A CLOSER LOOK AT THE NIMBY/LULU SYNDROMES

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ABSTRACT

Presentations at "technical" sessions of a conference such as Waste Management '89 will often conclude that the most serious problems of waste disposal have to do not with physical or biological science challenges, but with the NIMBY/LULU syndromes. Persons who see public opposition as the heart of the problem will usually refer to the "Not In My Back Yard" quandary, while those who trace the problem to the waste facilities that inspire the hostile reactions will often refer to the facilities as "Locally Undesirable Land Uses." The interrelated NIMBY/LULU syndromes have not received the systematic, scientific study they would appear to deserve if indeed they are as central to the ultimate success of waste management as is commonly held. Initial investigations, however, do suggest two conclusions. First, public reactions, including intensely negative ones, are often more "rational" than they may at first appear. Illustrations are provided. Second, those of us who are in the technical community may respond to regularities of human behavior in a way that is substantially less systematic and scientific than the ways in which we respond to physical or biological challenges.

WHAT ARE THE NIMBY/LULU PEOPLE LIKE?

For those of you who aren't in on that particular set of acronyms, "NIMBY" stands for "Not In My Back Yard", and "LULU" stands for "Locally Undesirable Land Uses." Depending on whether people see local opposition or the facilities themselves as the source of the problem, they'll talk either about the 'NIMBY' syndrome or the 'LULU' problem. The two are basically interchangeable, except that the choice of an acronym generally reflects a given person's point of view on the problem.

I plan to make two points in my presentation. One is that the public reactions probably make quite a bit more sense than you'd like to think; the second is that our reactions -- the reactions of those of us who have technical training and backgrounds -- probably make less sense than we'd normally like to think.

As an illustration, think about your own back yard -- literally your back yard (1). Imagine yourself not thinking about the conference right now, but coming back to your own home after fighting traffic and airports all the way back. You've been looking forward to getting home, but when you get there, you find a group of strangers -- having a picnic in your back yard. You might express your feelings more vigorously than this, but you'd probably say something like, "What are you doing here?" Imagine your reaction if they'd say, "Don't worry. We've done a careful assessment. We've looked at all the back yards in town, and it turns out yours is the best one for a picnic." Imagine further how you'd feel if they tried to answer your further protests by saying, "Your concerns have no basis. We have environmental mitigation systems set up; there shouldn't be much litter, and if our monitoring systems lead to the determination that litter is reaching unacceptable levels, we'll take care of it. Trust us."

Now consider a second example. Imagine you're going to buy a used car for your son or daughter, who's getting ready to go away to college. You go to a used car dealer who says, "We've checked out all of our cars. We're sure they're safe. No problem." Your kid gets into the car, heads off to university, and the brakes go out the first day, on the way to campus. What's your reaction? The salesman may or may not have had any way of knowing the brakes were going to go out; you probably know that. But are you more likely to err on the side of being too skeptical or the side of being too trusting?

Now imagine your own reactions if the used car dealership followed up by issuing a report, written in legalese. The report might say, in essence, that they'd done a study; of the 1197 cars they'd sold in the last seven years, there were only two cases where the brakes went out. Would that convince you? I see most of you looking skeptical already--but now I'd like to ask you how you'd feel if, at the same time, the dealership also started leaking "rumors" to the press: "We also have reason to believe that so-and-so may have had a drinking problem. He insists on blaming us for the unavoidable problem with the brakes, but it's not the first time that he's been a bit irrational." Would that convince you, or make you feel more cooperative?

I describe these illustrations in stark terms to make a point. These are some of the ways the NIMBY group members describe their feelings about what happens when their communities are "invaded," to repeat a term that has been used in explaining the problem to me.

Given the way people think about their own lives, their reactions make a bit more sense than you might first think. When it comes to understanding the public, if your first question is, "why don't people's reactions make any sense?" you're asking the wrong question. If you want to understand the NIMBY/LULU syndrome -- as scientists who care about facts and not just hunches -- your first question instead needs to be "Why do these reactions make sense, at least to the people who are reacting?"

The second point is that our reactions -- the reactions of those of us with technical training -- may actually be a little less rational than we think. Think for a moment about the tremendous amount of money we're spending on waste management in this country. Much of the money is being spent on research because any good scientist wouldn't want to put stuff down there before knowing something about groundwater, geology and so forth.

Now think for a moment about the conversations you've heard in the halls about waste management and the public they may be something like this: "The real problems don't have to do with the technology, they have to do with the

public. People just refuse to have one of these facilities nearby. But they'll put up with all kinds of other risks. We've just got to do a better job of public relations!"

Note these conversations probably didn't include much mention of research -- even if you were talking with people who are professional, scientific researchers, people who believe deeply in being systematic and empirical in almost every other aspect of their lives. Is it less important to be systematic when you're talking about the behavior of humans than when you're talking about the behavior of rocks?

That's a serious question. As a moment's reflection should convince you, in fact there is no law of nature that requires us to abandon the use of the scientific method merely because questions of human behavior are involved

So let me conclude with an observation, and a challenge. The observation is that if you take otherwise rational people who believe in the scientific method, and expose them to questions about human behavior, most will forget there's any such thing as a scientific method until they stop thinking about human behaviors. To put it a bit differently, even if you take people who tend to be scrupulously careful about keeping their opinions out of the "news stories" when they're discussing their own areas of scientific work, the majority of them seem to turn into editorial writers -- or worse, advertising specialists -- when it comes to the "people" concerns. Some will hire public relations specialists; others won't even do that. "Understanding rocks is hard," I once heard a geologist say. He went on to claim, however, that "everybody knows about people," and then to offer a set of illustrative arguments about people that were contradicated by roughly thirty years of empirical research. We need to be just as careful not to accept unsupported conjecture about humans as we are not to accept unsupported assertions about toxicity.

I'd like to leave you with a quote from another friend, this one a social scientist. His argument is that we shouldn't differentiate between the "hard" and "soft" sciences, but rather between those that are "hard" and those that are "easy." His observation is that everyone seems to be convinced that his or her own science is the hardest, but that, as far as he was concerned, understanding physical objects like rocks was a breeze -- they don't read what you say, they don't change their minds, and they rarely decide to pick up and move. The social sciences, on all counts, are thus the truly "hard" sciences.

Yet "hard" is not the same as impossible. Human behavior can be studied systematically, not just categorized, and not just cursed. Just as is the case for any other set of challenging problems, there really is no need for us to remain "stuck" forever in the unproductive pattern of editorializing about the public without really knowing what we're talking about. If public reactions really are important to waste management, then it's time to stop trying to deal with the public through unsupported assertions or poorly conceived public relations campaigns. Human behavior can be studied systematically -- and if we're ever to make progress toward solving problems of technological risks, then it must be studied systematically.

REFERENCES

1. Hance, B.J., C. Chess, P.M. Sandman, 1988 "Improper Dialogue With Communities: a Risk Communication Manual for Government", Published - New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers Universit