

Environmentalism's Winter of Discontent

-Steve Kretzmann & John Sellers

Successful organizers know that the way you start a conversation is critical in achieving your desired outcomes. In *The Death of Environmentalism*, Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus begin an important conversation by informing lifelong environmentalists that their movement is dead and its leadership stupid. Is it any wonder that many in the environmental community have scorned them? EarthFirst! co-founder Mike Roselle, in response, countered that "If I took all the crap I've read from these whining, sniveling nobodies seriously, I'd stay in bed and drink Nyquil and watch NASCAR all day." Clearly, Nordhaus and Shellenberger have gotten the bang they were aiming for. But, more importantly, will they accomplish their goals?

Shellenberger and Nordhaus (S&N) argue persuasively that the environmental movement's largest groups have lost the plot, becoming victims of their now legendary policy successes during the 1970s and 80s. They make no apologies as they pronounce the modern day environmental movement to have outlived its utility: "We have become convinced that modern environmentalism, with all of its unexamined assumptions, outdated concepts and exhausted strategies, must die so that something new can live."

The tragedy is that within S&N's insulting and divisive frame lays an important analysis that needs to be heard and openly debated. The importance of and need for building political power over prescribing techno-policy solutions is at the heart of *Death of Environmentalism*, and we couldn't endorse this thesis more. Given that, its almost comically ironic that the authors put so much thought and effort into being right, and seemingly none into being heard and affecting change.

Nine years ago, we both left Greenpeace in Washington DC on the same day. At the time, our experience of the movement was primarily limited to that organization, in that town. Since that time, working around the country and the world with many different communities and groups, we've learned a few things that we humbly offer here.

The Perception of Power

The environmental movement shares at least one important characteristic with most of the other progressive struggles in the U.S. Much of the truly effective work is driven by small and medium-sized groups working outside the D.C. policy echo chamber. Despite the current round of self-flagellation that S&N have initiated, we believe that there is still a lot of power in the environmental movement today – and the increasing pace of corporate surrender to the sophisticated green hordes outside their boardrooms suggests that the perception of power has never been stronger. Oddly, S&N could point only to their own initiative, the Apollo Alliance, as an example of the kind of visionary problem solving that will be required to turn things around. Had they looked a bit further, they might have found the following additional examples:

- ◆ *Saving forests:* ForestEthics, Rainforest Action Network (RAN), the Dogwood Alliance, and their many grassroots partner organizations have had an unprecedented string of victories against the largest logging, lumber, and paper companies on the planet. Using savvy messaging, values-based language, creative direct action, and branding jujitsu, anchored by good old-fashioned organizing, they have convinced corporations like Home Depot and Staples that they could have a business “win” by getting the hell out of ancient forests.
- ◆ *Changing the banking industry:* The recognition that the stigmatization of brand identity is a powerful motivator in an age of unprecedented corporate power has also led parts of the movement into an increasingly sophisticated and successful suite of campaigns designed to target the global financial architecture behind environmentally destructive industries. Internationally, the BankTrack coalition, led by Friends of the Earth and RAN, has quickly driven social and environmental standards at many private financial institutions to a precedent-setting level, thereby opening up a whole new front for international campaigners. Domestically, after a savage and ultimately successful campaign on Citigroup, the mere threat of a campaign by RAN was enough to motivate Bank of America to design the world’s best standards on forests and climate.
- ◆ *Protecting our health:* The environmental health and justice movement, ignored by Shellenberger and Nordhaus just as it is ignored by most of the D.C. Greens, has also had a string of successes recently. The Healthy Building Network worked with Clean Water and others to eliminate arsenic and cadmium from retail sales of pressure treated wood, a \$4 billion annual industry. The markets based effort leap-frogged a decade long campaign that had targeted EPA's registration for this last permitted use of arsenic as a pesticide. Watch for a growing movement of breastfeeding mothers from all political stripes Making Our Milk Safe (MOMS).
- ◆ *Protecting human rights:* Meanwhile, Earthrights International, one of the new crop of fusion environmental and human rights groups, has just settled a precedent-setting lawsuit against Unocal on behalf of Burmese villagers for abuses surrounding the construction of a natural gas pipeline. Unocal’s standing has tumbled so far in the wake of the ruling that a buyout seems imminent. Similar lawsuits are pending against ExxonMobil, Shell, and ChevronTexaco. For those who might callously wonder what help these are to the environment, we note that it helps when your political opposition is found guilty of murder.
- ◆ *Promoting renewable energy:* Finally, despite the ongoing defeat of energy and environmental advocates at the federal level, local and state level climate and energy activists have been carrying the flag bravely forward. Laws requiring increased purchase of renewable energy have passed in places from Iowa and Washington, D.C., to New England and the West Coast.
- ◆ *The rest of the world:* Our US environmental movement is connected to and part of a global movement. Yes, we face dark times, but most of the rest of the world has agreed to the Kyoto Protocol, and the precautionary principle is

