



## Are Environmental Regulations Too Restrictive?

**YES:** Peter W. Huber, from "Saving the Environment From the Environmentalists," *Commentary* (April 1998)

**NO:** Paul R. Ehrlich and Anne H. Ehrlich, from "Brownlash: The New Environmental Anti-Science," *The Humanist* (November/December 1996)

### ISSUE SUMMARY

**YES:** Peter W. Huber, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, argues that the environment is best protected by traditional conservation, which puts human concerns first.

**NO:** Environmental scientists Paul R. Ehrlich and Anne H. Ehrlich argue that many objections to environmental protections are self-serving and based in bad or misused science.

Concern for the environment in America is not much more than a century old. In 1785 Thomas Jefferson invented the idea (if not the wording) of NIMBY ("Not In My Back Yard") when he wrote, "Let our workshops remain in Europe." He thought that an American factory system would have undesirable social, moral, and aesthetic effects. Clearly, he was alone in that thought, for America developed its industrial base very quickly. The workshop builders flourished, and the effects that concerned Jefferson did indeed come to pass. The first national park, Yosemite, resulted from legislation signed by President Abraham Lincoln in 1864. Yellowstone was approved in 1872. Both were responses to an awareness that if the areas' unique features were not protected, they would be destroyed by ranchers, miners, loggers, and market hunters, as had already happened elsewhere.

By the 1960s people were beginning to realize that other activities, such as the use of pesticides, also threatened treasured features of the environment, such as songbirds (see Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* [Houghton Mifflin, 1962]), as well as human health. The result was government regulation of pesticides, air pollution, water pollution, and much, much more. Lead has been

removed from gasoline and paint, chlorofluorocarbons from aerosol deodorants and refrigerants, and phosphates from laundry detergents. Developers have been told they cannot fill in swamps and other wetlands. Loggers have been forbidden to log in many areas. And commercial fishing seasons have been limited or eliminated entirely.

The economic impact of environmental regulation has not been as great as it might have been if Jefferson had had his way in 1785, but in each case someone's economic benefit has been interfered with. In other cases—such as when users of off-road vehicles have been barred from driving on the nesting grounds of rare shorebirds—the freedom to do as one wishes has been interfered with. In nations such as China, which instituted a "one child per couple" population control policy in 1979, the freedom in question is the freedom to have as many children as one wishes. As the environmental regulations have proliferated, so has the interference with freedoms that people once took for granted. And so have the objections. Conservative politicians and lobbyists for industry, recreation, and home-owner groups struggle to block or weaken every new environmental regulation and to repeal old regulations, often in the name of individual freedom and property rights. Environmentalists counter that freedom must be tempered by responsibility: individual freedom and property rights must have limits, or we will destroy what lets us and our children live on earth.

The issue is not just America's; it is the world's. Environmentalists are active everywhere, identifying problems, promoting a sense of crisis, and saying what must be done, what behaviors must be controlled, and what freedoms must be limited. They have been successful enough to rouse fears among some political conservatives of a liberal-environmentalist conspiracy to take over the world and impose an antifreedom world government. Such conservatives welcome an approach that is designed to weaken environmental regulation in favor of the economy.

In the following selections, Peter W. Huber argues that the environment is best protected by traditional conservation. This puts human concerns before those of what he considers to be the insignificant and unattractive portions of the world that are favored by environmentalists and their "pervasive, manipulative, and intrusive bureaucracy." Paul R. Ehrlich and Anne H. Ehrlich maintain that many objections to environmental protections are essentially self-serving. They assert that anti-environmentalists deny the facts in favor of religious, economic, and political ideologies.



Peter W. Huber

## Saving the Environment From the Environmentalists

As a political movement, environmentalism was invented by a conservative Republican. He loved wild animals. He particularly loved to shoot them. In the spring of 1908, with time running out on his second term, President Theodore Roosevelt held a hugely successful conference on conservation. The report that emerged, T.R. would declare, was "one of the most fundamentally important documents ever laid before the American people." He promptly called a hemispheric conference on the same theme, and was working on a global one when he left office in March 1909.

He had learned his conservation the hard way. After Grover Cleveland defeated the Republicans in 1884, T.R. returned to his Chimney Butte ranch in the Dakota Territory with plans to increase his cattle herd fivefold. Armed neighbors came by to complain. As H. W. Brands recounts in his recent *T.R.: The Last Romantic*, "the potential for overstocking the range weighed constantly on the minds of the ranchers of the plains."

Although Roosevelt faced down his angry neighbors, he also set about finding a political solution to the problem that concerned them, forming and becoming president of the Little Missouri Stockmen's Association. He would only regret not starting earlier. The Dakota pastures were badly overgrazed in the summer of 1886, and many herds, T.R.'s among them, were destroyed in the dreadfully harsh winter that followed.

Occupying the White House two decades later, T.R. and his chief forester, Gifford Pinchot, would be the first to apply the word "conservation" to describe environmental policy. By then, Roosevelt had come to view the misuse of natural resources as "the fundamental problem which underlies almost every other problem of our national life."



The administration of Theodore Roosevelt was certainly not the first to show such concern. Congress had proclaimed Yellowstone a national park in 1872. Yosemite, Sequoia, and General Grant national parks were established in 1890. The first U.S. forest reserve, forerunner of the national forests, was proclaimed

in the area around Yellowstone National Park in 1891. Presidents Harrison, Cleveland, and McKinley transferred some 50 million acres of timberland into the reserve system.

