

# DEPARTMENTS OF ENVIRONMENT

## Part I

by J. STANLEY ROWE\*

In the last few years, rather suddenly, the word "Environment" has become prominent in government organization across Canada, a response to public uneasiness about deteriorating water, air and landscapes. This was to be an article comparing the environmental agencies of the federal government and the three prairie provinces, but Manitoba failed to respond.\*\* Unlike the rest, that province does not have a Department of Environment but rather a Department of Mines, Resources and Environmental Management. Let us then omit the Manitoba hybrid and look at the three that boldly take environment as their sole concern.

Since "environment" is by definition that surrounds us, it includes directly and indirectly practically everything with which governments deal. If Departments of Environment were to assume full responsibility for all environmental matters, they would have to absorb agriculture, Mineral Resources, Forestry, Public Health, etc. Obviously this is not feasible, so the environmental departments have set the more reasonable goal of coordinating and providing leadership for environmentally-related policies, programs, services and administrative procedures in their sister departments. However, each does maintain certain specific jurisdictions, especially over water. For example, the Alberta Department has its Water Resources Management Division, the Saskatchewan Department has its Water Management Service, and the Federal Department its Fisheries and Marine Services. There may be some hidden wisdom here, for water is more than a resource; it is a vital part of environment.

How does each of the three departments ride herd on other governmental agencies? At the federal level, it is not at all clear that interdepartmental coordination is being achieved. When the Doré Lake pulp mill was being mooted, Jack Davis, the Minister of the Environment, apparently heard about it by reading the newspapers rather than through the then Minister of the Department of Regional and Economic Expansion. The current goings-on in northern Canada concerning pipelines and hydroelectric developments also suggest that Environment Canada is only reluctantly and at late stages taken into the confidence of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. Things may be a little better in the provinces where at least formal means have been provided to facilitate environmental coordination. In Alberta there is a Natural Resources Coordinating Council, comprising deputy ministers of environment-related departments (Agriculture, Municipal Affairs, Industry and Tourism, etc.), that oversees all government policies and programs, and that reports to the Minister of Environment. In Saskatchewan, a similar "Interagency Coordinating Committee" fulfills the same function under the chairmanship of the Deputy Minister. How effective these devices are remains to be seen.

All departments look to the public for environmental advice, either directly or through appointed bodies. Both Canada and Saskatchewan have set up Environmental Advisory Councils whose members (15 and 12, respectively) represent a cross-section of groups interested in environmental protection and conservation. In each case the Council reports to its Minister, advising on the state of the environment, on priorities for government action, the effectiveness of government programs, and other matters suggested by the Minister. These Councils are too young to be evaluated yet,

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\*\*Manitoba responded too late for inclusion in this first article.



