



## Drastic Plastic

THE MUCH HERALDED ANSWER to the plastic waste problem – biodegradable or photodegradable plastic – has been given the thumbs down overseas, on the grounds that the plastic does not in reality degrade.

Composting experiments conducted in the United States suggest that even under the ideal decomposition setting of a compost heap, the kind of degradable plastic now available merely weakens, sometimes breaking into small pieces. Although the plastic changes form, most of its volume remains.

Degradable plastics were hailed as a solution to the problem of marine life being entangled in plastic six-pack holders, or ingesting plastic bags. But when supposedly biodegradable plastic bags were recently placed in lobster pots and submerged, they simply did not degrade in saltwater.

That doesn't mean to say degradable plastic is a hoax. In fact ICI has just developed the first truly degradable plastic. Instead of being derived from oil, the polymer, called PHB, is extruded from the natural excretions of bacteria. The bacteria can live on sugar so the whole process is completely renewable. The

sad fact is that ICI has been unable to sell any PHB because the current price of sugar is so high. Combined with the capital costs of setting up a production plant, it couldn't hope to compete against conventional plastic.

The question of *Forest & Bird* magazine wrapping is frequently raised by readers. One option is to revert to manilla envelopes: the consequence would be a doubling in the price of despatch. However, it's questionable whether such a move would necessarily assist the environment, as brown paper is heavier and bulkier in landfills and more polluting in its manufacture than polyethylene, a non-toxic form of plastic. Contrary to accepted wisdom, paper does not break down easily in landfills, graphically demonstrated by US "garbologist" William Rathje who has discovered buried copies of newspapers printed 40 years ago that "looked so fresh you might read one over breakfast."

## Black Swans Die From Lead

AN OUTBREAK of lead-poisoning in waterfowl at the Bool Lagoon Game Reserve in south-eastern Australia stimulated a survey that revealed that about 40 to 50 percent of black swans had excessive exposure to lead. The source is believed to be spent lead shot from hunting. Although this is the first detailed report on lead poisoning and lead contamination in Australian waterfowl, it is believed similar problems exist undetected elsewhere in Australia.

The same conditions exist for poisoning waterfowl in New Zealand as in Australia, the US and UK, where testing of ducks has shown higher levels of lead. The alternative is steel shot, used extensively in the United States. There is little cost difference between lead and steel shot.

## TV Remote Controls Power Guzzlers

FRIENDS OF THE EARTH (UK) have issued a warning that people should not switch their TVs off for the night with their remote control unit, but instead use the on/off switch. The reason is that the instant on/off that the remote control activates continues to use 15 watts of electricity.

FOE estimated that if half of the remote control TV sets in the UK (7 million) were being switched off in this manner, the electricity generation needed would add as much as 560 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> to the atmosphere in a single night – nearly 200,000 tonnes a year.

New Zealand energy researcher Molly Melhuish has worked out that the power wastage of the remote control TV sets in New Zealand is significant. If there were 500,000 such sets in New Zealand, they have the potential to lose the equivalent generating power of a quarter of the Wanganui River flow.

## World Heritage Gains New Members

THE German Democratic Republic, Malaysia and Uruguay have become parties to the World Heritage Convention.

## Last Year's Fashion – Fur

CONFIRMATION that wearing fur is outmoded overseas can be found in recent statistics on the fur industry. In Britain The Hudson Bay House, the UK's major fur-monger, has closed shop and retreated to Helsinki. The trade magazine *Fur Review* has ceased publication. In Finland 1000 fur factories have closed and in the Netherlands there are only 32 furriers where there were once 400. The Madison Square Garden's annual Fur Expo was cancelled for lack of interest, and one of the world's leading fashion magazines, *Mirabella*, notes: "This is not the year to flaunt fur." All good news for the world's threatened furry species, but not so good news for New Zealand's possum-besieged native forests.

## Books Received

**Repainting the Rainbow: Ecology and Christian Living**, edited by Ray Galvin and Robin Kearns (\$10, *Christian Ecology Group and McLaurin Chaplaincy*). The outcome of a conference held in Auckland in April 1989, this booklet will be a useful guide to those interested in the relevance of Christianity to the environment. Writers make the case for a Christian view of the world where nature has intrinsic value, but also make the point that Christian teachings have been invoked in the past as a justification for dominion over the animals. For a copy, send \$10 (inc GST and postage) to McLaurin Chapel, University of Auckland, Private Bag, Auckland.

**Management of New Zealand's Natural Estate**, edited by David Norton (\$23, *Ecological Society*, PO Box 25178, Christchurch). These proceedings of a symposium held two years ago sum up many of the issues facing conservation managers in this country. Its audience will be mostly limited to those intimately involved in managing the natural estate, although conservationists who want to become more aware of the issues would do well to own a copy. Topics covered include thar, brown kiwi, tussock grasslands, Hector's dolphin, farming and conservation. (Can be bought direct from the Ecological Society).



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