

# Poisoned air stains gene pool

By ELLEN HALE  
Gannett News Service

KUKLEN, Bulgaria — Nineteen cows in this village killed themselves last year by beating their heads against a barn wall.

Extraordinarily high amounts of lead in their silage caused the shocking behavior.

Surviving cows were treated with special therapy to leach out the deadly metal, and they now eat imported food.

But not the children who live here, even though tests on 27 showed they all had alarming levels of lead in their blood, nails and teeth — some high enough to warrant emergency care.

"You can tell they suffer lead poisoning because they are all so stupid," said Dr. Mitkova Matushka, head of the local clinic. That includes her own son, Stefan, 6, whose lead level is five times higher than what is considered dangerous in the United States.

Just a mile from this prosperous

“We are raising a generation of invalids that will have to be cared for the rest of their lives.”

— Anna Hradilkova,  
Prague Mothers

hamlet on the slopes of the Balkan Mountains, a battery factory spews hundreds of tons of lead, zinc and cadmium into the air each year. Since 1959, uncontrolled emissions of the toxic metals have permeated the village's soil, water and air.

Kuklen is a poisoned town in a poisoned part of the world where flagrant neglect of the environment has come full circle. Nature is striking back.

Throughout Eastern Europe and the

Soviet Union, years of abuse of natural resources are taking their toll on people's health — just as these countries struggle to emerge from decades of political repression and catch up with modern times.

Illnesses vanquished in most societies thrive here; diseases declining elsewhere are on the rise; and life-spans are dropping.

Worse, millions of children exposed to air pollution, radiation, contaminated food and toxic water have turned the future generation into a medical time bomb and imperiled the intellectual development of their countries.

"We are raising a generation of invalids that will have to be cared for the rest of their lives," said Anna Hradilkova, a founder of Prague Mothers. Worried about the declining health of their children, Hradilkova and other Czech women last year began protesting Prague's polluted air.

While the link between disease and

See AIR, Page 2C

## Communism

LANSING STATE JOURNAL

From 1C July 22, 1990

proved most resistant to environmental exploitation.

What went wrong in Eastern Europe? How could communist countries disregard the value of natural resources, disavow the filth from their factories and even ignore the health of their people?

The answer, say experts, lies in communism's basic failure.

Just now, after political upheaval, is the scope of the damage being unveiled:

■ Czechoslovakia is the most polluted country in Europe — perhaps the world. Seventy percent of rivers cannot be used for drinking, fishing or swimming. At least 5 percent are so polluted they cannot be used by industry.

■ The waterways of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union — immortalized in symphonies — are universally fouled. In Bulgaria, the environmental group Ecoglasnost says only six fishable rivers remain. The "Blue Danube" flows brown and polluted at every point on its 2,000-mile journey to the Black Sea.

■ Air pollution is so severe it is eating away buildings as well the health of people.

■ Severe deforestation, contamination by fertilizers and pesticides, careless irrigation, and pollution by chemical and metal factories rendered vast stretches of precious soil useless.

Repressive regimes prevented the public from protesting these catastrophes. Information on pollution was secret, so people had no idea how bad it was until it was so pervasive it could not be denied. It

ings here last year were prompted by ecological issues.

After World War II, Josef Stalin invested in heavy manufacturing — massive factories, mills and refineries. Environmental concerns were minimal then.

But there was no competition for profit — everyone was paid regardless of how hard they worked — so there was no incentive for change. Communist nations traded with each other and had little need to compete internationally.

So the same factories built after the war continue using outdated technologies that Western countries had long deserted. Thousands of massive steel works and chemical plants still grind away. Often they profit only because other government agencies are forced to buy their products.

Likewise, the push to produce more food required copious amounts of fertilizer provided free to farmers. The result: contamination by cancer-causing nitrates that will take decades to cleanse from the water and soil.

Meanwhile, the profit-making motive of the U.S. economic system created competitive pressures that moved the United States toward cleaner industries such as electronics.

Americans eventually protested — something not permitted in Eastern Europe. The result was Earth Day and the creation of state and federal environmental agencies. Even today, most communist countries do not have a separate environmental agency,