

The Case for a New American Environmentalism

Incremental change led by lawyers, scientists, and economists will not save our environment

by James Gustave Speth

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Aspecter is haunting American environmentalism—the specter of failure.

All of us who have been part of the environmental movement in the United States must now face up to a deeply troubling paradox: Our environmental organizations have grown in strength and sophistication, but the environment has continued to go downhill, to the point that the prospect of a ruined planet is now very real. How could this have happened?

Before addressing this question and what can be done to correct it, two points must be made. First, one shudders to think what the world would look like today without the efforts of environmental groups and their hard-won victories in recent decades. However serious our environmental challenges, they would be much more so had not these people taken a stand in countless ways. And second, despite their limitations, the approaches of modern-day environmentalism remain essential. Right now, they are the tools readily at hand with which to address many pressing problems, including global warming and climate disruption. Despite the critique of American environmentalism that follows, these points remain valid.

I. Lost Ground

The need for appraisal would not be so urgent if environmental conditions were not so dire. The mounting threats point to an emerging environmental tragedy of unprecedented proportions.

One-half of the world's tropical and temperate forests are now gone. The rate of deforestation in the tropics continues at about an acre a second, and has for decades. One-half of the planet's wetlands are gone. An estimated 90% of the large predator fish are gone, and 75% of marine fisheries are now overfished or fished to capacity. Almost one-half of the corals are gone or are seriously threatened. Species are estimated to be disappearing at rates about 1,000 times faster than nor-

mal. The planet has not seen such a spasm of extinction in 65 million years, since the dinosaurs disappeared. Desertification claims a Nebraska-sized area of productive capacity each year globally. Persistent toxic chemicals can now be found by the dozens in essentially each and every one of us.

The earth's stratospheric ozone layer was severely depleted before its loss was discovered. Human activities have pushed atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂) up by more than one-third and have started in earnest the most dangerous change of all: planetary warming and climate disruption. Everywhere, earth's ice fields are melting. Industrial processes are fixing nitrogen, making it biologically active, at a rate equal to nature's; one result is the development of hundreds of documented dead zones in the oceans due to overfertilization. Freshwater withdrawals are now over one-half of accessible runoff, and water shortages are multiplying here and abroad.

The United States, of course, is deeply complicit in these global trends, including our responsibility for about 30% of the CO₂ added thus far to the atmosphere. But even within the United States itself, four decades of environmental effort have not stemmed the tide of environmental decline. The country is losing 6,000 acres of open space every day, and 100,000 acres of wetlands every year. About one-third of U.S. plant and animal species are threatened with extinction. One-half of U.S. lakes and one-third of its rivers still fail to meet the standards that by law should have been met by 1983. And we have done little to curb our wasteful energy habits or our huge population growth.

Here is one measure of the problem: All we have to do to destroy the planet's climate and biota and leave a ruined world to our children and grandchildren is to keep doing exactly what we are doing today, with no growth in human population or the world economy. Just continue to generate greenhouse gases at current rates, just continue to impoverish ecosystems and release toxic chemicals at current rates, and the world in the latter part of this century will not be fit to live in.

But human activities are not holding at current levels—they are accelerating, dramatically. The size of the world economy has more than quadrupled since 1960 and is projected to quadruple again by mid-century. It took all of human history to grow the \$7 trillion world economy of 1950. We now grow by that amount in a decade.

The escalating processes of climate disruption, biotic impoverishment, and toxification, which continue despite decades of warnings and earnest effort, constitute a severe indictment of the system of political economy in which we live and work. The pillars of today's capitalism, as they are now constituted, work together to produce an economic and political reality that is highly destructive environmentally. An unquestioning societywide commitment to economic growth at any cost; powerful corporate interests whose overriding objective is to grow by generating profit (including profit from avoiding the environmental costs their companies create, amassing deep subsidies and benefits from government, and continued deployment of technologies originally designed with little or no regard for the environment); markets that systematically fail to recognize environmental costs unless corrected by government; government that is subservient to corporate interests and the growth imperative; rampant consumerism spurred by sophisticated advertising and marketing; economic activity now so large in scale that its impacts alter the fundamental biophysical operations of the planet—all combine to deliver an ever-growing world economy that is undermining the ability of the earth to sustain life.

