

ENVIRONMENT

Oceans Off Limits to Dumpers

by our Washington Correspondent

THE United States should take the lead in prohibiting or severely restricting the use of the oceans as a dumping ground, says a report of the recently constituted Council on Environmental Quality*. The recommendation has been endorsed by President Nixon in a message to Congress in which he promises to introduce legislation implementing the council's report.

The council has found that ocean dumping does not present much of a problem at present but is likely to become rapidly more serious in the future if not checked. To the extent that this is true, there should be little opposition to the council's recommendations and much praise of its sagacity in forestalling another area of pollution. In 1968 about 48 million tons of waste was dumped at distances between 4 and 125 miles off the coasts of the United States, 80 per cent of which was dredge spoils, 10 per cent industrial wastes, 9 per cent sewage sludge and the remainder construction debris, solid waste and explosives. The council recommends that all forms of ocean dumping should be prohibited or phased out as soon as possible with the exception of certain radioactive wastes when there is no alternative form of disposal offering less harm to man or the environment. These recommendations also apply to dumping in the estuaries and Great Lakes.

Dredge spoils represent a hazard when taken from areas contaminated with the sediments of industrial wastes; about a third of the 38 million tons of dredgings dumped off US coasts in 1968 were polluted, often with toxic heavy metals such as cadmium, chromium, lead and nickel. Industrial wastes dumped directly in the sea include acids, and the wastes from refineries, pesticide plants and paper mills. The ocean has long been used as a graveyard for obsolete munitions and, since 1963, the navy under Operation Chasc has sent to the bottom nineteen liberty ships, four of them loaded with chemical warfare agents and their carriers, and the rest with explosives. Detonation of the explosives, the report says, introduces trace amounts of lead, nickel and bronze into the water.

Little radioactive material is now dumped at sea because in 1960 the Atomic Energy Commission placed a moratorium on new licences for this kind of disposal, and since 1962 the AEC's major contractors have not made use of ocean dumping.

Excluding dredge spoils and explosives, the council reckons that about 2 million tons of wastes were dumped each year in the early 1950s, increasing to 6 million tons at the beginning of the 1960s and 10 million in 1968.

The council's report recommends that having put its own house in order, the United States should take the initiative towards achieving international co-operation on ocean dumping. The government should develop proposals to this end for presentation before the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment to be held in Stockholm in 1972.

Until such time as all dumping is phased out, people who wish to discard their trash in the ocean should be required to seek a permit from the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the

report says. The agency, along with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), came into existence early this month. The administrator has not yet been appointed, but one among the several names that have been mooted is that of Mr Russell Train, the chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality. His appointment to the post would neatly resolve—or irreversibly confuse—the possible overlap in the roles of the council and the agency. The reorganization plan establishing the EPA says that the duties to be transferred to it include “so much of the functions of the Council on Environmental Quality . . . as pertains to ecological systems”. In the act establishing the council these functions are defined as “to conduct investigations, studies, surveys, research and analyses relating to ecological systems and environmental quality”.

DEMOGRAPHY

1984 the Era of Young Marrieds

by our Washington Correspondent

At least one of the world's population bombs has been deftly defused and rendered innocuous. In a speech given in New York last week, Dr George H. Brown, director of the Bureau of the Census, gave his own estimates of the state of the nation 15 years ahead. Choosing George Orwell's “1984” as a point of departure—a date Orwell is said to have appointed by no more serious a method than permuting the last two digits of the year in which he was writing—Dr Brown sketched out an apocalypse strangely similar to the present. The basis of this prediction is the prospect of a stable population in the light of the bureau's downward revision of its estimates of population growth.

Until last year, the bureau was predicting an increase of from 80 to 160 million people by the year 2000. But in the face of fertility rates that have steadily dipped from 3.35 children per woman in the 1950s to 2.45 in the late 1960s, the bureau is now only betting on an increase of 35 to 45 million people over the present level of 204 million by 1984, Dr Brown said. “However, fertility rates could well drop below current levels in view of the current concern with the effect of population growth on the environment, and possible changes in the laws on abortion.” Population growth rate will inevitably rise for the next decade because the proportion of women in childbearing ages will increase. “On the basis of present information, however, the population growth rate could well return to its present levels in the eighties or, perhaps, slip below it.”

The age structure of the population predicted for 1984 differs from that of the present since a third of the expected increase will occur in the 25 to 34 year age group. There will be virtually no change in the number of people between 45 and 64. “The most significant fact about the expected change in age composition is the very sharp increase in the number of persons in their 20s and early 30s. The meaning is clear: the next 15 years is the era of the young married.”

Such an age structure could mean a shortage of experienced older men for positions of leadership in government, industrial management and politics. There could be pressure on some older men to postpone retirement.

* *Ocean Dumping, A National Policy* (US Government Printing Office, 55c).