

Introduction

Take Back the Conservation Movement

By Dave Foreman 2006

In my 37 years as a conservationist, I have never beheld such bleak and dreary circumstances as I see today. The evidence for my dismay falls into three piles: the state of Nature, the power of anticonservationists, and appeasement and weakness within the conservation and environmental movements. None of this is reason for shrugging our shoulders and giving up, however. The bleakness we face is all the more reason to stand tall for our Nature-based values and to not flinch in the good fight. But it is important for us to understand the parts and pieces of our predicament, so we might find ways to do better.

The State of Nature

I recently wrote a book, *Rewilding North America*, which goes into considerable detail describing and analyzing the Seven Ecological Wounds that drive the Sixth Great Extinction, which is the fundamental fact and problem in the world today. Around the world, direct killing of wildlife, habitat destruction, habitat fragmentation, loss of ecological and evolutionary processes, invasion by exotic species and diseases, ecosystem pollution, and catastrophic climate change are worsening—and pushing more and more species over the brink into the dark abyss of extinction. We almost-seven-billion too-clever apes are solely to blame. Duke University ecologist Stuart Pimm has shown in careful, painstaking detail how humans are now taking 42 percent of Earth's Net Primary Productivity (NPP). As we add half again as many people in the next few decades, how much NPP will we be gobbling up? How much will be left for the other several million species with which we share Earth? Despite impressive successes here and there,

the overall state of Nature continues to decline. This is simple reality, despite the scolding we hear not to be doom-and-gloomers.

Power of the Anticonservationists

In the United States, the federal government has become the sworn enemy of conservation. Not only have the authoritarian right-wingers running the Presidency and Congress stopped any progress for the conservation and restoration of Nature, they are dedicated to overthrowing the twentieth century's legacy of conservation and environmental policy and programs. They are unabashedly trying to go back to the unfettered, uncaring era of the robber barons in the late nineteenth century. This revolution is both philosophical and practical. Bad as this is, the radical-right is also dedicated to shredding science, particularly biology, and time-traveling back to before the Enlightenment, certainly to before Darwin.

While the United States is an extraordinary political case, elsewhere some of the supposedly most civilized nations on the planet, such as Canada, Norway, and Japan, are again waging nineteenth-century crusades against wild Nature: frontier-forest mining, slaughter of troublesome animals (such as seals, wolves, bears), and commercial whaling, just for starters. Japanese, European, Chinese, and North American businesses are looting the last wild places for fish, timber, pulp, wildlife, minerals, and oil, opening up such places to further habitat destruction and bushmeat hunting by local people.

Although the radical-right control of the U.S. Presidency and Congress was gained by a very small margin in 2004 (no mandate), and was lost in Congress in 2006, it is backed by powerful and popular forces and by a shocking descent into prescientific irrationality by large parts of the public.

Appeasement and Weakness in the Conservation and Environmental Movements

Efforts to protect wild Nature and to clean up pollution face internal subversion from the right and left that leads to deep compromises not only on policies but also on bedrock principles. We can stuff these calls to back off into several sacks, including sustainable development, resourcism, Nature deconstruction, politically correct progressivism, and anthropocentric environmentalism—all of which I combine under the umbrella of *enviro-resourcism*. It is this internal weakening of conservation that *The Myth(s) of the Environmental Movement* pins down and opens up.

First, some brief definitions: conservation or Nature conservation is the movement to protect and restore wildlands and wildlife (Nature for its own sake); resourcism or resource conservation is the resource-extraction ideology of multiple-use/sustained yield as practiced by the U.S. Forest Service and other agencies around the world (Nature for people); environmentalism is the campaign to clean up pollution for human health and to make cities livable (the “built” environment for people). When they turn their attention to Nature, environmentalists can be either conservationists or resourcists. I call those environmentalists with a resourcist approach to wild Nature *enviro-resourcists*.

