. Salopek has since been freed.

At the same time, we board members were scrambling to recruit candidates for the fall board election. Noted broadcast journalist Vince Patton decided not to seek re-election. A couple of other board members were on the fence. I was thankful that we have such a stable of great volunteers. We thank all who have served on the board, and hope you valued volunteers out there will consider running in the future. You know who you are. We know where to find you.

In the middle of this, we had a spirited discussion about our advisory board and one member's criticisms of SEJ. The exchange made us look in the mirror, not to say the criticisms were all on target.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch – or in this case the acreage in White Salmon, Wash. – conference organizer extraordinaire Jay Letto methodically filled remaining holes in the amazing conference lineup. It's hard to imagine how much work this event entails. Jay is a master at suggesting needed content, offering panelist ideas, and, yes, keeping the buses and volunteers running on time.

It was just another day in SEJ land.

Let me reflect on other developments of my tenure as president. I have been a member since 1991, and on the board since 1999. So I had some considerable background in SEJ programs, including two years as vice president for programs. Yet I've been amazed at the momentum and movement around SEJ these past two years. In many ways, this became a watershed time for freedom of information battles. This organization has always made freedom of information a priority, but the past two years it has been the issue that really put SEJ on the map. When you have people like Joe Davis, Ken Ward, Robert McClure, Jim Bruggers, Elizabeth Bluemink, Mark Schleifstein, Rebecca Daugherty and so many others watching the every move of our government, and some foreign ones, it's easy to see the red flags when they go up.

I considered the FOI campaign a top priority. Because SEJ is acknowledged as an important group with a clear message, I appeared on CNN and several radio programs live, wrote an op-ed that was published across this country and internationally and worked with SEJ friend and *Sacramento Bee* editor Rick Rodriguez on his watchdog-journalism campaign. I can't tell you how many letters the First Amendment Task Force and I sent off to Congress, or to agencies, but it seemed like dozens.

The past few years saw our awards program stay solvent, though it has drawn fewer than we would like. The Awards Committee has continued to revamp the contest to match SEJ goals and is considering ways to get more of you to share your work by entering. Don't be shy. You don't give yourself enough credit if you don't think your entry would be competitive.

Our conference remained strong with steady attendance despite the state of newsroom budgets and time constraints. We've retained the greatest staff in the nonprofit universe, a staff that brushes personal challenges aside and serves all of you in ways that simply defy proper accolades.

The past two years have brought almost unimaginable challenges, too. I came to work one day, early in the morning, and had a message from my friend Pat Beach at the *Austin American-Statesman*. He wanted me to call right away. Pat used to work with me here in Des Moines, and calls on occasion to ask advice on stories that have Midwest

angles. I thought maybe that was it. It wasn't. He informed me that Kevin Carmody, my long-time friend and board colleague, had killed himself the day before. Pat was one of Kevin's best friends at the *Statesman*. My duty was to inform the board and the great SEJ family, and it was an experience I'll never forget. Harsh. Painful. Numbing.

The aftermath of Kevin's death was amazing in many ways, though. SEJ grew stronger. Board members began to pay more attention to signs of stress and appreciated each other all the more. Accolades for Kevin's model work as an SEJ volunteer came in from far and wide and inspired thousands.

SEJ's the type of organization that just defies easy explanation. In many ways, it's a family bonded by very common interests but still capable of a hair-pulling hissy fit once in a while. Who would have thought that so many people, scattered all over the globe, could share such a bond.

I thank you all for the opportunity to serve you on the SEJ board, and, the past couple of years, as president. The best is still to come. The FOI light will shine brighter. Environmental journalism, even in the online age, will simply be grander. The SEJ members have made all that possible.

Report from the Society's President

By
Perry
Beeman



Outgoing SEJ President Perry Beeman covers the environment for The Des Moines Register.

SEJournal

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16th Annual Conference

Local food? Tasty and a good source of stories

By CHERYL DORSCHNER

Attendees at SEJ's 16th Annual Conference in Burlington, Vt., Oct. 25-29, will have a chance to witness a basic, but little-explored issue for most environment writers: food.

"What to Eat: An Aisle-by-Aisle Guide to Savvy Food Choices and Good Eating," articles appeared in *The Washington Post* living section and on CNN's American Morning show.

But nowadays food is also about science, economics and politics.

"Feeding first-world countries is inextricably intertwined with environmental issues because these countries have globalized food production and distribution systems," says Rachel K. Johnson, dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at the University of Vermont and a registered dietician.

That wasn't always so.

"It is only since World War II that the U.S. saw centralizing food systems as a way to feed its burgeoning population. Americans believed that use of emerging technology would make food better, safer and more nutritious," says Johnson, who also is the principle investigator with the Food Systems Leadership Institute, a consortium of universities funded by the Kellogg Foundation, which trains leaders in the interconnected economic, social, cultural and technological aspects surrounding food.

"My own parents are typical of that generation – they couldn't be happier to get off the farm. My dad believed technology was going to save us," says Megan Sheridan who is now director of

Vermont Fresh Network, a nonprofit organization networking farmers, food producers and restaurants. "He's changed his thinking on that, but one thing hasn't changed. He has always believed in local food."

Sheridan and Vermont Fresh Network embody efforts worldwide to turn the food system around. Organic farmer organizations abound, the Slow Food and Oldways movements and the number of nonprofits working toward repairing the food system are legion – and usually regional. Many have the words "green," "sustainable" or "local" in their names.

"Local speaks to everyone," Sheridan asserts.

Cheryl Dorschner directs the University of Vermont's (UVM's) effort to bring SEJ's 16th annual conference to Vermont, Oct. 25-29. UVM will co-host the conference with Vermont Law School.

Photo courtesy of CHERYL DORSCHNER



Fresh, seasonal food, direct from its local producers counters the fast-food trend, where food passes through the hands of many distributors. SEJ's annual conference in Vermont will consider the environmental angles of food.

A number of other issues will be explored, of course. But in Vermont, SEJ conference attendees will be able to grapple with the environmental issues of food.

SEJers will address "Eating as an Environmental Act" in a panel discussion Friday, Oct. 27 from 11:15 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

Also, food issues will come to life during a Saturday, Oct. 28 "Farm to Fork Diversified Agriculture" mini-tour.

And 'fresh,' 'local,' and 'seasonal' will be watchwords during SEJ's traditional Saturday evening reception as guests enjoy walk-around tasting with a chance to talk to Vermont food producers and leaders of organizations including the Vermont Fresh Network. An "all-Vermont" dinner and desserts will follow.

When the topic is food, too often legitimate environmental stories end up getting the "lifestyle" treatment. For example when environmental author Bill McKibben became a "localvore" for seven months, he sold the tale to *Gourmet* and feature writers interviewed him with me-too versions.

As Marion Nestle, food-politics and -safety author, publicizes her latest book,

SEJ's 16th Annual Conference Burlington, Vt. October 25-29

Visit www.sej.org/confer/index1.htm for more information, including:

- Draft Agenda
- Registration
- Lodging/Transportation
- Find a Roommate
- Speakers (so far)
- Exhibitors and Independent

Reception Hosts

Check the site often. Updates are added daily.

More questions? Email sej@sej.org or call 215-884-8174.

For registration questions, call 800-878-5131 (U.S.) or 517-485-2309

SEJ names finalists for 2006 awards

Global warming, toxic chemicals and threats to biodiversity were major themes of the best environmental journalism of 2005-2006, according to judges in the fifth annual contest sponsored by the Society of Environmental Journalists.

Twenty-six stories in nine categories have been designated as finalists in the SEJ Awards for Reporting on the Environment, the world's largest and most comprehensive awards for journalism on environmental topics.

Judging panels of distinguished reporters, editors and journalism educators considered nearly 200 entries to choose 26 finalists representing the best environmental reporting in print and on television, radio and the Internet.

Winners will be revealed and finalists honored Oct. 25 at a gala ceremony in the Emerald Grand Ballroom at the Sheraton Burlington Hotel in Burlington, Vt., on the first day of SEJ's 16th annual conference. Each winning entry will receive \$1,000 and a trophy.

This year's finalists, listed alphabetically by media outlet in each category:

Outstanding Radio Reporting, Large Market

- "Dupont Stories" – NPR's Living on Earth, Jeffrey A. Young
- "Borderlands" – NPR's Living on Earth, Molly Peterson
- "Bioko's Endangered Monkeys" – PRI's The World,

David Baron

Outstanding Radio Reporting, Small Market

- "Dirty Dealings at Maine's DEP" – MPBN Radio (WMEA Portland), Susan P. Sharon
- "Poultry Antibiotics" – NET Radio, Sarah McCammon
- "Eugenie Clark" – WGPU-FM and Florida Public Radio,

Amy Tardif

Outstanding Television Reporting, Large Market

- "Car Inspection Corruption" – CBS 4 News at 11, Kristen Setera
- "Melting Point: Tracking the Global Warming Threat" – CNN, Miles O'Brien
- "Dirty Secret" – WBAL TV 11 News, John Sherman and

Beau Kershaw

Outstanding Television Reporting, Small Market

- "Delicate Blooms: South Florida's Native Orchids" – WGPU TV, Alexa Elliott
- "The Dirt on Dickson County" – WSMV-TV, Demetria Kalodimos and Phil Dunaway
- "Toxic Treatment" – WTAE-TV, Jim Parsons, Kendall Cross and Shawn Quinlan

Kevin Carmody Award for Outstanding Investigative Reporting, Print

- "Vanishing Wetlands" – *St. Petersburg Times*, Craig Pittman and Matthew Waite
- "Toxic Legacy" – *The Record*, Jan Barry, Alex J. Nussbaum, Mary Jo Layton, Lindy Washburn, Tom Troncone, Thomas E. Franklin, Barbara Williams, Lynn Vial and Tim E. Nostrand
- "Toxic Traces" – *The Wall Street Journal*, Peter Waldman

Outstanding Beat Reporting, Print

- "Environmental Science and Health" – *Los Angeles Times*, Marla Cone
- "South Texas Environment Beat" – *San Antonio Express-News*, Anton Caputo

- "Environment Beat: From Drilling to Teflon" – *The Baltimore Sun*, Tom Pelton

Outstanding Explanatory Reporting, Print

- "A Body's Burden: Our Chemical Legacy" – *Oakland Tribune*, Douglas Fischer
- "Blue Smoke, Tainted Water" – *The Columbus Dispatch*, Spencer Hunt
- "The Climate of Man" – *The New Yorker*, Elizabeth Kolbert

Outstanding Small Market Reporting, Print

- "Our Changing World: Understanding the Science of Climate Change" – *Bangor Daily News*, Misty Edgcomb, Jonathan Ferland, Eric Zelz, Scott Haskell, Rick Levasseur, Brian Robitaille, Becky Bowden, Greg McManus, Charlie Campo, John Clarke Russ and Janet Sargent

- "Paso Del Norte Stories" – *El Diario De Juarez*, Erick Falcon

- "Who's Protecting Us?" and other stories – *The Repository*, Paul E. Kostyu

Outstanding Online Reporting

- "Integrity in Science" – *Environmental Science & Technology*, Paul Thacker
- "Fantastic Forests: The Balance Between Nature and People of Madagascar" – www.wbur.org, Daniel Grossman

This year's contest judges (asterisks indicate panel chairs):

Todd B. Bates,* environmental writer, *Asbury Park Press*

Randolph Brandt, editor, *The Journal Times*

Merrill Brown, founder and principal, MMB Media

Liddie Collins, MPTV

Aly Colon, group leader for reporting, writing and editing, Poynter Institute

Lisa Cordasco, Canadian Broadcasting Corp.

Steve Cuevas, reporter, Southern California Public Radio

Robert Garcia, Washington bureau chief, ABC Radio

Ed Jahn, producer, Oregon Public Broadcasting

John Krist, senior reporter, *Ventura County Star*

Margaret Kriz,* staff correspondent, *National Journal*

Bill Lambrecht, Washington bureau chief, *St. Louis Post Dispatch*

Vin Liotta, senior series producer, NOVA ScienceNOW

Ingrid Lobet,* West Coast editor, Living On Earth, National Public Radio

Dori J. Maynard, president and CEO, Maynard Institute for Journalism Education

Eugene Mulero,* reporter, *Arizona Republic*

Larry Pryor, associate professor, University of Southern California Annenberg School for Journalism

Paul Raeburn, freelance journalist

Jacques Rivard,* former correspondent, Canadian Broadcasting Corp.

Teya Ryan,* consultant, former executive vice president of CNN/US

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Endowment grant challenges SEJ to find new support

By **PETER THOMSON**

Here's the good news: SEJ will receive a matching grant of fifty cents for every dollar we raise for our endowment, by next May 31, up to a total of \$103,000. That's a potential challenge grant of \$51,500.

Here's the bad news: The challenge donors aren't making it easy.

The \$103,000 must come from people who haven't donated in the last three years or from larger donations from people who have. In recent years, scores of SEJ members and friends have donated to SEJ's 21st Century Fund Endowment, and the fund now stands at over \$125,000. But the goal of the campaign is a fund of \$5 million to support SEJ's core programs.

The folks at the Challenge Fund for Journalism – a joint effort of the Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and John S. and James L. Knight Foundation – understand that the only way to build such an endowment is through an aggressive and strategic campaign. It can't depend on a relatively small number of donors, or on a steady stream of relatively small donations. So their challenge grant to SEJ is designed to help us both broaden and deepen our donor pool, and to help us build the organizational capacity we'll need for a sustained campaign.

Hence the challenge: to draw in new donors and increase the levels of giving from current donors. The grant process also involves training sessions for board and staff members as well as fundraising advice and coaching.

"SEJ still has a long way to go to raise its \$5 million endow-

ment," says SEJ treasurer Carolyn Whetzel. "But this grant is an opportunity to jump-start the effort to generate both more and larger donations."

Over the next eight months, the SEJ board's endowment committee plans a series of special appeals to members and friends as well as special fundraising events and a targeted appeal to a small number of individuals able to make larger investments in SEJ's future. The leaders of the endowment effort also hope to raise 10 percent of the goal – \$10,300 – from SEJ board members themselves, and have also asked board members to raise another \$1,500 each.

How can you help?

Make a donation! If you've never given to the endowment, any amount you give now grows by 50 percent: \$100=\$150, \$1,000=\$1,500, etc. If you have donated within the past three years, the challenge asks you to stretch to a new giving level, as only the amount that exceeds your most generous gift in that time counts toward the match. (If you can't remember whether, when or how much you've given, get in touch—we know!)

Let us know about other potential supporters of SEJ—especially any individuals who might be able to make gifts of four figures or more.

Get involved in the effort. We've got lots of work to do to build the endowment that will help ensure that SEJ is always there to support the vital work that we all do.

For more information on the challenge grant and the endowment campaign, get in touch with Peter Thomson, pthomson@sej.org, or Carolyn Whetzel, cwhetzel@sej.org.

Former *Dayton Daily News* environmental reporter dies



Dale Dempsey, formerly of the *Dayton Daily News*

Former *Dayton Daily News* environment reporter Dale Dempsey died in August at his home. He was 54.

Dempsey was a copy editor and night news editor after the *Journal Herald* merged with the *Dayton Daily News* in Dayton, Ohio. He also covered business and environment. In 2004, he and another staff writer won second place from the Associated Press for Best Community Service for articles about the Greater Dayton Regional Transit Authority.

Dempsey was on a team of reporters who wrote an award-winning series on megafarms in Ohio. The series examined the impact of the consolidation of Ohio's livestock industry on the environment, exposing regulatory flaws. It won the James M. Cox Public Service Award for metro newspapers.

He also was the author of extensive coverage of urban sprawl and urban planning. Most recently, Dempsey was editing *The Ohio Education Gadget*, a newsletter produced by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

Dempsey is survived by his stepfather, Bud Fleischman; daughters Mary Dempsey of Kettering and Colleen Dempsey of Xenia; and a sister, Kathleen Kussman of Oakwood. Memorials may be directed to the Dayton offices of the American Cancer Society or the Humane Society.



