

Last Chance to Save the Planet

For years before we started writing this book, we considered ourselves pretty knowledgeable about environmental issues. And we thought we were immune to hysteria.

Even so, Jane “lost her cool” in 1989 when Meryl Streep appeared on the Phil Donahue Show warning parents about Alar, a chemical used on apples. After seeing the show, Jane remembers driving in her car, listening to the “news” about Alar on the radio. She told herself that this was probably just another hyped-up “scare of the month.” But she was also calculating how much apple juice her fourteen-month-old son drank each day, and trying to figure out if his chances of getting cancer had gone up.

It isn’t just our children who are afraid. We are, too. Where do these fears come from?

During the past three decades, a few emotionally powerful ideas—technology is harmful, we are running out of resources, the population is out of control—have taken hold. Although these ideas are misguided and therefore not likely to stand the test of time, they have not been allowed to die a natural death. Influential groups, especially environmental organizations, continue to hawk these ideas.

Today's environmental movement has roots in the conservation movement that started at the turn of the century. Its goals were to protect natural resources as industry grew, but not to halt growth. The Commons, Footpaths, and Open Spaces Preservation Society, for example, was founded in Britain in 1865. The world's first private environmental group, its goal was, in part, to preserve the urban commons for the enjoyment of the increasing numbers of urban workers.¹

The modern push to protect the environment, which started in the 1960s, is different. It encompasses many more issues, has broader public support, and is built on a foundation of alarm.

Three Landmark Books

Three landmark books shaped the modern environmental movement. These books were based on limited and, in some cases, even sloppy science and economics, but their impact has been incalculable.

Silent Spring

Before the 1960s, the term “ecology” didn't mean much to anyone except scientists. But in 1962, a single book made ecology—the “web of life”—a household word. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*² changed the emotional landscape. Consider the opening of the book, “A Fable for Tomorrow.”

There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where, in the spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields . . .

Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community:

mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and the sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was a shadow of death . . .

There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example—where had they gone? Many people spoke of them, puzzled and disturbed. The feeding stations in the backyards were deserted. The few birds seen anywhere were moribund; they trembled violently and could not fly. There was a spring without voices . . .

No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves.³

The idea that chemicals—pesticides—could cause a “silent spring” hit like a bombshell. Human beings had turned the “web of life” into a web of death.⁴ DDT, the chief target of the book, had protected millions of people by killing insects that carried malaria. But now it was viewed as a killer of birds. Indeed, all chemicals were suspect.

Silent Spring began a campaign against DDT. In 1967, residents of Long Island, New York, formed the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), with the goal of outlawing DDT. The movement was joined by concerned citizens in Canada. In 1969, the Canadian government began the phase-out process which led to a discontinuation of production and importation of DDT in 1985, although existing stocks were permitted to be in use until 1990. (The U.S. EPA banned the pesticide in 1972.) The success of this campaign made the EDF the model for the new environmental movement. From now on, litigation and lobbying would be the focus of environmentalism.

Because *Silent Spring* changed the environmental movement, its impact was greater than its effect on DDT or even on pesticides generally. *Silent Spring* shook up a culture that had been comfortable with technology, and sowed seeds of doubts about its benefits for humankind. For her clarion call to arms, Rachel Carson is a revered heroine in today’s environmental education programs. Textbooks in many fields, from science to geography, highlight her career and her fight against pesticides.

The Limits to Growth

In 1972, *The Limits to Growth*⁵ caused another sensation. Published by an international group of business executives and academics calling themselves the Club of Rome, this book predicted economic collapse by the end of the twenty-first century.

The authors based their claims on a computer model of the world economy. "If the present growth trends in world population, industrialization, pollution, food production, and resource depletion continue unchanged," they wrote, "the limits to growth on this planet will be reached sometime within the next one hundred years. The most probable result will be a rather sudden and uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial capacity."⁶ The authors urged massive international governmental intervention.

When the price of oil skyrocketed in 1973 as a result of the embargo by OPEC nations, the predictions of *The Limits to Growth* were confirmed, or so it seemed. It appeared that we were running out of our most important natural resources. *The Limits to Growth* became an international best seller, with more than ten million copies sold.

