

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.

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## RESOURCES & ENVIRONMENT

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### *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.

Surprisingly, says Thayer, technology is not the major barrier to increased recycling. The vast majority of plastic consumer goods are made from one of five resins, each of which can be fairly easily melted down and re-used. (Biodegradable plastics, on the other hand, remain for the most part a distant prospect.) "Most people in the plastics recycling business will tell you they can always use more plastic than is currently available, but that the bottleneck is in getting the materials collected from consumers," notes Thayer. The nation's few plastic recycling plants are supplied mostly by the nine states that have

passed deposit laws requiring the return of plastic soda bottles. Such obligatory programs ensure 70 to 90 percent participation rates by consumers; only 10 to 30 percent participate in the purely voluntary recycling efforts of towns and cities.

Collecting, sorting, and reprocessing plastics remains an expensive proposition. But the plastics industry, fearful of legislative efforts to curb the use of plastics, is working hard on these problems. It will have to. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is aiming to ensure that, ultimately, 25 percent of the nation's solid wastes are recycled.

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## ARTS & LETTERS

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### *Jazz Comes Marching In*

In the house of music, wrote the editors of the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* in 1918, the jazz spawned by the city belonged "down in the basement, [in] a kind of servants' hall of rhythm. It is there we hear the hum of the Indian dance . . . the click of Slavic heels, the thumpty-tumpty of the negro banjo."

Some blacks agreed. The music critic of Harlem's *New York Age* declared that jazz appealed "only to the lover of sensuous and debasing emotions." Such critiques of jazz, argues Levine, a Berkeley historian, were a product of America's misdirected search for cultural identity around the turn of the century. American artists and intellectuals who clung to European culture, he says, invented an artificial distinction between "high" and "low" culture, scorning all things American as inferior. The very term "highbrow" derived from the era's pseudoscience of phrenology, which held that a race's intelligence, reflected in the size of the forehead, diminished with distance from northern Europe.

"It required the stubbornness of Europeans," observed French critic Phillipe Ad-

"Jazz and American Culture" by Lawrence W. Levine, in *Journal of American Folklore* (Jan.-March 1989), 1703 New Hampshire Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

ler, "to convince America that she had . . . given birth to one of the most dazzling arts of the 20th century." The turn-

### *Elite Aliteracy*

The *Harvard University Gazette* (March 3, 1989) asked Richard Marius, director of Harvard's expository writing program, what degree of recognition the names of his favorite essayists—Joan Didion, Joe McGinnis, George Orwell, and Helen Vendler—would elicit from his students. Marius replied:

*Probably nil. I asked one of my classes recently to tell me how many of them read a weekly news magazine. I had 15 people in the class, and three of them held up their hands. I said how many read a daily newspaper and three of them, the same three, held up their hands . . . They do read, they read [thriller novelist] Stephen King. I have Stephen King coming here to lecture next month because my students read him and I think he is a wonderful writer.*