

ACCURACY IN MEDIA INC.

WYATT BUILDING, SUITE 427
777 14th STREET, N.W.
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20005
(202) 783-4407

NATIONAL ADVISORY BOARD:

Murray Baron/Ambassador Shelby Cullom Davis
Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow/Dr. William Yandell Elliott
Morris L. Ernst/Lawrence Fertig/Dr. Harry Gideonse
Reed J. Irvine/David S. Lichtenstein/Eugene Lyons
R. Adm. William C. Mott, USN (Ret.)/Edgar Ansel Mowrer
J. L. Robertson/Prof. Walter W. Seifert/Dr. Frederick Seitz
John E. Tilton/Dr. Frank Trager/General Lewis W. Walt, USMC (Ret.)

OFFICERS:

Dr. Francis G. Wilson, *President*/Alphons J. Hackl, *Vice President*
John J. Ryan, *Executive Secretary*/John K. McLean, *Treasurer*
Milton Mitchell, *General Counsel*

July 5, 1974

Mr. Alfred Meyer
Editor
Natural History
79th and Central Park West
New York, N. Y. 10024

Dear Mr. Meyer:

The article published in your June-July issue entitled "The Ungreening of South Vietnam" seriously misrepresented the findings of the National Academy of Sciences Committee on the Effects of Herbicides in Vietnam.

Arthur Galston, the author of this article, suggests that one of the facts brought out by the report about which "there is relatively little controversy" is that the destruction of the mangrove forests "is certain to have a profound impact not only on the ecosystem but also on the nutrition of the human population."

The report of the National Academy of Sciences draws no such conclusion. The scientists made estuarian studies in a region that had been defoliated and one that had not. They found that while both areas were rich in planktonic organisms, the numbers in the denuded area were lower than in the unsprayed area in the wet season. The reverse was true in the dry season. They found that fish eggs and fish larvae were actually considerably more abundant in the denuded area, while large fish were less abundant in the denuded area. The report states: "However, the data are not extensive, and the differences between the two sites are not large enough to draw firm conclusions." ("The Effect of Herbicides in South Vietnam, p. S-9).

Discussing the damage done by herbicides to inland forests, Galston neglects to tell your readers what the findings of the Committee were. The Committee included no fewer than 12 distinguished scientists who were experts in forestry, botany and related subjects. Ten of them concurred in finding that the damage to the inland forests from the herbicides had been but a fraction of the estimates that had been widely disseminated by critics of the defoliation operation. The critics had used figures of 45-46 million meters³ of merchantable timber destroyed. The Committee, after re-reviewing its work with painstaking care to give every consideration to those who were shocked by the lowness of its findings of damage to merchantable timber, could justify estimates of destruction of merchantable timber no higher than 500,000 to 2 million meters³. Gliding completely by this number, Galston reports only that two out of the dozen experts did not concur in the finding. One of the dissenters, Paul Richards appended a short statement giving his reasons for thinking that the damage may have been higher than the

Committee estimated, but he gave no estimate of his own, and he conceded that the earlier estimates that had been given wide circulation may have been too high. It is worth noting that even if the Committee's estimates were doubled, the figure of damaged merchantable timber would still be less than ten per cent of the earlier estimates. The reason for the low level of damage is associated with the fact that two thirds of the hardwood forests sprayed were sprayed but once. The Committee found that areas sprayed only once rarely suffered any significant damage and that damage was usually light in areas sprayed twice. Only 12 per cent of the inland forests that were sprayed were sprayed more than twice.

Galston states that it was especially true that the herbicide operations forced the displacement of Montagnards to urban relocation centers. He says, "Their villages may never be re-occupied." The study has a special section on the Montagnards, who were interviewed by the anthropologists on the team. It says this:

From the interviews it appeared the forest or sometimes the swiddens, not the villages, were the targets although spray sometimes drifted into the villages...

Responses of the villagers concerning long-range effects in sprayed areas varied. The Hanoi-trained agricultural engineer reported he believed effects on people and on plants would be only temporary. He believed that one of the types of herbicides being used broke down in the soil and actually increased soil fertility. Some villagers felt they could plant again in the affected areas, but most apparently decided to relocate their fields into unsprayed areas. Some reported persistent effects they believed to be due to herbicides more than a year after the spraying. (p. VII-64)

This does not suggest, nor does any other passage that we have been able to find in the report, that there was any, much less extensive, relocation of Montagnards to urban centers as a result of herbicide spraying. The report does make it clear that the herbicides had no lasting impact on soil fertility.

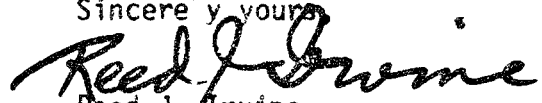
Galston says the report sheds no light on possible direct damage to humans from the herbicides. "No light" is a little strong. The Committee did look into the question. They could find no evidence that substantiated charges that the herbicides had produced birth defects. The results may have not been conclusive, but that is some light. They also found that the Montagnards frequently claimed that human illness and even deaths had resulted from spraying. They could find no direct evidence to confirm such stories, but they recommended further investigation.

Certainly the report did not suggest that there had been no ecological damage as a result of the use of herbicides in South Vietnam, but it did demonstrate that many of the wilder charges of extensive damage to forests, soils and human beings were not borne out by the evidence. This is why a few individuals who were dismayed to find that this careful study did not support claims to which they were emotionally wedded tried to sabotage the report, greatly delaying its appearance and then leaking a totally erroneous summary of its alleged findings to The New York Times in advance of publication. The Times took the bait and presented to its

readers on February 22, 1974, a misleading report on the findings. As a result of our complaint, The Times published a second story on this subject on April 29, partially correcting the errors of the first story.

It is clear that Natural History has fallen into the same trap as did The Times. May we count on you acting more expeditiously to run a correction? We would recommend that that be accomplished by printing this letter.

Sincerely yours,



Reed J. Irvine
Chairman of the Board

cc: Arthur W. Galston
Anton Lang
Arthur Ochs Sulzberger
Philip Handler