II. Are Environmentalists to Blame?

In assigning responsibility for environmental failure, there are many places to lay blame: the rise of the modern, anti-government Right in American politics; a negligent media; the deadening complexity of today's environmental issues and programs, to mention the most notable. But a number of observers have placed much of the blame for failure on the leading environmental organizations themselves.

For example, Mark Dowie in his 1995 book *Losing Ground*,¹ notes that the national environmental organizations crafted an agenda and pursued a strategy based on the civil authority and good faith of the federal government. "Therein," he believes, "lies the inherent weakness and vulnerability of the environmental movement. Civil authority and good faith regarding the environment have proven to be chimeras in Washington."² Dowie argues that the national environmental groups also "misread and underestimate[d] the fury of their antagonists."³

The mainstream environmental organizations were challenged again in 2004 in the now-famous essay, *The Death of Environmentalism*.⁴ In it, Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus write that America's mainstream environmentalists are not "articulating a vision of the future commensurate with the

magnitude of the crisis. Instead they are promoting technical policy fixes like pollution controls and higher vehicle mileage standards—proposals that provide neither the popular inspiration nor the political alliances the community needs to deal with the problem."⁵ Shellenberger and Nordhaus believe environmentalists do not recognize that they are in a culture war—a war over core values and a vision for the future.

These criticisms and others stem from the fundamental decision of today's environmentalism to work within the system. This core decision grew out of the successes of the environmental community in the 1970s, which seemed to confirm the correctness of that approach. Our failure to execute a dramatic mid-course correction when circumstances changed can be seen in hindsight as a major blunder.

Here is what I mean by working within the system. When today's environmentalism recognizes a problem, it believes it can solve that problem by calling public attention to it, framing policy and program responses for government and industry, lobbying for those actions, and litigating for their enforcement. It believes in the efficacy of environmental advocacy and government action. It believes that good-faith compliance with the law will be the norm, and that corporations can be made to behave and will increasingly weave environmental objectives into their business strategies.

Today's environmentalism tends to be pragmatic and incrementalist—its actions are aimed at solving problems and often doing so one at a time. It is more comfortable proposing innovative policy solutions than framing inspirational messages. These characteristics are closely allied to a tendency to deal with effects rather than underlying causes. Most of our major environmental laws and treaties, for example, address the resulting environmental ills much more than their causes. In the end, environmentalism accepts compromises as part of the process. It takes what it can get.

Today's environmentalism also believes that problems can be solved at acceptable economic costs—and often with net economic benefit—without significant lifestyle changes or threats to economic growth. It will not hesitate to strike out at an environmentally damaging facility or development, but it sees itself, on balance, as a positive economic force.

Environmentalists see solutions coming largely from within the environmental sector. They may worry about the flaws in and corruption of our politics, for example, but that is not their professional concern. That's what Common Cause or other groups do. Similarly, environmentalists know that the prices for many things need to be higher, and they are aware that environmentally honest prices would create a huge burden on the one-half of American families that just get by. But universal health care and other government action needed to address America's gaping economic injustices are not seen as part of the environmental agenda.

Today's environmentalism is also not focused strongly on political activity or organizing a grass-roots movement. Electoral politics and mobilizing a green political movement have played second fiddle to lobbying, litigating, and working with government agencies and corporations.

1. MARK DOWIE, *LOSING GROUND: AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTALISM AT THE CLOSE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY* (1995).

