

Cover Story:

Are the Greens losing their grip? U.S. environmental movement

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By Richard Minitier

By all indications, the environmental movement ought to be entering a golden age. The vice presidency of the country is held by the author of a popular environmental book. Leaders of green groups have been appointed to key positions in the Clinton administration. More Americans describe themselves as "environmentalists" than ever before and concern for the environment pervades every aspect of American life, from recycling garbage to eating "rain forest-friendly" ice cream.

Environmentalism, it would appear, has arrived.

Yet nearly the opposite is true. A mixture of economic and cultural changes is diminishing the power of the movement, which has been shaking up politics for more than 20 years, and several key sectors that support environmentalists - the government and, surprisingly, the media - are becoming noticeably less friendly.

On the surface, the environmental movement seems to have allies in all the right places. Vice President Al Gore, whose environmental call to arms, *Earth in the Balance*, made best-seller lists for weeks, is now in a unique position to influence environmental policy. One of his first moves was to disband former Vice President Dan Quayle's Council on Competitiveness, which sought to lessen the burden of environmental regulation on businesses. Gore's former Senate aide, Carol Browner, now heads the Environmental Protection Agency. Bruce Babbitt, a former president of the League of Conservation Voters, is secretary of the interior. George Frampton, former president of the Wilderness Society, is assistant secretary of the interior for fish, wildlife and parks. Molly Beattie, a well-known Vermont environmental activist who lives in a solar-heated house in the woods, now runs the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Rafe Pomerance left the World Resources Institute to direct international environmental policy at the State Department, and Brooks Yeager resigned from the National Audubon Society to take a post at the Interior Department. Other environmentalists are in lesser positions at the Interior, Energy and State departments. If the old maxim from the Reagan administration - "people are policy" - is correct, this should be the greenest administration ever.

Instead, the Clinton administration, which on the campaign trail repeatedly promised change, mostly has continued George Bush's environmental policies. George has done little on environmental issues - and what he has done hasn't always been popular with environmentalists. The administration's plan to reduce emissions of gases that it believes contribute to global warming was attacked by the greens. The Climate Change Action Plan uses mostly voluntary measures, which led Sierra Club spokesman Daniel Becker to tell Newsweek that it "looks global warming squarely in the eye and blinks."

The planned elimination of the president's Council on Environmental Quality, a small executive agency set up by Richard Nixon, provoked a heated debate between Gore and environmental leaders. Attempts to raise grazing and mining fees on federal lands, which set off a chorus of protests from Western lawmakers, received little support from environmentalists, who wanted them raised even higher. (Ranchers say fee increases would put many of them out of business.) Environmentalists were so unhappy about grazing and mining fees, Pamela Gilbert of Ralph Nader's Congress Watch told *Washington Monthly*, that they decided to sit on their hands as President Clinton's Btu tax withered on the vine - and a broad-based energy tax has been a goal of environmentalists for at least two decades.

Another troubling sign for environmentalists is that the once-friendly media are beginning to treat the greens like any other interest group. Environmentalists are getting skeptical accounts from unexpected sources: National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service's MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour, both of which have critically examined federal wetlands regulations, and newspapers such as the *Washington Post*, which ran a major story questioning the scientific basis for global warming, and the *New York Times*, which published front-page articles questioning the science behind pesticide regulation and detailing the human costs of expanding national parks.

Moreover, grass roots support is drying up. In the past, environmentalists posted handbills on college campuses asking for volunteers; now they often pay professionals to set up local front groups to assure the passage of ballot initiatives. The change is evident: Virtually all environmental bond acts and ballot initiatives, from New York's Environmental Quality Bond Act to California's Big Green ballot initiative, lost at the polls in 1990 and 1992.

