

Sensitive tensions

• View across Interstate 90 highway to the once-mighty Columbia River, Washington State - now a collection of long, narrow pools. Formerly the main artery of travel for the Wanapum Indians, it has been sliced up by a series of dams to provide cheap water for the farmers who work land - with the aid of taxpayers' subsidies - that many environmentalists believe ought to be left in a state of nature.



WATER is the focus of action by conservationists who want to stop the destruction of the natural environment of North America.

In Quebec, the Cree Indians plan to use the courts to block phase two of the James Bay hydro-electric project. They lost phase one, and were compensated with \$225m (£103m) in 1975. But the tribe's braves say they will use force to stop the flooding of hundreds of square miles of land which would upset the ecological balance and destroy their traditional hunting lands and fishing grounds.

The topography of the continent has been significantly reshaped by the way in which water has been used. And at the heart of the problem has been the under-valuation of water. Farmers and families have for decades enjoyed subsidised access to water. The costs have been paid by the general taxpayer (who finances the dams and most of the irrigation systems). And by nature herself.

But a new awareness of the fragility of the environment is creating popular activism to preserve aqua-systems. Local ordinances have brought people into dispute with the landowners who derive the major benefits from cheap water. King County, on the west coast of the state of Washington, is suffering the political turmoil that flows from that conflict of interests.

When King County Council approved an ordinance to curb rural development, the politicians found themselves besieged by angry farmers, ranchers and countryside residents. The Sensitive Areas Ordinance, which took effect last month, is designed to restrict development on wetlands and steep slopes. It also requires natural buffers along streams and rivers, with tougher standards for ranching and farming.

As a sop to vested interests, the legislation provides tax credits and density bonuses for property owners whose lands are affected.

King County reflects in microcosm the pressures that can be found in most regions of the continent. Already one of the fastest growing counties in the US, King County expects to add 700,000 people to its population by the year 2,000. The tension stems from the immediate needs of those people against the welfare of future generations.

Wetlands serve a vital ecological function, not only as a habitat

FRED HARRISON, in Seattle, reports on grassroots demands for protection of the North American environment, where ecology - not property rights - is assuming greater importance for many people.

for wild species but also for flood, climate and pollution control. Since the US was settled, the "lower 48" states have lost 118m of their 221m acres of wetlands, chiefly to agricultural drainage.

Under the King County plan, property owners who develop their land for homes and shopping malls will be expected to create man-made wetlands elsewhere. But the landowners protest that their property rights are being usurped. "Your home is your castle: Big Brother, stay out of our backyard," proclaimed a protester's banner in the council's gallery, at one angry meeting. People who back the legislation claim that property owners cannot be allowed to spoil the environment.

WHO PAYS for man's sometimes clumsy attempts to recreate the conditions of nature?

In neighbouring Pierce County, homeowners are angry because the council proposes a 1% tax on homes to finance the preservation of more open spaces. Is this a legitimate response to an increasingly acute problem?

Property owners ignore the fact that the general taxpayer's investment in water systems - and the under-pricing of water that is consumed - boosts the value of their land.

Conserving water, and the natural systems that provide the resource, in the end makes economic sense - even though, in the short term, it is a political hot potato. But time is running out for those who prefer to postpone difficult decisions.

- In Florida, geologists fear that all underground water will be gone within 10 years. If that happens, the economic crisis will dictate a massive investment in the provision of new sources of water: and that would mean an even bigger bill for someone to foot.

- Old cities like New York are struggling to preserve their ageing

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