T.R.'s distinction was to give conservation its name and, more importantly, to transform it into an enduringly popular political movement. On the way to adding 150 million more acres to the country's forest reserves, he would persuade the great mass of ordinary Americans that conservation was in their own best interests.

What with two world wars and a depression intervening, it would take another six decades to complete a federal legal framework for conservation. In the meantime, much occurred to affect conventional notions of the environment. The radioactive aftermath of Hiroshima taught a first, ghastly lesson about insidious environmental poison. There followed popularized accounts of industrial equivalents of Hiroshima—fallout without the bomb. Rachel Carson defined the new genre in 1962, with the publication of *The Silent Spring*, about the dangers of pesticides.

All this became reflected in law. The Clean Air, Clean Water, and Resource Conservation and Recovery Acts of the 1960's, like the Endangered Species Act passed unanimously by the Senate in 1973, seemed to be cut from the same old conservationist cloth woven by T.R. (though they concerned smoke, sewage, and landfills rather than parks and mountains). But even as they completed and somewhat extended the framework for traditional conservation, these laws also quietly launched a new era—the era of environmentalism.

Regulating multifarious forms of pollution—the purpose of the clean-air, clean-water, and landfill acts—required a more elaborate regulatory structure than regulating parks and reserves. President Nixon had to establish a new cabinet-level body, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), to take charge. More significantly, each of the laws also included something quite new: an open-ended "toxics" provision, a general invitation to monitor the micro-environment for poisons and regulate them as needed. Even the Endangered Species Act, though written mainly with the likes of cougars in mind, was drafted broadly enough to protect unpleasant rodents like the kangaroo rat, and would soon be amended to prevent not only hunting but also "harming," which a federal court then construed to cover "habitat modification."

A mere statutory afterthought in the 1960's, the micro-environment was getting entire acts of its own a decade later. The Toxic Substances Control Act was promulgated in 1976. Then, in 1980, came Superfund. And thus, somewhere between Vietnam and the discovery of alarming concentrations of chemicals in the soil and groundwater at a town in upstate New York called Love Canal, a legal infrastructure for the new environmentalism slipped into place. Conservation was not abandoned. But politically it was overtaken, subsumed into something bigger. Bigger precisely because it concerned the very small.



Over time, the distinctions between conservation and environmentalism have been obscured. But they really are two different schools.

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Conservation happens in places we can see, and draw on a map. Yellowstone starts here and ends there. Bison, eagles, and rivers are only somewhat harder to track.

T.R. had no trouble seeing the things that made him a conservationist. Forests were being leveled, ranges overgrazed, and game depleted. Hunters and hikers, cattlemen, farmers, and bird-watchers could easily grasp all this, too. The political choices T.R. was urging were based on these considerations: Americans would want to preserve Yellowstone for the same reason they might some day wish to climb Everest: because it was there, because they knew it was there, and because they desired to keep it there.

If conservation happens in places we can see, micro-environmentalism happens everywhere. The microcosm is so populous, the forces of dispersion so inexorable, that in every breath we take we inhale many of the very molecules once breathed by Moses and Caesar. At that level of things, everything gets polluted, even though no one can see it, and it is all too easy to suggest causes and effects. Fish die, frogs are deformed, breast cancers proliferate, immune systems collapse, sperm counts plummet, learning disabilities multiply: every time, invisible toxics are assumed to be the culprit.

To believe wholeheartedly in micro-environmentalism one must either be a servant or put a great deal of trust in savanis. In particular, one must put one's trust in computer models. The model is everything. Only the model can say just where the dioxin came from, or how it may affect our cellular protein. Only the model will tell us whether our backyard barbecues (collectively, of course) are going to alter rainfall in Rwanda. Only the model can explain why a relentless pursuit of the invisible—halogenated hydrocarbons, heavy metals, or pesticides—will save birds or cut cancer rates. The cry of the loon gives way to the hum of the computer. T.R. trades in his double-barreled shotgun for a spectrometer.

But precisely because it involves things so very small, the microcosm requires management that is very large. Old-style conservationists maintained reasonably clean lines between private and public space. They may have debated how many Winnebagoes to accommodate in Yellowstone, how much logging, hunting, fishing, or drilling for oil to tolerate on federal reserves, but the debates were confined by well-demarcated boundaries. Everyone knew where public authority began and ended. Yellowstone required management of a place, not a populace. Municipal sewer pipes and factory smokestacks may have required more management, but still of a conventional kind. The new models are completely different, so different that they are tended by a new oligarchy, a priesthood of scientists, regulators, and lawyers.

With detectors and computers that claim to count everything everywhere, micro-environmentalism never has to stop. With the right models in hand, it is easy to conclude that your light bulb, flush toilet, and hair spray, your washing machine and refrigerator and compost heap, are all of legitimate interest to the authorities. Nothing is too small, too personal, too close to home to drop beneath the new environmental radar. It is not Yellowstone that has to be fenced, but humanity itself. That requires a missionary spirit, a zealous willingness to work door to door. It requires propagandists at the EPA, lesson plans in public

schools, and sermons from the modern pulpit. Children are taught to enlighten—perhaps even to denounce—their backsliding parents.

At this point, environmental discourse often degenerates into a fractious quarrel about underlying facts. One side insists that tetraethyl lead, pseudo-estrogen, and low-frequency electromagnetic radiation seriously harm human health. The other side says they do not. One side says these things will hurt birds, frogs, and forests, and have already done so. The other side says they have not and will not.