Internationally since the 1980s, conservation efforts to protect wildlands and habitat by means of national parks, game reserves, and other protected areas have been undermined as financial-aid agencies and even some top international conservation groups have shifted to promoting so-called sustainable development and community-based conservation over protected areas. Dutch botanist Marius Jacobs warned the IUCN against this approach in 1983 but went unheeded. Although these approaches are sometimes sound conservation tactics as part of a larger strategy that emphasizes large strictly protected areas and gun-totting wildlife protection, in

practice they have elbowed Nature into second place, and siphoned the economic benefits meant for local peasants into fat consulting fees for the poverty establishment and for bloated secret deposits in Swiss accounts for local thugs. This establishment undercutting of Nature conservation has been aided by the leftist passion of some anthropologists and other social engineers to reject protected areas in favor of indigenous extractive reserves and land redistribution for peasants (*socioambientalistaism* as it is called in Latin America). Shockingly, criticism of protected areas rides high in the pages even of *Conservation Biology*, and sustainable development gains more and more adherents in resource management graduate schools and large “conservation” organizations. In some circles “conservation” is seen as a poverty-alleviation tool, not as a way to protect wild species and habitats. Some members of the academic left have become deconstructors of Nature, denying that it independently exists, proclaiming that we invent it; therefore there is no reason to protect it. Right-wing advocates of resource extraction glom onto the arguments of the wilderness deconstructionists.

Pressured from the left and right during the last twenty-five years, conservation and environmental organizations worldwide have moved away from forthright calls for zero population growth, even though human overpopulation is the underlying cause of all conservation and environmental problems. We hear a growing drumbeat that there is a dearth of births and that developed nations face economic collapse because of fewer young people. Conservationists and environmentalists stand mostly silent in the face of this cornucopian madness. Similarly, the conservation and environmental movements in general shy away from acknowledging the reality of human-caused mass extinction. If we don't even clearly state the problem, how can we do anything about it?

We can also see a shift in the U.S. from conservation to resourcism among several prominent and influential entities. Once the preeminent conserver of biological diversity, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) has been steadily moving to a resourcist approach. They talk now of “working timberlands and ranches,” a fancy euphemism for logging and livestock grazing, and insist that their employees talk about people instead of Nature. Nonetheless, TNC also continues to protect priceless hot spots of biodiversity.

I am particularly concerned about the strengthening whip-hand enviro-resourcists hold over the conservation movement. Enviro-resourcists are generally progressive-movement professionals who believe that conservation should be about people, not Nature. They are found among staff and board members of grantmakers, consulting and training groups that help conservation groups with “organizational effectiveness,” media consultants watering down the messages of conservation groups, new leaders and staff members of conservation groups motivated by ambition and lacking a gut feeling for wilderness, and in the ranks of anthropologists and other social scientists working for poverty alleviation. With a crowbar of financial support and organizational control, enviro-resourcists break into conservation groups and push them, including grassroots wilderness groups, into enviro-resourcism in these ways: (1) Downplay Nature-for-its-own-sake values in favor of economic and other anthropocentric values as the reason for conservation; (2) Replace strict protected areas, such as wilderness areas and national parks, with sustainable development, ecosystem management, “working” ranches, and extractive reserves; (3) “Retire Cassandra” or downplay doom-and-gloom in favor of smiley-face optimism; (4) Negotiate with other “stakeholders,” including anticonservationists, for “win-win” compromises for land management; (5) Get measurable results, including the designation of new wilderness areas and other protected areas, even if they represent a net loss of wildness, and then

proclaim unvarnished victory—Canadians seem particularly good at this; and (6) Emphasize the health of the organization over its mission. Not all enviro-resourcists push all of these approaches. And many honestly believe they are saving conservation with their new, more sophisticated approaches.

Such enviro-resourcists are aided and abetted internationally by international funding institutions such as the World Bank and corporations, and by United Nations' agencies.

Several bright young men have gained a disturbing amount of attention with their recent speeches about the “death” of environmentalism. Insofar as they consider Nature protection at all, they demand that conservationists drop their priorities to focus on social justice and other anthropocentric progressive causes. Overall, they call on environmental organizations to essentially go out of business and just become part of the progressive wing within the Democratic Party. In the United States, the overwhelming identification of environmentalism with the progressive movement and the Democratic Party is a key reason that it lacks credibility with much of the American public.

