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Environmentalism, RIP? Not So Fast

by Angela Logomasini

Is environmentalism dead? Yes, say environmental activists Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus in a recent essay, "The Death of Environmentalism," that has sparked serious debate within the green Left. They argue that the movement is losing ground, and that it might need to abandon the drapery of environmentalism to pursue their overarching goal: "progressivism." (The essay, released at the Environmental Grantmakers Association's October 2004 meeting, is available online at <http://www.grist.org/news/maindish/2005/01/13/doe-reprint/index.html>.)

Environmental activism may be in transition, but the contention that the movement is losing major ground is belied by its ongoing impact on American life—an impact on both our pocketbooks and our personal freedom. Indeed, Americans who value freedom over the "progressive" nanny state should be very concerned about the scope and power of the environmental progressives today.

Shellenberger and Nordhaus are surprisingly forthcoming. They and many other activists are unhappy because they don't measure success based on whether the air and water are getting cleaner (which they clearly are), but on whether

the movement has passed any new, major laws that increase their power. As the authors bluntly note, they evaluate their policy successes "not only for whether they will get us the environmental protections we need but also whether they will define the debate, divide our opponents, and build our political power over time."

And they want that political power to lord over the rest of us. As Shellenberger and Nordhaus plainly state, the greens want to pass a global warming law to "remake the global economy in ways that will transform the lives of six billion people," which they admit is an "undertaking of monumental size and complexity."

With such utopian goals, it's not surprising these authors are disappointed. Even history's most famous utopian, Karl Marx, did not have similar grandiose delusions that he could institute such a world-wide economic reorganization. He expected the masses to rise up on their own and change the course of history (though in practice communism was forced on the masses by the elites, instead).

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Environmentalism RIP?

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Unfortunately, while the greens have not yet forced their entire vision on us, they have done quite a bit to build up the green regulatory state. Maintaining that “empire” alone represents a significant power base. Expecting to continually expand their grip on society is not only naive, it’s just plain arrogant.

In the United States today, the environmental empire consists of dozens of extensive regulatory statutes, thousands of pages of regulations, numerous government agencies continually passing new rules, and a legal system that allows activists to enforce, if not expand, their regime. By preventing any reasonable reforms to environmental laws, activists ensure that the cost of environmental regulation remains substantial and continues to grow. In his 2004 study, *Ten Thousand Commandments*, CEI Vice President

a process to prove it “safe”—an impossible standard since one cannot prove a negative. This program has more to do with red tape than safety, mandating that firms jump through regulatory hoops before selling products that consumers would chose to buy on their own.

Policies like REACH inevitably lead to reduced consumer choice, higher prices, less innovation, and impediments to the free exchange of goods and services—without any appreciable environmental benefit. But Europe is seriously advancing this proposal largely because groups like Greenpeace think it’s a good idea.

And despite Shellenberger and Nordhaus’s lament that the movement has “strikingly little to show” for its global warming efforts, the European Union, Russia, and other nations have ratified the Kyoto Protocol, which went into effect on February 16. In addition, California recently enacted global warming regulations, and other states and Canada are considering following suit.

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for Policy Clyde Wayne Crews, Jr. reports that environmental regulations cost consumers \$203 billion in 2003 alone. In addition, federal agencies spend billions of tax dollars every year and issue hundreds of regulations based on all these laws.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of environmental activists work on “stakeholder” committees at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Department of Interior, and other agencies—churning out more regulations every year that affect how we live. For 2003 alone, Crews identified 417 on the EPA’s and another 295 for Interior. Of all federal government departments and agencies, only the Department of Treasury had more rules on its agenda than EPA. EPA was also tied for first place with the Department of Health and Human Services for having the highest number of “economically significant” rules—those costing more than \$100 million—on its agenda that year.

Despite activist complaints about lack of global warming legislation to “transform the lives of six billion people,” new regulatory initiatives are coming out every year.

For example, the greens are successfully pushing the European Union to enact its Registration, Evaluation, and Authorization of Chemicals (REACH) directive, which would outlaw commerce of any product that has not gone through

Perhaps the greens may justifiably grieve the fact that they haven’t been able to get “enough” regulation per dollar spent—but they certainly don’t have much trouble raising those dollars, which figure in the billions. According to the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, the nation’s top 10 green groups had a total income of more than \$1.8 billion. And that’s a small sampling of hundreds of groups in this movement.

Shellenberger and Nordhaus rightly acknowledge that, “Today environmentalism is just another special interest.” Indeed, its interest is in forcing the world to accept a bankrupt ideology. Today, most people aren’t looking to expand the nanny state. They simply want to know that their air and water will be safe and that there are protections for wildlife. The last thing they want or need is an extreme green makeover to transform the way they live. What’s truly odd is that it’s the environmentalists who are crying; consumers and those who value their freedom should be the ones weeping.

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