One might suppose that science would settle such disputes. But it cannot. In a classic essay from 1972, the nuclear physicist Alvin Weinberg explained why. He coined a term, "trans-science," to describe the study of problems too large, diffuse, rate, or long-term to be resolved by scientific means. It would, for instance, take eight billion mice to perform a statistically significant test of the health effects of radiation at exposure levels the EPA deems to be "safe." The model used to set that threshold may be right, or it may be way off; the only certainty is that no eight-billion-mouse experiment is going to happen.

The same goes for any model of very-low-probability accidents—an earthquake precipitating the collapse of the Hoover dam, say, leading to the inundation of the Imperial Valley of California. Statistical models can be built, and have been, but their critical, constituent parts cannot be tested. And similarly with all the most far-reaching models of micro-environmentalism, a realm of huge populations (molecules, particles) paired with very weak or slow effects. Whether we are talking about global warming, ozone depletion, species extinction, radiation, halogens, or heavy metals, whether the concern is for humans or frogs, redwoods or sandworts, the time frames are too long, the effects too diffuse, the confounding variables too numerous.

You may doubt this if you get your environmental trans-science the way most people do, for the mass media always convey a greater sense of certitude. There is no news in reporting "Dog May or May Not Bite Man; Scientists Waffle." Instead, *Newsweek* gives us: "Meteorologists disagree about the cause and extent of the cooling trend. But they are almost unanimous in the view that the trend will reduce agricultural productivity for the rest of the century." That was in 1975. They were still almost unanimous in 1992, according to Vice President Al Gore; but about what? "Scientists have concluded—almost unanimously—that global warming is real and the time to act is now." (I owe this juxtaposition to the *Economist*, December 20, 1997.) If the papers give you the various sides of the trans-scientific debate at all, they give it in different editions; sometimes, the editions are published twenty years apart.

It is a fair bet that now and again a model will predict things exactly right. It is a fairer bet that much of the time it will not. Indeed, if overall statistics confirm anything, it is that environmental toxins of human origin are not the main cause of anything much. The more industrialized we become, the longer we live and the healthier we grow. There is a model—quite a credible one, in fact—that purports to prove that a steady dose of low-level radiation, like the one

you get living in a high-altitude locale like Denver, or at some suitable distance from Chernobyl, actually improves your health.

Nor are these the only problems. Suspect toxins vastly outnumber model-ers. The list of things we might reasonably worry about grows faster than new rules can be published in the *Federal Register*. But the axiology of science, its priorities of investigation and research, the criteria for what to study and what not to, are matters of taste, budget, values—everything but science itself. Scientific priorities, Weinberg notes, are themselves trans-scientific. So are all the engineering issues, the practical fixes that regulators prescribe. Science will never tell us just how much scrubber or converter to stick on a tailpipe or smokestack, how much sand and gravel at the end of a sewer pipe, how much plastic and clay around the sides of a dump.

So, in the end, the micro-environmentalist just names his favorite poison, and gets on with making sure that nobody drinks it. The process is arrayed in the sumptuary of science, but the key calls are political. Micro-environmentalism ends up as a pursuit of politics by other means.



There is nothing wrong with politics, of course—T.R. revealed in them. But here too there is an essential difference between the old conservatism and the new environmentalism.

All the choices old-style conservationists make are conventionally political. The Clinton administration recently designated as a national monument a vast stretch of land in Utah, from Bryce Canyon to the Colorado River, and from Boulder to the Arizona state line. It was a controversial call: the area includes the Kaiparowits plateau, where a Dutch-owned concern was slated to begin mining massive coal formations. T.R. would certainly have understood the controversy over the Kaiparowits plateau, and would likely have approved the decision to conserve.

In the new environmentalism, by contrast, conventional political process decides little. The clauses about toxics that were inserted as an afterthought in the clean-air and clean-water acts, and as the central thought in Superfund, are just a stew of words. They articulate no standard, set no budget, establish no limits. In T.R.'s day they would not even have passed constitutional muster. The Supreme Court would have cited the "nondelegation doctrine," which, then at least, forbade Congress to delegate responsibilities wholesale to the executive branch.

Today the delegation goes a lot further. Though nominally in the hands of the President and overseen by Congress, political authority for micro-environmental matters is now centered in the new trans-scientific oligarchy. The key calls are still stroke-of-the-pen political, at bottom, but no ordinary observer can see to the bottom. The only thing ordinary Americans may dimly realize is that somewhere deep in the EPA it has been deemed wise to spend more money digging up an industrial park in New Jersey than ever was spent conserving a forest in the Adirondacks.

Politicians know how to reward friends and punish enemies, but democratic politics tends, as a whole, to be pretty even-handed. When the old conservationists took your land, they paid you for it, and the money came from taxes and user fees. That was about as fair as the income tax—not very, but fair enough. In the new environmentalism, most of the taxing occurs off the public books. There is a great deal of creeping, uncompensated expropriation, and a freakish rain of ruin on those unlucky enough to discover the wrong rodent, marsh, or buried chemical on their land. Any amount of public environmental good, however small, can entail any private financial burden, however large.