Environment coverage is down on TV, but some broadcast veterans offer hope

By **ROBERT MCCLURE**

Environmental news is almost non-existent on the three network newscasts – and, by extension, much of television news.

That stark assessment came from Andrew Tyndall, the former reporter who has monitored the network news for nearly two decades. Tyndall spoke at the Environmental Journalism Television Summit in New York on July 28, sponsored by the Knight Center for Environmental Journalism at Michigan State University, and by SEJ.

Tyndall said the reason networks eschew environment coverage is “they are in the business of telling you what happened in the last 24 hours. Environment is by its nature a feature beat rather than a news beat.”

Stories specifically about the environment get about 1 percent of the airtime on the networks, Tyndall said, and the networks can be viewed as a barometer of all television news. While one might expect to see about 100 network news reports each week – about seven stories per night per network – just one is likely to focus on the environment.

The big exceptions, he said, are man-made disasters such as the Exxon Valdez oil spill and environmental conflicts that spark political debates as has happened with climate change.

This tendency to minimize environment coverage has gotten stronger in recent years, Tyndall said. For example, while the Rio Earth Summit received 90 minutes of coverage in 1992, the Johannesburg Earth Summit a decade later got 10 minutes.

Enviro news started to get more television coverage after the Bush administration took over, but the 9/11 terror attacks “wiped out” that trend, Tyndall said.

The solution? Try to work the environmental angle of big breaking stories, Tyndall advises. Katrina, tsunamis and other “weather porn” are naturals. Or take the genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan – it’s driven in part by increasing desertification. That’s how to get environmental news onto TV, Tyndall said.

“You can’t do it by having global warming features – it’s by getting the global warming angle into other stories,” he said.

(Just two weeks after the summit, one of those unusual stories broke that pushed up enviro journalism’s numbers on the networks: the announcement that BP’s pipeline from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez, Alaska, had to be shut down because of corrosion. Instead of the average five minutes a week, environmental stories skyrocketed to 19 minutes the week of Aug. 7-11.)

Peter Dykstra of CNN, another speaker at the summit, said television news is changing more rapidly than print, and that has meant reduced coverage of the environment. He says getting past

the gatekeepers means recognizing that “they don’t know science. They’re afraid of science.”

And remember, “You don’t have a story unless you have a person,” Dykstra said. The person might be a scientist, a business person or an activist, but getting a face on the screen is key to the TV story, he said.

Dykstra said coverage of education, health issues and similar topics have suffered after 9/11, so “don’t take it personally.”

Former TV newsman David Ropeik said he knew it was time to leave when his general manager remarked, “If we cover the environment too much, we’re afraid people will think we’re too thoughtful.”

Ropeik’s advice: Work the political angles that hold more interest for the gatekeepers. Try to break stories that the local paper and others haven’t yet covered. Downplay the science when you’re pitching a story, and present it in terms that might interest folks gathered around the office water cooler.

Bill Blakemore of ABC News chastised fellow broadcasters for failing to cover the global warming story and letting Hollywood take it away. “Going for balance is the lazy thing, and we have been extraordinarily lazy,” Blakemore said.

He recalled “the Cessna factor.” It’s the reaction many Americans had when they first heard of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center: Oh, probably those terrorists rammed the building with a Cessna or a Piper Cub.

Such natural denial mechanism must be resisted, Blakemore said, because “global warming is bad news, frightening news.”

As for getting it on the air? “You have to be polite, but you have to be a little crazy and relentless about it,” Blakemore said.

Blakemore worked for a long time on a story about people living off the grid. About half of them are old hippies, he found. Not surprising. But most of the rest are survivalists. That was just about enough to get his supervisors’ OK for a story, but not quite. Still, Blakemore found a survivalist in north Florida and began to interview him.

It took a long time, but finally it paid off. After Hurricane Opal hit, this was Blakemore’s pitch: How would you like to interview the only person in the Florida Panhandle who has electricity today? Story sold.

“It’s the back door,” Blakemore said. “We shouldn’t have to rely on it, but sometimes you have to.”

Robert McClure covers the environment for The Post-Intelligencer in Seattle.

Did you know...

you can find Freedom of Information Act tips at SEJ.org

Are reporters biased toward business or the environment?

By JAN KNIGHT

Survey shows environment reporters are not anti-business

Environment reporters do not possess an anti-business bias, despite frequent claims that their coverage is negatively slanted, a recent survey shows.

A total of 98 percent or more of reporters surveyed in four U.S. regions agreed that coverage needs to be fair to both business and environmental activist sources. They commonly use a business/economics angle in their coverage, with 91 percent reporting that they always, often or sometimes use this frame. At least 89 percent of those surveyed said they also always, often or sometimes use a nature frame.

Further, they reported that they routinely use sources from manufacturing companies and the development or other business sector, although they use local environment groups and individual activists more often than any other type of source. Their least likely sources include the Chemical Manufacturers Association and Greenpeace.

Taken together, this suggests that the reporters surveyed “appeared almost as likely to use sources from a business-oriented viewpoint as they were to use environmental advocacy sources,” according to the researchers who conducted the survey.

The survey is part of a series of ongoing projects to establish baseline data on U.S. journalists who cover the environment and was conducted by David B. Sachsman, James Simon and JoAnn Myer Valenti. The researchers interviewed 364 reporters in four regions (a total of 28 states) by telephone, and the respondents included 49 TV station reporters and 315 newspaper reporters who regularly cover the environment.

Most reporters (91.3 percent or more) disagreed that their colleagues tend to be too “brown” (pro-business and industry) in their environment coverage, but 38 percent to 46.5 percent agreed that their colleagues’ coverage is too “green.”

Although research suggests that representatives of business and industry tend to be difficult sources, those surveyed did not rank them highly as a barrier to environment coverage. The No. 1 barrier listed in all regions was lack of time for reporting, followed by financial constraints and lack of news hole.

“The environment reporters surveyed do not, in their reported work habits, evidence the anti-business bias claimed by critics,” the researchers concluded. And although a “substantial minority” feels that some coverage is too green, this provides evidence that “many environment reporters appear to be wrestling with this question of objectivity and fairness.”

For more information, see “Wrestling with Objectivity and Fairness: U.S. Environment Reporters and the Business Community” by David B. Sachsman, James Simon and JoAnn Myer Valenti, in *Applied Environmental Education and Communication*, Volume 4 (2005), pp. 363 – 373.

Hybrid car news focuses on environment but fails to cover consumers’ top priorities, study shows

Newspaper coverage of hybrid electric cars focuses on fuel economy and emissions, but consumers rank these attributes low on the list of things they seek when buying a new car, according to a recent study.

Surveys show that consumers rank fuel economy behind other attributes they consider most important when buying a new car, such as safety, reliability and performance. Even among consumers who buy hybrids – presumably with an interest in their environmental benefits – only 36 percent of owners surveyed in Oregon mentioned environmental attributes as something they liked most about their vehicles, according to the study authors.

Yet, the very information that consumers seek is missing from hybrid car coverage, the authors found. This is important, they suggested, because it may be contributing to public misperceptions about hybrids.

The researchers examined a random sample of 153 news articles about hybrid electric vehicles (HEVs) published between November 2002 and November 2003 in the United States. They found that most (63 percent) focused on general information, such as describing what hybrid cars are and how they work. A total of 47 percent of the articles addressed hybrids’ environmental benefits, including reduced emissions. But only 8 percent of the articles focused on HEV performance and only 3 percent focused on HEV safety – even though consumers rank these attributes as top considerations when choosing a new car.

Less than 10 percent of the articles provided information about tax incentives associated with buying a hybrid, and none of them provided information about hybrids’ top speed, reliability and warranties, or where to learn more about them – all ranked important by consumers.

The researchers found no significant differences among coverage in four geographic regions.

“Individuals in the market for a new car are least likely to find information about HEVs that they would consider most important ... by reading newspaper articles,” the researchers concluded.

The researchers, both from the University of Michigan School of Natural Resources and Environment, conducted the study to explore the “barriers to expanding the market” for hybrids, including incomplete knowledge and misperceptions among the public.

“Attributes of HEVs reported on frequently by newspapers are well known by the public, and attributes reported on less frequently relate to public misperceptions,” the researchers stated.

HEV manufacturers and others wishing to promote hybrids should focus on hybrids’ reliability, safety and performance when interacting with journalists, the researchers suggested, with environmental benefits a “secondary rather than primary focus of communications by sources seeking to meet consumers’ information needs about HEVs.”

For more information, see Todd Pollak and Michaela Zint, “Are Newspapers Steering Potential Hybrid Drivers Off Course? An Analysis of U.S. Newspaper Coverage of Hybrid Electric Vehicles” in *Applied Environmental Education and Communication*, Volume 5 (2006), pp. 51 – 61.

Jan Knight, a former magazine editor and daily newspaper reporter, is an assistant professor of communication at Hawaii Pacific University in Honolulu. She can be reached at jknight@hpu.edu.

The world of birds holds untold stories

By MATT MENDENHALL

Birds and the people who study them make great news stories – and not just for me, an editor of *Birder's World* magazine. Newspapers, broadcasters, online writers, and general-interest magazines can all report on birds with confidence that readers and audiences will tune in.

Birds are more accessible for most people to watch than other animals, and they are arguably the most beautiful creatures on earth. The extraordinary popularity of "March of the Penguins" last year – it garnered \$77 million at the box office in the United States – is the latest example of the appeal of birds.

Reporters do a solid job already of covering bird news. Recent claims of ivory-billed woodpecker sightings made the front page nationwide. I frequently find bird stories of local interest by searching Google News and SEJ's *EJ Today* page.

But allow me to introduce you to sources for bird news you might not be aware of: ornithology journals and other publications in the biological sciences. The papers they publish can provide you with material for compelling, stand-alone graphics, or they can be fodder for stories on global warming, pollution, or other major issues.

These journals are often the source for news we report in "Birding Briefs," the news section of *Birder's World*. Though our audience is quite interested in birds, we focus on papers that we think will have the widest appeal. That means we avoid stories that are newsworthy only to a handful of academics – what survey methods work best in grasslands, for example. Instead, we look for reports on a newly observed or newly understood behavior, preferably of a familiar bird.

We also keep tabs on what scientists are writing about endangered species, migration studies, and birds' adaptations to human environments.

Reporters for other news outlets can tell the same stories, though with more explanation for the non-birders in your audience. To find newsworthy bird papers, start with any of North America's six major ornithology journals: *The Auk*, *The Condor*, *The Wilson Journal of Ornithology* (formerly *The Wilson*

Bulletin), the *Journal of Field Ornithology*, *Waterbirds* and *The Journal of Raptor Research*. Also, find the journal of your state or region's ornithological society. It could prove to be a source for news and local bird experts.

Look for research on familiar birds – backyard songbirds, bald eagles, ducks, hummingbirds – or on threatened species that live in your state or region.



When a paper's title grabs you, read the abstract, and if you're still interested, skim the parts about the study's methods and results. Then, take the time to read the "discussion" – the last few pages of the paper that describe in detail what the author found and why it's important. You can go back to dive into the guts of the report later.



Photo courtesy of U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Condor chicks are fed by San Diego Zoo staffers using puppets. Will the species ever again be truly wild?

In addition, get to know a top birder or ornithologist in your city, and when you find a story that seems newsworthy, ask for his or her take on it before you write your lede.

Following are a few examples of scientific reports we covered in the June 2006 issue of *Birder's World*. With a bit more background, they could also make compelling reports in other news outlets. (To read our stories, click on the "Birding Briefs" link at birdersworld.com.)

- A year or so after the unprecedented winter movement of mostly Canadian owls into Minnesota and points east, the journal of the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union reported more-or-less final numbers for the invasion. We turned the report into a bar chart that shows how extraordinary the invasion was.

- A study found that foraging by overabundant deer harms songbirds, especially species that rely on a forest's understory for nesting and feeding sites. The paper appeared in the November

2005 issue of *Biological Conservation*. (This journal is one of many that publish papers about ornithology as well as other biological fields. For other such journals see resources box, p. 10)

- Our most familiar native bird, the American robin, sings earlier in the morning in places with bright artificial light. The brighter the light, the earlier the birds start singing. U.S. Geological Survey researcher Mark Miller published a paper

(Continued next page)

Birds... (from page 9)

describing his efforts to record each day's first robin songs in the February 2006 issue of *The Condor*, the journal of the Cooper Ornithological Society.

Besides published reports, you can also find bird news in the

To get access to papers without having to pay for them, here are a few tips:

- Ask the lead author for a PDF. Most scientists I've dealt with are happy to help journalists.

- Google the lead author to find his or her campus home page at the school they work for. Some scientists provide PDFs of all of their papers on their personal websites.

- Search for the paper you want through Google Scholar. A free copy of it might be available.

- Go to the library. Large university libraries have full access to BioOne (and other online journal publishers). You'll probably have to pay only for print-outs.

Your options are more limited for finding papers in local and state ornithological journals and in *The Journal of Raptor Research*, which are available only in print. You can ask an author for a PDF, search for a library that carries the journal, or pay the society's membership fee to get a subscription.

The lesson here is that birds are newsworthy even when the headline does not include words like extinct, rediscovered or killed. Certain bird stories require a bit of digging, but they're out there and are waiting to be told.

Photo courtesy of U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE



Overabundant deer can diminish the forest understory that birds such as the Rufous hummingbird need for nesting and feeding.

presentations given at ornithological society meetings. California condor experts, for example, said at the 2005 American Ornithologists' Union meeting that even though the species has been saved from extinction it might never be truly wild.

The birds' unfortunate habit of eating trash and ingesting lead from animals shot by lead bullets means that they require constant monitoring and frequent intervention to stay alive. We reported the concerns in our December 2005 issue.

Of course, most environment reporters won't take four-day trips to cover meetings of bird societies. (Though if ornithologists ever hold a meeting in your town, be sure to cover it. You'll find stories.) The alternative to traveling is to download the PDF of a meeting's abstracts from the society's website and scan it for news. To avoid reading every word, search by keywords for birds, regions, or issues. Then look up researchers of studies that interest you, and interview them.

The lack of a travel budget shouldn't prevent you from getting a compelling bird story, and if you also lack a budget for subscriptions, you can still get the full text of scientific papers. Unlike *Science* and *Nature*, which offer media access online, ornithology and most other biology journals require a subscription in order to download papers. To subscribe to a journal, you'd have to pay a society's membership fee. The six major ornithological groups charge between \$21 and \$80 a year to join.

BioOne (www.bioone.org) publishes five of the major ornithology journals online. Members of a society receive full access to its journal. But for no charge, you can search the site for specific articles or authors, and you can browse individual journals' contents pages and abstracts of current and back issues.

Matt Mendenhall is associate editor of Birder's World, a magazine for birdwatchers. His bookshelves are lined with unread books because he spends too much time reading journals of ornithology.

Online ornithological resources

- At www.osnabirds.org find links to the websites of North America's six major ornithological societies.

- Visit www.bioone.org to find the latest issues of *The Auk*, *The Condor*, *Waterbirds*, *The Wilson Journal of Ornithology* and the *Journal of Field Ornithology*.

- The Searchable Ornithological Research Archive is an open-access site providing PDFs of all papers from seven journals through the year 2000: <http://elibrary.unm.edu/sora/index.php>

- Find a list of 167 bird journals, magazines, and newsletters from around the world at www.nmnh.si.edu/BIRDNET/period.html

- To locate scientific papers on virtually any subject, search Google Scholar: <http://scholar.google.com> and go to the "Advanced Scholar Search" page

Other journals that publish studies about birds:

- *PLoS Biology*: <http://biology.plosjournals.org>

- *Biological Conservation*: www.elsevier.com/locate/biocon

- *The American Naturalist*: www.journals.uchicago.edu/AN

- *Ecology Letters*: www.blackwellpublishing.com/journals/ele

Mapping data may be vital story key

By **DAVID POULSON**

When cholera gripped London in 1854, most health authorities figured the disease was spread by noxious vapors.

