

LECTURE

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Individuals, Liberty, and the Environment: Challenging the Foundations of the Green Establishment

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Abstract

Liberty is our nation's central organizing principle, and environmental policies must therefore be consistent with this principle. Policies that emanate from liberty are consistent with holding human well-being as the most important measure of environmental policy. Freedom fosters scientific inquiry, technological innovation, entrepreneurship, rapid information exchange, accuracy, and flexibility. Additionally, there is a strong, statistically demonstrable correlation between economic freedom and environmental performance. What is needed is a set of principles to guide environmental thinking in a way that is consistent with our commitment to individual liberty, limited government, and free markets. These principles are embodied in the American Conservation Ethic.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/hl1214>

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Working in the environmental realm, we are deluged with bad news. We are told that:

- Humans are degrading natural resources, disrupting the delicate ecological balance, the web of life—Earth as a living, breathing entity. By and large, Earth's natural resources are fragile, finite, and destined to degradation and decline, and even supposedly “renewable” natural resources are threatened given the rate at which they are now being depleted. This destruction is unsustainable. We are approaching points of no return: a tipping point for the acceleration of global warming, the line where the extinction rate creates runaway ecological catastrophe or irrevocable injury to water, air, or other fragile resources.
- Human consumption drives the degradation and destruction, and as population grows, so does the impact.
- Technological advances magnify our ability to degrade and deplete natural resources.
- Profits from meeting the increasing consumption-driven demand

KEY POINTS

- The key to effective environmental stewardship is to better understand renewable natural resources and the relationships among them.
- We need to use science to create policies that result in real and significant environmental benefits.
- We should tap the free market and property rights to achieve environmental goals.
- We should approach environmental issues on a site- and situation-specific basis.
- We need to tap the inherent drive for efficiency through technological improvement.
- We must recognize that humans are the most important resource and liberty is something we choose and refuse to sacrifice.
- Applying these principles improves our ability to use our natural resources wisely and conserve them for the benefit of current and future generations.

enable further technological advances, establishing a vicious cycle of increasing destruction.

- The array and magnitude of the threats humans present demand action even if some threats are speculative and even if the costs of the proposed actions are enormous.
- Consequently, science can no longer be value neutral when employed in the public policy arena and should determine environmental policies.
- Government regulation and ownership—centralized and top-down—are necessary to protect Earth's natural resources.
- Making society environmentally sustainable will require social transformation for undeveloped nations with explosive birthrates and especially for developed nations with disproportionate per capita consumption of resources. Achieving this will require altering, eroding, or jettisoning obsolescent cultural concepts, legacies, and institutions: the institution of property rights; the Judeo-Christian concept of dominion (the according of lesser values to non-human species); American notions of social and geographic mobility; and, clearly, consumption-oriented behavior. While many may resist transforming to environmentally sustainable lifestyles, policies must establish new norms that put us in greater harmony with the Earth. Opposition to these policies will eventually wane, and ascending generations will have altered—meaning lowered—expectations tempered

by their greater environmental awareness.

This sounds ominous. I have asked other friendly audiences, “What do these ideas have in common?” I have gotten many different answers, but the most common by far was that these ideas are used to support command-and-control policies.

The Consequences of Wrongheaded Ideas

That is definitely true. Ideas like these have shaped the spines and ribs of much environmental thinking and, consequently, relevant institutions, laws, and policies:

- The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the National Environmental Policy Act, and the Clean Air Act in 1970;
- The Clean Water Act (Amendments to Federal Water Pollution Control) in 1972; and
- The Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973.

These ideas really began to take hold four decades ago in the Nixon era of wage and price controls, a command and control-friendly time frame. But while the command-and-control answer is true, the answer I was seeking was simpler, and it is this: While there are instances, events, and examples that those who believe these ideas can point to in defense of their worldview, the reality is that, in general, these ideas are wrong. They are wrong, and wrong-headed ideas have consequences.

- Environmental groups opposed capturing the last few wild California Condors so that they

could be captivity bred and argued instead for death—extinction—with dignity. Really? We are going to let this fascinating bird with a nine-foot wingspan—albeit one that sticks its head in rotting carcasses—go extinct to preserve its dignity? Nearly 40 years after the ESA's enactment, we keep adding critters to the list with little evidence that the program generally works and much evidence that it does not.

