

More public
awareness
in Canada

"Enough is known about acid rain to put an end to debate over whether the phenomenon is real, man-made and damaging. It is all three. The important area for action now is how best to go about reducing sulphur and nitrogen oxide emissions, and how fast".

Precisely. This is the problem that still faces us now, as it faced us two years ago. One of the items on the bright side, however, is that at least we have made some progress in terms of public awareness. In Canada, only 5 per cent of our population is unaware of the threat of acid rain, and a staggering 77 per cent of Canadians view acid rain as our most serious and pressing environmental problem.

Yet, incredible as it must seem to you scientists and experts in the field, there are those who still insist that acid rain poses no immediate threat, and that it should be a subject merely for further research, not quick action.

The so-called scientific case against action was recently put in an article appearing in the *Wall Street Journal*. The basic argument was that the acid rain question calls for more research, that as yet too many unproven variables enter the equation, and that controls might prove to be ineffective. The report's author, by the way, was the president of the National Coal Association.

There is no lack of scientific proof as to the causes of acid rain, or that it might not really be due to the long range transport of pollutants, or that emission controls are not the best way of dealing with the problem.

But let us even concede, for the sake of argument, that all the facts are not yet in on acid rain. In science, it is always possible to gather more information, and to constantly refine our judgments. Are we in that case still justified in taking immediate action?

The answer can only be yes. Consider the case against smoking. "Scientific" debate still goes on, yet any reasonably prudent person knows what is best for his or her own health. Or take the matter of phosphorous pollution of the Great Lakes, an excellent precedent of bilateral co-operation between Canada and the United States. We didn't wait until every iota of humanly obtainable evidence was in before taking firm and effective steps against phosphorous emissions; if we had waited, Lake Erie would be dead today. An unarguable preponderance of evidence dictated the need for prompt action, and we acted.

I put it to you that the same situation exists today with regard to acid rain. To procrastinate on the basis of a so-called lack of knowledge would be like hesitating to drain a malarial swamp, because we didn't know precisely which mosquitoes were carrying the disease.