The vital signs of any political movements are measured in dollars, donors and staff. The top 10 environmental organizations have combined budgets in excess of \$ 500 million. That sounds impressive, but the indicators are pointing downward. For almost all the major environmental groups, contributions are flat or falling, recruitment of new members is off and donors are drifting away. Vacant staff positions are not being filled and work forces are being trimmed. In the go-go 1980s, the Wilderness Society, the National Audubon Society and Friends of the Earth grew too fast; now they are laden with overhead they no longer can afford. The League of Conservation Voters, the so-called green PAC largely responsible for electing Democratic Sen. Bob Kerrey of Nebraska, was in debt for much of 1989 and 1990.

As many green groups flirt with red ink, cost-cutting measures are on the rise. The National Wildlife Federation, which saw revenues fall \$ 77 million in 1991, dismissed 56 employees that year and left another 54 positions unfilled. It also eliminated its book and school programs. Green-peace U.S.A. temporarily reduced its direct mail appeals from 5 million pieces per month to 500,000, fired 20 staff members, left about 30 positions vacant and closed its offices in Boston and Fort Lauderdale, Fla. The Sierra Club ran a deficit of more than \$ 1 million in 1990, according to the New York-based National Charities Information Bureau, and pruned excess staff. Funding was flat for 1991, the bureau reported. The Wilderness Society also cut its staff and the National Resources Defense Council held employee raises to an average of 1 percent.

The recession that began in 1990 accounts for some of the downturn in contributions. But there are other trends at work. By and large, the movements has captured almost all of its potential

funding and membership base. The baby boom generation, always a major source of money for green causes, is now in its peak earning years. With incomes growing more gradually and children's tuition bills due, the boomers won't be increasing their donations anytime soon. Foundations, which once provided the bulk of financial support for national environmental organizations, now are diverting more of their funds to regional and local environmental groups.

The result? Increasingly, national environmental groups are turning from donors to merchandising, government subsidies and corporate product tie-ins to fill their coffers.

So far, this approach is succeeding, but at a price. MCI now offers new customers the chance to donate 5 percent of their monthly telephone bill to one of four major green groups: The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, the National Audubon Society and the National Wildlife Federation; the arrangement is worth as much as \$ 500,000 a year for each group.

Nearly every environmental organization has launched some kind of merchandising effort because federal laws allow everything from calendars to teddy bears to be considered "nature education materials" for tax purposes. The National Wildlife Federation, which may receive up to half its budget from merchandising, licenses its logo for toys, T-shirts, teddy bears and greeting cards. Greenpeace offers greeting cards, stationery and wrapping paper.

In addition, the National Audubon Society and other are working with Visa and MasterCard to set up "affinity card programs," in which a small percentage of every charge would go to the environmental groups.

All this creative fund-raising makes national nonprofit groups less dependent on their memberships - and, perhaps, less responsive to them. If environmental organizations see their revenues grow as their public support shrinks, it could turn into a public relations disaster.

The public already is becoming more skeptical of environmentalists, who are seen by many as elitist. Some groups unwittingly have contributed to this image problem. The largest nonprofit environmental groups have erected large, corporate-style headquarters in Washington. National Wildlife Federation President Jay Hair, whose annual salary and benefits exceed \$ 200,000, hobnobs with DuPont and Monsanto executives and likes to be chauffeured around town. The Nature Conservancy, a nonprofit organization with 1992 revenues in excess of \$ 140 million, has six vice presidents making more than \$ 100,000 a year.

Moreover, the leadership of major environmental groups is almost uniformly white, mostly male and disproportionately educated in Ivy League schools. That is true of the environmentalists in government as well. A Knight-Ridder/Tribune News Service survey of Clinton's first 518 appointments finds that about 80 percent hail from the Northeast or the West Coast, and at least one-third attended Harvard or Yale or both. This amounts to "way too much Brooks Brothers and way too little Sears, Roebuck," maverick Texas Democrat Jim Hightower told Washington Monthly.