But Dr. John Snow noticed that cholera deaths concentrated in homes near a particular public water pump. The British epidemiologist mapped their locations and also found relatively few deaths reported at residences near other pumps.

All of the pumps drew water from the Thames River. The difference: The deadly one drew water downstream of the sewage and filth of the city while the intakes for the other pumps were upstream.

Snow uncovered a great environmental story by marrying data to geography, a process known today as Geographic Information Systems, or GIS.

Nowadays, computer-driven GIS helps journalists report stories that they couldn't get otherwise. And perhaps no reporter can better benefit from mapping software than the one who covers the environment. The sense of place, the where of the story – its geography – is vital to an environmental journalist.

Chances are you've already seen GIS news stories. One of the most common identifies sexual offenders who live near schools and daycare centers. Sexual offender lists are great fodder for this kind of thing. But there are other hazards worthy of plotting on a map.

Take the location of leaking underground storage tanks, the legacy of old gas stations. Most states track the progress – or its lack – in cleaning up the petroleum-based chemicals at these sites.

In my state, Michigan, the threat these sites pose to groundwater has prompted restrictions on installing new petroleum tanks within 300 feet of a drinking water well. But many tanks are closer. They may have been installed

before the regulations, or owners may have been unaware of the restriction or oblivious to a nearby well. What's more, water wells may have been drilled near a tank long after it was installed.

With GIS you can map water wells and identify the leaking tanks that fall within 300 feet of them. You can also identify the leaky tanks that are within 25 feet of surface water, an area where Michigan law requires all tanks to be double-walled and monitored. Once mapped, you can export the data on just those tanks to a spreadsheet. Then you can examine the extent of contamination, the progress of cleanups and the presence of noxious compounds like MTBE at the tanks leaking in particularly sensitive areas.

That's a pretty good story. And, as a bonus, it produces a map to illustrate it. That's the neat thing about GIS. It lets you create

a data subset based on a geographic feature while giving the graphics department a head start on an illustration.

Say you want to profile the pollution inputs of the area that drains into a local river. You've got lists of local factory discharge permits, wastewater treatment plants, storm water permits, leaking petroleum tanks, large farms and other pollution sources. Unfortunately their locations are reported by county or city – political boundaries largely irrelevant to an area defined by natural features. But if you plot them on a map, you can sort out which ones fall within the irregular boundaries of the watershed. Now you've got just the pollution data that directly impacts the river.

It's not just pollution sources environment reporters find worthy of mapping. *Columbus Dispatch* environment reporter Spencer Hunt mapped property parcel information when he examined development threats to Darby Creek, one of Ohio's last relatively untouched havens for rare and threatened wildlife. By looking at the ownership of parcels within the watershed, he figured out how much land was protected from development and how much was owned by developers, farmers and others.

It took traditional shoe-leather reporting to sort out developers from other owners. Land could be currently farmed and yet owned by a development corporation. But in the end, Hunt quantified how much of the watershed was primed for development and identified who bought it up.

When you use GIS, the point for reporters is not so much the map that's produced, but the opportunity to inform their reporting. The Darby Creek ownership map never appeared in the paper, says Hunt. "It was so complex and the parcels were so tiny in comparison to the watershed, we literally would have needed two pages to make it legible."

Yet often, reporter-created GIS maps are a boon to graphics departments. For the same story, Hunt placed the watershed onto a map of regional growth predictions. He shaded the map by percentage of developed land for both 2000 and 2030, dramatically illustrating a projected 60 percent population increase for a sensitive ecosystem.

"There is no other way to give readers this kind of information and analysis without an assist from a computer," says Hunt. "For environmental reporting, mapping is key."

David Poulson is associate director of the Knight Center for Environmental Journalism and teaches computer-assisted reporting at Michigan State University.



Mapping resources:

- The best place to learn GIS is at the three-day Map Camp run by Investigative Reporters and Editors at the University of Missouri. IRE's boot camp calendar can be found at <http://www.ire.org/training/bootcamps.php>
- Geography departments at local colleges and universities often offer GIS workshops. They may even help you work on a story in return for a little credit.
- Make friends with a local planner who can help get you up to speed.
- IRE sells a great primer, "Mapping for Stories: A Computer-Assisted Reporting Guide" by Jennifer LaFleur and Andy Lehren, at <http://www.ire.org/store/books/mapping.html>

The art and practice of the interview

By DAVID POULSON

You've got a great story idea, uncovered some data and read up on the latest science.

The obvious next step: Ask questions of the right people.

How interviews are conducted varies by reporter, circumstance and source. All reporters have problems getting information from spinning politicians, belligerent bureaucrats, stonewalling executives and media-shy citizens. Those who cover the environment have additional challenges with deciphering jargon-prone scientists and evaluating sensational statements of media-savvy environmentalists.

Veteran journalists say there are some common techniques that serve them well. Here are some interviewing tips provided recently by SEJ members.

Questions

The simpler, the better.

"Why?" is the question that has served Trudy Tynan well during a 36-year journalism career.

"Ask it gently. Ask it interestedly. Ask it skeptically," says the former reporter for The Associated Press. "I've never known an elected person who didn't respond with quotable material when faced with a reporter with a puzzled expression asking 'Now, why did you do that?'"

"And keep asking until you are satisfied that you understand what they mean as well as what comes out of their mouth. If you are unsure, ask the same question in different words. There is nothing wrong in saying, 'So, are you saying XXXX?' and offering them the opportunity to say 'No, I mean YYYYY.' And then hit them with another 'Why?'"

"It's so simple and direct it doesn't give them any place to dodge," Tynan says. "And if they are dodging and spinning, ask them what they are concerned about: i.e., why are they behaving that way?"

Another great question: "How's that work?"

It's particularly effective for prompting researchers and other experts to open up and talk in a lively and understandable way, says Chuck Quirnbach, a reporter with Wisconsin Public Radio.

"They usually want to show you their work ... let you in on what they've been working on for years," Quirnbach says. "I learned that tip at SEJ-Baltimore, when a colleague asked about the mating of captive whooping cranes ..."

A similar question, "Can you help me to understand this?" serves two purposes, says Kate Jaimet, national news reporter for the *Ottawa Citizen*: "Not only does this flatter their ego, it shows them that you are willing to listen."

To prompt subjects to recreate events and produce telling scenes, *Kansas City Star* reporter Mike Mansur asks, "If this were a movie and it's the opening scene, what would the camera focus on?"

"People give you the most insightful, incredible answers," Mansur says. "Getting people to think of a movie in filling in the

blanks of a narrative can really work."

Another handy tool is letting sources come up with their own questions as the interview ends.

"Always end with, 'Is there anything else you want to add?' 'Is there anything else that will help our readers understand this situation?'" says Wisconsin freelancer Christine Heinrichs.

Mark Schleifstein, a reporter at the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, finishes an interview with, "Is there anything I haven't asked that I ought to be asking? Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

Many reporters save tough questions for last in case they prompt a source to end an interview early. But that's not a hard and fast rule.

"If your interview is very time-constrained and you may only get in one or two questions (I've often experienced this when interviewing politicians) then ask the most critical, toughest ones first," Jaimet says. "You can always get the softball information later from spokespeople."

Silence

The urge to break a silence is a powerful ally. Many journalists insist that their most successful interviews happen when they keep their mouth shut

"Cultivate long pauses," says Elizabeth Weise, science writer for *USAToday*. "It's amazing what people will say when you don't jump in."

Silence can be golden, Mansur agrees. "I recently on a week-end assignment had to interview the mother of a teenager who had been 'hill-jumping,' racing over rolling country roads. He had gone too fast and flown too far, killing himself and four others. The mother had been interviewed by TV and tried to put her best spin on things. She said it was God's will ... etc.

"Finally, I sat down with her in her home. She began with the same answers. But when she said it was God's will, I sat silent. Didn't say a word for a minute. And finally it all came flying out of her – how it was her fault (it really wasn't), how she had let her son off early from being grounded for racing his car, etc.

"The truth came out.

"To me, it made the woman more sympathetic and that came through in the story. She seemed more real, a grief-stricken mom wondering why she had done this or her son had done that."

A well-placed "uh-huh" can also be better than a question because it may spur elaboration.

"At first, someone sounds dumb or fears they might," Mansur says. "But listen to how friends talk. They affirm each other."

Indeed, the encouraging sounds and silences are part of an essential background track of any interview, says Perry Beeman, a reporter with the *Des Moines Register*: "I really do think the rhythm of an interview is important. That's where the uh-huhs mix with the carefully placed silences.

"Of course, it's always important to realize that the best stuff

always comes at the end when the source thinks the interview is over and starts to let loose. Keep the recorder running. Never fully put the pad away.”

Persistence

Sometimes you have to press hard to wade through jargon-laden responses that, left uninvestigated, will confuse readers as much as they confuse you. Roger Witherspoon once interviewed an engineer who said he had developed a “fully suspended, five-axis, three-magnetic-bearing, dynamic spin rig with forced excitation.”

“I simply asked him what, in English, he had invented,” says Witherspoon, contributing editor for *US Black Engineer* and *Information Technology*. “He laughed and e-mailed me a diagram. I opened it and asked him which end was up.

“He laughed some more and explained it was a helicopter engine with no ball bearings in the engines – a development which could allow the development of several types of engines without the need for motor oil or their accompanying exhaust.”

Prepare

Examine the record of actions by government officials, politicians or corporate executives, says Bill Kelly, correspondent for *California Energy Circuit*. “Such preparation will guide you to the questions that will make your interview more hard hitting and productive.

“The journalist I.F. Stone used to write articles that were practically devoid of interviews, instead based almost solely on written records of actions,” Kelly says. “This is to say that there often is a great gulf between what people say and what they do, and it’s the latter that matters most. Too often, though, it’s what they say that passes as news.”

Schleifstein suggests listing questions before interviews for lengthy projects or investigative pieces. That way, you’re sure to

cover them all. And he says it’s a good idea to bring someone who can keep the subject busy as you’re scribbling notes.

“I often give photographers free rein to ask questions during an interview for that reason – and often, they come up with some pretty good questions exactly because they don’t have the knowledge you have,” he says.

.....
“Frequently, politicians and corporations will give responses which are not answers to the question posed... My policy is to simply state, ‘You did not answer the question, and if you stick with that response, I will have to write that you refused to answer.’”

 –Roger Witherspoon

Good preparation can free a reporter up to listen and observe while gathering context, perspective and color.

“Don’t ask any more questions than you really have to,” says Merritt Clifton, editor of *Animal People*. “Almost everything that reporters typically ask is info that they should already have from clips, websites, printed literature, maps, reference works, impact reports, site visits, etc., before ever going to bug any sources. Therefore, most reporters don’t get half as much out of interviews as they should.

“Get your background first. Then go talk to the sources. You’ll need to have a couple of questions in mind to help get the conversation started, and of course there will be the essential questions that you need to have answered.

“However, reporters who ‘always ask the hard questions’ are often reporters who take shortcuts, jump to conclusions, and may produce sensational stories at the expense of depth.”

When a source is evasive

A reporter is not a “mindless dictationist who takes a quote and goes to print,” Witherspoon says.

“Frequently, politicians and corporations will give responses
(Continued next page)

‘Toxic Legacy’ wins N.J. reporters \$75,000 prize

A nine-member reporting team with *The Record* (Bergen County, N.J.) is the 2006 winner of the \$75,000 Grantham Prize for Excellence in Reporting on the Environment.

The team won journalism’s highest-dollar prize for its “Toxic Legacy” investigative series on pollution caused by Ford Motor Company automobile-assembly plant in Mahwah, N.J.

Grantham Prize jurors described *The Record’s* 2005 series as “environmental watchdog reporting of the highest order, marked by exhaustive reporting, stellar writing, and an innovative multimedia presentation that sets a new standard.”

The award is to be shared by nine *Record* journalists who spent eight months investigating how actions of the company, government officials, and organized crime exposed northern New Jersey residents to numerous environmental risks.

Three other finalists for the prize won “Awards of Special Merit,” each carrying a \$5,000 prize:

- Douglas Fischer of the *Oakland Tribune*, for his series “Our Body’s Burden: Our Chemical Legacy.” The jurors said the series “takes science reporting to a new level by applying

scientific method in an original investigation of the presence of toxic chemicals in a local family.”

- Elizabeth Kolbert of *The New Yorker* for “The Climate of Man,” a series about the science and effects of climate change, which the jurors described as a “triumph of environmental journalism” for its “thoroughness, elegance, and persuasiveness.”

- John Sherman and Beau Kershaw of WBAL-TV, Baltimore, Md., for “Dirty Secret.” The jurors called the piece “good, dogged broadcast journalism” marked by “great photography” and “a fast-paced editing style.” Other local and national TV media “should follow WBAL’s lead and give their employees the time and resources to produce outstanding TV environmental journalism that makes a difference,” the jurors said.

The Grantham Prize was funded by Jeremy and Hannelore Grantham through their foundation that supports natural-resource conservation programs both in the United States and internationally. Jeremy Grantham is a Boston investment strategist and Hannelore Grantham is the director of The Grantham Foundation.

The interview... (from page 13)

which are not answers to the question posed – particularly if the issue is a touchy one. My policy is to simply state, ‘You did not answer the question, and if you stick with that response, I will have to write that you refused to answer.’”

Avoid the newsroom

Interviewing sources on their home turf gives you a chance to note what’s on their desk, hanging on their walls or sitting on their bookshelves. Such observations provide color and can prompt revealing conversations.

And if you’re in the person’s office, you might be within striking distance of other documents, says Schleifstein. “Whenever I visit a scientist in his/her office, as we’re finishing, I ask if they have any reprints of papers they’ve written that are germane to our conversation.

“They’re usually impressed that you’d actually want to read them, and it could result in unexpected information falling into your hands.”

Putting sources at ease

“Often when I talk to scientists for the first time, early in the conversation the discussion gets into their past experience with reporters, usually generalists who have misunderstood something or misquoted them or one of their colleagues,” says Schleifstein. “I use that discussion as an opportunity to urge them to call me if there’s any problem with the story – again helps cut through their distrust.”

Clifton says he meets sources in their natural habitat and talks first about what they want to talk about. And he feeds them.

“Share a bag of cookies or chips, or take them for coffee or a beer,” he says.

“Getting a source to laugh can help, too. And sometimes just being patient helps, especially with older people and people from traditional or indigenous cultures.

“Sometimes you can just come right out and say, ‘I’m so-and-

so from the daily rag, and I don’t have any idea how to make you comfortable for an interview, so I’m just going to sit here and look stupid until you tell me how.’ In my experience, that always breaks the ice, even if the person just wants to tell me how stupid I look and how long I’ll be sitting.”

Get scientists beyond the science

“When you are talking to a naturalist or scientist at a place you’re visiting, go beyond the basics of research projects and local ecology,” says Wendee Holtcamp, a freelance writer-photographer. “Ask them for funny experiences that happened while doing research, or how they got into the field of study they are in.

“Also probe the people you interview for cultural lore or historical events – things that bring an added element of interest to a story.

“Pay attention to the person also – is their office messy or neat? Are they talkative and effervescent when explaining their work, or low-key and laid back? How do they compose themselves when speaking? Focus your mind’s eye on every detail.”

And keep them on track

“Make sure you keep focused on the big picture,” Holtcamp says. “Particularly scientists can tend to get bogged down talking about the little details of their specific research, when what you want are implications, generalizations, the take-home message.

“You want to get a feel for the implications of their research, the place of their research in light of the understanding of that discipline as a whole. Don’t hesitate to guide the discussion back on track if they get talking about little details and you want to get back to the big picture.”

David Poulson is associate director of Michigan State University’s Knight Center for Environmental Journalism.