- Some of you from the Southwest will recall an incident where bureaucrats labored over waiving restrictions of the Wilderness Act to allow helicopter rescue of a lost Boy Scout. There have similarly been debates about allowing disabled individuals to have access to wilderness areas because they needed a mechanical device—say something like a wheelchair. Really? What purpose does thinking like this serve?
- All of you are aware of the left's push to restrict U.S. CO₂ emissions, although the effects upon temperature of doing so may not even be detectable, while the costs would be staggering. Really? This defies logic.
- And then there's EPA and wetlands. This beflowered agency sought to whimsically enforce wetlands regulations against the owners of a dry residential lot in Idaho. What was the possible environmental benefit?

Up to this point, we have raised issues like these, pointed out things that were stupid or wrong, and opposed bad policies. However, those in the political realm who are

sympathetic to us have generally had few choices as to where they could make their stand.

Those with constituencies who understand these issues, who know the dishonesty of the environmental establishment—typically these are rural and, consequently, declining constituencies—could be firm in their opposition to wrongheaded green policies. They could afford to “just say no.” Others, however, while they might be sympathetic, are daunted by the greens. Often, such officials take the position that they will only do some of what the greens want. This is not a compromise—it is just slow capitulation.

For our allies, what is needed are principles to guide their environmental thinking—their positions—in a way that is consistent with the rest of their worldview, with their commitments to and championing of individual liberty, limited government, and free markets.

With ideas that are consistent with one’s overall worldview, you can argue with more passion and confidence and therefore are more persuasive. With such ideas, one has a firm footing, which is essential as none of us can master the facts for every single issue. And with principles, we can seek to engage in debates on ground of our choosing.

Principles of the American Conservation Ethic

The principles we think should provide such a foundation are not of my own making. Becky Norton Dunlop, George Dunlop, Kathleen White, Alan Moghissi, Jim Streeter, and Lisa Jaeger contributed to these ideas. And we did not just conceive of them. These are ideas that have been

tested and honed for years. They are almost an antithesis of the ominous worldview I presented up front.

However, compared to the worldview—the voodoo—of the environmental establishment, these ideas are shiny new: vibrant, crisp, and clean. And most important, these principles are grounded in reality. These are ideas ready to ascend as the flaws within the obsolescent thinking of Nixon-era policies become increasingly evident.

These principles, all eight, are covered in more depth in the publication provided to you,¹ but I will touch upon them briefly now. They are:

Principle #1: People are the most important, unique, and precious resource. This is both a value statement and a recognition of the power of human creativity. We believe that the inherent value of each individual is greater than the inherent value of any other resource. Accordingly, human well-being, which incorporates such measures as health and safety, is the foremost measure of the quality of the environment. Simply put, a policy cannot be good for the environment if it is bad for people. Moreover, this principle recognizes that human intellect and accumulated knowledge are the only means by which the environment can be willfully improved or modified.

The power of human creativity was most famously demonstrated by a bet between Julian Simon and Paul Ehrlich. Simon, a great free-market thinker, believed that human creativity was the ultimate resource. Ehrlich, who constantly sells catastrophe, sees us as a plague. He even devised an equation: $I = P \times A \times T$, in

which “I” (negative environmental impact) equals “P” (people) times “A” (affluence) times “T” (technology). We are reduced to nothing more than a negative variable, and the renaissance—progress itself—is illusory.

Many years ago, Simon bet Ehrlich that any basket of resources Ehrlich picked would go down in price over time. Ehrlich was sure that he would win because as population increases, demand increases, reducing supply. This would be especially so for finite materials. If present trends continue, prices should go up. Ehrlich picked a group of metals: What could be more finite?

Simon won. When the wager was up, every single metal Ehrlich had picked went down in price—several even without accounting for inflation. They went down because present trends don’t continue. They don’t continue because the ultimate resource—human creativity—changes things. The ultimate resource resulted in things like the discovery of new supplies, more efficient mining techniques, or the development of substitutes.

Principle #2: Renewable natural resources are resilient and dynamic and respond positively to wise management. These resources—trees, plants, soil, air, water, fish, and wildlife—are the resources upon which we depend for food, clothing, medicine, shelter, and innumerable other human needs. Such resources are regenerated through growth, reproduction, or other naturally occurring processes that cleanse, cycle, or otherwise create them anew. These characteristics make it possible to use renewable resources now while ensuring that

1. See *Environmental Conservation: Eight Principles of the American Conservation Ethic* (Washington: The Heritage Foundation, 2012), <http://www.heritage.org/research/projects/environmental-conservation>.

they are conserved for future generations.