Charges of elitism aside, environmentalists also are losing public support because they no longer concern themselves with issues that excite the public. When activists gathered on the first Earth Day in 1970, they saw a nation beset with severe environmental problems. The Cuyahoga River in Cleveland was so polluted it caught fire. Automobile exhausts fouled the air. And species such as

the California condor and the bald eagle were vanishing.

The resulting call to arms produced about 100 major pieces of federal legislation during the next decade, including the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act and the Endangered Species Act. Great progress was made. Poisonous rivers were cleaned up. Automobile-related air pollution fell 96 percent. Many species threatened with extinction, including the condor and the bald eagle, are now recovering.

Environmental groups thrived as well. Dozens of new organizations were formed in the 1970s. Those young activists who didn't start their own groups succeeded in slowly taking over old-line conservation organizations such as the National Wildlife Federation, which were founded by sportsmen decades before. Though they had little interest in hunting, environmentalists knew that controlling these organizations was the key to prestige, money and the political establishment. The mission of the conservation foundations was irrevocably politicized; the old conservation ethos, more an avocation than an ideology, was scraped away and replaced by radical environmentalism. The change is best captured in the movement's holidays: benign Arbor Day was replaced by the politically oriented Earth Day.

Having made tremendous headway in the 1970s, these groups turned their attention to less critical issues in the 1980s. They began to focus on private rather than public property, losing public support and prompting grass roots resistance. Regulations implementing Bush's "no net loss of wetlands" pledge proved to be a turning point.

In 1989, then-Epa Administrator William K. Reilly and others widely redefined wetlands so that the category included ground that was wet for only two weeks a year. (Wetlands regulation originally was designed to protect swamps and bogs.) Congress has never passed a wetlands protection act. Lacking that, regulators relied on a string of court cases brought by environmentalists to form the legal basis for wetlands protection. Without any real guidance from Congress, Reilly and others devised regulations that idled tractors on irrigated farmlands in the Midwest, stopped the construction of homeless shelters in Alaska and outraged tens of thousands of small landowners across the country. Soon rural landowners were organizing around kitchen tables to fight federal restrictions, and the property rights movement was born. By 1990, the movement was coalescing into a national network, and there now are more than 500 property rights groups varying in size from a few thousand members to half a million.

Bush's enforcement of the Endangered Species Act also backfired. An effort to protect the northern spotted owl, which is not genetically different from the northern California owl, threatened to shut down tens of thousands of acres of prime timberland. Thousands of high-paying timber jobs were on the line in the sparsely settled Pacific Northwest. Loggers quickly came to view the issue as them versus the owl. Even as "filet of spotted owl" began turning up on menus in the Northwest, few in the White House realized that this grim humor neatly captured most loggers' deep-seated resentment of environmental regulations.

A meeting in a Nevada hotel soon transformed the spotted owl from the butt of bitter jokes to a rallying cry to oppose environmentalism, root and branch. One of those gathered to launch the movement was Ron Arnold, a professional right-wing activist based in Battle Ground, Wash. He

gave the movement its name and manifesto: Henceforth, these disgruntled loggers called themselves the "wise use movement" and locked arms with ranchers, miners, hunters and recreationalists to oppose environmental regulations throughout the West. Unlike the property rights movement, in which women play key roles and which relies heavily on small donations, the wise use movement is led mostly by men and receives some corporate support, albeit mostly from small logging and mining concerns.

After eight years of stonewalling during the Reagan administration, Republican appointees finally opened their doors to environmentalists under Bush. By expanding wetlands and endangered species rules favored by environmentalists, these Bush officials forced a sizable portion of the Republican coalition into the opposition and created the first grass roots resistance to environmental policies.

The weight of the property rights and wise use movements is beginning to cost the environmental lobby victories in the one arena where the greens usually win - Congress.