Quick interviewing tips

- Research before you question.
- Simple questions work best.
- Listen. Don’t tromp all over the answers.
 - Pay attention to the surroundings. (It’s best to not interview in the newsroom)
 - Avoid “yes” or “no” questions when possible.
 - Ask people to walk you through what happened, step-by-step.
 - Silence can be better than a follow-up question. People naturally fill in the dead-air.
 - End with “Any other questions I should have asked?”

NTBG Fellowship in Kaua’i accepting applications

The National Tropical Botanical Garden annual Environmental Journalism/Science Writing Fellowship program will take place May 21-26, 2007, on the Hawai’ian island of Kaua’i. Application deadline is Feb. 28, with notification of acceptance on March 5.

NTBG’s fellowship provides working journalists in broadcast, print or online media information about ethnobotany and tropical ecosystems. The week-long, intensive course provides deep background in tropical ecology with daily field trips supervised by NTBG’s research scientists.

Including historic, ancient Hawaiian cultural sites and botanical collections extending back to the period of Hawaiian royalty in the late 1800s, the congressionally authorized, non-profit organization offers a rich living classroom for basic concepts in

tropical biology, indigenous use of plants for medicine, and the ecology of tropical fauna. The Garden is a nesting site for both threatened Green sea turtles and endangered water birds.

Lodging, airport transfer, ground transportation, and meals are provided. Journalists are responsible for their own airfare to and from Lihue, Kaua’i, Hawaii. Application information is available at www.ntbg.org.

Requests about the NTBG Environmental Journalism Fellowship may be directed to: Dr. Namulau’ulu G. Tavana, Director of Education, National Tropical Botanical Garden, 3530 Papalina Road, Kalaheo, HI 96741. Telephone: (808) 332-7324 ext. 225 or 251. Fax: (808) 332-9765. Email: tavana@ntbg.org. Or contact Dr. JoAnn M. Valenti, course coordinator, at valentijm@yahoo.com, 801-942-8516.

Newspaper world's top blogger says: Be interactive

By GREGORY REEVES

A newspaper going online is like Lawrence Welk trying to dance at a rap concert, Internet pundit Jon Katz wrote in 1994.

Those words are truer than ever today as newspapers toss up blogs on their websites, or what pass for blogs, overseen by editors who, for the most part, still don't get online.

Most newspaper blogs are little more than part-time extra assignments for already over-booked reporters who still, theoretically, have to maintain the appearance of objectivity on their beat.

Also, blogs by definition are frequently updated, which is rarely the case in newspaper blogs. A few posts a day – or even every other day – is closer to the norm.

This infrequency kills interactivity – the essence of blogging. When Internet proponents say everybody's a publisher, they're talking about blogs. Few newspaper blogs have engendered true interactivity.

There are two kinds of newspaper blogs – celebrity blogs, and the rest. Humor writer Dave Barry, for example, is a celebrity whose blog is a Miami online gabfest every day. It helps a lot that he's still funny.

Every hour a reporter blogs is an hour he or she isn't reporting. Knowing this, some editors have thrown teams of reporters at one blog.

No fewer than seven reporters post on the *San Jose Mercury News* arts-and-entertainment blog, AEI. Their efforts placed AEI a distant second to Barry in traffic counts of the late Knight-Ridder Inc.'s 113 blogs.

Slightly behind AEI is my blog, Crime Scene KC, for *The Kansas City Star*. Although my traffic is in third-place, I get more comments than either AEI or Barry – 350-500 a day, on average.

Crime Scene KC began in October of last year as an effort to become the central online go-to site for crime news and crime information about the Kansas City area. As I said then, I want to be the blog overlord of Kansas City. My experience may not relate directly to environment writers, but more of them will be blogging, if they're not already. So they have much to learn from my short experience of blogging at a newspaper.

This year, *Editor & Publisher* awarded its online journalism Eppy award to Crime Scene KC, naming it the best media-affiliated news blog.

Before Crime Scene KC, I was the long-time CAR reporter and database editor of *The Star*. Before that, I did 10 years on cops and courts and criminal justice beats.

Blogging wasn't a job add-on, it was a career change. Reporters at *The Star*, bless their hearts, have to click on Excel by themselves now. And they have.

Launching the blog was like Lawrence Welk showing up drunk at the rap concert. Although I had lived online for years, running a blog opened my eyes to its fundamental difference from print and the media revolution now engulfing us.

We put the blog online in August 2005 but didn't tell anyone. Silly us. It got spidered, and before I knew it, my stats one day showed more than 10,000 people had clicked 22,500 times on my post: "Top tattoos of Missouri prison inmates." (Cross, skull, rose, mama, etc.)

Turns out we had been "farked" – discovered by and linked to fark.com, one of the most popular sites on the Internet, something like 4 million visitors a day. I've been farked occasionally since, and it's always a good day.

My assignment was 7 to 10 posts a day. That's turned out to be a minimum. I'm online at my work desktop at 6 a.m. (from home, via VPN), and need my blog headlines fresh and updated by 8 a.m., when thousands of people start landing there.

Readers vote with their mouse-clicks what they want and don't want, and with their comments what they like and don't like. Every day is sweeps week on the blog.

The rest of the morning is like working at a hamburger stand, posting crime stories of the day, or shocking email from a reader ("Leawood mom's anger at drunk driver who hurt her baby").

By 9 a.m., I may have 50-100 comments, which can be posted anonymously. I only require a nickname. With lots of cops, ex-cons and spouses of meth heads on my blog, I want them to feel free to speak.

My news sources are 1) *The Star*'s website, 2) AP and 3) readers who send me links – a ready-made measure of what's popular.

When a crime galvanizes the city – savage rape of a toddler, for example, ("KC man charged in 'most horrific' abuse"), people rush to the blog. It becomes a community outpouring of sympathy for the victim and wrath at the suspect. Defendants on my blog aren't just convicted in the press, they're torn to shreds. I try to keep it down.

However, the blog can be part nonsense. I tracked the number of fans arrested, for example, through the 2005 season of the Kansas City Chiefs, home and away ("Drunken fan arrest rates"), and presented the numbers in spreadsheet format.

Fans raved. They sent me stories ("The battle for Section 304") of loutish behavior at Arrowhead. They posted my stuff on the Chief's discussion boards. They asked me to do it again this year.

I operate under the same journalistic rules as other reporters at *The Star*, except I post every 45 minutes and rarely leave home or the newsroom.

Factual errors in print are traumatic, like a typo in the Bible. Online, most mistakes are edited out and forgotten. Case in point: On St. Patrick's Day, at a sobriety checkpoint, I saw a young driver turn around, flee, and wrap his Pontiac G6 around a pole, killing a passenger. Details at 2 a.m. were sketchy – and wrong. As the day progressed, I corrected my post as information became available. Not one of 84 commenters complained; readers understand breaking news and honest mistakes.

(Continued next page)

Blogger... (from page 15)

Inevitably, social groups are forming in these discussions. A passel of 20-something women showed up on my mostly-male

would rebel. I was wrong. When I announced rules against obscenity, vulgarity, racial and ethnic slurs, thank-yous poured in. They care about the signal-to-noise ratio. Bad speech drives out good.

When I began, I was a militant defender of free speech online. Now I want to send Trojan horses to trolls and abusers of my blog ... and crash their PCs. I was reluctant to institute any rules; I was afraid my readers would rebel. I was wrong. When I announced rules against obscenity, vulgarity, racial and ethnic slurs, thank-yous poured in. They care about the signal-to-noise ratio. Bad speech drives out good.

To get started blogging right away, download a free, 30-day trial of easy-to-use blogging software at www.typepad.com. Even if you've never seen a blog before, TypePad, although not the best platform for a large blog, will have you posting to the Internet in a few minutes.

Finally, there's this: What about the future of newspapers versus online?

blog several months ago, and it hasn't been the same since. The testosterone level shot up 1,000 percent, and young people are meeting, having sex and getting their hearts broken.

A generation ago, department stores (Sears, Montgomery Ward, etc.) were confronted by a new threat – discount retailers. The big chains scoffed – discount prices were no way to make money!

It got so bad in the threads ("lol" and "hiya htgirl!" are not really comments), I started a daily "open thread" that now operates something like a chat room. Readers compete over who can be the first to comment. They play chat footsie all day in there – within the blog rules barring obscenities, etc.

Only one chain, Dayton-Hudson, figured out that discount was the wave of the future. Most of the rest of them went under. You may know Dayton-Hudson today as Target.

When I began, I was a militant defender of free speech online. Now I want to send Trojan horses to trolls and abusers of my blog, spoofed through an open proxy, and crash their PCs.

Gregory S. Reeves, former database editor at The Kansas City Star, spends his days writing and reporting for the newspaper's Crime Scene KC blog.

I was reluctant to institute any rules; I was afraid my readers

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McPhee... (from page 1)

quite awhile, he adds, to clean the hands of the Princeton University president after she reached for them.

McPhee first refers to the piles of little notebooks as “junk,” but then apologizes, to himself as much as his visitors, it seems. The notebooks represent one of the most important and convenient tools of his trade. “The little memo books are the things I always have in my pocket,” McPhee noted. “I use a tape recorder if I have to, if someone talks too quickly, but, by preference, I scribble in that notebook. Notebooks like that fit in my pocket and off I go.” In fact, he crossed the continent with a truck driver for his most recent book, “Uncommon Carriers” (published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, June 2006), and came back with plenty of filled notebooks, but no tape.

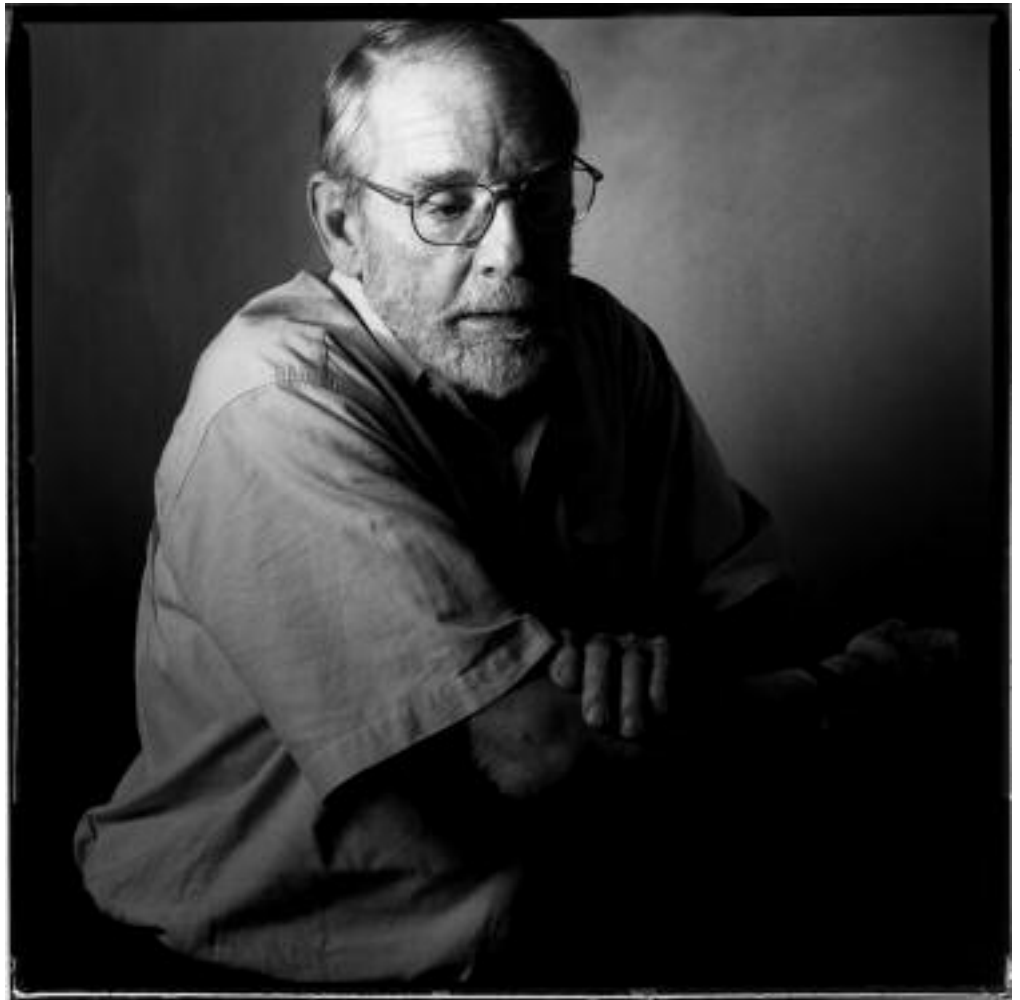
Whether written or spoken, the notes McPhee gathers after months of reporting excursions and research are reduced to numbered 3 x 5 cards. “Let’s say there are 36 parts in this piece,” he explained. “I know 1,2,3, up through 36, (and) where they’re going to go.” He juggles the cards, reorders them, to build the structure of a story or book. Then he can focus on any particular element, say part 3, and write that section without worrying about the rest of the piece.

But this isn’t the beginning. A lead comes first. “If you know where you’re starting...then the rest of it is much easier to structure and figure out than it would be if you started cold without the lead.” McPhee defined leads this way in a 1989 interview with Terry Gross for the NPR program “Fresh Air”: “The lead ought to shine like a flashlight down into the whole piece.”

Writing the lead and building the structure seem relatively easy for John McPhee. Not like writing the first draft, which he approaches with “dread.” That’s what he told my colleague Noah Adams in a 1998 interview for “All Things Considered.” “My daughter Jenny tells me not to carry on as dourly as I do about the writing process,” McPhee said. “She says, ‘You know you have fun doing it part of the time and so you ought to say so.’ So I will begin by saying that. I do have fun part of the time. A really small part.”

“I feel inadequate,” McPhee told *Sierra* magazine editor Joan Hamilton in 1990. “Sometimes I’m so desperate I’m almost throwing things at the paper.” McPhee told Hamilton that this is also a difficult part of the process for his wife, Yolanda. “If I want to make Yolanda mad, I just tell her I’m going to start working at home again,” McPhee explained to Hamilton.

Even now, with 27 of his own books on the shelf, there’s still pain with the first draft. “Name anything I’ve ever written,” McPhee told me this summer. “The first draft was an unreadable thing. And you would not want to show it to anybody because it’s just full of entrails hanging out with loose ends...You belch it all out on paper. When you’ve got some-



Courtesy of FARRAR, STRAUS, & GIROUX

For anything McPhee has written, he says, “the first draft was an unreadable thing.”

thing on paper, you then have something to work with...and turn into a piece of writing.”

So, no one else sees the first draft. But somebody hears the second. McPhee believes the written word must be read aloud and heard before it makes it into print. “I’ve never written a word that I haven’t heard going over my tongue...A perfectly good sentence may have to be changed because sentence number two makes it a little awkward rhythmically...A significant goal for me is to just hear this thing.”

This is when it is safe to work at home or at least read the second draft to wife Yolanda. A Princeton friend also listens, at times, and McPhee often reads aloud as he writes. By this time, “...the dread goes away for me,” McPhee told Noah Adams in 1998. “And I become much more caught up in it, with what might even be described as pleasure now and again.”

(Continued next page)

McPhee... (from page 17)

McPhee describes great pleasure in the friendships he develops with some of the characters in his books. He becomes wistful as he recalls several of them: Don Ainsworth, the trucker in "Uncommon Carriers;" the coal train and tow boat crews in "Uncommon Carriers;" former basketball whiz Bill Bradley in "A Sense of Where You Are;" Captain Paul Washburn, the skipper of the Merchant Marine vessel, in "Looking for a Ship." These are people who McPhee spent days or weeks with, often 24-7, sometimes in cramped quarters. He has focused on people and their interaction with a subject rather than the subject itself. "The person gives me a story," McPhee says. "What my work has in common, 100 percent of it, is it's about real people in real places. Period. Everything else is miscellaneous, from tennis and nuclear energy to some trapper in Alaska. But, they're all people doing these things. And that's what I do...sketches of people."

