

# No harp seal role for Oakland-based environmentalists fighting the times

By TOM LONERGAN

Members of the East Michigan Environmental Action Council (EMEAC) can easily recap the organization's 10-year history on both fingers.

At least 10 major environmental and pollution control laws are on the books that weren't there in 1969.

"The legislative achievements of the environmental movement in Michigan during the 1970s were spectacular," the non-profit organization boasts in its 1979 annual report.

But while the Oakland County-based environmental group cheers a decade of gains, the 1980s poses a common but pressing problem for any voluntary organization — survival.

MONEY FROM private foundations and such groups as the American Lung Association and the Junior League of Birmingham have kept EMEAC afloat since it was founded on "Earth Day," in April 1970.

When the foundation money dried up, the group decided to push for more individual members, who pay annual dues from \$5 (seniors and students) to \$100 (patrons). General member dues are \$10.

The group just completed a year-long membership drive with the help of the Harder Foundation, a private trust that matched the regular dues of new members. EMEAC claims about 400 individual members, not including membership among smaller, more single-issue ecology groups.

"It (funding) hasn't been too bad until now," said EMEAC President Elizabeth Harris, a Bloomfield Hills attorney. "We assume we're going to be in the fundraising business from now on."

EMEAC is "very much of an expert group — almost a consultant," says John Sobetzer, 29, a lawyer who has been the group's executive director since 1976. Sobetzer and a part-time organizer comprise the group's staff.



ELIZABETH HARRIS  
No compromise on M-275



JOHN SOBETZER  
Ten new laws

which shares office space in Troy with Concern, Inc.

Half of the group's 16-member board of directors are either professors or lawyers whom Sobetzer describes as "lay experts." Chairman is zoologist Philip T. Clappitt of Ferndale. Paul Tomboularian is a chemist at Oakland University.

"We provide the more activist local groups with the expertise and information," said Sobetzer. "Our focus has always been information."

The group's Guide to the Michigan Environmental Protection Act has been used by the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the House of Representatives Conservation Committee. Local and regional government agencies have relied on EMEAC for information as well.

Among the more recent years' successes pushed by EMEAC members were the state's Wetlands Protection Act and Hazardous Waste Disposal Act, both passed by the Michigan Legisla-

ture last year, and the returnable bottle law, adopted by voters in a 1976 statewide referendum.

Sobetzer describes the group's focus for the 80s as three-fold:

- Opposing urban sprawl or further development in the semi-rural areas of the region.

- Monitoring enforcement of Michigan's environmental laws.

- Promoting individual conservation of fuel and all energy resources.

A toxic waste information center is also planned.

SOBETZER SEES a slowing of urban sprawl in the region, which stopped growing in population during the 1970s.

"It's going to be slow because of the economy," he said. "It would be better to have the growth in Troy than in Oakland Township. If there were the en-

ergy, the resources and the land, we'd keep playing Chinese checkers."

The group has been a long-time opponent of the proposed M-275 expressway in western Oakland County and "super sewer" in western Wayne and Oakland counties.

Modified versions of both have been approved in the past year, although M-275's future remains to be decided in Washington D.C.

The environmental movement began as a "pollution control thing," says Sobetzer.

In southeast Michigan, EMEAC's early focus was water quality and the reduction of detergent-based phosphate wastes in rivers and streams.

An Army Corps of Engineers flood control project along the Clinton River in Macomb and Oakland counties was also an early target of EMEAC and other environmentalists. The corps has since incorporated many of the group's suggestions, Sobetzer said.

THE GROUP hasn't always been confrontational during its 10 years, despite the controversy of the issues. "We support compromises," said EMEAC President Harris. "We don't go on and on ourselves on one position."

But, she says, there are some groups with which EMEAC probably won't compromise. One is the highway lobby regarding M-275, proposed for the lakes region of western Oakland County. "We're on opposite sides of the ring. We'll just continue to slug it out," Harris said.

EMEAC members say both M-275 and the Northwestern Highway extension probably would have been built by now had not protesters pushed for environmental impact statements on both projects.

Sobetzer says EMEAC's membership is a mix of people with liberal and con-

servative political views. To him, an environmentalist is "anybody whose ox is being gored at the moment."

As an example, he cited the recent controversy in Bloomfield Township over state-sanctioned spraying of the pesticide Sevin to control gray moths.

Hundreds of the affluent township's homeowners protested the state Agricultural Department's plans.

"They are the same people who wouldn't dare call themselves environmentalists on other issues," Sobetzer said.

EMEAC HAS applied for a federal grant through the Environmental Protection Agency to open a toxic waste information center in the region. What a more conservative Reagan administration in Washington will mean to the grant and environmental programs remains to be seen. EMEAC receives no government funds now, Sobetzer said.

If an anti-environmental protection attitude exists, it's due to pollution control being "caught up in the anti-regu-

latory framework," Sobetzer said. "It doesn't mean Reagan isn't going to attack it (the EPA and other agencies)," he added.

But Sobetzer notes the environmental movement's political "diversity." Its components range from the conservative National Audubon Society to the more activist Friends of the Earth, one of the many groups spawned from the '60s and '70s environmental awareness days.

"We are challengers of traditional assumptions," said Sobetzer. "Even though we don't go running in the streets like loonies, we're still perceived by conservative people as threatening."

IN THE PUSH for wetlands preservation, EMEAC allied with both urban liberals and rural conservatives. EMEAC was part of a coalition pulled together by Detroit City Council President Erma Henderson to support anti-renting provisions in last year's Essential Insurance Act passed by the Legislature.

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