

The fallacy of the

'People vs. Trees' tactic

By M. PHILIP STERN

The issue of "environmentalism" should be addressed from a wider perspective than that usually adopted. It is not merely an ecological, but in a way not usually understood, a significant moral issue.

The recent public hearing on the siting of group homes in Corson's Brook Woods reveals the need for such discussion. Many people have seen the moral issue too narrowly, and in too simple terms. They have tended to settle for unfortunate, polarizing phrases, such as "People versus Trees."

The phrase is unfortunate because it pits two sets of dedicated, highly moral people against each other. It is also probably inaccurate — as many have pointed out both people *and* trees could probably receive justice.

As I see it, however, the major problem is that the phrase implies the terribly low value (in most people's minds) of trees and of "environmentalism" in gen-

eral, and that this reveals something about the way modern human beings think about themselves in relation to "nature." Though most people are not aware of it, from a moral point of view, it is this way of thinking that is terribly significant.

Let us establish first the moral perspective that is clear to everyone. There has been community opposition to group homes wherever the state has tried to place them. Morally, this is shameful, and advocates for the handicapped are thus understandably suspicious, even angry at the opposition of environmentalists.

Furthermore, the present plans to deinstitutionalize remaining residents of places such as the Staten Island Developmental Center are also the result of moral indignation. The poignant memories of horror stories have made absolutely clear the urgent need to protect those who cannot protect themselves; to respect their dignity and worth as human beings, and to try to provide them

with an environment in which they can grow and develop.

What has been involved for advocates of the handicapped has been a long process of consciousness-raising — similar to that of minorities in the 60s, and more recently, of the women's movement. As in those movements, ignorance, fear, and prejudice had to be overcome, and these dedicated advocates have achieved much public understanding through their deeply moral perseverance.

Sadly, even though most of the same issues are involved, the slogan mentioned earlier suggests that a similar moral understanding of environmentalism still needs to be won. Our natural resources, too, cannot protect themselves (as the name of our local organization, the "Protectors," suggests), and they too need an environment in which they can grow and develop.

To be sure, there are differences between people and trees, and if there really were no other alternatives, the needs of people