

able abroad. And nuclear power specialists in other countries are "baffled" by the U.S. utilities' reluctance, until recently, to cooperate among themselves to exchange in-

formation, improve equipment, and assess performance. If the U.S. nuclear industry is to succeed, the authors believe, the worst must learn from the best.

RESOURCES & ENVIRONMENT

The Desert Doesn't Grow

"The Myth of the Marching Desert" by Bill Forse, in *The New Scientist* (Feb. 4, 1989), Oakfield House, 35 Perrymount Rd. Haywards Heath, West Sussex RH 16 3DH, England.

The headlines warn that the world's deserts are growing at an alarming rate, burying farms, forests, and pastureland in drifting sand. A third of the planet's surface is at risk, according to Mostafa Tolba, director of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), and 850 million people stand to lose their land. In Africa's Sahel region, the Sahara is said to have pushed 60 miles south during the last 20 years. Needed, says UNEP, is a \$4.5 billion international preventive effort.

Wrong on two counts, contends Forse, a writer for the *New Scientist*. The UNEP estimates of "desertification" are based on a poorly designed questionnaire sent to African governments in 1982, a time of extraordinary drought. "There is extremely little evidence based on field research or remote [satellite] sensing for the many statements about the extent of desertifi-

cation," says Ridley Nelson of the World Bank.

Satellite pictures of the Sahara taken during the 1980s depict a fluctuating desert border that changed in accordance with normal variations in rainfall. From 1982 to 1984, the desert did creep south. But during the next three years it retreated as rainfall returned to normal levels. A Swedish study of the Sudan concluded that "the creation of desert-like conditions seemed to occur mainly in drought periods." When the rains resumed, farm "productivity recovered."

The tragedy, says Forse, is that poor countries such as Mali have wasted precious dollars to create "greenbelts" against an illusory threat. The money would be better spent on temporary food aid during droughts and research to improve farm methods in desert borderlands.

Recycling Plastic

"Solid Waste Concerns Spur Plastic Recycling Efforts" by Ann M. Thayer, in *Chemical & Engineering News* (Jan. 30, 1989), P.O. Box 28597, Central Station, Washington, D.C. 20005.

America's "garbage crisis" is lending new urgency to efforts to recycle newspapers, bottles, aluminum cans, plastic, and other municipal solid wastes.

Today, the United States generates about 320 billion pounds of such wastes annually, reports *Chemical & Engineering News's* Thayer, of which 85 percent is simply dumped into landfills. Because about one third of these landfills are scheduled to shut down during the next five years,

many more localities are going to have trouble getting rid of their trash—at least at a reasonable cost.

Only 10 percent of America's trash is now recycled: 30 percent of all aluminum, 20 percent of all paper. Bottles, wrappers, cups, and other plastic products account for 30 percent of the nation's solid waste, in terms of volume (or seven percent by weight), yet only one percent of plastic is reclaimed.