Just as there has been a worrisome shift in attitudes among large segments of the public, so have there been troubling changes among members of the conservation public. To be blunt, many of the employees and activists with conservation groups are ignorant of our history and have not read the classic books of conservation. There is a stunning lack of intellectual curiosity in the movement. On the whole, staff and leaders of radical-right professional groups both read and think more than do conservationists and environmentalists (interestingly, most of the criticism of an earlier version of this paper was directed at this claim). As far as outdoor recreation goes, young people, who once would have been hikers and backpackers, now seek thrills on mountain bikes and thus cut themselves off from experiencing true wilderness and from

having self-interest in protecting roadless areas. I don't see kids outside messing around in little wild patches; they're inside, plugged in to a virtual reality.

Take Back the Conservation Movement

These are trends. Of course there are exceptions. There are true-blue conservationists in all of the outfits I mentioned above, including land- and wildlife-managing agencies. I underscore this: I am talking about *some* not *all* people and organizations within the broader entities I criticize. I am describing the direction conservation is going, not where it is at. Of those I do criticize, I may be a little rough but not mean. Indeed, wherever possible, I depersonalize my criticisms by not naming names. Nor do I damn enviro-resourcists for being bad people; I think most are well meaning (though there are some exceptions). Some are friendly acquaintances and allies of mine on certain issues. Dwelling on the exceptions, though, keeps us from doing something about the real problems. I'm not doing "nuance" here. This sober, unapologetic cataloging of the array of problems Nature conservationists face is, however, the first step in developing a more effective strategy for Nature lovers to take back the conservation movement, which I believe is essential for halting or at least lessening the destruction of wild Nature. In the final chapter of *Myth(s)*, I describe the following steps to take back the conservation movement:

ORGANIZATIONAL

- Recognize the differences between conservation and environmentalism, and between conservation and resourcism. Understand enviro-resourcism.
- Overcome the "Environmentalism Stereotype," which tars all environmentalists and conservationists with being left-wing, politically correct, vegetarian, antigun Democrats.
- Reach out to the political mainstream, including reasonable Republicans and Independents in the U.S.

- Strategically redirect conservation funding to build a powerful movement for the long term.
- Encourage intellectual inquiry and develop a strong think-tank presence within the conservation movement.
- Face up to the problems of professionalism and corporatism in our groups.

VALUES, POLICIES, AND ACTION

- Proudly proclaim the basic values of Nature conservation: other species deserve protection from extinction for their own sakes, not just for what benefits they might bring humans.
- Defend strictly protected areas as “the most valuable weapon in our conservation arsenal.”
- Carefully frame the message of Nature conservation.
- Recognize that the overarching problem is the human-caused Sixth Great Extinction, and its driver is the exploding population of human beings married to rising affluence and technology and revved up by globalization.
- Proclaim and work for a vision that is bold, practically achievable, scientifically credible, and *hopeful*.

These are the steps conservationists need to climb if we are to take back our movement from enviro-resourcists and to boldly tackle the forces of ecological destruction.

In December of 1776, the American Revolution was in its darkest hour. In response, Tom Paine wrote his first “Crisis” paper:

These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.

General Washington had the paper read to his miserable, disheartened troops in their frozen winter camps. There was no surrender. Years of hard battle lay ahead but victory was gained.

We need Tom Paine conservationists in *our* dark hour. Let us not apologize for loving wild Nature, for caring about other species, for speaking the truth. Reach out to others. Make deals when they are good deals. But let us not be frightened and browbeaten into appeasement. Let us instead offer a bold, *hopeful* vision for how wilderness and civilization can live together, and be unyielding in defending and restoring wild Nature and in

standing up for the idea and reality of wilderness areas and other protected areas.

To encourage you to read further and to let you know what you are in for, I offer this quaint, old-fashioned preview of the book.

Part I “The Myth(s) of the Environmental Movement”

This section looks at the relationship between conservation and environmentalism, the stereotype of environmentalists (and conservationists) as a liberal special interest group within the Democratic Party, and the confusion between animal rights and conservation. It concludes with a discussion of enviro-resourcism and how enviro-resourcists have undercut and weakened the conservation movement.