Principle #3: Private property protections and free markets provide the most promising new opportunities for environmental improvements. The reality is that ownership inspires stewardship. Whether for economic, recreational, or aesthetic benefit, private property owners have the incentive both to enhance their resources and to protect them. Polluting another's property is to trespass or to cause injury. Polluters, not those who are most vulnerable in the political process, should pay for damages done to others. The guarantee that people can reap the fruits of their own labor inspires the investments of time, money, and effort necessary to expand upon centuries of accumulated wisdom.

Principle #4: Efforts to reduce, control, and remediate pollution should achieve real environmental benefits. Science provides invaluable tools to do just that. One is risk assessment, through which we may rationally weigh risks to human health or assess and measure other environmental impacts. Another is cost and benefit analysis, through which we may measure actions designed to reduce, control, and remediate pollution or other environmental impacts so that we can have a cleaner, healthier, and safer environment. Tools such as these, not the "precautionary principle," are mostly likely to help us achieve real environmental benefits.

Principle #5: As we accumulate scientific, technological, and artistic knowledge, we learn how to get more from less. The reality is that technology promotes efficiency,

and through efficiency we substitute information for other resources, resulting in more output from less input. Technological advancement confers environmental benefits like more miles per gallon, more board-feet per acre of timber, a higher agricultural yield per cultivated acre, and more GDP per unit of energy. As the economics writer Warren Brookes used to say, "the learning curve is green."

Principle #6: Management of natural resources should be conducted on a site- and situation-specific basis. Resource management should take into account that environmental conditions will vary from location to location and from time to time. A site- and situation-specific approach takes advantage of the fact that those who are closest to a resource are also those who are best able to manage it. A site- and situation-specific approach avoids the institutional power and ideological concerns that dominate politicized central planning. Where laws and regulations to achieve environmental goals must be set, we should ensure that they are meaningful, measurable, and objective and contain bright legal lines—rather than bureaucratic requirements—as to how such standards are to be met.

Principle #7: Science should be employed as a tool to guide public policy. Science should inform societal decisions, but ultimately, such decisions should be based on ethics, beliefs, consensus, and other processes. A law is a determination to force compliance with a code of conduct. Laws go beyond that which can be established with scientific certainty; indeed, laws are based on normative values and beliefs and are a commitment to use force.

Principle #8: The most successful environmental policies emanate from liberty. Americans have chosen liberty as the central organizing principle of our great nation. Consequently, environmental policies must be consistent with this most cherished principle. Choosing policies that emanate from liberty is consistent with holding human well-being as the most important measure of environmental policies. Freedom unleashes the forces most needed to improve our environment. It fosters scientific inquiry, technological innovation, entrepreneurship, rapid information exchange, accuracy, and flexibility. The reality is that there is a strong and statistically demonstrable positive correlation between economic freedom and environmental performance.

The Key to Effective Stewardship

Briefly, those are the principles of the American Conservation Ethic. In a nutshell, we recognize that:

- The key to effective environmental stewardship is to better understand renewable natural resources and the relationships among them;
- We must use science as a guide for public policy;
- We need to create policies that result in real and significant environmental benefits;
- We should tap the free market and property rights to achieve environmental goals;
- We must approach environmental issues on a site- and situation-specific basis;

- We need to tap the inherent and relentless drive for efficiency through technological improvement; and
- While doing all of this, we recognize humans as the most important resource and liberty as something we choose and refuse to sacrifice.

Applying this knowledge improves our ability to use our natural resources wisely and conserve them for the benefit of current and future generations.

All Americans aspire to improve upon our tradition of wisely using and conserving the world around us for generations to come. We believe the American Conservation Ethic embodied in these eight principles is the way to fulfill these aspirations.

While we may not have all the expertise gathered here to answer each and every environmental question, we—not being planners for the state—should not expect to. What we recognize is that somewhere out there, among the greatest resources—humans, human intellect, human creativity—there is an answer and

that having principles such as these can help us identify it.

—**Robert Gordon** is Senior Adviser for Strategic Outreach in the External Relations Department at The Heritage Foundation. He delivered these remarks at a meeting held in conjunction with publication of a new Heritage Foundation study, *Environmental Conservation: Eight Principles of the American Conservation Ethic*, in Washington, D.C.