In the nearly twenty-five years since the publication of the *The Limits to Growth*, however, the fears have proved groundless. Oil is plentiful and cheap. The world did not run out of gold by 1981, or zinc by 1990, or petroleum by 1992, as the book predicted.⁷ Food supplies have not diminished. Instead, they have grown faster than world population has.⁸ Air pollution levels in Canada and the United States have decreased.⁹ Water pollution has also dropped significantly. Population growth is not out of control. Instead, the rate of growth has been decreasing since the mid-1960s, and world population is expected to level off by the end of the next century.¹⁰ (See chapters 6, 7, 12, and 16.)

Nor has economic growth severely harmed the environment. Rather, it has provided the wealth to correct the problems that accompany growth. With higher living standards, people want to protect the environment and are more willing and more able to pay the

costs.¹¹ But despite the spectacular inaccuracy of the doomsday predictions in *The Limits to Growth*, the notion that the world is poised on the edge of disaster is still being taught in our schools.

Global 2000

The message of *The Limits to Growth* resurfaced in 1980 with the US federal government's stamp of approval. *Global 2000*, a 760-page book, was compiled by the departments of State, Interior, Energy, and Agriculture and nine other government agencies in the Carter administration.¹² Over one million copies were distributed. In its opening paragraphs, *Global 2000* echoed the conclusions of the Club of Rome:

If present trends continue, the world in 2000 will be more crowded, more polluted, less stable ecologically, and more vulnerable to disruption than the world we live in now. Serious stresses involving population, resources, and the environment are clearly visible ahead. Despite greater material output, the world's people will be poorer in many ways than they are today.

For hundreds of millions of the desperately poor, the outlook for food and other necessities of life will be no better. For many it will be worse. Barring revolutionary advances in technology, life for most people on earth will be more precarious in 2000 than it is now—unless the nations of the world act decisively to alter current trends.¹³

The news media covered the report uncritically. *Time's* story was headlined "Toward a Troubled 21st Century: A Presidential Panel Finds the Global Outlook Extremely Bleak."¹⁴ *Newsweek's* article was titled "A Grim Year 2000."¹⁵

Four years later, 24 respected scholars challenged the report. *The Resourceful Earth: A Response to Global 2000*¹⁶ was written by experts

such as D. Gale Johnson, a prominent agricultural economist at the University of Chicago, Marion Clawson, a longtime natural resource scholar at Resources for the Future, and H. E. Landsberg, professor emeritus at the Institute for Fluid Dynamics and Applied Mathematics at the University of Maryland. Some of their conclusions were:

- ◆ life expectancy has been rising rapidly throughout the world, a sign of demographic, scientific, and economic success;
- ◆ the birth rate in less developed countries has been falling substantially during the past two decades, from 2.2 percent yearly in 1964 to 1.75 percent in 1982-3;
- ◆ many people are still hungry, but the food supply has been improving since at least World War II;
- ◆ trends in world forests are not worrying, though in some places deforestation is troubling;
- ◆ there is no statistical evidence for rapid loss of species in the last two decades;
- ◆ the climate does not show signs of unusual and threatening changes; and
- ◆ mineral resources are becoming less, rather than more, scarce.¹⁷

These rebuttals received little media coverage. The authors of *The Resourceful Earth*, though eminent, were out of step with the times, and the optimistic message was not considered newsworthy.

Scaring the Rest of Us

The pattern of exaggeration that took form in the 1970s and 1980s is still with us today. Let us look more carefully at the groups that promote these claims.

- ◆ Environmental groups are often portrayed as good guys who are battling evil big business. But environmental organizations have become big businesses themselves.
- ◆ The Canadian Wildlife Federation, the largest conservation organization in the country, had 500,000 members and supporters and a budget of \$7 million in 1996.¹⁸
- ◆ Greenpeace Canada, the best-known environmental group in the nation, had 187,000 members in 1997¹⁹ and a budget of \$5.57 million in 1995.²⁰
- ◆ The World Wildlife Fund Canada, with over 55,000 members, had a budget of \$10.7 million in 1996. The WWF is the largest international conservation organization in the world, with over five million members and offices in seventy countries worldwide.²¹

The budgets of the twelve most prominent environmental organizations in the United States added up to \$569.6 million, according to the editors of *Outside Magazine*. There are more than 1800 environmental organizations at the national, provincial, and local level throughout Canada,²² and even more in the United States.