Chapter 1 “The Myth of the Environmental Movement.” The Myth of the Environmental Movement (that conservation and environmentalism are one movement)

is rejected. Instead, conservation (wildlands and wildlife) and environmentalism (pollution's effects on human health and urban quality of life) are separate movements in values, history, activists, and issues. Nature conservation and resource conservation (Resourcism) are also different and are often in conflict. Environmentalists can approach Nature with either conservation or resourcist perspectives. The latter are "enviro-resourcists." Differentiation helps both conservation and environmentalism because it is more accurate, avoids conflicts for dominance, and leads to better cooperation. Examples of how environmentalism often dismisses Nature or conflicts with conservation are given.

Chapter 2 "Left and Progressive Environmentalism." The belief that environmentalism (and conservation) is leftist or progressive and in the Democratic Party is another myth, although partly true. The Environmentalist Stereotype is described. Other topics include: The attempted leftist takeover of the environmental movement; the political spectra; progressive and leftist influences on environmentalism; the problem of political correctness; and Left-wing Environmentalism. The Myth of Left Environmentalism harms the effectiveness of conservationists and drives away potential allies.

Chapter 3 "Greens and Animal Rights." Major topics here include: The mistaken lumping of Greens and animal rights with conservation. The Green Political Movement and its takeover by the Left and its conflict with conservation. The confusion of Animal Rights with conservation. Philosophical and ethical differences. Difference between animal rights and animal welfare (or animal protection). Animal Rights-Conservation conflicts on predation, control of exotic species, and hunting/fishing. Identification with animal rights hurts conservation; conservation needs hunters and fishers active in it. The

problem of rights for other species. Value of issue cooperation between conservationists and animal welfare groups.

Chapter 4 “How Enviro-resourcism Undercuts Conservation.” Enviro-resourcists have weakened the conservation cause. Topics include: Biocentrism and belief in the intrinsic value of Nature and other species is the bedrock of true conservation. There is room for different strategies but not for compromised values. How enviro-resourcists chip away at Nature-for-its-own sake values. How the Sierra Club is shifting to a techno-fix approach. Protected areas are the centerpiece of conservation work. How elements in The Nature Conservancy and in the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB) are moving away from protected areas to the mush of sustainability and ecosystem management. Socioambientalistas also undermine SCB.

Chapter 5 “Meet the Enviro-resourcists.” Other conservationists are worried about enviro-resourcists. The trends in the conservation movement away from Nature protection to enviro-resourcism. Who are the enviro-resourcists? (Consultants, staff for funders, leaders and staff of conservation organizations.) Methods of enviro-resourcist influence. The problems of professionalization and corporatization in conservation groups.

Part II “Wilderness Deconstructionism”

This section examines the arguments against traditional conservation by postmodern deconstructionists and provides a sweeping rebuttal. It also takes on the myths of the Noble Savage and sustainable development.

Chapter 6 “The Academic Left’s War on Biology.” Existentialists hated Nature, and postmodern deconstruction comes partly from existentialism. The Darwinian Revolution in biology and philosophy. Social science’s rejection of Darwin and biological explanations; the Standard Social Science Model (SSSM). Postmodern deconstructionism and its rejection of reason and science.

Chapter 7 “Wilderness Deconstruction.” The emergence of wilderness deconstructionism from the SSSM and postmodern deconstructionism. A brief history of its debate with wilderness advocates, including Callicott, Cronon, and Soulé. Table of the literary/historical/philosophical arguments against wilderness by wilderness deconstructionists.

Chapter 8 “Where Man Is a Visitor: Wilderness Deconstruction vs. Wil-Der-Ness.” Using quotes from main sources, the basic deconstructionist arguments against wilderness are organized, explained, and rebutted.