2. *Id.*

3. *Id.*

4. MICHAEL SHELLENBERGER & TED NORDHAUS, *THE DEATH OF ENVIRONMENTALISM: GLOBAL WARMING POLITICS IN A POST-ENVIRONMENTAL WORLD* (2004).

5. *Id.* at 6-7.

A central precept, in short, is that the system can be made to work for the environment. In this frame of action, scant attention is paid to the corporate dominance of economic and political life, to transcending our growth fetish, to promoting major lifestyle changes and challenging the materialistic values that dominate our society, to addressing the constraints on environmental action stemming from America's vast social insecurity and hobbled democracy, to framing a new American story, or to building a new environmental politics.

Not everything, of course, fits within these patterns. There have been exceptions from the start, and recent trends reflect a broadening in approaches. Greenpeace has certainly worked outside the system, the League of Conservation Voters and the Sierra Club have had a sustained political presence, groups like the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Environmental Defense Fund have developed effective networks of activists around the country, the World Resources Institute has augmented its policy work with on-the-ground sustainable development projects, and environmental justice concerns and the emerging climate crisis have spurred the proliferation of grass-roots efforts, student organizing, and community and state initiatives.

But organizations that were built to litigate and lobby for environmental causes or to do sophisticated policy studies are not necessarily the best ones to mobilize a grass-roots movement or build a force for electoral politics or motivate the public with social marketing campaigns. These things need to be done, and to get them done it may be necessary to launch new organizations and initiatives with special strengths in these areas.

The methods and style of today's environmentalism are not wrongheaded, just far, far too restricted as an overall approach. The problem has been the absence of a huge, complementary investment of time, energy, and money in other, deeper approaches to change. And here, the leading environmental organizations must be faulted for not doing nearly enough to ensure these investments were made.

America has run a 40-year experiment on whether this mainstream environmentalism can succeed, and the results are now in. The full burden of managing accumulating environmental threats has fallen to the environmental community, both those in government and outside. But that burden is too great. The system of modern capitalism as it operates today will continue to grow in size and complexity and will generate ever-larger environmental consequences, outstripping efforts to cope with them. Indeed, the system will seek to undermine those efforts and constrain them within narrow limits. Working only within the system will, in the end, not succeed—what is needed is transformative change in the system itself.

III. A New Environmental Politics

Environmental protection requires a new politics. This new politics must, first of all, ensure that environmental concern and advocacy extend to the full range of relevant issues. The environmental agenda should expand to embrace a profound challenge to consumerism and commercialism and the life-

styles they offer, a healthy skepticism of growthmania and a redefinition of what society should be striving to grow, a challenge to corporate dominance and a redefinition of the corporation and its goals, a commitment to deep change in both the functioning and the reach of the market, and a powerful assault on the anthropocentric and centropcentric values that currently dominate.

Environmentalists must also join with social progressives in addressing the crisis of inequality now unraveling America's social fabric and undermining its democracy. It is a crisis of soaring executive pay, huge incomes, and increasingly concentrated wealth for a small minority, occurring simultaneously with poverty near a 30-year high, stagnant wages despite rising productivity, declining social mobility and opportunity, record levels of people without health insurance, failing schools, increased job insecurity, swelling jails, shrinking safety nets, and the longest work hours among the rich countries. In an America with such vast social insecurity, economic arguments, even misleading ones, will routinely trump environmental goals.

Similarly, environmentalists must join with those seeking to reform politics and strengthen democracy. What we have seen in the United States is the emergence of a vicious circle: Income disparities shift political access and influence to wealthy constituencies and large businesses, which further imperils the potential of the democratic process to act to correct the growing income disparities. Corporations have been the principal economic actors for a long time; now they are the principal political actors as well. Neither environment nor society fares well under corporatocracy. Environmentalists need to embrace public financing of elections, regulation of lobbying, nonpartisan congressional redistricting, and other political reform measures as core to their agenda.

