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DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGY

Kenn. Bldg., Tower

August 5, 1974

Mr. Reed J. Irvine
Accuracy in Media, Inc.
Wyatt Bldg., Suite 427
777 14th St., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20005

Dear Mr. Irvine:

I have just returned from a scientific meeting in England to find a copy of your letter to the Editor of Natural History magazine criticizing my article, "The Ungreening of South Vietnam". I have considered carefully what you have written, and I conclude that in no way does the article "seriously misrepresent the finding of the National Academy Committee on the Effects of Herbicides in Vietnam", as you have charged.

Your second paragraph misquotes me ^{misleadingly} ~~seriously~~. Read again what I have written in the top paragraph of p. 12.

"There is relatively little controversy about some of the facts. For example, it seems clear that the extensive mangrove forests in the estuarine zones of Vietnam were extraordinarily sensitive to Agent Orange and frequently succumbed to a single spraying. The Academy report estimates that 36 percent of all the mangroves of South Vietnam, representing 0.6 percent of the total area of that country, have been killed by defoliating chemicals. Because the mangrove community is an extraordinarily rich and important ecological complex, one in which many fish and shellfish complete a portion of their life cycle, this destruction alone is certain to have a profound impact not only on the ecosystem but also on the nutrition of the human population. Since the report estimates it will take a century or more for the mangroves to come back naturally or, optimistically, twenty to thirty years with some help from man, the damage is not apt to be temporary."

The "relatively little controversy" clearly refers to the figures about the extent of the damage (36% of all the mangroves killed, representing 0.6% of the total area of the country). The remainder of the paragraph, starting with "Because the mangrove community....." is my interpretation of the consequences of those facts. I stand by that interpretation on biological grounds. One simply cannot destroy an entire plant community without simultaneously affecting the animals that live in it. No facts in the report negate this interpretation.

Re the bottom paragraph on p. 1 of your letter, my article clearly highlights the controversy concerning the amount of damage done to inland forests. The report itself is not convincing with respect to absolute numbers in this section; furthermore, since all data were obtained from the air, with little or no on-site inspection, the facts are not as "hard" as scientists would like them to be. You cannot brush off the objections of Paul Richards as you have done, for if, as he charges "much of the 1972-73 photography was of indifferent quality" then data based on these pictures are not terribly trustworthy, and if "there was inadequate appreciation of postmortem changes to which trees are subject in humid tropical climates" then estimates of damage may be seriously in error. Prof. Richards is the world expert in this area, and if he is that unhappy, so am I. That is why a quotation of numbers in this controversial area was not deemed relevant.

The rest of your letter does not include substantial criticism, but only matters of taste and interpretation. I shall not comment on these sections.

I must confess that I am completely unfamiliar with your organization. When were you founded? How financed? How are officers chosen? What other issues have you investigated? Why have you chosen to interest yourself in this matter? I would appreciate whatever information you can give me.

Sincerely,

Arthur W. Galston
Eaton Professor of Botany

AWG/rp

cc: Prof. Anton Lang
Dr. Philip Handler
Mr. Alan Ternes
Mr. Arthur Ochs Sulzberger