

# The New Environmentalists

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In March of 1977 I made my first speech as EPA Administrator to the National Wildlife Federation. In reviewing that speech, I found considerable talk about new objectives for the agency, economic and environmental compatibility, and improving the management of federal regulations.

Those were the thoughts of a man who had never had a nuclear protester give him a dead fish on national television.

Nor had I faced the U.S. House Agriculture Committee, or argued with the steel industry, or felt the barbs of environmental lawyers, or saw the Amoco Cadiz blacken the feathers of fowl and the aspirations of fishermen. I since have had those experiences and my objectives of March 1977 remain the same. But those events and others have forged a new appreciation for the environmental movement—an appreciation for the basic tenets of ecology that provide strength and direction in dealing with human affairs.

I have called on those strengths many times in the past 21 months. And I believe others have also—others whom we might not suspect. The environmental movement has weathered numerous stormy confrontations with big business, growth-at-any-cost advocates, developers, and armchair lawyers and economists. Yet our numbers grow. Our institutions become stronger. The principles of ecology remain as true today as ever before.

**The fervor of the late sixties** and early seventies has evolved into the environmental institutions of the seventies and eighties. Environmentalists today carry calculators instead of picket signs. Demonstrating housewives are now presidents of the Lung Association or the League of Women Voters. Law students wearing sweatshirts and sneakers now carry legal briefs in fine leather cases—and those briefs have established a truly astounding docket of precedent-setting environmental decisions.

Perhaps most significant, the street leaders on Earth Day have become the institutional leaders of today. In fact, many of them are now EPA administrators wondering why the environmentalists are shouting at them.

The reason is simple. We have become a permanent part of the political value system. Environmental courses are taught at every major university. Most companies have environmental departments. And grass roots organizations—of the kind that organize letter writing campaigns, participate in government hearings, and lobby political officials—abound throughout this country. They have provided strong intellectual leadership on a wide range of issues.

So it's no surprise to me that public opinion polls show that support for environmental programs is broadly based. The differences in support between Republicans and Democrats are negligible. Support among those with a high school education or less has grown until it approaches the level of those with college education. Support among blacks for more government spending on the environment jumped from 33% in 1969 to 65% today.

A New Resources for the Future poll shows that 53% of those polled believe that protecting the environment is so important that requirements and standards cannot be too high, and continuing improvements must be made regardless of cost.

**These are attitudes born of experience**—of having seen one environmental forecast after another proved to be right, of having seen technical products made better by environmental concern, of having seen cleaner air and water.

Those who scorned Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* have seen the chemical disasters with names like kepone, Love Canal, and PCBs. They have also seen the return of birds and wildlife to estuaries no longer threatened by DDT.

Those who castigated environmentalists for holding up the Alaska Pipeline must admit that it's a better, safer line today than it would have been without their protests. And there are plenty of oil men who share that recognition—at least on an off-the-record basis.

Nationally, sulfur oxides are down 27%. Dirt and smoke are down 12%. Carbon monoxide is going down at a rate of 5% a year. And most importantly, there are people in Los Angeles who can see the mountains for the first time—in spite of continuing high levels of smog. Their eyes still may water from the effort, but progress is being made.

However, even these successes do not fully explain the masses of people—two out of three according to a Harris poll last year—who consider themselves concerned about the environment. So what is it that has attracted blue collar workers, inner city residents, sophisticated suburbanites, farmers and merchants alike to make this claim?

Certainly, the basic principles of ecology provide worthy answers. Whether articulated by Rene Dubos, or Jacques Cousteau, or any other environmentalist, the principle remains valid that *all elements of life are connected to each other in a fabric of cause and effect relationships. We all know that if even one strand is cut, a basic strength of the system is diminished. This understanding has nurtured the environment throughout its existence.*

**This bedrock environmentalism** is one explanation for the polls. But I believe that in the last decade, two other broad groups of like-minded peoples have formed—those who find stability in lasting environmental values and those who have come to respect the environment for its impact on their health and livelihood. These are the new environmentalists, the people who have discovered a source of strength in nature and a new understanding of the fragility of human life. Perhaps they are drawn to this discovery through the general frustrations of a highly technical and complex society: of products that don't work, governments that don't respond, services that aren't rendered, and promises that aren't kept. In the environment they find a sense of order, a permanence in the life cycle of nature, and genuine hope in the age-old renewal of life that regenerates the world. These are values that transcend the daily onslaught of society's breakdowns.

*Time* magazine, in attempting to draw universal meaning from

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the recent election results, said America's "mood . . . seemed quirky, dissatisfied, independent." Perhaps an imprecise and undignified word like "quirky" is appropriate in describing our media-oriented life. What can you expect in a television society where cars are fixed by Mr. Goodwrench, and U.S. Senators are best known for their American Express cards.