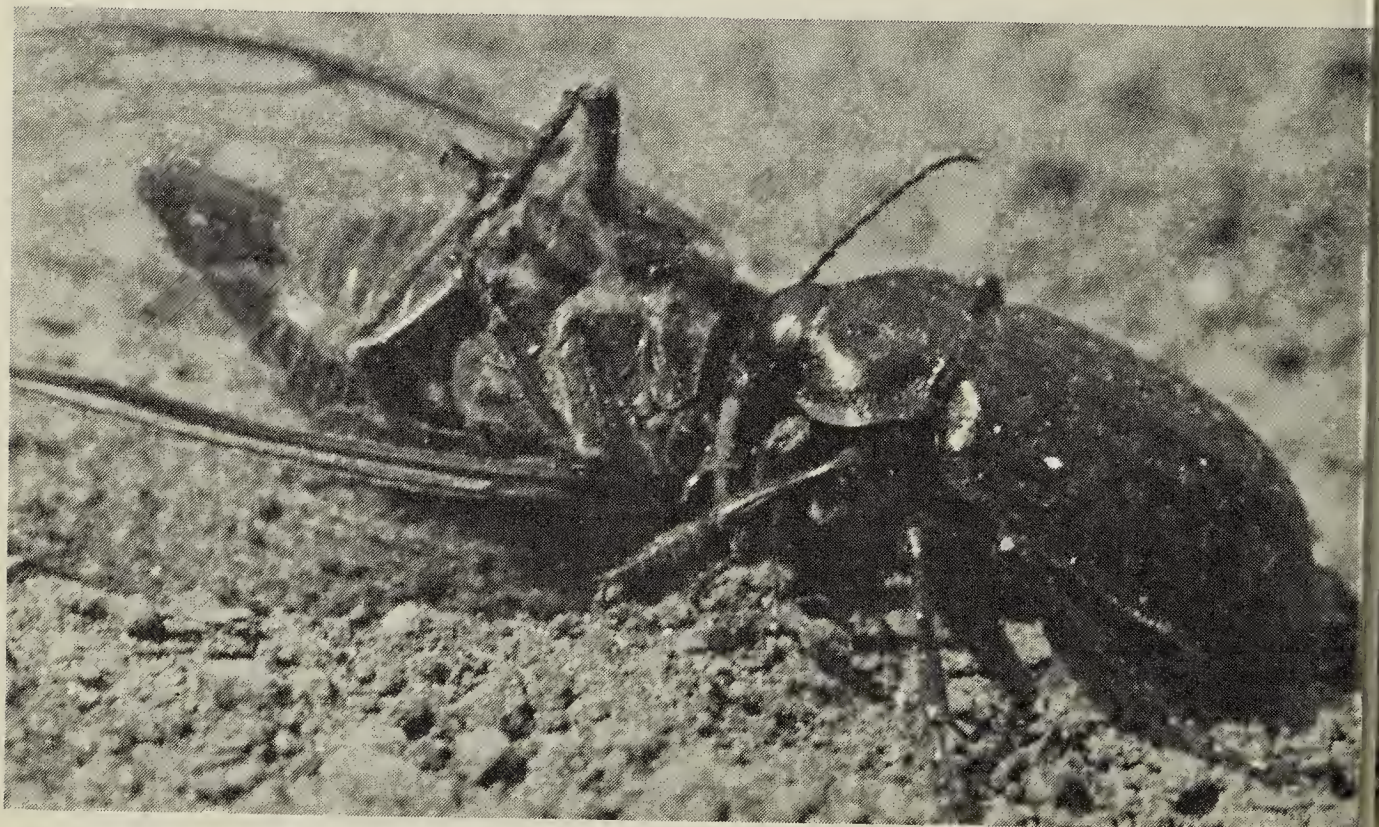
but their worthiness or lack of it ought to emerge in about a year's time when they begin to produce reports. The Councils invite public input, and in Saskatchewan any person or group with an environmental concern is asked to contact the Provincial Environmental Advisory Council, Box 1906, Saskatoon.

Alberta has taken a somewhat different tack, setting up a near autonomous Environment Conservation Authority. A three-man board that became a crown corporation in 1971, it is staffed by salaried professionals with a budget ample to hire consultants, hold public hearings, and more or less independently review policies and programs concerned with conservation, resource development and pollution. The Authority has its own Advisory Committees, one of which in 1972 petitioned the Minister to rescind a recent amendment to the Environment Conservation Act that curtails the Authority's "freedom of action in generating public discussion of environmental problems". Whereas the Authority used to report directly to the Lieutenant-Governor-in-Council, now it must report to the Minister. In this there is the suggestion that the Authority may be causing the government some

concern. Mr. Yurko, the Alberta Minister, is probably looking enviously at the easier arrangement in Saskatchewan and at Ottawa.

Internally, the three departments have many similarities. Each has its "Environmental Protection" service, concerned with such subjects as pollution control in air, water and on land. Each recognizes the importance of public information and education by an appropriate service or division, and each has a policy, planning and research branch. The need for the latter is well expressed in the following quotation from "Environment News", a monthly publication by Alberta Environment: "In essence, the role of government is to emphasize prevention rather than treatment on the basis that this principle is logical, practical and more economic. With environmental matters, this means that the government needs coordinated, comprehensive input and long-term planning."

Long-term planning is certainly a key to a healthy environment, and it is to be hoped that the Departments will be lavish in providing the money, brains and time for this essential activity. In a subsequent article, the Acts under which the three environmental departments operate will be reviewed and compared.



Carabid beetle feeding on a Cicada.

J. D. Shortho