

Rebuilding a Mainstream Consensus for Environmentalism

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The most perplexing feature of current federal environmental policy is that public attitudes, compelling science, and pragmatic solutions matter so little. Poll after poll demonstrates that the American people embrace environmental values and support stronger environmental protections. The mobilization of competent scientific expertise to speak with overwhelming consistency about environmental threats, such as global warming and biodiversity loss, is extraordinary and unprecedented. Nor are pragmatic, sensible policy solutions lacking. There is an emerging consensus that a market-based, cap-and-trade approach to reducing greenhouse gases makes sense. Similarly, driven by the Endangered Species Act, a variety of place-based public-private initiatives have emerged to conserve biodiversity.

Yet the prospects for US government leadership on these and other environmental issues is grim. Gridlock appears to be the likely scenario, with the rollback of current environmental policies at least as plausible. How can this be? What can environmentalists, including scientists, do about it?

Unfortunately, neither good science nor thoughtful solutions drive public policy. Politics drives policy. While environmentalists may have the science right, and devote inordinate attention to crafting proposed policies, they have the politics wrong, and are reaping the consequences of having had them wrong for a long time. Although it's convenient to blame the anti-environment bent of the Bush administration and hostile congressional leadership, environmental groups have significantly contributed to their own marginalization.

Ironically, the modern environmental movement was one of the most potent forces transforming American society in the past few decades. It produced the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and many other federal laws that dramatically improved air and water quality, protected millions of acres of pristine public lands, and reformed management of wildlife and other natural resources. Most important, the movement instilled its values in the mainstream of American thought and discourse.

These values are not necessarily part of a "liberal" or "progressive" ideology. In fact, they are inherently conservative, involving individuals' responsibilities to others. Many religious conservatives care about being good stewards of creation. Fiscal conservatives oppose wasteful and environmentally damaging agricultural and energy subsidies and water development projects. Pro-growth conservatives are coming to appreciate the economic benefits of ecological services provided by healthy natural systems. Free-market entrepreneurs are innovating market-based strategies to find efficient and cost-effective solutions to environmental problems. Thoughtful pro-life conservatives embrace a comprehensive culture of life—throughout all of human lives and including non-human life. Social conservatives have learned that common caring for our shared environment helps build stronger human communities.

Unfortunately, environmental issues have been framed and claimed in polarizing ways that have largely excluded conservation and environmental stewardship from the central tenets of conservatism. And in the poisoned partisan

culture of Washington, DC, environmental policies have become wedge issues. Republicans see little political gain in leading (or even supporting) environmental initiatives, and Democrats seek primarily partisan advantage, putting posturing over policy progress.

The complicity of some national environmental groups in this cycle of degenerating discourse was especially evident in the 2004 presidential election cycle. Several prominent groups embraced the money-driven, shrill partisan politics that alienates many Americans. They joined the "shadow" Democratic party by creating so-called §527 organizations to solicit large soft-money contributions to defeat President Bush, supplanting the role political parties played before the McCain-Feingold campaign finance reforms. Their tactics further undermined the bipartisan foundation of conservation dating back a century or more.

The national environmental movement has evolved significantly since the first Earth Day in 1970 and the plethora of environmental groups it spawned. These new groups awakened an environmental awareness among millions of Americans to complement the hunting-and-fishing-oriented conservation groups dating back to Teddy Roosevelt's role in founding the Boone and Crockett Club. Both types of groups emphasized volunteerism and reflected genuine concerns shared widely by Americans of diverse political persuasions, backgrounds, and preferred forms of outdoor recreation. Since then, however, national environmental groups have become professionalized and increasingly focused on legislative and regulatory ac-

tions. At the same time, the United States has changed—politically, demographically, and otherwise—and, in general, national environmental groups have been slow to adapt effectively.

Many Americans who care about the environment do not embrace big government and “command-and-control” regulatory approaches as preferred strategies. But national environmental groups gained influence and funding through their ability to deploy professional staff to master the arcane intricacies of federal legislation and regulation. These staff forged close relationships with key congressional staff, primarily among Democratic legislators, who were then usually in the majority. Environmental groups relied on these relationships in the 1980s and 1990s to thwart anti-environment initiatives, especially during the Reagan administration.

Although successful in the near term, these tactics were pursued largely at the expense of developing a positive message and effective strategies for mobilizing mainstream Americans into a bipartisan constituency for environmental protection. This grassroots organizing is hard work, takes a long time to show results, and requires dispersing resources around the country instead of supporting a centralized staff in Washington, DC, or New York City. The long-term consequences of this tactical choice, and of environmentalist groups’ alignment with Democrats, became evident with the emergence of Republican congressional majorities in the 1994 elections and, even more so, when George W. Bush became president.

Some among the leadership of environmental groups realize the importance of reaching out to conservatives and rebuilding a bipartisan grassroots consensus for conservation. So far, however, these efforts have focused more on developing better “messages” for the same regulatory-based solutions. Too little attention has been paid to developing an open-ended, values-based dialogue with conservatives that does not presuppose specific policy outcomes.

More troubling, national environmental groups, with a few notable exceptions, have failed to respond effectively to the changing face of America. The leadership and membership of these organizations remain predominantly white, although with many effective women leaders. For years this inattention was excused based on a belief that African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and other ethnic groups have other priorities besides environmental protection. But the reality and research suggest otherwise. Historically, the members of the Congressional Black Caucus have been among the most reliable proenvironment votes, although this support has waned in recent years. Last year, a cover story in *Environment* magazine summarized social research indicating that African Americans’ concern for the environment approximates and in some instances exceeds whites’. In recent environmental referenda and bond issues in southwestern states, the percentage of Hispanic Americans voting for land, water, and environmental protection has been greater than that of white voters.

The failure to look like America is, in large part, because the major national

organizations have not made it a sustained priority. With the recent election of an African American as board chair of the National Wildlife Federation—America’s largest membership-based environmental group—there are hopeful signs that a new face of environmentalism is emerging. But a commitment to diversity has not yet energized the national environmental movement or become a long-term strategic priority.

To be sure, the Bush administration’s policies have a strong anti-environment bent. Republican partisan operatives have co-opted the language of environmentalism to obscure efforts to undo decades of environmental progress. Conservatives are also at fault for failing to articulate an affirmative agenda for protecting the environment and for not demonstrating consistent leadership in developing better approaches. But the failure of national environmental groups to address the systemic causes of their loss of influence and respond effectively in a strategic, nonpartisan way exacerbates America’s inability to meet the environmental challenges we face. Until we get the politics right again, more science and more clever policies won’t make a meaningful difference in transforming the US government back into a leading voice for and actor in global and national environmental progress.

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