The first item on the wish list of Washington environmentalists is the National Biological Survey. Interior Secretary Babbitt touted it as a formula to "avoid environmental train wrecks," in which endangered species rules provoke showdowns between environmentalists and landowners. The survey is billed as the environmental equivalent of the U.S. Geological Survey, which began in the 1880s as a way of mapping the young nation. The idea is to map all ecosystems so policymakers will no longer have to debate in the dark.

The scope of the survey is almost unlimited. It will "catalog everything that walks, crawls, swims or flies around this country," boasted Rep. Gerry Studds, a Massachusetts Democrat who is chairman of the House Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee.

Critics call Babbitt's survey "the National B.S."

"It is a Trojan horse for the radical environmental movement to take private property without compensation," says Peggy Reigle, chairwoman of the Fairness to Land Owners Committee, based in Cambridge, Md. Reigle's fears were confirmed when Babbitt's science adviser, Thomas Lovejoy, told a conference room full of environmentalists that the survey will "map the whole nation for all biology and determine development for the whole country and regulate it all because that is our obligation as set forth in the Endangered Species Act." Lovejoy's words struck a chord with land rights activists who feared that a program to "determine development for the whole country" will lead to national zoning. But that is a dream for some environmentalists who never got over the defeat of Arizona Rep. Morris Udall's national zoning bill in the 1970s.

By the time the survey reached the floor of the House, its funding was already assured. Though Congress had ignored its own rules against appropriating funds for a project before the project itself was authorized, there seemed to be nothing that could stop the survey. Here property rights activists and lawmakers friendly to their cause flexed their muscles for the first time. After a sharp debate, the House passed four amendments. One, sponsored by Louisiana Democrat W.J. "Billy" Tauzin, barred the survey from using volunteers. Other federal land scouting programs, such as the Interior Department's recently discontinued National Natural Landmarks Program, used volunteers who sometimes trespassed on and vandalized private property and often recorded

false data that needlessly ensnared landowners in federal red tape. An amendment sought by California Democrat Calvin Dooley required scientific peer review of the survey's results. In the past, incomplete scientific data was used to regulate property by federal officials who argued that they were "better safe than sorry." Louisiana Democrat Jimmy Hayes pushed through an amendment to require that all federal land must be surveyed before any private property. Finally, an amendment backed by North Carolina Republican Charles Taylor forbade trespassing on private land and allowed landowners to review the survey data when completed.

Each of these amendments was staunchly opposed by environmentalists and the Clinton administration. The day after they passed, Babbitt asked Studts to pull the bill. The administration no longer could support it with those restrictions. It was the worst defeat for the environmental movement in more than a decade.

The survey is now being debated in the Senate, where Mississippi Republican Trent Lott plans to offer similar property rights amendments.

At a recent gathering of the Society of Environmental Journalists, Babbitt expressed great surprise that anything as "plain vanilla" as the National Biological Survey could provoke such opposition. He said he was particularly surprised by the opposition of Louisiana's Hayes. "I called him up and I said, (Mr. Hayes, you're a tricky, no-good devil," Babbitt said jokingly, "(What you are doing is using my bill as the stage for a dress rehearsal debate about the Endangered Species Act,' and he sort of smiled and said, "That is exactly what I'm doing." If the upcoming Endangered Species Act reauthorization fight resembles the debate about the NBS, environmentalists are in for a rough ride.

No matter who wins this struggle, the outcome is sure to change America as environmentalists and property owners come into conflict. Whoever prevails will remake the political landscape. If the property rights movements wins, some regulations would disappear and others would become more costly to enforce. If the environmentalists succeed, the few remaining limits on regulation would be swept away.

In warfare it is best to know your enemy. For environmentalists, the first reconnaissance mission began in a small office outside Charlottesville, Va. There Debra Callahan planned a national study of land rights groups. Speaking extemporaneously at a meeting of the Environmental Grantmakers Association last year, Callahan revealed her findings. "When you think of the property rights movement you think of command and control, top-heavy, corporate-funded front groups that are organizing local people to get involved," she says. Based on her 50-state survey, Callahan says, that's just not true. "In fact, the more we dig into it...we have come to the conclusion that this is pretty much generally a grass roots movement. Some of the grass roots groups are dirt poor. Which is a problem, because it means there's no silver bullets." In other words, there is no easy way to stop the land rights movement.