Chapter 9 “The Myth of the Noble Savage.” The Myth of the Noble Savage holds that indigenous peoples were ecologically beneficial, egalitarian, and peaceful before being corrupted by civilization. Corporate interests use the myth to justify resource exploitation. The Pristine Myth: the Americas were heavily settled and managed everywhere by Indians before Columbus; there was no wilderness. The Ecological Savage Myth: native peoples improve on Nature and create biodiversity. How wilderness deconstructionists and industrial landscapers use these myths to argue against wilderness and protected areas. Wilderness deconstructionists’ arguments rebutted, including myths of the peaceful and egalitarian savage.

Chapter 10 “Sustainable Development vs. Protected Areas.” Wilderness deconstructionists claim that indigenous people and Third World peasants have no concept of wilderness. Wilderness deconstructionists use the Noble Savage Myth to join with international aid institutions and extractive industry to argue that so-called “sustainable development” should replace protected areas, which are legacies of colonialism and have failed. This debate subverts international conservation organizations and actions. Sustainable development is nothing more than the failed “resourcism” of Gifford Pinchot one hundred years ago. The wilderness deconstructionist arguments are rebutted. Replacing the Myth of the Noble Savage does not denigrate living peoples; it rather lays the groundwork for cooperation on conservation. Examples of indigenous peoples cooperating with conservationists to protect biodiversity, wildlife, and wilderness.

Chapter 11 “Lost in the Wilderness: Confusion Among the Wilderness Deconstructionists.” The general misunderstandings about wilderness and wilderness advocates by the wilderness deconstructionists are organized, explained, and rebutted.

Part III “Conservative-Conservation”

This section autopsies the historical relationship between conservation and conservatism (and the Republican Party) and offers ways to bring principled conservatives back to conservation.

Chapter 12 “The Conservative War on Conservation.” Early cooperation between conservatives and Republicans with conservationists to protect land and wildlife. How the Republican Party and conservatives came to oppose conservation. The

environmentalists' drift to the Democrats. The takeover of conservatism by corporatism, rural populism, dominion theology, materialistic libertarianism, and neoconservatism, and its resulting hostility to conservation and environmentalism.

Chapter 13 "Conservatism and Conservation." How Russell Kirk, the founder of modern intellectual conservatism, supported conservation. Traditional conservatism and conservation share underlying principles: antimaterialism, piety, prudence, posterity, values, and responsibility. Each are explained and applied to conservation issues to show how honest conservatives could be attracted to conservation. Religious support for conservation, including from evangelicals, is described.

Chapter 14 "Conservation and the Free Market." The problems with materialistic, theoretical libertarianism for conservation. How sensible application of free-market and other conservative principles can be effectively applied to conservation and environmental issues in three categories: Regulatory Reform, Free Market (no subsidies), and Incentives.

Part IV Population Growth and Extinction

This section looks at the problem of human overpopulation and how "The Environmental Movement" has retreated from the issue during the last thirty years.

Chapter 15 "Carrying Capacity...Crash." A brief history about concern for overpopulation from the perspectives of feeding ourselves, land abuse and resource depletion, social and economic impacts, and harming wild Nature and other species. Explanation of the biological concept of carrying capacity and how it relates to humans.

We are in a temporary Age of Exuberance because of the discovery of the Americas and fossil fuels. General review of human population growth and the prospects of Crash.

Chapter 16 “Cornucopianism.” The Idea of Progress and the arrogance of humanism are shared by the Right and Left and in-between. The Cornucopian Myth of no limits. The Paul Ehrlich-Julian Simon debate and why Ehrlich was generally right. Analysis of Simon’s no-limits madness. Why the Birth Dearth is hot air.

Chapter 17 “Retreat...and Return.” Why the environmental, conservation, and resourcist movements retreated from forthright concern about population growth. Historical developments, the view that Simon won over Ehrlich, and aspects of human nature are the causes for the retreat. The strategic error of limits-to-growth advocates stressing famine and resource depletion. The immediate consequence of human population growth is the destruction of wild Nature and mass extinction. Conservationists should stress these biodiversity impacts. Can we have Hope?

Epilogue. Whither Conservation?

Chapter 18 “Take Back OUR Movement.” Nature lovers need to deal with the myths of the environmental movement and take back the conservation movement. I provide detailed recommendations on how to do so in two categories—organizational reforms and those dealing with values, policy, and action.