The current financial crisis and, at this writing, the response to it, reveal a system of political economy that is profoundly committed to profits and growth and profoundly indifferent to people and society. This system is at least as indifferent to its impacts on nature. Left uncorrected, it is inherently ruthless and rapacious, and it is up to citizens, acting mainly through government, to inject values of fairness and sustainability into the system. But this effort commonly fails because progressive politics are too enfeebled and Washington is increasingly in the hands of powerful corporate interests and concentrations of great wealth. The best hope for real change in America is a fusion of those concerned about environment, social justice, and strong democracy into one powerful progressive force.

The new environmentalism must work with this progressive coalition to build a mighty force in electoral politics. This will require major efforts at grass-roots organizing, strengthening groups working at the state and community levels, and developing motivational messages and appeals—indeed, writing a new American story, as Bill Moyers has urged. Our environmental discourse has thus far been dominated by lawyers, scientists, and economists. Now, we need to hear a lot more from the poets, preachers, philosophers, and psychologists.

Above all, the new environmental politics must be broadly inclusive, reaching out to embrace union members and work-

ing families, minorities and people of color, religious organizations, the women's movement, and other communities of complementary interest and shared fate. It is unfortunate but true that stronger alliances are still needed to overcome the "silo effect" that separates the environmental community from those working on domestic political reforms, a progressive social agenda, human rights, international peace, consumer issues, world health and population concerns, and world poverty and underdevelopment.

The final watchword of the new environmental politics must be: "Build the movement." We have had movements against slavery and many have participated in movements for civil rights and against apartheid and the Vietnam War. Environmentalists are often said to be part of "the environmental movement." We need a real one—networked together, protesting, demanding action and accountability from governments and corporations, and taking steps as consumers and communities to realize sustainability and social justice in everyday life.

Can one see the beginnings of a new social movement in America? Perhaps I am letting my hopes get the better of me, but I think we can. Its green side is visible, I think, in the surge of campus organizing and student mobilization occurring today, much of it coordinated by the student-led Energy Action Coalition and by Power Vote.

It's visible also in the increasing activism of religious organizations, including many evangelical groups under the banner of Creation Care, and in the rapid proliferation of community-based environmental initiatives. It's there in the joining together of organized labor, environmental groups, and progressive businesses in the Apollo Alliance and there in the Sierra Club's collaboration with the United Steelworkers, the largest industrial union in the United States. It's visible too in the outpouring of effort to build on Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, and in the grass-roots organizing of 1Sky and others around climate change. It is visible in the green consumer

movement and in the consumer support for the efforts of the Rainforest Action Network to green the policies of the major U.S. banks. It's there in the increasing number of teach-ins, demonstrations, marches, and protests, including the 1,400 events across the United States in 2007 inspired by Bill McKibben's "Step It Up!" campaign to stop global warming. It is there in the constituency-building work of minority environmental leaders and in the efforts of groups like Green for All to link social and environmental goals. It's just beginning, but it's there, and it will grow.

The welcome news is that the environmental community writ large is moving in some of these directions. Local and state environmental groups have grown in strength and number. There is more political engagement through the League of Conservation Voters and a few other groups, and more work to reach out to voters with overtly political messages. The major national organizations have strengthened their links to local and state groups and established activist networks to support their lobbying activities. Still, there is a long, long way to go to build a new and vital environmental politics in America.

American politics today is failing not only the environment but also the American people and the world. As Richard Falk (a Princeton University professor, law scholar, and peace researcher) reminds us, only an unremitting struggle will drive the changes that can sustain people and nature. If there is a model within American memory for what must be done, it is the civil rights revolution of the 1960s. It had grievances, it knew what was causing them, and it also knew that the existing order had no legitimacy and that acting together, people could redress those grievances. It was confrontational and disobedient, but it was nonviolent. It had a dream. And it had Martin Luther King Jr.

It is amazing what can be accomplished if citizens are ready to march, in the footsteps of Dr. King. It is again time to give the world a sense of hope.