However, these organizations are not as healthy as these numbers suggest. By the early 1990s, membership and revenues for several big environmental groups were stagnant or falling. In the United

States, the Wilderness Society's members fell by 3 percent in 1993 and by 17.8 percent in 1994, for example, while membership numbers leveled off for Audubon and the Natural Resources Defense Council.²³ In 1997, partially in response to a decline in membership from one million to 400,000 in a matter of years, Greenpeace USA reduced its infrastructure from 11 nationwide offices employing over 400 people, to one permanent office staffed by 65.²⁴ To stay strong, these organizations must keep up the drumbeat of impending disaster.

- ◆ “In 1998, the relentless assault on Canada’s wild animals and wild places continues . . .” opens a fund-raising letter from the World Wildlife Fund. “Every 15 seconds, an acre of Canada’s wilderness is lost to logging, roads, sub-divisions and commercial development” (underlining in the original).²⁵
- ◆ The World Wildlife Fund Canada further says that “every hour, at least 100 hectares of Canada’s wilderness disappear—lost to logging, mining, hydroelectric dams and urbanization. If the current pace continues, we place our country’s greatest asset at risk.”²⁶
- ◆ “When the logging industries in Canada, and in Melanesia, Russia and Brazil, continued to chop down the dwindling forests, the lungs of the entire planet became even more damaged and frail,” warns a Greenpeace Canada mail-out.²⁷
- ◆ “If nothing is done by us, our descendants will have few options,” says a letter from the U.S. National Audubon Society. “We can project with some accuracy the eventual end of the natural world as we know it. That is, no trees. No wildlife. Climate changes so radical the tropics have migrated to the North Pole.”²⁸

The Audubon Society illustrates the changes in the environmental movement. Audubon still maintains an extensive system of bird and wildlife refuges but in recent years has expanded its reach to such issues as toxic waste and population control.

The society long ago terminated its Junior Audubon Clubs, which had taught children about birds. In 1990, it stopped publishing its *Wildlife Report*, a series of books on the condition of animal species and, a few years later, folded its bird magazine, *American Birds*.²⁹

In 1991, Peter Berle, then Audubon's president, even tried to change the society's logo. The logo bore a picture of the great egret, a stately bird that Audubon had saved from extinction. Berle considered Audubon's "bird" image as stodgy, explained the *New York Times*, and he wanted people to know that Audubon was much more than birds.³⁰ (He replaced the egret with a blue flag.) His action caused an uproar, especially among longtime members, and he was forced to restore the great egret, although less prominently.

Newer environmental organizations do almost nothing except litigate and lobby. The Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, for example, was created as an offshoot of the Sierra Club in 1971 after the Club stopped Disney Corporation from building a resort in California's Mineral King Valley. The Fund now employs forty lawyers who sue over issues ranging from endangered species to chemicals.³¹

Litigation is financially rewarding. Environmental groups in the United States can be compensated by taxpayers for legal costs when they sue the federal government. The Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund has received \$1.8 million in tax dollars for its litigation on the spotted owl.³²

Friends in High Places

Environmental groups can't maintain the barrage of predictions of disaster all alone. Other individuals and groups also spread the idea that calamity is around the corner.

Scientists as Activists

Paul Ehrlich of Stanford University has made a career out of predicting worldwide famine due to overpopulation. In 1968 he published *The Population Bomb*, in which he said that "massive famines" were likely in the 1970s.³³ These did not occur, but, undaunted, in 1990 he and his wife published *The Population Explosion*, predicting that "human numbers are on a collision course with massive famines."³⁴

When the *New York Times* reported on Ehrlich's disagreement with a more optimistic social scientist, Julian Simon, he said, "Julian Simon is like the guy who jumps off the Empire State Building and says how great things are going so far as he passes the 10th floor."³⁵

E.O. Wilson of Harvard University is trying to arouse public alarm over the loss of biodiversity. "Vast numbers of species are apparently vanishing before they can be discovered and named," he wrote in the *New York Times*. He went on to predict that 50 percent of all rain forest species may be lost by the middle of the next century.³⁶ Yet these figures (as we will see in Chapter 11) are guesses at best.