Calling the property rights movement very effective, Callahan said, "The movement is actually growing quickly at the grass roots, as it finds its base. This is happening in every single state." Callahan recommended an aggressive campaign "to find the ideological divisions in the movement and exploit them."

Callahan's campaign quickly swung into action. The winter 1992 newsletter of the Conservation Law Foundation, which is funded by members of the Environmental Grantmakers Association, attacked property rights groups as "a motley crowd of deceivers" that are "fronting a slick, industry-funded public relations campaign" with ties to timber and mining companies. Lumping together grass roots property rights organizations with industry-financed wise use groups follows Callahan's strategy of exploiting differences. Some greens also are studiously misrepresenting the origins and makeup of the land rights movement, linking it to fringe movements and exaggerating the scope of the change it seeks - "If they succeed, there will be no health and safety regulation."

This campaign probably will prove self-defeating. The land rights movement is growing rapidly at a time when funding and membership levels in environmental organizations remain flat. Though environmental organizations are likely to retain their clear advantage in numbers and dollars, full-scale resistance to the policies advocated by land rights activists probably will not succeed in the long run.

This confrontation is unnecessary. Maverick environmentalists and policy analysts favoring property rights are already finding common ground. If both sides can find a way to safeguard the environment without undermining property rights, the current political deadlock can be broken. But that would require a dramatic change in the terms of the environmental debate.

Most of the problems environmentalists wish to solve through regulation of private property can be addressed by harnessing property rights instead. In a number of key areas, private property approaches to environmental protection have been tried - and proved successful. Nonprofit groups such as the Bozeman, Mont-based Political Economy Research Center have been working with small environmental organizations such as the Sand County Foundation of Madison, Wis., to develop market-oriented environmental policies. Studies by the center show that privately managed resources such as lakes, forests and even wildlife are healthier than their government-run counterparts.

Conservatives and conservationists agree that it is time to abolish government programs which harm the environment, including federal subsidies for logging on public lands, federal dams and water projects that disrupt ecosystems and farm subsidies that encourage the clearing of unused land.

On two contentious issues - wetlands and endangered species - this fragile coalition could make a big difference.

Existing government regulations are responsible for destroying most of America's major wetlands, either through farm subsidies that encouraged farmers to drain them or through canal- and dam-building projects. Also, an array of federal regulations make it difficult for landowners to protect coastal wetlands from erosion.

Prudent deregulation coupled with lower property taxes for wetlands could save most of those areas. This would give property owners a financial incentive to protect wetlands and minimize adverse impacts.

Of the more than 700 species that have been listed as threatened or endangered, only eight have recovered from endangered status. Four of those were listed as endangered by mistake. The other

four (all species of birds) recovered mostly due to private efforts.

In fact, property rights enabled one woman to save most of the hawk population of the Northeast at a time when several state governments were trying to eradicate the birds. The hawks passed through a "bottleneck" over Hawk Mountain in Pennsylvania on their seasonal migrations.

Rosalie Edge bought the mountain in the 1930s and founded a wildlife sanctuary there. She hired an armed guard to drive off hunters who were responsible for killing hundreds of hawks a day. Meanwhile, Pennsylvania was subsidizing the killing of hawks by paying a bounty for each bird. Private ownership of a habitat also is responsible for saving sea lions in northwestern California.

Within the next year, three major pieces of environmental legislation will be before Congress for reauthorization: Superfund, which is supposed to fund the cleanup of toxic waste sites; the Clean Water Act, used to regulate wetlands; and the Endangered Species Act. How effective the environmental movement will continue to be as a political force depends on whether it chooses confrontation or cooperation.

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