Invisible Borders: Transboundary Pollution in Europe

16.1 Introduction

On April 26, 1986, scientists at a nuclear power plant in Sweden listened in horror as their computers began to beep. The beeps meant that there were high levels of nuclear radiation in the air. This form of energy, produced by nuclear power plants, is deadly to living things when present in large amounts. The signals that the Swedish scientists were receiving indicated a radiation leak—a sign that something had gone very wrong in a power plant.

The scientists searched their plant for a leak, but they soon discovered that the radiation was not from the Swedish plant. In fact, the source of the radiation was not even anywhere in Sweden. Instead, winds had carried the radiation to Sweden from the Soviet Union. Eventually the world learned that there had been an accident at a Soviet nuclear power plant called Chernobyl.

The Chernobyl accident is an example of transboundary pollution. As you know, pollution is damage to the environment that is caused by harmful substances. The word transboundary means "across country boundaries." Transboundary pollution starts in one country and then spreads to other countries.

In this chapter, you will learn about several cases of transboundary pollution in Europe. You will find out how different kinds of pollution begin and how that pollution can then easily cross borders between countries. You'll also learn about people's efforts to reduce transboundary pollution.

How can one country's pollution become another country's problem?

This illustration shows parts of Europe and Russia. It also shows one source of transboundary pollution in this region. Notice how this pollution spreads across borders. Keep this illustration in mind as you try to answer the Essential Question.