



AMERICAN COUNCIL ON SCIENCE AND HEALTH

[About ACSH](#) •
 [Contact ACSH](#) •
 [Support ACSH](#) •
 [My ACSH](#) •
 [Advanced Search](#)

[Home](#) |
 [Health Issues](#) |
 [News Center](#) |
 [Publications](#) |
 [Events](#) |
 [FactsAndFears](#)

Health Issues

Browse by:

- [Author](#)
- [Title](#)
- [Date](#)


[ACSH articles for YOUR site](#)

[Home](#) > [Health Issues](#) >

Environmentalists Behaving Badly—But Influentially: NYPIRG and Research Misconduct

By Dr. David Seidemann

Posted: Wednesday, October 1, 1997

ARTICLES

Publication Date: October 1, 1997

Over the last several decades, as political scandals and corporate malfeasance have eroded popular confidence in government and industry, the public has increasingly depended on "environmental groups" (EGs) for help in exposing and restraining institutional wrongdoing. Because EGs are perceived by the public as trusty watchdogs, their research can considerably influence the formulation of public policies.

Jumping the Gun

The hoopla that attended media coverage of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) study of the agricultural chemical Alar [see *Priorities*, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 18-20] illustrates how EGs can use their own research to influence public opinion. The media had a field day with the NRDC study, which (prematurely) indicted Alar as a potent carcinogen. Coverage included a *60 Minutes* segment and press conferences by movie star Meryl Streep. Consumer reaction to the NRDC study cost apple growers \$200 million. In the midst of the publicity—and perhaps prompted by publicity-generated public concern—the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) released an interim report on a breakdown product of Alar and recommended banning the use of Alar on food.

The public is very sensitive to media reports that it is at risk. The case of the supposedly carcinogenic phone is an outstanding illustration of such sensitivity. In 1993, on the CNN talk show *Larry King Live*, a man from Florida who was neither a scientist nor a physician blamed his wife's fatal brain cancer on her frequent use of a hand-held cellular phone manufactured by NEC Corporation of Japan. Although evidence of the alleged cellphone-disease relationship was purely anecdotal, the man's claim was widely publicized; the value of cellphone company stocks plummeted by 10 to 15 percent; and a Congressional hearing was held that involved, among others, the Food and Drug Association, the Federal Communications Commission, the National Cancer Institute, and the EPA.

The magnitude of the public's reaction to the Florida man's allegation suggests that EGs have a vast potential to sway popular opinion: If the public is so sensitive to the opinion of a

 [Printer Format](#)

 [E-mail Information](#)

Quick Search

[Search](#)

[Advanced Search](#)



Sign up for personalized e-mail alerts on your topics! [Read Full >>](#)

single layperson, how much more sensitive it must be to the pronouncements of organizations that purport to be consumer-advocacy groups guided by scientific experts.

EG research contributes to public-policy change more directly through its courtroom influence than through its media-grassroots influence. For example, a December 1994 ruling by a Federal District Court in California allows the NRDC to monitor the California Transportation Department's plan to decrease the amount of contaminated water flowing from urban streets into waterways; makes departmental personnel and records available to the NRDC; and authorizes the NRDC to engage outside experts in the review of departmental matters. The ruling thus seems to confer quasigovernmental status on the organization.

EG research can also affect policymaking by influencing government agencies. For example, according to a 1994 *Science* editorial the EPA has uncritically used Greenpeace research on chlorine and health.

Who's Watching the "Watchdogs"?

Academic, industry, and government research involves mechanisms of supervision, or oversight. Pre- and postpublication peer review [see *Priorities*, Vol. 9, No. 1, p. 33] is the primary mechanism of oversight for academic research. And the media, government agencies, and EGs commonly monitor industry and government research.

It is ironic that EGs, whose *raison d'être* is independent monitoring, are virtually unmonitored. EG research is typically publicized through popular-press reports of position papers and studies and through letters published in lay periodicals. The news media lack the expertise to evaluate purportedly scientific research, and they do not routinely ask nonenvironmentalist experts to do so. Furthermore, neither the government nor the academic community monitors EG research, and criticism from industry groups is often dismissed as that of a vested interest.

The lack of EG oversight mechanisms is risky. EGs, after all, have interests—their own financial health, for example—that do not coincide with those of the public. Without effective oversight, EGs may be prone to design and use their research as a public-relations tool rather than as a means of increasing knowledge of environmental problems. The research of the New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG), one of a group of 23 PIRGs in 23 states, is a case in point.

Hanky-Panky

After examining NYPIRG's research, many of my colleagues at the City University of New York and I signed a statement to the effect that there is sufficient evidence of research misconduct. NYPIRG demonstrably influences both the news media and government officials nationwide. But its influence is unjustified, as its research transgressions are clear-cut, repeated, and capable of significantly harming the public. Below are descriptions of such misconduct.

