

NYTimes
Death Off Amchitka

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The dictionary defines cavitation as "the rapid formation and collapse of vapor pockets in a flowing liquid." Cavitation was the cause of death for approximately a thousand sea otters in the waters off Amchitka Island in the Aleutians following the nuclear test last month. This loss is ten to fifty times higher than the predicted in the Atomic Energy Commission's environmental impact statement last June or than the even smaller number the A.E.C. estimated immediately after the explosion.

But the real issue that has been raised has far less to do with the number of animals killed or damage done than with the nature of the risk to which the A.E.C. committed the United States at Amchitka. Advocates of the test have taken smug comfort from the fact that the magnitudes of damage were not far higher, that the test did not trigger an earthquake and tidal wave with loss of human life or that radiation did not escape to poison many fish and sea mammals.

Like the larger than expected loss of life among sea otters, these other potential disasters were also risked when the nuclear device was set off. Men do not dwell alone on this planet and their natural environment is not invulnerable to abuse. On the contrary, men are trustees for every other living organism and the biosphere they share is fragile, interdependent, and seriously imperiled. To burn or blow up, to pillage or pollute this planet with its limited quantities of air and water is to offend against life itself.

The whole experiment was a gamble with nature. How many more Amchitkas before the gambler and the victim are one?

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