We have likewise lost all pragmatic sense of when enough is enough. Conservation, driven as it must be through normal political channels, can be pushed only so far. The Clinton administration had to trade political chips for the Kaiparowits plateau; nobody feared it would soon seize the rest of Utah. Conservation works, politically, because the boundaries are reasonably well defined and because it targets real estate, not molecules. By contrast, most of the Northeast could be placed in regulatory receivership for its countless micro-environmental derelictions. Whereas hikers and hunters occupy a seat or two at the political table, synthetic estrogens and carbon dioxide have somehow escaped from the coils of politics, and the priesthood can pursue them without restraint.

The "remedial" efforts that emerge from this pursuit end up repelling even the intended beneficiaries. Contact with Superfund has become socially poisonous. The very arrival of the EPA in a community shatters property values, repels new industrial investment, and throws a region's entire future into doubt. Environmental regulation has in effect become a mirror image of the problems it is supposed to solve, leaking into society cancerous plumes of lawyers, administrators, and consultants, the brokers of ignorance, speculation, and uncertainty.



Theodore Roosevelt was no Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, or John Muir. These "preservationists" revered wilderness for its own sake. Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, adamantly opposed building the Tuolumne River dam in Yosemite to supply water to San Francisco. T.R. supported it, consistent with his "wise-use" philosophy of conservation. For T.R., the whole point of conserving nature was to continue using it—forests for lumber, ranges for grazing, rivers for electrical power. Hunters, cattlemen, ranchers were to be involved in conservation because it was in their own self-interest. "Despite occasional moments of doubt," writes H. W. Brands, T.R. "passionately believed in the capacity of the ordinary people of America to act in the public welfare, once they were alerted to the true nature of that welfare."

That was the faith that defined the first century of conservatism. Congress had established Yellowstone National Park as a "pleasuring ground" for people. The national parks would include forests, seashores, lakeshores, and scenic trails but also monuments, historical sites, and battlefields—man's creation alongside nature's. T.R.'s distant cousin Franklin, too, was an ardent

conservationist, and during his presidency he established his own share of national parks and forests; but he also built roads, bridges, tunnels, airports, and skyscrapers. Like T.R., he believed there was room enough in nature for man.

Today, the preservationist vision is back on top. The quasi-pagan nature worship of the late 19th century has been reworked as the trans-scientific demology of the late 20th. Those who believe in the new methods and models do not even credit the distinction between conservation and preservation. The computer models can link any human activity, however small, to any environmental consequence, however large—it is just a matter of tracing out small effects through space and time, down the rivers, up the food chains, and into the roots, the egg shells, or the fatty tissue of the breast. This is what chaos theorists call the "butterfly effect," traced out by computer. If you believe in the computer, you must believe that the only way really to "conserve" is not to touch at all.



Is it possible to change course, and if so, how? The answer comes in two parts, the philosophical and the practical-political.

There was never much high-church philosophy to T.R.'s conservationism. It was inspired by an abiding appreciation for the beauty of nature—that is, by aesthetics. And it was disciplined by a real sense (this may seem a curious thing to say of a man like T.R.) of humility. Not much philosophy there, but enough. A sense of aesthetics would get us a long way in reforming environmental discourse. It would, to begin with, help us cut through the scientism, the fussy bureaucratic detail. It would let us ignore the priesthood and dispense with its soaring intellectual cathedrals. It would save us the enormous expense and inconvenience of digging up New Jersey and conserving our own trash. It would allow us to spend our energy and dollars on places that are simply beautiful, and oppose things for no fancier reason than that they are ugly.

The aesthetic approach does not mean ignoring the micro-environment completely, still less rejecting every commandment ever prescribed by the priesthood. Priests and propagandists have every right to help shape our aesthetic preferences, for better or worse; they just should not be allowed to palm off their art as science. Purity is beautiful, and industrial byproducts in our drinking water are ugly, even if invisible and harmless. (Fluoride and chlorine in the water are sort of ugly, too, even if they give us healthier teeth and guts.)

There is also an aesthetic case to be made for frugality: we are not going to run out of space for dumps, but garbage is not beautiful, and making do with less often is. By the same token, however, profligate excess in the digging up of dumps is as ugly as profligate excess in the original dumping. T.R.-style conservationists would devote far more energy to parks and forests, to sewage treatment and cleaner smokestacks, and far less to part-per-billion traces of dioxin. Whatever impact pesticides may have, setting aside 100 million acres of forest will likely protect more birds than trying to bankrupt the DuPont corporation through the Superfund. The most beautiful way to purify water is

probably the most effective way, too: maintain unspoiled watersheds. While an "almost unanimous" priesthood forecast cooling in 1975, and warming in 1992, the conservationist just went on planting trees, the most pleasant and practical way to suck carbon out of the air, however it may (or may not) affect global climate.

As for a sense of humility, it might usefully take the form of a wariness of grand public works. T.R. endorsed his share of them; FDR endorsed many more. In retrospect, it seems clear that more of the megalithic government projects of those days should have been opposed. They certainly should be as we go forward. Yesterday the federal dollar erected huge dams and drained swamps; today federal money is used to unleash those same rivers, and convert sugar plantations back into swamp. (The swamp programs are doubly expensive because the government also props up the price of sugar.) A consistent conservatism might have blocked more of the before, and thus saved us from having to do much of the after.

A consistent philosophy of moderation and caution could also do much to blunt the vindictive, punitive impulses of the modern environmentalist—and thereby help make things greener. In the aftermath of the Exxon Valdez spill, the multi-billion dollar steam-cleaning of rocks in Prince William Sound did far more harm than good, stripping away the organic seeds of rebirth along with the oil. In places where the cleanup was left to the wind and the waves, "nature," Scientific American would conclude, "fared better on its own." But the frenzied demands that Exxon be made to pay and pay overwhelmed every other impulse, to the point where increasing the damage to the oil company became much more important than abating damage to the Sound.