Arbitrary Conclusions

A study conducted by NYPIRG in the early 1980s linked health problems in a New York City community to air pollution from nearby landfills. But NYPIRG did not compare the health of

people who lived near the landfills with the health of similar people outside the area (i.e., a control group). Without such a comparison, it is impossible to determine whether the landfills were sources of any health problem. Thus the organization's indictment of them is born of preference rather than of science. The absence of a control group did not prevent the Associated Press and New York Newsday from conveying NYPIRG's conclusions uncritically.

In a 1986 report, NYPIRG described two discrete observations—that an urban estuary was polluted and that particular landfills had leaks—under a heading whose implication was that leakage from the landfills had polluted the estuary. This is wordplay, not science. NYPIRG did not even mention any other potential source of the pollution. In fact, sewage was, by far, the main source thereof. Yet New York's *Daily News* ran two major articles that uncritically conveyed the association suggested by NYPIRG.

Misrepresented Data

Another 1986 NYPIRG report, *The Burning Question: Garbage Incineration vs. Total Recycling in New York City*, purports to be a demonstration of the feasibility of recycling 60 to 90 percent of New York City's solid waste. But the report is based on a misdescription of data, specious reasoning, and conjecture. For example, NYPIRG assigned to park waste alone (i.e., grass and leaves at city parks) the quantity of waste assigned to *food and yard waste together* in the government database the group said was its resource. It is easier to recycle park waste than to recycle food and yard waste. Thus, NYPIRG exaggerated New York City's potential for recycling. Yet NYPIRG's faulty recycling plan served as the basis for several recent legislative proposals.

Self-Contradiction

In 1988, *Road and Track* described a widely publicized NYPIRG report, *Shifting the Blame—A Report on Sudden Acceleration in the Audi 5000*, as "statistical rubbish—a textbook example of how to lie with statistics." NYPIRG blamed an alleged mechanical defect for certain Audi 5000 accidents. But *Road and Track* stated that NYPIRG had "assembled incomplete and biased data, [had] arranged and interpreted it to support predetermined conclusions, [and had] then omitted or glossed over facts that cast doubt on their assertions."

Indeed, the central conclusion of NYPIRG's Audi 5000 study—that there is no causal relationship between driver experience and Audi 5000 driving accidents—is not only false; it is also belied by NYPIRG's own data. The conclusion of three subsequent studies—by the governments of the United States, Canada, and Japan—was that driver error, not a mechanical defect, was the primary cause of the accidents.

Despite the report's self-contradiction, *The Washington Post* conveyed the report's conclusions uncritically, and sixteen members of Congress signed it and sent it to the Secretary of Transportation with a request for action.

Scare Tactics

In 1986 *The New York Times* published a letter from NYPIRG implying that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission had spoken of a 45-percent chance of a U.S. nuclear accident harmful to the public. In fact, the commission had referred to a 45-percent

chance of a nuclear accident that would damage *plant equipment*.

Much of the environmental research that has stimulated the news media—research on Alar, asbestos, and radiation exposure, for example—involves risk assessment. The uncertainties inherent in such research preclude unequivocal judgments about the researchers' conclusions. But the defects in NYPIRG's research *apart from its conclusions* are unambiguous. Misrepresentation of data and arbitrary conclusions are scientifically indefensible. Indeed, academic scientists who deliberately misrepresent data, or who fabricate "data," are subject to severe penalties.

A Proposal

The news media and government officials apparently consider NYPIRG a trustworthy resource despite its record of substandard and misleading research. The quality of "environmental group" research depends entirely on how competent the organization is and how willing it is to exercise competence.

I propose, as a safeguard, a system whereby EGs might voluntarily submit their research reports to an accreditation panel consisting of members of professional scientific societies. Because the number of EGs that significantly influence policymaking is relatively small, such a system would not burden the scientific community inordinately. The accreditation panel would make known to the media the accreditation status of any EG that has submitted research reports to it. Thus, the news media could routinely report the accreditation status—and, by implication, the degree of reliability—of any EG. The credibility of accredited EGs would increase, while the credibility of nonaccredited EGs would decrease, hopefully to levels that would render negligible the nonaccredited EGs' potential for influencing policymaking.

In any case, a heightening of vigilance is imperative. Any system that fails to bring out the fundamental flaws that characterize research conducted by influential environmentalist organizations undermines efforts to formulate sound public policies.

David Seidemann, Ph.D., is Professor of Geology at Brooklyn College and a Research Affiliate at Yale University.

(From *Priorities*, Vol. 9, No. 4)

[About ACSH](#) • [Contact ACSH](#) • [Support ACSH](#) • [My ACSH](#) • [Advanced Search](#)



AMERICAN COUNCIL ON SCIENCE AND HEALTH

1995 BROADWAY, 2ND FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10023-5860

TELEPHONE: (212) 362-7044 • TOLL FREE: (866) 905-2694 • FAX: (212) 362-4919 • E-MAIL: General organization mailbox: acsh@acsh.org ; Individual staffer: [last name or last name followed by first initial]@acsh.org

Copyright © 1997-2003 [American Council on Science and Health](#) • [PRIVACY POLICY](#) • All Rights Reserved