These scientists have the respect of the press and the public, but their claims are rarely based on their scientific knowledge. Stephen Schneider, a vocal proponent of the view that global warming will be severe, describes the dilemma that activist-scientists face. He told *Discover* magazine:

On the one hand, as scientists, we are ethically bound to the scientific method, in effect promising to tell the truth, the whole

truth, and nothing but . . . On the other hand, we are not just scientists, but human beings as well. And like most people we'd like to see the world a better place . . . To do that we need to get some broad-based support, to capture the public's imagination. That, of course, entails getting loads of media coverage. So we have to offer up scary scenarios, make simplified, dramatic statements, and make little mention of any doubts we might have . . . Each of us has to decide what the right balance is between being effective and being honest. I hope that means being both.³⁷

Schneider's candor is refreshing, but it should warn us that we hear more from scientists than the plain facts.

The Media: Advocates and Proud of It

Time magazine science editor Charles Alexander stated publicly at a conference: "I would freely admit that on this issue [environmentalism] we have crossed the boundary from news reporting to advocacy."³⁸ A Cable News Network producer, Barbara Pyle, has said: "I switched from being an 'objective journalist' to an advocate in July 1980." On this date, she read the *Global 2000* report.³⁹

Not all reporters have deliberately abandoned objectivity. But then it isn't necessary, since so many journalists share the views of environmentalists. In their book *The Media Elite*, Robert Lichter and his associates found that journalists reporting on nuclear power were far more "antinuclear" than scientists, including those who specialized in energy. The journalists quoted antinuclear sources far more than those who favored nuclear power.⁴⁰

Stories about crises sell newspapers and push up television ratings. As one science reporter has observed, no one is likely to see a headline reading "Earth Not Destroyed; Billions Don't Die."⁴¹

Business: Out of Its Element

The direct cost of environmental legislation is often borne by businesses. But business opposition to environmental regulations is generally seen as being merely self-interested, and therefore is given little credibility. Thus, businesses can do little to challenge the apocalyptic claims of environmental activists. As a result, business lobbyists sometimes join rather than fight, hoping to wrest special advantages for their companies.

As the U.S. Clean Air Act of 1970 took shape, for example, some American auto manufacturers supported a provision that eliminated the air-cooled engine. By barring this technology, the law contributed to the disappearance of the Volkswagen “bug.”⁴²

In 1977, the U.S. Clean Air Act required power plants to control sulfur dioxide emissions. But rather than allow these utilities to use whatever method they wanted to reduce this pollution, the law required them to use special coal “scrubbers” to remove the sulfur dioxide. Why?

Eastern U.S. coal companies and their unions had protected their market. Without the law, many utilities would have bought low-sulfur western coal, and the eastern companies would have lost money. The results of this policy were much higher costs and probably dirtier air.⁴³

The Environmentalists' Agenda

“I know social scientists who remind me that people are part of nature, but it isn’t true,”⁴⁴ wrote National Park Service biologist David M. Graber. Instead, human beings are a “cancer,” said Graber. “Until such time as *Homo sapiens* should decide to rejoin nature, some of us can only hope for the right virus to come along.”

Graber’s view of humanity diverges sharply from that of most people. In fact, many members of environmental groups would be amazed at such statements. Yet influential environmental advocates

hold such views, and they influence what is taught in our schools. Parents should be aware of the following themes:

Private Property: Just a “Sacred Cow”

Many environmentalists consider private ownership to be the enemy of the environment. A newsletter of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, an environmental group based in Montana, called private land rights a “sacred cow.”⁴⁵ Jon Roush, president of the U.S. Wilderness Society, wrote in a letter to the *New York Times*: “Too many of us are still locked in that mindset that says the way to make money off a piece of land is to mine it, drill it or log it.”⁴⁶ He recommended that trees be preserved instead. (That philosophy did not prevent him from selling 400,000 board feet of timber from his Montana ranch.)

As we will discuss later, the *absence* of private ownership rights explains many environmental problems. Publicly owned land is often littered and abused because there is no owner to insist on protection. Lakes are overfished and wildlife hunted to the point of extinction when there is no owner committed to maintaining the resource. Private ownership, in contrast, often encourages stewardship because the owner benefits from increasing the value of property, and suffers from neglecting it.

The Fragility of the Earth

Environmentalists love to illustrate the fragile nature of the earth.