This affinity for people begins with a distinct disadvantage. "I am shy," McPhee reveals. He has a hard time approaching people. "It's something I'm not very fond of...It's hard to walk up the walk and go into the door and start talking to somebody...It's very hard."

But the reticence doesn't last. "In my work, I get by that...Once you get to know them a little bit and they tell you interesting things...off you go." This seems to be the part of the process McPhee enjoys most. "I've spent half my life in pickups, riding around, while people do what they do. I just sort of melt into the other seat and I love being there. But, by now, I know them."

Once he's with them, McPhee generally sits back and observes. "I don't have any method. I don't have a prepared set of questions. I don't have anything...I don't actually write questions down...I do feel that you should prepare enough so that you're not impolite...I just get into it, start asking questions and learn as I go."

McPhee acknowledges that extensive time with his characters and stories gives him more flexibility than reporters with more frequent deadlines. "I do not envy reporters who go out every day on a different story. You have to develop a real talent for that. I don't have to because I'm so long with each subject."

In the final stage of writing, McPhee turns to his collection of dictionaries. "Hunting around dictionaries" is something he

does a lot, he says. "I've written rectangles around certain words. They're perfectly all right. They look like opportunities, not for a more recondite word (but) usually a shorter one."

The search for simplicity, for a 5-cent replacement for a 25-cent word, does not start with a thesaurus. McPhee is adamant about that. "I'm forever looking up words I know to see how the dictionary defines them because it will lead you to a word that's better...The thesaurus is a bad way to start because it's got a miscellaneous collection of words that are related in meaning, but aren't the same...You wouldn't want to pluck one out of Roget and hope for the best."

We pause briefly during our interview to change flash cards (we use recorders that record audio on flash memory cards) and are surprised to learn we've been at it more than two hours. It's time to free McPhee from our microphones. But there are two more questions, one writer to another. Well, more like one journeyman to a master. "Where do the story ideas come from?" I ask.

Curiosity, he responds. And serendipity. But many of his subjects can be traced back to summer canoe camps that began almost 70 years ago.

"All this interest in environmental things and the outdoors and the bark canoe and Alaska and...geology derived from interests when I was in high school or earlier. I started going to canoe tripping summer camps that made canoe trips all over the place when I was six. And I was still there in college leading these canoe trips...You can see that it was...a limited world but that's my world. And I still live in canoes today."

McPhee is now 75 and I wonder how many words and characters he has left in him. I try to figure out a polite way to ask about the stories and books to come. "I'm not going to stop doing this," he responds, emphatically. "I'm just trying to figure out what I'm going to do next. Y'know, you always start with a small thing and see where it grows."

Howard Berkes is National Public Radio's rural affairs correspondent and is based in Salt Lake City. He has spent most of his 25-year NPR career reporting on the American West. The interview with John McPhee took place on June 8. Portions were broadcast on NPR's All Things Considered on June 24 and are available at www.npr.org.

Finalists... (from page 5)

Streenath Sreenivasan, dean of students and associate professor, Columbia University School of Journalism

Jean Trumbo,* associate professor of Visual Communication and New Media, Reynolds School of Journalism, University of Nevada-Reno

Paul Wagner, reporter, WTTG-TV

Kathy Warbelow, managing editor, *Austin American-Statesman*

Ken Weiss,* environmental writer, *Los Angeles Times*

Dale A. Willman,* executive editor, Field Notes Production

Bruce Wirth, news and public affairs director, KBCS 91.3

FM

The SEJ awards are administered by a committee appointed by the SEJ board. This year's awards committee members (asterisks indicate committee co-chairs) are:

Dan Fagin,* New York University

Ilsa Setziol,* KPCC Radio, Pasadena, Calif.

Emilia Askari, *Detroit Free Press*

Sharon Friedman, Lehigh University

Miguel Llanos, MSNBC

Francesca Lyman, independent journalist

Ed Rodgers, New Jersey Public Television

Phyllis Sides, *Racine (WI) Journal Times*

David Wiwchar, A-Channel TV News, Victoria, B.C.

John McPhee: Notes from the field

Editor's note: The following is an excerpt from the interview with NPR's Howard Berkes.

Berkes points to a pile of colorful notebooks on the floor of McPhee's office at Princeton University.

Berkes: And these little memo books, these small pocket-sized ones, are those what you take notes on?

McPhee: The little memo books are the things I always have in my pocket...

Berkes: Do you mind showing us one of these?

McPhee reaches down and picks up a small spiral notebook with the number three scrawled on the red front cover.

McPhee: I have no idea...[McPhee pauses]. "3," it says...

McPhee flips through the pages of the notebook, which contain handwritten notes. The words lean slightly to the right. Capitals and small "f's," "t's," "p's," "y's" and other letters with long stems, rise high and dive deep, framing low humps of companion letters. It's a casual, unhurried script, decipherable but not much better than the scrawl that earned me an "F" in handwriting in elementary school.

McPhee: This is from the first story in the present book, "Uncommon Carriers." I'm in a tractor-trailer with a truck driver going across the continent from the southeast [United States] to near Tacoma [Wash.]. And I just sit with these notebooks and scribble while he talks. There's nothing else for me to do. I had a tape recorder, but I never really needed it...

Berkes: Could you read some of it?

McPhee: Gee whiz. [Reading]...We're in IOWA!! [Mileage is] 8,325. His tractor was new and it had gone 8,000 miles. Now we're in the mid plain and Loess Hills. Set back. Look like mountains in the summer haze. So we ride on another five miles and...[Talking now] It says... [Reading again] breakfast at 6:30 and lunch at...[Talking] Oh. This is our daily routine. We had breakfast at 6:30 and lunch at THREE. No wonder he had steak for breakfast, and eggs, etc.

Courtesy of NPR NEWS/Tina Tennesen



Nebraska pebbles gathered during one of McPhee's geological explorations.

Berkes: That made it into the book. That entry.

McPhee: That remark did. That point did. It's a long time between six and three for lunch...[Reading again] Lush green eastern Nebraska. Soy. Corn. Soy. Corn. A little wheat. Beautiful. Sea swell. Pasture land. Big AGP grain elevator complex on 2...[Talking] That's Nebraska (Route) 2. We left the interstate and angled up toward Lincoln on Nebraska 2...[Reading] Entering Lincoln with red lights and the...monoethanolamine kicking like a baby.

McPhee: See [that's] the stuff in the back of the truck that had filled the tank. So, if you're off on a so-called horse and buggy highway, you're not on an interstate, you feel the kick of the load when you stop at a red light. You can't stop that slosh, the surge.

So, WHAM! It hits you in the back, it makes you stand up.

Berkes: That's another entry that made it into the book. I remember that.

McPhee: Yeah. [He laughs] Remember, writing's selective. In these little white spaces between the notes, I'm not doing anything.

Berkes: How much time [is there] between the spaces? Hours?

McPhee: Could be overnight...It could be moments, hours.

Berkes: So, Don Ainsworth, the subject of this chapter, wasn't constantly entertaining on this drive?

McPhee: Well, we were together for 24 hours a day for 7 days, or 6 days. No, Don likes to talk and he spent a lot of time talking. But, still, it's a long trip and we had quiet times...It's interesting that I picked that [particular notebook]...which was just lying around. I called it junk. I apologize. But it's waiting on the floor, waiting to be filed by someone else, waiting to be filed by me. I happened to pick up this notebook at random and it relates to the first piece in this book "Uncommon Carriers."

McPhee tosses the notebook back onto the pile on the floor.

Courtesy of NPR NEWS/Tina Tennesen



John McPhee prefers small, pocket-sized notebooks like these when he researches articles and books.

*Get ready for the challenge,
coming soon to your mailbox...*

TV... (from page 1)

Miles O'Brien. The hour-long documentary looked at global climate change, telling the story through a small Pacific Ocean island nation, Alaska natives and low-lying Louisiana and New Orleans.

Small market finalists are:

- WTAE of Pittsburgh and Jim Parsons, Kendall Cross and Shawn Quinlan, "Toxic Treatment." Parsons documented the use of a kerosene-based waste, MC-70, and drilling brine as dust suppressants on rural roads in Pennsylvania. Toxins in those two liquids threatened the environment and people who lived along the roadways. The state suspended use of MC-70 after the report.

- WSMV-TV of Nashville and reporter/anchor Demetria Kalodimos and photographer Phil Dunaway, "The Dirt on Dickson County." The investigative report documented how trichloroethylene, or TCE, had polluted the ground and surface water of a nearby, mostly rural county. The suspected sources were the county's landfill and a now-closed industry that used the chemical. The problems ranged from residents who could no longer use wells or springs on their property to a church camp that used the tainted water to fill its swimming pool.

- WGCU-TV of Fort Myers, Fla., and Alexa Elliott, "Delicate Blooms: South Florida's Native Orchids." The station did a half-hour documentary on rare and often endangered orchids and the swamps in which they are found and the threats to their survival.

The winners will be announced on Wednesday evening, Oct. 25, at the beginning of the SEJ annual conference in Burlington, Vt.

SEJournal asked five of the six finalists a few simple questions to get to the Inside Story on what made their stories worthy of recognition. Elliott was unavailable during the time this story was reported and written:

Q. What started your story? (Was it a tip, something you noticed, etc.?) What went into the decision to spend the time and resources?

WSMV's Kalodimos said her story wasn't new.

"The TCE contamination had been in the news on and off, and we had done cursory, brief stories (a few packages and voice-overs) on the problem, that always included the official line, 'the levels are considered safe... or well within the concentrations allowable by the EPA.' To be honest, hearing that phrase parroted over and over just caused my journalistic senses to tingle. I decided to look a little closer. Being a full-time anchor, I report in my spare time, so I did a lot of telephone and e-mail work before I began shooting."

CNN's Rokus said, "For CNN's 25th anniversary, we wanted to examine a story that was global, important and, obviously, newsworthy. Since this was for a documentary, we also looked for a story that hadn't received a large amount of recent in-depth coverage on television. Climate change is a perennially newsworthy subject, but it rarely has the kind of breaking news that would propel in-depth coverage. We found that without those breaking news 'flashpoints,' climate change hadn't received a lot of attention. Given its global importance, it was the perfect story for an international news organization like CNN."

WTAE's Parsons said, "Our story started with a complaint from a viewer. The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) dumped thousands of gallons of a kerosene-based product called MC-70 on a 3-mile dirt road. It was definitely a 'shoot first, ask questions later' situation. We had nothing to lose by driving out into the country and getting video of the oily substance and

interviewing the worried homeowner. We decided to invest more time in the story once we discovered that PennDOT planned to use MC-70 on a wide-scale basis beginning in spring 2007."

WBZ's Setera said, "This investigation began with a tip I received following a series of earlier reports I had done that raised serious questions about the accuracy of the state's emissions test and the overall management of the program at both the state and federal level. Shortly after these reports aired, I received a phone call from a man who claimed to have an outside business arrangement with a manager at the state Department of Environmental Protection. He claimed that both he and this DEP manager had come up with a scheme to rig the auto emissions test so more vehicles would fail and they could personally profit by selling software that would teach auto repairers how to fix vehicles that had failed the test.

"This person also alleged that the managers at the state DEP eventually changed the state's software to make it look like this program was meeting its goals in order to meet federal guidelines. According to this tipster, the DEP manager had allegedly given him proprietary state data to help him perfect the software that the two would eventually end up selling. We decided to dedicate the time and resources necessary to pursue this story because these allegations were very serious, and if there were any truth to them, our story would impact everyone who owns a vehicle in Massachusetts. Thousands of motorists might have gotten an inaccurate emissions test and paid for vehicle repairs that just weren't necessary," Setera said.

WBAL's Sherman said he has been doing stories on environmental challenges to the Chesapeake Bay for the past 2-3 years. As a result, he has the ear "of a lot of citizens and activists who alert me to what's going on." Tipsters pointed him at the story of New Earth Services and the pollution coming from the operations.

Q. What elements made your story compelling (video, the human story, etc.)?

Kalodimos said her TCE stories "certainly (had) the human element: a family's dream home lost to contamination they should have been told about, the almost cavalier attitude of a summer church camp that continued to fill its swimming pool with contaminated spring water because it was cheap, the heartbreak of 19 families whose children were born with cleft lip/palate, defying the epidemiological odds. This was a story with many tentacles; the hard part was choosing which ones to focus on."

CNN's Rokus said, "When we first set out to tell the story of climate change, our first concern was finding a way to make it into interesting television. It doesn't matter how important the subject matter is, if you can't keep viewers interested for an hour of TV. This can be an especially daunting challenge when telling science stories on television – and it's even more daunting when the science story in question is predicted to mostly occur over the course of hundreds of years.

"Our first priority, then, was finding stories of climate change happening now. We looked for humans, animals and places that could illustrate the effects of climate change for an audience which may be relatively unfamiliar with the concept.

"We began most of the hour-long documentary's six segments with one of those examples (for example, the Inuit in

(Continued next page)

Alaska, polar bears on Hudson Bay, the island-nation of Tuvalu in the South Pacific). Once we had established for viewers the real-world importance of climate change, we used the second portion of each segment to explain the science behind the human (or animal) story. Hopefully, we provided a good mix of interesting characters and hard science,” Larch said.

“Just by chance, we found that climate change was occurring in locations that would be interesting to viewers. We traveled to Churchill, Manitoba to tell the story of polar bears and spent a week each above the Arctic Circle and on Tuvalu (one of the smallest and most remote countries in the world). These are places most viewers don’t have a chance to visit. Each location also made for incredibly compelling video.

“The exotic nature of these locations was also a concern, however. We wanted to make sure viewers in the United States realized climate change could affect them too – so we made a point to include New Orleans as one of our examples. We completed this show pre-Katrina, so our New Orleans segment focused on how its existing subsidence problem could combine with climate change-induced sea level rise to potentially flood the city.”

Parsons said, “The visual image of MC-70 oozing on our car and dripping into a creek was compelling. Also, the lab results showing toxic levels of heavy metals helped drive home the point that this is stuff that probably shouldn’t be getting spread onto roads next to waterways.”

Setera said, “I think what made our story so compelling is that when the DEP manager was confronted with all of these allegations and given an opportunity to refute them, he said absolutely nothing. He made no effort to try and defend himself. Also interesting was the fact that the tipster had contacted me before he reached out to federal investigators. This enabled me to convince him to do an on-camera interview and allowed our viewers to hear first-hand his account of how the state’s auto emissions test was allegedly manipulated at the expense of taxpayers and the environment.”

Sherman said, “Environmental stories are natural, they can be very compelling for television. You can see natural beauty being polluted. They tend to have a story to them – often good guys and bad guys – heroes and villains – it plays like a classic story. When the bad guys become the villain and when you catch them doing it, well that’s compelling.”

Q. Your story deals with a fairly complex issue for television. How did you make it easier for viewers to follow?

Kalodimos said, “I would like to think we did explain it well, with carefully crafted writing, and excellent, illustrative photo-journalism. My partner on the story, Phil Dunaway, used tasteful and appropriate effects that made the most out of the one jar of the TCE solvent we managed to obtain. We were always thinking of how to visualize something that you couldn’t see, taste or

smell... a challenge, but not impossible.”

Parsons said, “Compared with other environmental stories I have told (for example, particulate matter pollution; river dredging; eco-terrorism), this series of reports was relatively straightforward in terms of story-telling. PennDOT dumped tons of oozy, gooey oil on a road. We shot it and tested it and showed results of both to our viewers. Pretty simple.”

Making a complex and science-based story in a short amount



The low-lying Pacific Ocean nation Tuvalu could be swamped by a rise in sea level caused by global warming, according to CNN’s ‘Melting Point,’ a finalist for the large-market television report awards sponsored by SEJ.

of time, Setera said, was “no easy task. I tried to boil the issues down to the very basics and after I had come up with a script, I asked a couple people in the newsroom who were not familiar with the story to give it a read. They gave me some feedback which was very helpful because it allowed me to eliminate aspects of the story that were unnecessary and might have been too confusing to the average viewer.”