So much for philosophy. Politically, the most important principle is that whereas the environmentalist mission is exclusionary, the conservationist mission is populist and inclusionary, welcoming humankind as an integral and legitimate part of nature's landscape. Conservationism does not see man as a tapeworm in the bowel of nature. Symbiosis is possible. And when a choice has to be made, as it sometimes must, people come first.

The old conservationists were reluctant collectivists; the new environmentalists, eager ones. Having successfully conflated eagles with snail darters, halogenated hydrocarbons with the mountain peaks of Yosemite, the new environmentalists claim to speak for them all. This is an agenda that fits easily into a left-wing shoe. Running the whole environment—literally, "that which surrounds"—is an opportunity the Left gladly welcomes. The micro-environment is the best part of all, requiring as it does a pervasive, manipulative, and intrusive bureaucracy—for the Left, political ambrosia.

In reply, the Right has nothing better to offer than a long tradition of creating parks, husbanding wildlife, and venerating natural heritages of every kind. Politically speaking, however, that should be enough. It is the old conservation, not the new, that welcomes the family in the camper. It is the old that dispenses with oligarchy and caters to the common tastes of the common man.

It is the old that is the legacy of T.R., a man who so loved to shoot wild animals that he resolved to conserve the vast open spaces in which they live.

Besides, too-eager collectivists never end up conserving anything; only the reluctant ones do. (Behold the land once called East Germany: Love Canal, border to border, perfected by Communists.) The old conservatism, of parks and forests and Winnebagoes, advances the green cause *because* of the Winnebago. The man in the Winnebago is enlisted in the cause precisely by an appeal to his own private sense of what is beautiful, and therefore to what he wants for himself and his family.

What is wrong with that?



Paul R. Ehrlich and Anne H. Ehrlich

## Brownlash: The New Environmental Anti-Science

Humanity is now facing a sort of slow-motion environmental Dunkirk. It remains to be seen whether civilization can avoid the perilous trap it has set for itself. Unlike the troops crowding the beach at Dunkirk, civilization's fate is in its own hands; no miraculous last-minute rescue is in the cards. Although progress has certainly been made in addressing the human predicament, far more is needed. Even if humanity manages to extricate itself, it is likely that environmental events will be defining ones for our grandchildren's generation—and those events could dwarf World War II in magnitude.

Sadly, much of the progress that has been made in defining, understanding, and seeking solutions to the human predicament over the past 30 years is now being undermined by an environmental backlash. We call these attempts to minimize the seriousness of environmental problems the *brownlash* because they help to fuel a backlash against "green" policies. While it assumes a variety of forms, the brownlash appears most clearly as an outpouring of seemingly authoritative opinions in books, articles, and media appearances that greatly distort what is or isn't known by environmental scientists. Taken together, despite the variety of its forms, sources, and issues addressed, the brownlash has produced what amounts to a body of anti-science—a twisting of the findings of empirical science—to bolster a predetermined worldview and to support a political agenda. By virtue of relentless repetition, this flood of anti-environmental sentiment has acquired an unfortunate aura of credibility.

It should be noted that the brownlash is not by any means a coordinated effort. Rather, it seems to be generated by a diversity of individuals and organizations. Some of its promoters have links to right-wing ideology and political groups. And some are well-intentioned individuals, including writers and public figures, who for one reason or another have bought into the notion that environmental regulation has become oppressive and needs to be severely weakened. But the most extreme—and most dangerous—elements are those who, while claiming to represent a scientific viewpoint, misstate scientific findings to support their view that the U.S. government has gone overboard with regulation, especially (but not exclusively) for environmental protection, and that subtle, long-term problems like global warming are nothing to worry about.



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The words and sentiments of the brownlash are profoundly troubling to us and many of our colleagues. Not only are the underlying agendas seldom revealed but, more important, the confusion and distraction created among the public and policymakers by brownlash pronouncements interfere with and prolong the already difficult search for realistic and equitable solutions to the human predicament.

Anti-science as promoted by the brownlash is not a unique phenomenon in our society; the largely successful efforts of creationists to keep Americans ignorant of evolution is another example, which is perhaps not entirely unrelated. Both feature a denial of facts and circumstances that don't fit religious or other traditional beliefs; policies built on either could lead our society into serious trouble.

Fortunately, in the case of environmental science, most of the public is fairly well informed about environmental problems and remains committed to environmental protection. When polled, 65 percent of Americans today say they are willing to pay good money for environmental quality. But support for environmental quality is sometimes said to be superficial; while almost everyone is in favor of a sound environment—clean air, clean water, toxic site cleanups, national parks, and so on—many don't feel that environmental deterioration, especially on a regional or global level, is a crucial issue in their own lives. In part this is testimony to the success of environmental protection in the United States. But it is also the case that most people lack an appreciation of the deeper but generally less visible, slowly developing global problems. Thus they don't perceive population growth, global warming, the loss of biodiversity, depletion of groundwater, or exposure to chemicals in plastics and pesticides as a personal threat at the same level as crime in their neighborhood, loss of a job, or a substantial rise in taxes.

