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From the Chair....



Capitalizing on the 'Issue-Attention Cycle' in Environmental Affairs

As I write, jet-lagged delegates to the first international talks on global warming are assembling in Kyoto, Japan; the massive forest fires from earlier in this year still smolder in Indonesia, and prominent news media (The International Herald Tribune, the New York Times, and the Los Angeles Times) have increased the number of column inches that they devote to environmental issues. It appears that we are entering another upswing phase in what Anthony Downs has called the 'issue attention cycle' (Downs, 1972).

According to Downs, modern publics attend to many issues in cyclical ways. A problem "leaps into prominence, remains there for a short time, and then, though still largely unresolved, gradually fades from the center of public attention" (1972:38). Environmental problems have gone through several issue-attention cycles during the past forty years. The first post-WWII cycle probably began in 1964 with the publication of *Silent Spring* and lasted until 1973 when an economic crisis turned peoples' attention elsewhere. A second, less pronounced cycle began in the late 1980s when the coincidence of a long, hot (New York) summer and massive fires in the Amazon basin helped people appreciate the realities of 'global warming'. Public interest in this issue may have slowly dissipated during the early and mid-1990s. The first post-WWII attention cycle characterized all environmental issues, but later ones have become more issue specific and do not occur in historically synchronized fashion. For example, the 1997 public's interest in issues of global warming may be increasing while its' interest in issues of toxic waste may remain basically unchanged. There is however something of a synergistic effect operating here. Interest in one environmental problem begets interest in another environmental problem.

These ideas are worth recalling because they have real consequences for environmental sociologists. Courses in environmental studies that did not enroll enough students two years ago might attract more student interest in the fall of 1998. Foundations and agencies may decide to increase the funds and programs directed at environmental problems. Deans and department heads may look with more favor on proposals to add more environmental social science to curricula or hire an environmental social scientist. The implications of issue-attention cycles and their effects for our own behavior are clear. If you have been nursing an idea for a significant new initiative in your own work, wondering when to launch it, the appropriate time might be now! Given that issue attention cycles govern the availability of funding and political support for our efforts, 'he/she who hesitates, when interest is rising, is lost!'

References

Downs, Anthony, 1972, "Up and down with ecology - the issue attention cycle." *The Public Interest*. 28:38-50.

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