Sherman added: “You have to simplify things as much as you can. You have to distill it as much as you can.” He credits his station for allowing him not only the resources but the time to make things simple. One story ran seven minutes – an almost unheard of length in a typical television newscast.

Q. What were the sources you used (people, documents, reports, etc.)?

Kalodimos said, “My notebooks contain everything from handwritten Post-It notes state officials happened to leave on original documents to somewhat damaged audio cassettes that served as the minutes at a public hearing. The cassettes had to be re-mastered for speed and audio clarity, but they provided an interesting insight into how long the problem had been festering. I also had a few off-the-record sources telling me where to look in big boxes of records – that always helps. At times there was so much caution and secrecy, I actually was driving up to mailboxes at night and

(Continued next page)

TV... (from page 21)

leaving envelopes for a source. It was very Woodward-Bernstein.”

Rokus said CNN “wanted to make sure we were getting the best science possible. I’d estimate we spent at least a month researching before we shot a single frame. We consulted countless experts both on and off camera and found reports published by the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) invaluable.”

Parsons said, “In determining the potential toxicity of MC-70 and brine for use on roadways, we spoke with numerous experts; studied reports on file with the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, and other sources; and took a sample of the MC-70 to an environmental lab.”

Setera said she relied on a variety of sources. “I made multiple public records requests to the DEP and EPA for documents reflecting any and all performance audits, monitoring and oversight of this program. I also spoke extensively with the tipster, along with automotive industry insiders familiar with the operation of the state’s auto emissions program, as well as a whistleblower inside the DEP.

“But I’d have to say the initial tipster who called me was the most helpful. He gave me access to documents that confirmed some type of business relationship did indeed exist between himself and the manager at the state DEP. I was also given access to copies of cashed checks, a business proposal, internal e-mails within the DEP that were sent to him by the DEP manager, along with computer files and software which our tipster says he developed with the help of this state manager. These materials were eventually turned over to federal investigators by the tipster and have become part of the ongoing, federal investigation,” Setera said.

Q. What advice would you give other television reporters who might want to do similar stories?

Kalodimos said she had three points: “1. Do not be afraid of what seems like a technical issue, or something ‘out of your league.’ Chances are very good that an expert is willing to give you a thorough science tutorial. And, believe it or not, starting with a mere layman’s understanding can help you explain the difficult material more effectively to viewers who are in the same boat. 2. Go back!!!!...look at property deeds, old hearings, old minutes. It was fascinating to learn how concerned people were with one of the contaminated springs 30 years before the TCE problem surfaced. This context helped me build a stronger story.

“3. Be ready and prepared to get no official comment or cooperation. These days municipalities, even the feds, seem to have no qualms about just not playing ball at all on an issue. It’s difficult for us to imagine telling a story without the traditional balance we are used to, but there are ways to be fair and skeptical without interviewing folks in suits.”

CNN’s Tokus said, “I would say it’s similar to doing any other kind of television story – great characters and great pictures will be the keys to success. We were lucky in that we were able to find both in places being affected by climate change.

“I’d also advise to not underestimate the intelligence of your audience when it comes to science. We didn’t shy away from trying (and hopefully succeeding) to explain the detailed science of climate change. It certainly helped that we had an hour to tackle the subject. As mentioned above, we also made sure to ‘humanize’ the science. All of the graphs, statistics and experts are much more meaningful when viewers can associate them with the fate of an entire country or the face of a cute polar bear.”

Setera said, “As far as advice to other reporters who might want to do similar stories, I think it’s worth taking the time to really educate yourself about how a program is supposed to work. Even though the focus for this story was on how the program had run amok, I thought it was important to learn how programs in other states work for comparison purposes.

“I also thought it was important to get educated about the program, learning the proper terminology to describe the equipment and the science involved. I discovered that by doing this, more people were willing to open up and provide me with information because I had made some kind of effort to learn about their world, so to speak,” Setera said.

“Also, typically, stories like this one don’t make for good television. But, you need to be persistent. I was eventually able to get our tipster to agree to do an on-camera interview if we agreed to hide his identity. The key is to try to get as much access and information from your tipster before they go to law enforcement because once he/she does go to law enforcement, then law enforcement will discourage them from cooperating with you.”

Sherman urged other reporters to “argue on behalf of environmental journalism. Television often has a narrow view of what our viewers want.” But when one taps into the potential power of a good environmental story, television reporters should continue to build on success. “If you do it once, you can do it twice and three times and four times. Argue to do more.”

Finally, Parsons said, “If you are in a market with a substantial number of dirt or gravel roads, this is a story worth investigating. If you are in an area where oil and natural gas wells are active, there is a story for you. You will likely find that the amount of brine being used for road dust control is increasing in direct proportion to the amount of brine being produced in wells. In other words, roads in your area aren’t getting any dustier. There probably aren’t more dirt roads being built. The only explanation for the increase in brine being applied to roads is the increase in oil and gas production.

“As always with an environmental story, assess the potential impact on viewers before you take the story idea to your news director. Be ready to answer the question that a former news director of mine often asked: ‘Is anybody dead?’”

Mike Dunne, assistant editor of the SEJournal, writes for The Advocate in Baton Rouge, La.

Story links

- CNN’s ‘Melting Point’: www.cnn.com/CNN/Programs/presents/index.melting.point.html
- WBZ’s ‘Car Inspection Corruption’: http://cbs4boston.com/iteam/local_story_125211042.html
- WTAE’s ‘Toxic Treatment’: www.thepittsburghchannel.com/team4/5331654/detail.html
- WBAL’s ‘Dirty Secret’: www.thewbalchannel.com/news/4797884/detail.html
- WVCU’s ‘Delicate Blooms’: www.wvcu.org/earthedition_detail.asp?id=1171
- WSMV’s ‘Dirt on Dickson Country’ is no longer available online.

Truth and fiction about fish and wildlife, climate and the swamp

Two books on global warming set the stage for key future questions

AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH

By Al Gore

Rodale, \$21.95

FIELD NOTES FROM A CATASTROPHE: MAN, NATURE, AND CLIMATE CHANGE

By Elizabeth Kolbert

Bloomsbury, \$22.95

Reviewed by TOM HENRY

These aren't the first two books I've read about global warming. Nor will they be my last.

But they are two that grabbed hold of me and left a lasting impression.

First, the Al Gore book. A companion to the movie of the same name, it is nothing short of a visually stunning treat. And despite whatever impression late-night talk show hosts have foisted on us of Gore's persona, the book is not as stiff, highbrow or academic as the robot-like image of George W. Bush's opponent during the 2000 election.

"An Inconvenient Truth" is arguably one of the most clear, concise, and thorough examinations of global warming. Not only what it is, but also how we got to where we are, why mainstream science has embraced it, what's at stake if we do nothing and why the United States needs to set an example for China.

There's even a fairly lengthy discussion about what you can do as a consumer, whether it's installing higher-efficiency light bulbs or buying locally produced goods. The latter can cut down on emissions from unnecessary transportation.

Gore's point: You don't have to go out and buy a hybrid car tomorrow. Just think twice about where you set your thermostat.

Think of Gore's book as part primer and part how-to manual, wrapped in the same basic Powerpoint presentation that was the basis for his movie. The breadth of photographs and other graphics, many pulled from high-level, credible government agencies, is mind-boggling. One minute you're looking at Mount Kilimanjaro's vanishing snowcap. The next, you're flipping through Defense Department satellite images.

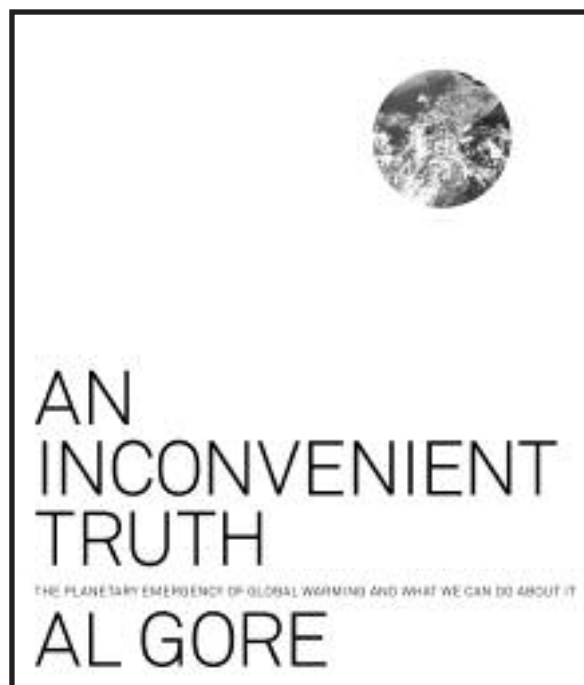
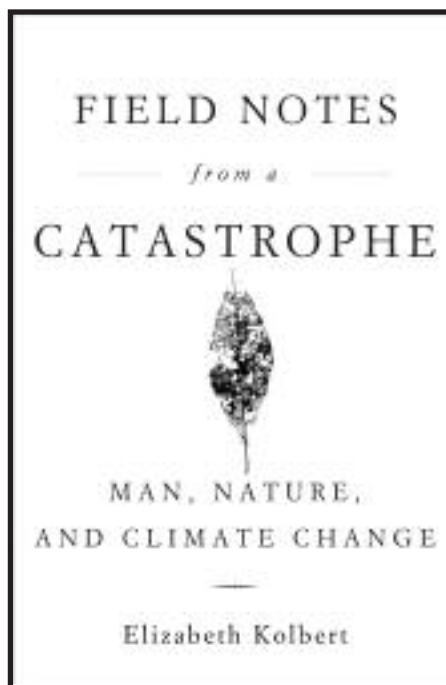
I found myself so engrossed in "An Inconvenient Truth" that I couldn't put it down. It was incredibly disturbing and fascinating at the same time. People may read political innuendo between the lines, but I didn't see it as an overt political campaign.

It is gutsy, ambitious, and balanced.

Yes, you can extrapolate a moment or two of Bush-bashing

if that is your mission. But you'll find more of that on the book jacket of just about any Michael Moore book and certainly more in Robert F. Kennedy's "Crimes Against Nature," a scathing indictment of the Bush administration's first term.

The fact is that mainstream science has shifted so firmly behind global warming that even one-time skeptics, such as Bush,



have found it politically stupid to deny global warming exists.

"Field Notes From a Catastrophe," which preceded Gore's book by a few weeks, is an eloquent collection of essays written by the gifted Elizabeth Kolbert, a writer for *The New Yorker*.

While Gore is portrayed as the doomsayer, Kolbert actually is the one who leaves you with more of a boxed-in feeling.

Her message isn't that our efforts will be futile, but that we're clearly headed for disaster if we don't correct our course of action and get China to do the same.

Both books offer a healthy dose of reality. Kolbert's, though, is the more sobering, aptly drawing comparisons to Rachel Carson's landmark 1963 book "Silent Spring," which awakened Americans to the dangers of pesticides.

"Field Notes" stemmed from a three-part series in *The New Yorker*. Kolbert shares observations of distant places, such as the Arctic Circle and the Netherlands, while providing an incisive analysis of policy back in Washington.

Of particular appeal to me is the chapter she devoted to Burlington, Vt., a beautiful city in the Green Mountain State that I had the pleasure of visiting recently, and the location of SEJ's upcoming annual conference.

"Several years ago," she wrote, Burlington "voters decided that instead of authorizing the local utility company to buy more power, they would use less of it. Since then, the city has probably done as much as any municipality in the country to try to reduce

(Continued next page)

Bookshelf... (from page 23)

greenhouse gas emissions. The Burlington Electric Department may be the only utility in the United States whose vehicle fleet includes mountain bikes.”

She goes on to describe an interview with Burlington’s long-time mayor, Peter Clavelle, who is one who believes you “either can bemoan federal policies or you can take control of your own destiny.”

While Vermont’s statewide usage of electricity has risen 15 percent since the late 1980s, the power consumption within Burlington – the state’s largest city – has dropped 1 percent, nearly entirely through voluntary measures. “Burlington’s experience demonstrates how much can, indeed, be accomplished through local action,” Kolbert wrote.

So, ultimately, that is the question: Do Americans care enough about global warming to do something about it, even if it’s inconvenient and a feeling of helplessness pervades the nation?

Or do we sit back and wait for bureaucrats to pass command-and-control regulations, often diluted by lobbyists?

The answers require considerable thought and, yes, a lot of soul-searching about the legacy we want to leave behind for our children.

These two books are as good as any for a starting point of the discussion.

Tom Henry has been The (Toledo) Blade’s environmental reporter for 13 years.



The definitive tale of human miscues in Florida’s swamp

THE SWAMP: THE EVERGLADES, FLORIDA AND THE POLITICS OF PARADISE

by **Michael Grunwald**
Simon & Schuster, \$27

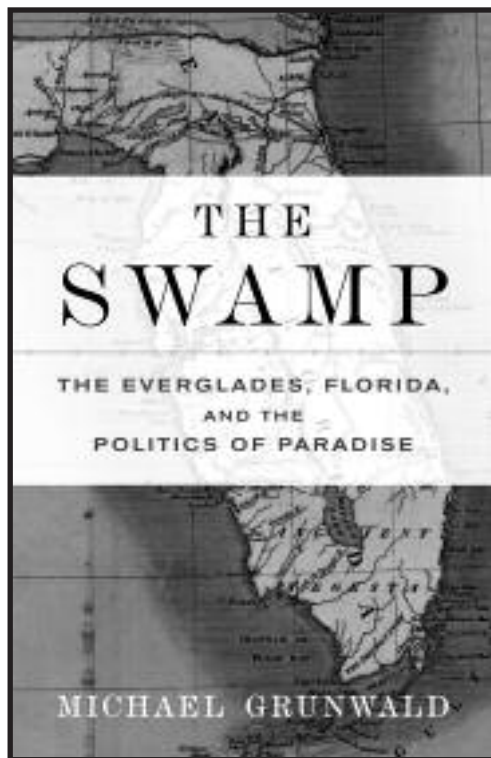
Reviewed by CRAIG PITTMAN

Although it’s been around for centuries, you could argue that the Everglades started with a book. When it was published in 1947, Marjory Stoneman Douglas’ classic “The Everglades: River of Grass” stirred nationwide interest in saving South Florida’s boggy wilderness.

These days Douglas’ pioneering work has lots of company. Every year publishers bring out two or three new Everglades books, to the point where it seems like the books outnumber the dwindling sawgrass.

Now they can stop. “The Swamp: The Everglades, Florida and the Politics of Paradise” by prize-winning *Washington Post* reporter Michael Grunwald is the last word on the subject, at least

for a few years. Though it’s his first book, Grunwald does an entertaining and mostly thorough job of portraying the various dreamers and schemers who have tried to bend the Everglades to their will, usually with disastrous results.



The title should not be taken literally. As Grunwald himself points out, the heart of the Everglades is technically a marsh. But Grunwald’s topic is not so much the biology of the River of Grass as it is the fact that every attempt to alter it inevitably becomes mired in a swamp of unintended consequences. That includes the most recent effort, the \$10-billion Everglades restoration project.

Grunwald leads off his book by recounting the bizarre scene in December 2000 when then-President Bill Clinton signed the bill launching the restoration program with Florida Gov. Jeb Bush looking on – even as the U.S. Supreme Court was hearing arguments over who won the presidential election in Florida.

The restoration aims to mimic, though not duplicate, the Everglades’ natural plumbing system, which once sent a river 50 miles wide and an inch or so deep meandering southward so slowly that its speed was measured in miles

per month.

While this system attracted wading birds by the thousands and untold numbers of other creatures, the American soldiers who chased Seminole Indians through the Everglades in the 1830s failed to appreciate its elegance.

“It is in fact a most hideous region to live in, a perfect paradise for Indians, alligators, serpents, frogs and every other kind of loathsome reptile,” wrote one Army surgeon quoted by Grunwald.