On top of all that, the University of North Carolina has recalled more than 3,000 diplomas from the class of 1975 to fix the fading ink. Perhaps getting an education these days is as risky as driving a car with radial tires. In any case, it's another symptomatic rupture in the reservoir of faith that we have traditionally placed in our institutions. Television hyperbole, auto recalls, and fading ink symbolize the public frustrations. But the private are just as pervasive. Our children often refer to this as the "space" problem, with space meaning at least a psychological state in which they are free to pursue their own interests. For those of us born before the days of hard rock music, the plea for space can be translated into less congestion, fewer demands on our time, and a couple of free days with a golf club or a fishing pole. Politically, these frustrations may mean a clarion call for less government, lower taxes, and something reverently referred to as Proposition 13.

**But whatever the cause** of the phenomenon—from companies that are over-regulated to individuals who are over-congregated—the plea for space remains the same. And many of the new environmentalists are finding that space in nature, on lakes, in parks, and in other rural areas.

These new friends spent \$5.1 billion dollars last year on campers and vans. They purchased back packs by the millions. They lined up for marathon races by the thousands. They appreciate clean air and clean water.

Some people fear that these environmentalists will destroy the sanctuaries they seek. And preservation is a necessary vigil. But they present a tremendous opportunity for the environmental movement in terms of mass support.

The second group of new environmentalists are those who have felt the adverse impact of degradation on their lives and livelihoods.

*The Washington Post* ran a story last month with this lead paragraph:

Wearing quilted jackets, string ties and suspenders, the dairy farmers who sat in a Frederick County courtroom last week are not anyone's Image of political activists. But they are part of a new group of environmentalists: those who claim that industrial pollution damages their livelihoods as well as the quality of their lives.

These are people who have been harmed by environmental carelessness, or callousness or disregard. They are fishermen fighting kepone in the James River. They are oystermen and crabbers concerned about thermal discharges from nuclear plants, or oil spills from petroleum refineries. They are farmers worried about reduced milk production or damaged trees and crops.

They understand that a clean, healthy environment is in their own economic self-interest. And when economic self-interest reinforces as sound environmental ethic, the combination is just about unbeatable.

Certainly we have come to understand in the last few years that there is an economic cost associated with using up clean air, clean water, and other natural resources.

When our forefathers strode mightily across this country, land was their most valuable resource. Land determined voting rights, personal profits, individual stature, and physical freedom. To a degree, many of those qualities are still associated with the land.

But for the 80% of our population which lives on 20% of the

land—in our urban areas—the values are changing. There is no more land to take. Natural resources are limited. But the land has taken on a new value—its quality. The quality of the air above it and its proximity to other human endeavors. The elite today live in environmentally rich areas. Smog is heaviest in poor areas. And real estate values can be measured in the color of the sky and how far you can see. A recent study found that people living in the Four Corners area of the Southwest said they would pay an average of \$850 a year to avoid having visibility reduced from 75 to 25 miles.

**People are beginning to realize** that their quality of life depends on how others use the water and the land. A smoke-stack on one side of town influences property values on the other side of town. A chemical plant in the next state may contaminate fish in far away waters. It's a pocketbook issue that will continue to swell the ranks of the environmental movement.

People today also can clearly see the connection between the environment and their health—their ability to work and live with the promise of a full life. The symptoms of many new environmentally related diseases are now becoming visible. Air pollution that destroys the lung and weakens the heart is too often casually described as the source of stinging eyes or a little congestion. But only an ostrich can ignore the miscarriages, nervous conditions, sterility, and death associated with environmental exposure to certain chemical substances—many of them cancer causing.

John B. Oakes wrote on the editorial pages of the *New York Times* a couple of years ago that, "The environmental cause is neither amorphous nor elitist; it is a combination of pragmatism and ethics. It is summed up," he said, "in the practical conviction that man cannot survive as a civilized being unless he reaches an accommodation with his natural surroundings; and in the ethical view that if he fails to do so, his survival in such a world will be worthless.

Those convictions and ethics are embodied throughout today's environmental movement—the old and the new. Whether we come to the environmental cause through concern for ecology, the quality of life, or health and livelihood, we are propelled by the view that survival of one kind or another is at stake.

It is a conviction worth pursuing and a duty worth serving. In the new environmentalists we also have a pragmatism worth understanding. These are people who have moved from the idealism of Earth Day to the realism of 1978. If they share our concern for the environment, they also share a concern for world and national economic problems. If they see the environment as a factor in relieving frustration and improving the general quality of life, they also see that a declining dollar and soaring costs are symbols of another global concern.

As Brookings Institute economist Arthur Okun points out in a recent essay, the opportunities for political and ideological polarization are considerable in today's society.

It would be easy to cry in anguish that our social conscience is being left at the altar of economic greed; or from the other side that our individual freedoms are imperiled by the preservationists and social reformers. We cannot allow this to happen. We cannot allow the fanaticism of the right or the left to dictate the national debates.

The new environmentalists are uniquely equipped to prevent this situation, to set the tone for steady and substantial progress in improving the world order. That always has been a special legacy of the environmental movement—an ability to see the big picture, to provide a philosophical framework for human progress that accounts for all parts of an ecological or economic system.