- ◆ Paul Ehrlich, in an analogy frequently repeated in textbooks, has compared the Earth’s ecology to the interconnected systems of an airplane. In his view, the organisms in an ecosystem are like the bolts which hold an airplane together. While the airplane may stay aloft in spite of the loss of a few bolts, after a point the plane will be so weakened that the loss of one more bolt

will cause it to plunge from the sky. In a similar way, the analogy goes, the loss of too many species could damage an ecosystem to the point where it can no longer function.⁴⁷

- ◆ One children's book, *A Great Round Wonder*, tells readers: "Imagine that the Earth is one gigantic spider web, where every string is connected to the rest. If you cut one string, no one may notice. If you cut several strings, the web will start to droop. And if you keep cutting, one day you will cut one string too many. Then the web will fall apart completely."⁴⁸

- ◆ A science experiment for children suggests that they adopt an egg for the day. They are to carry it around with them, and try to bring it back to their next class undamaged. "The world is like an egg," they are told. "The world houses life, just as an egg can contain a baby chicken. The world sustains life, just as we can obtain nourishment from an egg. The world is strong, just as an egg's shell is tough enough to protect a developing chick. But the world is also fragile, just as a forceful blow will crack an egg's shell and cause its contents to spill out."⁴⁹

These are effective images, but effective at what? —at terrifying our children about the imminent destruction of the Earth. As we will see, the Earth is in better shape than the books would have us think.

Only the Government Can Do It

Environmentalists often think that only government action can solve a crisis. The massive environmental damage caused by government central planning in socialist societies has not changed this view. To many, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe are simply considered "different."

Western democratic governments are often no better. Governmental stewardship of resources is as bad as, or worse than, abuse by the private sector. In spite of decades of government management, the Atlantic cod fishery has been closed, and the Pacific salmon industry in Canada is in severe decline.

While profit-making businesses can cause pollution, over time private ownership discourages pollution. Since pollution wastes raw materials, companies can save money if they can use raw materials more efficiently and waste less. Competition spurs privately owned companies constantly to discover ways to produce more goods with less energy and fewer raw materials.

Economist Mikhail Bernstam has estimated that firms in socialist economies discharged more than twice as much air pollution as firms in Western market economies did⁵⁰ and used nearly three times as much energy to produce the same amount of goods.⁵¹

An Idyllic and Pastoral Past

Many environmentalists disparage modern life and romanticize the past. Margaret Mead, the famous anthropologist, once said, “Not war, but a plethora of man-made things . . . is threatening to strangle us, suffocate us, bury us, in the debris and by-products of our technologically inventive and irresponsible age.”⁵²

Herman Daly writes about the “corrosive effects of economic growth on community and on moral standards” and claims that “we have overshot the optimal scale of the human economy.”⁵³ The implication is that we should return to a more idyllic past.

While many of us sometimes long for a simpler life, we must recognize that living in simple societies was precarious, due to disease, infection, spoiled food, and frequent famines. In the past, pollution was severe. In the fourteenth century, a Londoner was executed for burning sea coal, which had been outlawed to reduce smoke pollution. The Thames River was so clogged with human and animal waste that ships could hardly pass. In the early twentieth century,

urban dwellers welcomed the automobile because it eliminated the horse manure that cluttered city streets.⁵⁴

In their adulation of the past, environmentalists often assume that Native American tribes “walked quietly on the Earth.” But many used fire extensively, creating prairie grasslands to attract buffalo, moose, and elk.⁵⁵ Even before they had horses and guns, Native Americans killed vast numbers of buffalo by herding them onto cliffs, where they plunged to their deaths.⁵⁶

Nature, Not God

The grandeur of nature often takes the place of the grandeur of God. “It is not in God’s house that I feel his presence most—it is in his outdoors, on some sun-warmed slope of pine needles or by the surf,” writes Bill McKibben.⁵⁷ Joseph Sax describes his fellow environmentalists as “secular prophets, preaching a message of secular salvation.”⁵⁸

At times, the deification of nature leads to despising human beings. Stephanie Mills, author of *Whatever Happened to Ecology?* speaks of “debased human protoplasm.”⁵⁹ E. O. Wilson says that it is a “misfortune” that a “carnivore primate and not some more benign form of animal” should now control the Earth.⁶⁰

In sum, while the environmental movement has brought awareness of issues, it has brought with it some troubling baggage—values that are at odds with those held by most people. Exploring that conflict is beyond the purposes of this book, but parents, teachers, and students should be alert to the messages.

Notes

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