

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 13 (1986)
Heft: 4

Artikel: Switzerland and international environmental protection efforts :
environmental disasters do not respect national boundaries
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907880>

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Environmental disasters do not respect national boundaries

The «dying forests» and the nuclear accident at Chernobyl have made most people aware that environmental disasters do not respect national boundaries. It has now been seen that even strong commitment to environmental protection in the national interest is not enough; the measures taken by individual states to preserve the ecology must be co-ordinated internationally. So, Switzerland collaborates with other countries within a network of international agreements and also takes its own initiatives in the field of environmental protection.

Consciousness of the environment has grown enormously in Switzerland. The new Swiss environmental protection law is one of the most advanced in the world. Acid rain, the dying forests and the Chernobyl accident have made the man-in-the-street more sensitive to environment issues. Further steps to reduce pollutants and to promote energy-saving measures are under discussion in the Federal Councils. All this permits Switzerland to participate actively in international endeavours to protect the environment. But our country is dependent on the co-operation of other countries. Damage to the environment by air pollution, the reduction of the ozonosphere, climatic changes due to deforestation, etc. demand imperative, internationally co-ordinated measures; the possibility of sudden disaster, like the Chernobyl catastrophe, also requires international discussion.

Chernobyl and the consequences

The reactor accident at Chernobyl has clearly shown that, internationally, new precautions must be taken in at least three areas:

- The standards for reactor safety as well as information on reactor accidents must be improved, which is a matter for

the International Atomic Energy Organization (IAEO) in Vienna. Here, it was possible, with the consent of the Soviet Union, to achieve some first improvements last summer.

- The standards governing the highest radiation levels that are not injurious to health must be harmonized internationally; the present «standards salad» has led to measures which vary as between countries and thus to uncertainty. The World Health Organization (WHO) in Geneva is concerned with this problem, not

Dying forests have perturbed the citizen: weakened and badly-damaged spruce (Photo: EAFV)



least on the initiative of Switzerland.

- The situation regarding liability for environmental damage must be improved and unified. Switzerland again took the initiative during the summer when, at the conference of European justice ministers in Oslo, Federal Councilor Elisabeth Kopp proposed that the Council of Europe should work out a convention. A W. European agreement could be extended to other states, *inter alia* to the E. European countries.

The fight against air pollution

For years, the world of states has striven to reduce the alarming proportions that air pollution has assumed. Their efforts are concentrated within the framework of the UN Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) in Geneva.

The ECE is concerned, for example, with the noxious exhaust emissions from motor vehicles. Switzerland has done pioneer work in this field: it did not shrink from introducing stricter exhaust emission standards in 1982, thereby risking, in Europe, a much-criticised «go-it-alone» stance. Now, the EEC in Brussels also wants to reduce exhaust emissions likewise, albeit to a somewhat lesser extent and at a more leisurely pace.

Following the alarming reports on the dying forests, a protocol was sanctioned in the ECE, on the basis of which twenty European countries undertook to reduce, by 1993, emissions of sulphur dioxide (SO₂) from household oil-fired furnaces and from industrial plants, by at least 30 per cent. The document has already been ratified by six of the countries. Switzerland will also ratify it before long.

Now the battle is being concentrated, in the ECE, on nitrogen and hydrocarbons. Here there is still great resistance, particularly on the part of the Eastern Bloc

states, to be overcome; again, Switzerland, together with the Federal Republic of Germany and Austria, has seized the initiative.

Protection of the ozone layer

Among the many international efforts made in environmental protection, in which the UN Organization for Environmental Protection (UNEP) in Nairobi acts as the leader, the battle to preserve the ozonosphere must be mentioned. It is recognized that the use of propellant gases destroys this protective ozone covering, which can have serious effects on climate. In 1985 the UNEP adopted an agreement whereby its member-states agreed to take measures for the protection of the ozone layer. This declaration of intent has been ratified by various states and should shortly be accepted by Switzerland.

Not a great deal has been achieved however; what is needed is a protocol which would

lay down precise standards for noxious propellants (*inter alia* fluorocarbons). But the large industrial nations, world-wide, remain at odds on the question of «safe» levels. Switzerland appears to be ready to accept a protocol on the restricted use of propellants. There is not much time left: according to the latest monitoring tests, the «holes» in the ozone layer are becoming larger.

Almost too many initiatives

Environmental protection is still inadequate in many areas: control and supervision of the disposal of toxic wastes and of substances which endanger the environment leave much to be desired; and too much conflict of interests hampers international co-operation. At the same time, however, one records an abundance of overlapping, even clashing, initiatives in the international endeavours to protect the ecology. Today, countless committees of the

UNO, the OECD in Paris, the ECE in Geneva, the CESC, the EEC, and the Council of Europe are concerned with environmental questions. The layman can scarcely find his way through the jungle of these bodies. Yet, it is up to all to make efforts, and this is what Switzerland is doing: helping to establish order in the inherently laudable endeavours, to ensure co-ordination and to concentrate the points of main effort. The animal and plant world is also part of the environment. The preservation of rare animals and plants is an important task to which the Council of Europe is dedicated. The respective agreement bears the title: «Convention of Berne». Here, too, Switzerland played an active part. Much remains to be done in international environmental protection. But the awareness that this is imperative is growing very quickly. ●

Henri Stranner

Editor «Basler Zeitung»



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