But the soldiers also reported that beneath the water flowing across the Everglades was a layer of rich muck that, if drained, would undoubtedly produce a year-round bounty for settlers. So for more than a century, Florida and a long line of speculators and promoters tried repeatedly to get rid of the water.

Grunwald has a keen eye for the hucksters who sold land by the gallon instead of the acre, the public officials who touted development while on the take, the stubborn engineers who refused to recognize the flaws in their blueprints even when unforeseen flooding killed thousands.

He gives a vivid description of how turn-of-the-century work crews began draining the wetlands, and then shows the consequences when the Corps finished the job in the 1960s – just as people like pioneering biologist Art Marshall began raising concerns about what had been lost, and talking about how to get it back.

But there’s a surprising imbalance in the structure of the book, considering its origin. “The Swamp” grew out of an out-

(Continued next page)

standing four-part series outlining the problems of the Everglades restoration program that Grunwald wrote for the *Post* in 2002. Yet the restoration plan's many problems – such as its reliance on untested technology and its lack of alternatives should they fail – occupy only a small amount of space in Grunwald's book, a fact that he apologizes for in his extensive footnotes.

So a colorful Reconstruction-era scalawag named William Henry Gleason, who proposed draining the Everglades but never did, gets three pages in "The Swamp." But important modern figures like lead restoration planner Stuart Appelbaum of the Corps of Engineers and John Ogden, dubbed by the *Miami Herald* "The Einstein of the Everglades," rate only a passing mention.

As Grunwald notes toward the end of the book, there are now persistent whispers that the Everglades plan is stumbling badly and may be on its last legs. The price tag is ballooning. Key projects are behind schedule. Congress and the White House have been too distracted by wars and hurricanes to get necessary work started. State and federal agencies are fighting each other.

Should the restoration plan sink into a permanent bureaucratic quagmire, then perhaps some new Grunwald will write its epitaph. For now, though, "The Swamp" pretty much says it all.

Craig Pittman covers the environment for the St. Petersburg Times in Florida.

■ ■ ■

Stripers' tale carries a lesson for all species

STRIPER WARS: AN AMERICAN FISH STORY

By Dick Russell
Island Press, \$26.95

By CHRISTINE HEINRICHS

The striped bass could be viewed as the aquatic equivalent of the American bald eagle. After near extinction due to over-fishing, habitat destruction and pollution, the striped bass once again is abundant in its natural habitat.

"Striper Wars," by SEJ member Dick Russell, is not only an incredible fish tale, it also provides a critical lesson in environmental management.

Against a backdrop of politics and commerce, Russell has written a lucid book imbued with awe and respect for the fish.

Russell tells his story so well that even this non-fishing reader was lured in. His rich descriptions of these beautiful, intelligent stripers – much prized by fishermen – made me long to see them.

Having himself led a coastal conservation campaign, Russell and other activists like Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Robert Boyle were major players in the battle to save the species from the brink

of extinction.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the future looked bad for the striper, especially in the Chesapeake Bay. The battle to save the fish was pocked with politics, as fishermen and governments disputed how best to regulate the fisheries.

Fishing is more tightly regulated now and striped bass have once again become abundant in their native habitat.

However, the striper is still afflicted by pollution and over-fishing, Russell writes. Hudson River stripers, for example, contain polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) levels that exceed U.S. Food and Drug Administration thresholds for human consumption.

In the Chesapeake Bay watershed, where most Atlantic striped bass spawn, their diet is threatened by heavy fishing pressure on a major food source, menhaden.

Even the sport fishermen who catch and release striped bass can exact a heavy toll if they aren't careful. The mortality rate is 50 percent if a striped bass is caught on a traditional J-hook and 18 percent when overzealous fishermen catch-and-release many fish. The overall mortality rate for catch-and-release stripers is probably 8 percent.

Ultimately, a larger picture of greater environmental complexity emerges from "Striper Wars." As Russell writes: "Their story today vividly illustrates the need for an expanded view: If we want to preserve species, we can't do so one by one; rather, we must look at the entire ecosystem of which they – and we – are a part," he writes. Amen.

Christine Heinrichs is a freelance journalist in Madison, Wisc., where she is currently working on a book about chickens.

■ ■ ■

Wildlife mystery thriller is written by a writer who knows her stuff

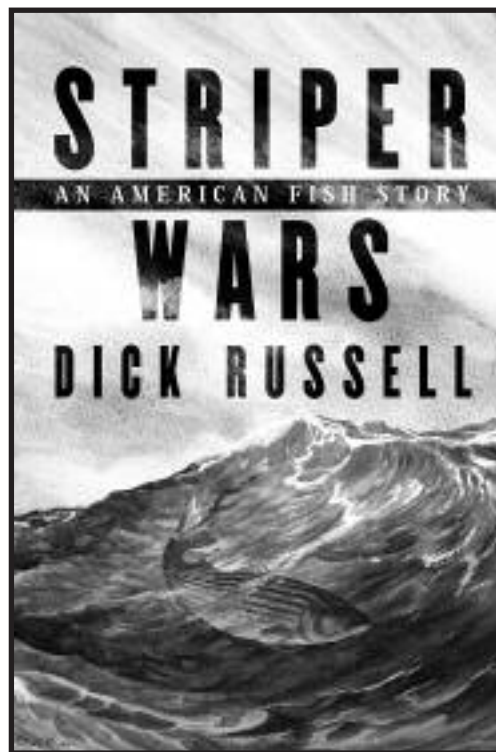
RESTLESS WATERS
By Jessica Speart
HarperCollins-Avon Books, \$6.99

By JOANN M. VALENTI

When separating fact from fiction fills your daily work routine, it can be relaxing to indulge occasionally in some well-written, contrived storytelling. When the writer offers recognizable fact in the story line – this works only when the book is clearly labeled "fiction" – casual reading can be even more fun, especially if the background research shines.

Jessica Speart writes about environmental and wildlife issues with the kind of authority of one who's been in the trenches. Speart has written nine paperback mysteries featuring one Rachel Porter: a femme fatale feminist – if that's not an oxymoron – who is a government fish and wildlife officer.

Porter gets the bad guys, mostly, and she knows her critters.
(Continued next page)



Bookshelf... (from page 25)

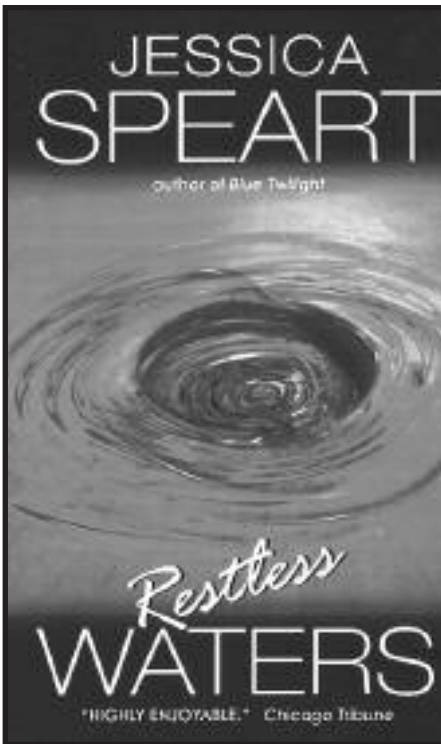
I've never been a mystery fan, but her latest book, "Restless Waters," recently arrived on my desk with promises of science, hot environmental issues, political intrigue...and a Hawaiian setting. Plus, it's ounces to James Michener's pounds of "Hawaii."

Maybe this is a new genre: wildlife mystery thriller. Woven into a who's-the-killer plot we have hitchhiker seeds, breeders and sellers for the illegal pet store trade, stow-away insects in driftwood and all sorts of invasive species.

In the mixed bag of native and introduced terrestrial species: mongoose, feral pigs, access deer, coqui frogs, snakes and goats. No terrestrial amphibians are native to Hawaii, the extinction capital of the world.

Along with the island's biological backstory, be ready to wade through some colorful prose: "The air grew cool as night wrapped its cloak around the mountains and the stones came to life, vibrating with a mystical force." The menehune – magical little people of Polynesian lore – also find their way into the mystery.

The recent designation of nearly 140,000 square miles of the



northwestern Hawaiian Islands as a national monument, making it the world's largest marine preserve, brings a long overdue spotlight to this extraordinary U.S. state. The commercial fishing industry is moving out, and visitors now need special permits to visit the site.

All of which bodes well for biodiversity research. Meanwhile, settle back with a good book, one that hits that sweet spot between fiction and non-fiction.

JoAnn Valenti, SEJournal editorial board member and emerita professor of communications, co-founded and facilitates NTBG's annual Environmental Journalism Fellows Program in HI.

Editor's note: True stories can read as good or better than fiction. For a well-written, adventure-packed book about an Alaskan wildlife enforcement case, pick up ex-Fish & Wildlife agent Lucinda Schroeder's "A Hunt for Justice," published in 2006. The book describes Schroeder's 1992 undercover mission to

guide-outfitters in Alaska's Brooks Range.

Advertisement

Dying Alaska sockeye courtesy of Orna Izakson

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Climate change remains hot, and more blogs are sprouting

By MIKE DUNNE

Environmental reporters penned and broadcast series and special reports on MTBE, lead in housing, nitrogen pollution in springs, environmental problems with animal-feeding operations, coasts and forest fires in the last few months.

Matt Pacenza of the *Albany* (N.Y.) *Times Union* produced a special report, "Hidden Poison," about MTBE pollution. "The gasoline additive MTBE poses a continuing threat to New York's drinking water and public health, according to a four-month *Times Union* investigation, which examines how officials often fail to protect residents in the Capital Region and beyond," the newspaper reported. See the report at: www.timesunion.com/TUNews/SpecialReports/HiddenPoison/index.aspx

Sharon Coolidge of the *Cincinnati Enquirer* had a special report June 23 on lead poisoning in housing. "Hundreds of homes are contaminated by poisonous lead paint in Cincinnati and the city's Health Department is not forcing property owners to fix the problems," she wrote. Health officials challenged 17,000 property owners for litter but took only five landowners to court for failing to clean up lead.

"Since 2002, more than 570 young Cincinnati children have been poisoned by lead, which can stunt their growth both intellectually and physically," she wrote.

She reported that critics charge that city lead-prevention administrators "are don't-rock-the-boat bureaucrats more interested in collecting their salaries than tackling the problem."

The *Tallahassee Democrat* published a series June 18-20 on groundwater pollution threats to Florida's springs, including Wakulla Springs. One of the largest and deepest springs in the world, the clear waters of Wakulla Springs have become tinted green and are choked with weeds and algae. Scientists have recorded a five-

fold increase in nitrate levels at the springs.

Only herbicide spraying allows springs visitors to continue pumping \$22 million into the local economy. Scientists

Tallahassee's wastewater spray field as the largest of the possible nitrogen sources in the region. Prior to coming to Tallahassee in 2000, I covered concerns about



Courtesy of THE TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

Invasive hydrilla plants are clogging Florida's Wakulla Springs — one of the deepest in the world — and disrupting the \$4 million tourist industry. The *Tallahassee Democrat* reported on the issue, including efforts to clear the hydrilla with herbicides.

point to septic tanks, dirty stormwater runoff and Tallahassee's wastewater as likely sources of pollution. Wakulla Springs faces some of the same problems as other springs across the state, including Ichetucknee Springs and Fanning Springs.

Democrat reporters **Jennifer Portman** and **Bruce Ritchie** covered the problems and solutions involving development, wastewater, agriculture, science and government. The *Democrat* also held a community meeting on Aug. 26 to explore solutions to the problems facing Wakulla Springs.

Ritchie said the story was suggested by an editor and fit with what he had been doing.

"I had been covering the growing Wakulla Springs controversy with several stories during the past five years, especially after a 2002 study documented the nitrogen increase and identified

Ichetucknee Springs (a popular state park and tubing area) and other springs along the Suwannee River. Development and wastewater are primary concerns at Ichetucknee Springs and septic tanks and agriculture, especially dairy farms, are a concern along the Suwannee River."

To read the series, see www.tallahassee.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/99999999/NEWS01/60616005&template=the_me&theme=WAKULLASPRINGS

On Sunday, Aug. 13 and Monday, Aug. 14 **Tom Henry** of the *Toledo* (Ohio) *Blade* wrote about the impact of mega-farms known as concentrated animal feeding operations, or CAFOs. The operations are controversial all over the nation but especially in the western Lake Erie region, "where fresh water is abundant and the multibillion-dollar tourism industry relies on the health of the Great Lakes." One

(Continued next page)

Beat... (from page 27)

cow produces the waste of 23 to 30 humans, giving some farms the sewage challenges of small cities.

"I'm telling you these are not family farms. They are industrial farms, and they are producing industrial-sized waste," said Ron Wyss, a Hardin County farmer who is president of Citizens for Responsible Agricultural Environmental Policies to Henry. "It seems to me that all we're doing now is issuing permits to pollute."

Minnesota Public Radio reporters **Bob Kelleher** and **Stephanie Hemphill** reported extensively on the Cavity Lake fire in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness from July 20 until Aug. 4. The fire burned 40 square miles where the "big blowdown" had toppled millions of trees seven years ago. It will give wilderness campers an unusual opportunity to see how the forest grows back. To see a web version of the report at: <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2006/07/26/afterfire/>

On June 25, **Wade Rawlins** of the *Raleigh (N.C.) News and Observer* wrote about how development on the state's coast was damaging shellfish. It is part of a "summer series" that monthly is covering a coastal issue. "As thousands of new rooflines rise on North Carolina's inner coast, the rules designed to stop pollution and keep coastal waters clean for shellfish are failing, state officials say."

Rawlins said regulations allow dense subdivision developments that overwhelm the land's ability to filter out pollutants.

Forest issues continue to be a source of good stories.

The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer's* **Robert McClure** wrote on June 6 about a statewide plan that would shield Washington's timber industry from Endangered Species Act prosecutions for harming salmon and four dozen other types of water creatures. "In exchange, the industry pledged to take steps to help salmon, such as leaving forests alongside streams on 9.3 million acres. That's one-fifth of the state, making it the largest such deal in the West," McClure wrote. But, "Officials don't really know yet how many of those acres actually will get the promised preservation measures."

Joe Baird and **Judy Fahys** of the *Salt Lake Tribune* wrote about the budgetary challenges of Utah's five national parks.

Like many others, they are stretched more thinly than ever balancing protecting spectacular places and providing services to larger and larger numbers of visitors. "With the arrival of Memorial Day weekend – kickoff to the parks' busy summer season – at least some of those visitors are worried not only about the present state of the parks, but what could be even further belt cinching by the agency," the May 28 story said.

On July 13, **Elizabeth Bluemink** in the *Juneau Empire* wrote about Southeast Alaska environmentalists, loggers and state and federal regulators meeting to negotiate conflicts over Tongass National Forest timber sales and other land disputes.

Grassland bird species are in decline in many places, but they are thriving in reclaimed grasslands in Ohio, wrote **Bob Downing** of the *Akron Beacon Journal* on July 21. Ohio has more than 40,000 acres of grasslands where coal was once mined and that total grows. The reclaimed lands are acidic, and non-native plants do better than many native plants; but grasslands birds are thriving. Downing also wrote on Aug. 14 about researchers at the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden who are successfully cloning the northern monkshood, a federally threatened plant. The goal is plant the man-made monkshood in a second location in the Akron area park this fall to help boost the plant's numbers.

The Great Lakes Radio Consortium's **Jennifer Szweda Jordan** aired a June 5 story about college students leaving their dorms and tons of unwanted furniture, rugs, and other stuff that just didn't make the cut for the trip back home. In recent years, some universities have been sorting out the usable items and holding huge yard sales instead of sending them to a landfill.

Mercury emissions and tainted fish continued to make news.

Michael Hawthorne of the *Chicago Tribune* wrote June 6 about a leading consumer group that advised pregnant women to never eat canned tuna based on the chance that it will contain high levels of mercury. The Consumers Union, publisher of *Consumer Reports* magazine, said they decided to recommend a tuna-free diet for pregnant women based on a *Tribune*

investigative series on mercury in fish and the latest testing by the Food and Drug Administration. The newspaper reported late last year that about 15 percent of canned light tuna – the kind of tuna touted by the FDA as a low-mercury option – is made with a species that often contains high amounts of the toxic metal.