So anti-science rhetoric has been particularly effective in promoting a series of erroneous notions, including:

- Environmental scientists ignore the abundant good news about the environment.
- Population growth does not cause environmental damage and may even be beneficial.
- Humanity is on the verge of abolishing hunger; food scarcity is a local or regional problem and not indicative of overpopulation.
- Natural resources are superabundant, if not infinite.
- There is no extinction crisis, and so most efforts to preserve species are both uneconomic and unnecessary.
- Global warming and acid rain are not serious threats to humanity.
- Stratospheric ozone depletion is a hoax.
- The risks posed by toxic substances are vastly exaggerated.
- Environmental regulation is wrecking the economy.

How has the brownlash managed to persuade a significant segment of the public that the state of the environment and the directions and rates in which it is changing are not causes for great concern? Even many individuals who are

sensitive to local environmental problems have found brownlash distortions of global issues convincing. Part of the answer lies in the overall lack of scientific knowledge among United States citizens. Most Americans readily grasp the issues surrounding something familiar and tangible like a local dump site, but they have considerably more difficulty with issues involving genetic variation or the dynamics of the atmosphere. Thus it is relatively easy to rally support against a proposed landfill and infinitely more difficult to impose a carbon tax that might help offset global warming.

Also, individuals not trained to recognize the hallmarks of change have difficulty perceiving and appreciating the gradual deterioration of civilization's life-support systems. This is why record-breaking temperatures and violent storms receive so much attention while a gradual increase in annual global temperatures—measured in fractions of a degree over decades—is not considered newsworthy. Threatened pandas are featured on television, while the constant and critical losses of insect populations, which are key elements of our life-support systems, pass unnoticed. People who have no meaningful way to grasp regional and global environmental problems cannot easily tell what information is distorted, when, and to what degree.

Decision-makers, too, have a tendency to focus mostly on the more obvious and immediate environmental problems—usually described as "pollution"—rather than on the deterioration of natural ecosystems upon whose continued functioning global civilization depends. Indeed, most people still don't realize that humanity has become a truly global force, interfering in a very real and direct way in many of the planet's natural cycles.

For example, human activity puts ten times as much oil into the oceans as comes from natural seeps, has multiplied the natural flow of cadmium into the atmosphere eightfold, has doubled the rate of nitrogen fixation, and is responsible for about half the concentration of methane (a potent greenhouse gas) and more than a quarter of the carbon dioxide (also a greenhouse gas) in the atmosphere today—all added since the industrial revolution, most notably in the past half-century. Human beings now use or co-opt some 40 percent of the food available to all land animals and about 45 percent of the available freshwater flows.

Another factor that plays into brownlash thinking is the not uncommon belief that environmental quality is improving, not declining. In some ways it is, but the claim of uniform improvement simply does not stand up to close scientific scrutiny. Nor does the claim that the human condition in general is improving everywhere. The degradation of ecosystem services (the conditions and processes through which natural ecosystems support and fulfill human life) is a crucial issue that is largely ignored by the brownlash. Unfortunately, the superficial progress achieved to date has made it easy to label ecologists the doom-sayers for continuing to press for change. At the same time, the public often seems unaware of the success of actions taken at the instigation of the environmental movement. People can easily see the disadvantages of environmental regulations but not the despoliation that would exist without them. Especially resentful are those whose personal or corporate ox is being gored when

they are forced to sustain financial losses because of a sensible (or occasionally senseless) application of regulations.

Of course, it is natural for many people to feel personally threatened by efforts to preserve a healthy environment. Consider a car salesperson who makes a bigger commission selling a large car than a small one, an executive of a petrochemical company that is liable for damage done by toxic chemicals released into the environment, a logger whose job is jeopardized by enforcement of the Endangered Species Act, a rancher whose way of life may be threatened by higher grazing fees on public lands, a farmer about to lose the farm because of environmentalists' attacks on subsidies for irrigation water, or a developer who wants to continue building subdivisions and is sick and tired of dealing with inconsistent building codes or U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service bureaucrats. In such situations, resentment of some of the rules, regulations, and recommendations designed to enhance human well-being and protect life-support systems is understandable.

Unfortunately, many of these dissatisfied individuals and companies have been recruited into the self-styled "wise-use" movement, which has attracted a surprisingly diverse coalition of people, including representatives of extractive and polluting industries who are motivated by corporate interests as well as private property rights activists and right-wing ideologues. Although some of these individuals simply believe that environmental regulations unfairly distribute the costs of environmental protection, some others are doubtless motivated more by a greedy desire for unrestrained economic expansion.

At a minimum, the wise-use movement firmly opposes most government efforts to maintain environmental quality in the belief that environmental regulation creates unnecessary and burdensome bureaucratic hurdles which stifle economic growth. Wise-use advocates see little or no need for constraints on the exploitation of resources for short-term economic benefits and argue that such exploitation can be accelerated with no adverse long-term consequences. Thus they espouse unrestricted drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, logging in national forests, mining in protected areas or next door to national parks, and full compensation for any loss of actual or potential property value resulting from environmental restrictions.

In promoting the view that immediate economic interests are best served by continuing business as usual, the wise-use movement works to stir up discontent among everyday citizens who, rightly or wrongly, feel abused by environmental regulations. This tactic is described in detail in David Helvarg's book, *The War Against the Greens*:

To date the Wise Use/Property Rights backlash has been a bracing if dangerous reminder to environmentalists that power concedes nothing without a demand and that no social movement, be it ethnic, civil, or environmental, can rest on its past laurels. . . . If the anti-enviros' links to the Farm Bureau, Heritage Foundation, NRA, logging companies, resource trade associations, multinational gold-mining companies, [and] OKV manufacturers . . . proves anything, it's that large industrial lobbies and transnational corporations have learned to play the grassroots game.

