

Reviewed by  
Carol Van Strum

# Environment of Terror

The reviewer is the author of "A Bitter Fog: Herbicides and Human Rights."

In Edward Abbey's eco-fiction classic, "The Monkey Wrench Gang," four endearing misfits romp across the western United States, wrecking bulldozers, coal trains, bridges and other instruments of landscape destruction. One

## Book World

### THE LAST GASP.

By Trevor Hoyle.

(Crown, 430 pp. \$14.95.)

step ahead of the law, Abbey's characters don't wait for science to justify sabotaging technological "progress."

In contrast, "The Last Gasp" is the story of three eminent scientists in 1990 who stumble on hard evidence of impending global disaster beyond the Monkey Wrench Gang's wildest fears. Gavin Chase, an exuberant young British marine biologist with a research team in Antarctica, encounters a dog sled carrying a dying Russian scientist across a barren ice field, thousands of miles from the nearest Russian installation. Before he is whisked away by American intelligence officers, the man desperately repeats a single Russian name to Chase and scribbles a chemical formula on a scrap of paper.

Months later, at an environmental conference in Geneva, Chase meets Boris Stanovnik, the Russian microbiologist whose name the dying man had spoken, and his American colleague, Theo Detrick, an expert on plankton research. The chemical formula scrawled by the dying Russian fills the last crucial gap in their research, confirming a planetary calamity: global pollution and industrial oxygen consumption have triggered a runaway de-

cline in the Earth's atmospheric oxygen. The forests and oceanic phytoplankton that supply the planet's oxygen have been decimated beyond any chance for recovery.

Attempting to alert their governments and the scientific community to their discovery, the three scientists encounter a bewildering conspiracy of silence and vicious terrorism. When Detrick is killed, his daughter Cheryl takes up his crusade, working with Chase and Stanovnik to expose the secret Russian and American schemes for "environmental war" that have made nuclear weapons—and public declarations of war—obsolete.

Alerting the world to the military superpowers' insane schemes proves far easier than convincing people that their frail "spaceship Earth" is running out of air. As plummeting oxygen levels and spreading dioxin contamination render more and more of the globe uninhabitable, Gavin, Cheryl and a small network of scientists, newpeople and politicians battle the stubborn capacity of humans to deny the appalling and obvious truth.

Like a diver who fails to monitor his air-supply gauge, the world recognizes its predicament too late. In a diabolical attempt to reduce oxygen consumption, a secret Russian-American military team successfully completes its final mission: the extermination of three-quarters of the world's population with a mutant, dioxin-bearing virus.

But global poisoning merely accelerates the implacable reversion of the atmosphere to its Precambrian fog of hydrogen, methane and ammonia. Hav-

ing failed to save the world, Gavin embarks on his own final, desperate mission to rescue Cheryl and save his small band of survivors.

Where Gavin Chase fails, author Trevor Hoyle succeeds, in presenting—with awesome credibility—a vision of man-made apocalypse. His military scenario for environmental warfare is largely based in reality and is hardly more absurd than nuclear suicide. The Machiavellian projects of Hoyle's Gen. Madden have their real-life antecedents in chemical and biological warfare.

The publication of "The Last Gasp" follows a year of discouraging global news. In the United States, Europe, and Canada, forests wither and die under clouds of acid rain, while acres of tropical rain forest are felled every minute. Along the coast of the Americas, El Nino—the cyclic Pacific current—flows with unusual virulence, destroying phytoplankton populations and fishing industries. In Oregon, traces of dioxin have turned up in the tissues of a baby born without a brain.

Against this factual background, "The Last Gasp" reads more like a documentary thriller than science fiction. With a skill equal to Aldous Huxley's, Hoyle weaves basic principles of biochemistry, genetics and global ecology into a terrifying race between humanity's biological imperative and its obsessive power to control or destroy.

Hoyle's superb dialogue, vivid imagery and wry humor—Chase's 30-year contest of one-liners with colleague Nick Powell; a would-be assassin's grim comedy of errors at JFK Airport—render the unthinkable almost commonplace.

"The Last Gasp" is a landmark in the emerging field of eco-fiction. As Trevor Hoyle points out in his epilogue, no reduction in atmospheric oxygen has been recorded—yet. But if and when that happens, no magic will reverse the consequences.