Alex Breidler of the *Stockton (Calif.) Record* wrote Aug. 26 about electronic car parts containing mercury that could add to the planet's problem with the metal. "Your car's lights may harbor only a few drops of mercury, but each drop contributes to a worldwide health problem, experts say. Exposure to mercury causes nervous-system ailments and, according to one study, reduces the intelligence of hundreds of thousands of unborn American babies every year."

David Templeton of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reported that a group of 44 medical, public health and environmental officials statewide are pushing the state Legislature to adopt stricter standards for mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants. The group wanted the state to take action rather than being required to use U.S. Environmental Protection Agency regulations that permit a slower rate of compliance.

On the same day, **Jeff Montgomery** of the *Wilmington News Journal* reported that Delaware's largest power plants may have to spend as much as \$750 million to curb smog, soot and mercury emissions under a newly announced proposal by state officials there. The Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control's multi-pollutant strategy includes provisions that are tougher than upcoming federal requirements for nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxide and mercury emissions.

Dan Shapley of the *Poughkeepsie Journal* identified a large source of mercury emissions – area cement plants – that are "completely unregulated... . The Hudson Valley's cement plants are owned by the world's largest cement manufacturers and they are New York's two largest sources of mercury air pollution, according to the latest federal data. The story ran on July 16.

Chemical pollution also continued to be a standard topic.

(Continued next page)

Martin Mittelstaedt of the *Toronto Globe and Mail* reported on June 7 that Health Canada said it mistakenly gave an internal government document supporting the safety of 2,4-D to an industry representative who has lobbied for the use of the weed killer. The action has raised concerns among environmentalists about the objectivity of Health Canada, the country's pesticide regulator, which is now in the final stages of what is supposed to be an impartial review of the safety of 2,4-D.

On May 28, Mittelstaedt wrote that federal regulators have determined about 4,000 chemicals used for decades in Canada pose enough of a threat to human health or the environment that they need to be assessed for safety. There is probably not a person in Canada who hasn't been exposed to some of them, he wrote. Many are industrial compounds but others are used in everyday products found in every home and office in the country – hair dyes to fast-food wrappers.

Peggy O'Farrell of the *Cincinnati Enquirer* wrote on June 5 about an investigation into a possible cancer cluster in Hamilton County. A May report from the Ohio Department of Health shows the incidence of cancer in Addyston, a village of about 1,000 people, is 76 percent higher than expected in the general population. The suspected cause is dust and emissions from a long-time plastics plant in town operated by Lanxess Corp. since 2005. The Ohio EPA released a study last year said people who inhaled fumes for decades from the Lanxess plant have a 50 percent greater risk for developing cancer.

San Jose Mercury News reporter **Julie Sevrens Lyons** wrote on May 23 about a new study that suggests household cleaners and air fresheners – particularly those with pine, orange and lemon scents – may emit harmful levels of toxic pollutants.

Exposure to some pollutants and their byproducts may exceed regulatory guidelines when used repeatedly or in small, poorly ventilated rooms, researchers at the University of California-Berkeley and Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. For example, the study concluded a person cleaning a shower stall for 15 minutes with a product containing glycol ethers may be exposed to three times the recommended one-hour exposure limit. Professional house cleaners who clean four homes a day, five days per week, take in about double the

recommended formaldehyde levels. The report is available ftp://ftp.arb.ca.gov/carbis/research/apr/past/01-336_a.pdf.

On July 31, **Cheryl Hogue** of *Chemical and Engineering News* wrote about the effort to make antifreeze and other toxic but apparently tasty substances bitter. "Antifreeze containing ethylene

Gary Lenton of the *Harrisburg (Pa.) Patriot News* was one of several reporters to write about sportsmen jumping into the global climate debate on June 18. He focused on an ice-fisherman who rarely used his equipment last winter. Sportsmen groups like the National Wildlife Federation are expressing concern that



Courtesy of CHERYL HOQUE

Animal welfare groups want Congress to require a bitter-tasting additive in antifreeze, hoping to stop the poisoning of pets that lap up the toxic liquid. Some worry the additive might pollute drinking water wells.

glycol is linked to thousands of child poisonings and tens of thousands of pet deaths in the U.S. each year. Because of this, Congress could require manufacturers of antifreeze sold to consumers to add a bitter chemical to this automotive fluid. Proponents of such a law, who include Republicans and Democrats, say this will prevent children and animals from drinking antifreeze," she wrote.

On July 14, **Marla Cone** of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote that California is considering a ban on pyrethroid insecticides that end up in urban streams, killing tiny aquatic creatures, and commonly used in gardens. The chemicals are man-made versions of natural compounds in chrysanthemum flowers and generally considered less-toxic alternatives to more dangerous insecticides, some of which have been banned.

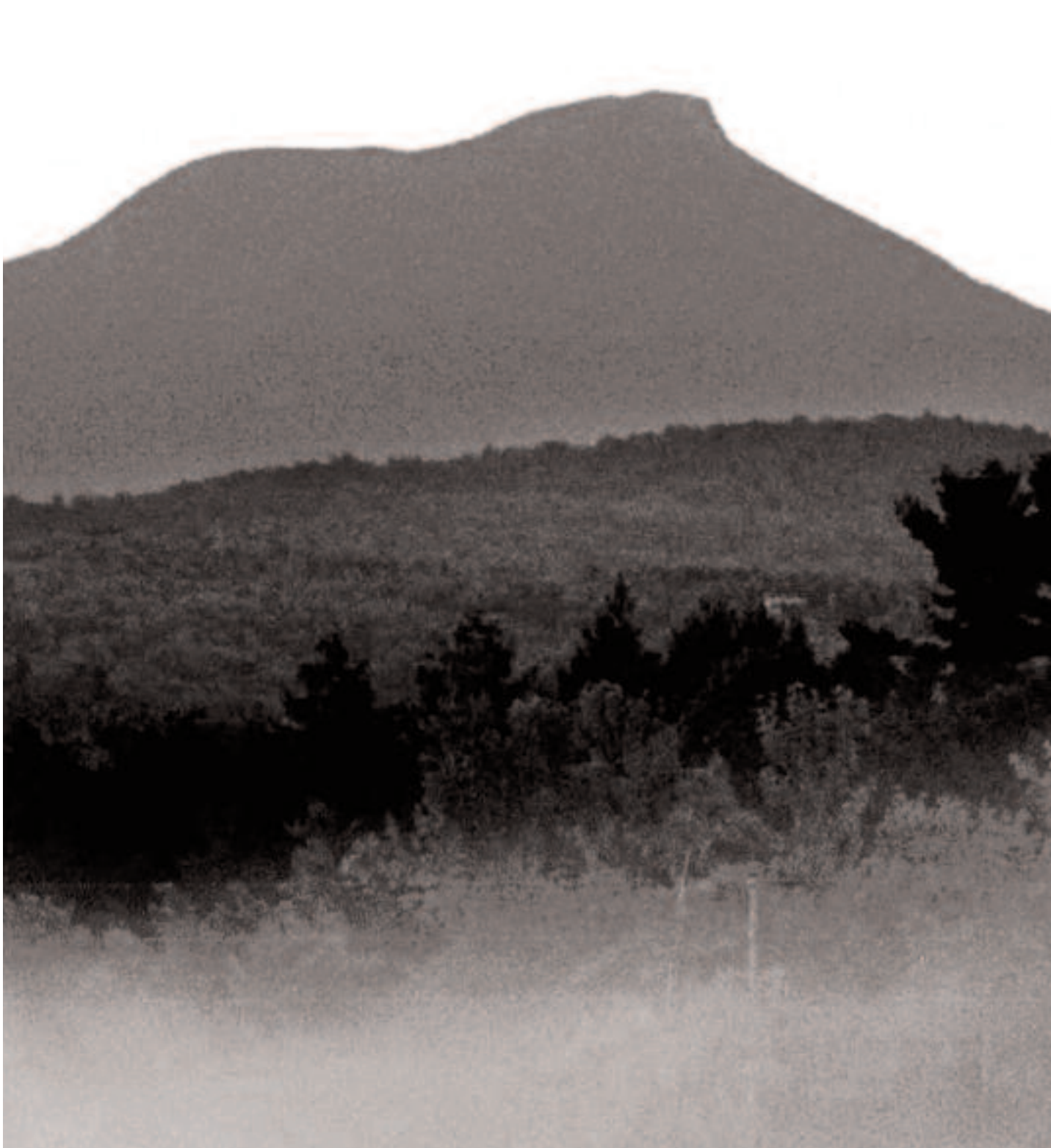
Global climate change interest climbed with the temperatures.

greenhouse gases may end up changing game habitat and wildlife distribution.

On June 23, **Dan Vergano** of *USA Today* reported on a study that concludes global warming helped fuel 2005's destructive hurricane season. "About half of last year's extra (ocean) warmth was due to global warming," says a co-author of the study, Kevin Trenberth of the federally funded National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colo. That translates into an increase in ocean temperatures of just under 1 degree Fahrenheit above natural year-to-year variability in temperatures.

Les Blumenthal of McClatchy Newspapers wrote an Aug. 28 story about disappearing glaciers in Washington State. "With more glaciers than any state in the Lower 48, Washington state has emerged as a bellwether for global warming. The signs are not encouraging." He reported

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SEJ 16th Annual Conference
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that a national environmental group recently said national parks in the North Cascades and Mount Rainier are among the dozen landmarks most susceptible to climate change.

On July 16, **Shirley Ragsdale** of the *Des Moines Register* wrote a story about how climate change and environmental issues were being discussed in churches in Iowa, localizing the story of what some see as a growing movement in evangelical circles. On the same day, the Associated Press's **Rose French** wrote about some in the Southern Baptist Convention worried about that and other issues splitting church members and diverting their attention from spreading the Gospel. "The Southern Baptist Convention approved its own resolution on the environment at its annual meeting in June. The resolution urges Southern Baptists to be stewards of the environment, but not to align with 'extreme environmental groups' or support solutions based on 'questionable science' that could hurt the economy," French wrote.

The Toronto Star's **Peter Calamai** reported June 22 that Ontario should expand nuclear power by more than 50 per cent over the next four decades as a key part of a made-in-Canada climate change plan. This was in contrast to an earlier energy blueprint that would freeze total nuclear generation in the province with one or two new reactors added solely to replace old units that shut down.

David Rogers of the *Ottawa Citizen* on July 1 wrote Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd. is considering a plan to permanently dispose of 150,000 cubic meters of nuclear waste from its Chalk River research reactor in a man-made underground depository near the Ottawa River.

Bill Kupferschmidt, who is in charge of waste management at Chalk River, said there is enough low- and medium-level nuclear waste to fill a football field 15 meters deep. Low- and medium-level nuclear waste includes things like contaminated building rubble, air filters, discarded coveralls, mops and waste from nuclear medicine. Spent reactor fuel that is highly radioactive would remain in concrete canisters in storage buildings until a permanent disposal site is found.

Climate change also often sparks stories about water.

On July 23rd, **Stacey Shelton** of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* wrote about how drought was making more difficult a settlement in a 16-year-old dispute over water between Alabama, Georgia and Florida. The entire region was withering under a drought. Rivers and streams in Georgia, Alabama and north Florida were running low as well as reservoirs used by Atlanta. How to manage the water and who gets it is at the core of a 16-year legal battle known as the tri-state water wars.

Polly Ross Hughes of the *Houston Chronicle* wrote Aug. 21 about wells running dry in the Austin area. "Like dozens of homeowners in western Hays County – conservative estimates range from 30 to 50 – their wells ran dry during this year's drought." Some residents are relying on weekly water deliveries to their homes. Hughes wrote: "Few dispute the Trinity Aquifer's water table is dropping, and with rapid residential development, more wells are poking into ever-scarcer resources. Locals refer to their situation as too many straws in the milkshake."

While in some places there may be too little water, in others there may be too much.

PBS's Living on Earth's **Jeff Young** was one of many reporters looking at levee failures, loss of wetlands and Hurricane Katrina one year later in his Aug. 25 report on how South Louisiana's flawed levee system came about. "It's a history full of skewed priorities, political squabbles and unintended consequences for a river, the land it built, and the people who live on it," he reported.

On Aug. 19, **Matthew Brown** of the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* wrote that EPA's 11-month effort to look at chemical contamination of soil and water following Hurricane Katrina gave the area a clean bill of health. There are some hot spots, including the area around the million-gallon Murphy Oil spill in St. Bernard Parish, below the Crescent City. "In the end, federal and state officials said the contamination they found was typical of many cities." Brown wrote. Officials rejected calls by residents and environmental groups to scrape up the roughly 3 million cubic yards of mud left by the storm.

The Associated Press' **Gina Holland** was one of many writers to document the confusion created by the U.S. Supreme Court's June 19 decision – or lack of decision – on two wetlands cases. The Justices could not agree on an opinion. Chief Justice John Roberts said that the result was confusing and that "lower courts and regulated entities will now have to feel their way on a case-by-case basis."

On June 25, two newspapers wrote about green buildings. **Jennette Barnes** of the *New Bedford (Mass.) Standard-Times* wrote that eco-friendly homes were becoming more popular as energy prices soar. "The best examples save energy and water, use renewable materials and promote healthy living conditions such as clean indoor air," she wrote.

And **Timothy Wheeler** of the *Baltimore Sun* wrote: "With electricity rates set to increase and heating oil and natural gas prices already soaring, more Marylanders are starting to look for ways to keep their utility bills manageable. He wrote that more grants, low-interest loans and tax credits are being offered to install or retrofit solar collectors and other energy-saving devices or systems. Baltimore County, for instance, is eyeing a 10-year property tax credit for "high-performance" commercial or office buildings – though nothing just yet for homes, Wheeler wrote.

Rail safety and chemicals continued to make news.

Mimi Hall of *USA Today* wrote June 23 about how some U.S. cities are considering a ban or limitation on rail shipments of toxic chemicals in an effort to reduce the chance terrorists could use tank cars for weapons. Rail industry figures show that 1.7 million carloads of hazardous material are shipped along the nation's tracks each year. Washington, D.C., passed a ban last year, which the industry is fighting in court. Other communities considering bans or limitations include Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Las Vegas and Buffalo.

Martha Elson of the *Louisville (Ky.) Courier-Journal* wrote on July 3 about safety concerns about bringing in 90-ton rail cars of liquid chlorine to the
(Continued next page)

Beat... (from page 31)

Louisville Water Co.'s Crescent Hill treatment plant.

Because the Internet allows people to become publishers in a different way outside of traditional media, some SEJ members have been taking advantage of the new technology.

For example, freelance writer **Mary Grady** has launched a website to cover environmental topics in Rhode Island. Natural News Network features articles on outdoor recreation, natural science, environmental issues, how to take action, and lots more. The aim is to inspire, inform, and build community through collabora-

tive efforts. A free monthly newsletter keeps users updated on new content at the site. Explore at <http://naturalnews.net>

And, finally, **Jim Bruggers** of the *Louisville (Ky.) Courier-Journal* is writing about reporting on the environment in a new blog, or weblog. "I have written something every work day for more than a month now. In it, I share news items and observations from inside the environment beat locally, regionally and globally. I call readers' attention to other journalism on science and the environment, including providing links to other SEJ members' work. Sometimes, I go behind the headlines to answer questions

and explain some of my own coverage in the newspaper. Topics have ranged from global warming to local air quality to bug infestations in the West to government secrecy. This is, of course, in addition to writing for the newspaper. I got inspiration from the blog of **Robert McClure** and **Lisa Stiffler** in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*.

Brugger's blog can be found at www.courier-journal/earthblog

SEJournal *assistant editor* *Mike Dunne* also reports for *The Advocate* in *Baton Rouge, La.*

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