Wise-use proponents are not always candid about their motivations and intentions. Many of the organizations representing them masquerade as groups seemingly attentive to environmental quality. Adopting a strategy biologists call "aggressive mimicry," they often give themselves names resembling those of genuine environmental or scientific public-interest groups: National Wetland Coalition, Friends of Eagle Mountain, the Sahara Club, the Alliance for Environment and Resources, the Abundant Wildlife Society of North America, the Global Climate Coalition, the National Wilderness Institute, and the American Council on Science and Health. In keeping with aggressive mimicry, these organizations often actively work *against* the interests implied in their names—a practice sometimes called *greenscamming*.

One such group, calling itself Northwesterners for More Fish, seeks to limit federal protection of endangered fish species so the activities of utilities, aluminum companies, and timber outfits utilizing the region's rivers are not hindered. Armed with a \$2.6 million budget, the group aims to discredit environmentalists who say industry is destroying the fish habitats of the Columbia and other rivers, threatening the Northwest's valuable salmon fishery, among others.

Representative George Miller, referring to the wise-use movement's support of welfare ranching, overlogging, and government giveaways of mining rights, stated: "What you have . . . is a lot of special interests who are trying to generate some ideological movement to try and disguise what it is individually they want in the name of their own profits, their own greed in terms of the use and abuse of federal lands."

Wise-use sentiments have been adopted by a number of deeply conservative legislators, many of whom have received campaign contributions from these organizations. One member of the House of Representatives recently succeeded in gaining passage of a bill that limited the annual budget for the Mojave National Preserve, the newest addition to the National Parks System, to one dollar—thus guaranteeing that the park would have no money for upkeep or for enforcement of park regulations.

These same conservative legislators are determined to slash funding for scientific research, especially on such subjects as endangered species, ozone depletion, and global warming, and have legislated for substantial cutbacks in funds for the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Geological Survey, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and the Environmental Protection Agency. Many of them and their supporters see science as self-indulgent, at odds with economic interests, and inextricably linked to regulatory excesses.

The scientific justifications and philosophical underpinnings for the positions of the wise-use movement are largely provided by the brownlash. Prominent promoters of the wise-use viewpoint on a number of issues include such conservative think tanks as the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation. Both organizations help generate and disseminate erroneous brownlash ideas and information. Adam Myerson, editor of the Heritage Foundation's journal *Policy Review*, pretty much summed up the brownlash perspective by saying: "Leading scientists have done major work disputing the current henny-pennyism about global warming, acid rain, and other purported environmental catastro-



phes." In reality, however, most "leading" scientists support what Myerson calls henny-pennyism; the scientists he refers to are a small group largely outside the mainstream of scientific thinking.

In recent years, a flood of books and articles has advanced the notion that all is well with the environment, giving credence to this anti-scientific "What, me worry?" outlook. Brownlash writers often pepper their works with code phrases such as *sound science* and *balance*—words that suggest objectivity while in fact having little connection to what is presented. *Sound science* usually means science that is interpreted to support the brownlash view. *Balance* generally means giving undue prominence to the opinions of one or a handful of contrarian scientists who are at odds with the consensus of the scientific community at large.

Of course, while pro-environmental groups and environmental scientists in general may sometimes be dead wrong (as can anybody confronting environmental complexity), they ordinarily are not acting on behalf of narrow economic interests. Yet one of the remarkable triumphs of the wise-use movement and its allies in the past decade has been their ability to define public-interest organizations, in the eyes of many legislators, as "special interests"—not different in kind from the American Tobacco Institute, the Western Fuels Association, or other organizations that represent business groups.

But we believe there is a very real difference in kind. Most environmental organizations are funded mainly by membership donations; corporate funding is at most a minor factor for public-interest advocacy groups. There are no monetary profits to be gained other than attracting a bigger membership. Environmental scientists have even less to gain; they usually are dependent upon university or research institute salaries and research funds from peer-reviewed government grants or sometimes (especially in new or controversial areas where government funds are largely unavailable) from private foundations.

One reason the brownlash messages hold so much appeal to many people, we think, is the fear of further change. Even though the American frontier closed a century ago, many Americans seem to believe they still live in what the great economist Kenneth Boulding once called a "cowboy economy." They still think they can figuratively throw their garbage over the backyard fence with impunity. They regard the environmentally protected public land as "wasted" and think it should be available for their self-beneficial appropriation. They believe that private property rights are absolute (despite a rich economic and legal literature showing they never have been). They do not understand, as Pace University law professor John Humbach wrote in 1993, that "the Constitution does not guarantee that land speculators will win their bets."

The anti-science brownlash provides a rationalization for the short-term economic interests of these groups: old-growth forests are decadent and should be harvested; extinction is natural, so there's no harm in overharvesting economically important animals; there is abundant undisturbed habitat, so human beings have a right to develop land anywhere and in any way they choose; global warming is a hoax or even will benefit agriculture, so there's no need to limit the burning of fossil fuels; and so on. Anti-science basically claims we can keep the good old days by doing business as usual. But the problem is we can't.

Thus the brownlash helps create public confusion about the character and magnitude of environmental problems, taking advantage of the lack of consensus among individuals and social groups on the urgency of enhancing environmental protection. A widely shared social consensus, such as the United States saw during World War II, will be essential if we are to maintain environmental quality while meeting the nation's other needs. By emphasizing dissent, the brownlash works against the formation of any such consensus; instead it has helped thwart the development of a spirit of cooperation mixed with concern for society as a whole. In our opinion, the brownlash fuels conflict by claiming the environmental problems are overblown or nonexistent and that unbridled economic development will propel the world to new levels of prosperity with little or no risk to the natural systems that support society. As a result, environmental groups and wise-use proponents are increasingly polarized.

Unfortunately, some of that polarization has led to ugly confrontations and activities that are not condoned by the brownlash or by most environmentalists, including us. As David Helvaig stated, "Along with the growth of Wise Use/Property Rights, the last six years have seen a startling increase in intimidation, vandalism, and violence directed against grassroots environmental activists." And while confrontations and threats have been generated by both sides—most notably (but by no means exclusively) over the northern spotted owl protection plan—the level of intimidation engaged in by wise-use proponents is disturbing, to say the least. . . .

Fortunately, despite all the efforts of the brownlash to discourage it, environmental concern in the United States is widespread. Thus a public-opinion survey in 1995 indicated that slightly over half of all Americans felt that environmental problems in the United States were "very serious." Indeed, 85 percent were concerned "a fair amount" and 38 percent "a great deal" about the environment. Fifty-eight percent would choose protecting the environment over economic growth, and 65 percent said they would be willing to pay higher prices so that industry could protect the environment better. Responses in other rich nations have been similar, and people in developing nations have shown, if anything, even greater environmental concerns. These responses suggest that the notion that caring about the environment is a luxury of the rich is a myth. Furthermore, our impression is that young people care especially strongly about environmental quality—a good omen if true.

Nor is environmental concern exclusive to Democrats and "liberals." There is a strong Republican and conservative tradition of environmental protection dating back to Teddy Roosevelt and even earlier. Many of our most important environmental laws were passed with bipartisan support during the Nixon and Ford administrations. Recently, some conservative environmentalists have been speaking out against brownlash rhetoric. And public concern is rising about the efforts to cripple environmental laws and regulation posed by right-wing leaders in Congress, thinly disguised as "deregulation" and "necessary budget-cutting." In January 1996, a Republican pollster, Linda Divall, warned that "our party is out of sync with mainstream American opinion when it comes to the environment."

Indeed, some interests that might be expected to sympathize with the wise-use movement have moved beyond such reactionary views. Many leaders in corporations such as paper companies and chemical manufacturers, whose activities are directly harmful to the environment, are concerned about their firms' environmental impacts and are shifting to less damaging practices. Our friends in the ranching community in western Colorado indicate their concern to us every summer. They want to preserve a way of life and a high-quality environment—and are as worried about the progressive suburbanization of the area as are the scientists at the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory. Indeed, they have actively participated in discussions with environmentalists and officials of the Department of the Interior to set grazing fees at levels that wouldn't force them out of business but also wouldn't subsidize overgrazing and land abuse.

Loggers, ranchers, miners, petrochemical workers, fishers, and professors all live on the same planet, and all of us must cooperate to preserve a sound environment for our descendants. The environmental problems of the planet can be solved only in a spirit of cooperation, not one of conflict. Ways must be found to allocate fairly both the benefits and the costs of environmental quality.

## POSTSCRIPT

### Are Environmental Regulations Too Restrictive?

The effects of "wise use" policies can be seen in Douglas Gantenbein's "Old Growth for Sale," *Audubon* (May/June 1998), in which the author says that efforts to reduce logging of centuries-old trees on federal lands have failed. Such results would not surprise the Ehrlichs, who, in "Ehrlich's Fables," *Technology Review* (January 1997), write about "a sampling of the myths, or fables, that the promoters of 'sound science' and 'balance' are promulgating about issues relating to population and food, the atmosphere and climate, toxic substances, and economics and the environment."

The issue has found new life in the debate over whether or not the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) should be opened to oil drilling. Supporters of drilling put human needs first, with one writer saying that the ANWR should be fair game because it is a forlorn, unattractive, uninhabitable hellhole (see Jonah Goldberg, "Ugh, Wilderness!" *National Review* [August 6, 2001]).

In the Worldwatch Institute's *State of the World 1999* (W. W. Norton, 1999), Lester R. Brown says, "As we look forward to the twenty-first century, it is clear that satisfying the projected needs of an ever larger world population with the economy we now have is simply not possible. . . . Human societies cannot continue to prosper while the natural world is progressively degraded." "Catastrophe can be avoided, but not if we insist on doing things the way we always have."

Since the 1992 Earth Summit (the UN Conference on Environment and Development) in Rio de Janeiro, the world's environmental problems have actually gotten worse. But according to Christopher Flavin, in "The Legacy of Rio," *State of the World 1997* (W. W. Norton, 1997), the answer does not lie in some centralized world government but "in an eclectic mix of international agreements, sensible government policies, efficient use of private resources, and bold initiatives by grassroots organizations and local governments."

In those nations that have ignored environmental issues and refused to regulate, the problems have grown much worse. See Mike Edwards, "Lethal Legacy: Pollution in the Former USSR," *National Geographic* (August 1994), which begins, "The story on these pages is not a pretty one. It stems from decades of neglect and abuse of a vast and beautiful land. . . . In their ruthless drive to exploit and industrialize their nation, Soviet leaders gave little thought to the health of the people or to the lands that they ruled."