being used to justify policy decisions in the European Union. No, its not all good news everywhere, but as ecologists we know that it is all interconnected, and so we find reason for hope in many diverse trends.

It is towards these bright spots (and we've doubtless left out many other deserving ones) that we should all be looking for lessons.

A Policy of Losing

S&N might be forgiven for mistaking the most well financed, bureaucratic and least inventive environmental institutions for the entire movement. It is clear they have spent much of their professional careers inside the environmental mainstream. *Death of Environmentalism* reads more accurately and less offensively to the average activist if one makes a simple adjustment. Every time the authors use the words "environmental movement" they are actually talking about "Big Green" organizations with relatively large budgets doing legislative battle in an effort to stabilize the Earth's climate. When they use the word environmentalist it generally refers to someone drawing a paycheck from one of these organizations.

At its heart *Death of Environmentalism* is a scathing indictment of the strategic rut these groups now find themselves in. S&N note that:

- Environmentalists are in the middle of a culture war based on values armed only with techno babble solutions;
- The environmental movement has put all its eggs in the legislative/policy basket on global warming where they've been getting their asses kicked for 15 years (Kyoto, fuel economy, ANWR); and that
- Environmentalists fail to conceive of how they can build long term political power even while losing specific legislative battles.

The *Death of Environmentalism* treats the insight that D.C. Greens are locked into a costly and near futile legislatively dominated strategy as if it is a groundbreaking revelation. The fact is that many have been saying this for years, going back at least as far as the 1991 People of Color Environmental Summit. Yes, of course, legislative wins are imperative to the consolidation and institutionalizing of power, but they tend to come only after a lot of noise has been made, and attitudes have changed in the field, and in people's personal value structures.

The connection between protest and power is worth highlighting. In a recent academic study of the subject, Jon Agnone of the University of Washington confirms what activists at the grassroots have learned by experience. Namely that:

- The level of protest is the only factor that can be statistically linked to passage of environmental legislation.

- Public opinion on environmental issues alone is not a predictor of the passage of laws favorable to the environment. Shifts in the level of public opinion do influence passage of legislation, but only when accompanied by protest.
- Protest is more important to securing policy gains than is institutional movement activity, and this effect is stable even when public opinion is taken into account.

The lesson is clear. To avoid changing the Earth's climate, we need to change the political climate inside the Beltway. In the absence of protest, and the organizing that makes it possible, there will be no policy fix to the problem of global warming.

Money or People

As Saul Alinsky knew, power comes from two sources: money and people. On the Left, it mostly comes from people, because even the most well-funded Beltway Greens have miniscule resources compared to an ExxonMobil. In the battle over climate change, organizing and protest is the only realistic path to long term power. You would think that S&N would know this from the evolution of the Apollo Alliance. Eighteen months ago, when Apollo started, it was a very clever frame. The idea was to craft a plan that emphasized the job creation and national security benefits of a crash program in renewable energy, to gather a broad spectrum of endorsements behind it, and then to offer that to Presidential candidates as a ready made platform to inject energy issues into the limelight of the presidential campaign.

That didn't work out too well. Among the reasons why is the simple fact that Apollo invested a lot in elite level policy crafting, branding, and leadership level alliance building. They invested comparatively little in field strength – particularly of the kind that could punish their opponents. Today, Apollo is clearly evolving as an organization, as they are putting a premium on organizing at the state and local level, building political power and strength up from the grassroots for future fights.

It is precisely this understanding of political power that is currently missing among most Beltway enviros. Building more power for the movement as a whole right now is much more critical than crafting clever policy solutions, cutting short term deals, or even saving any particular piece of real estate, no matter how rich in biodiversity and beauty.

The recent Senate vote that refused to rule out drilling in the Arctic puts D.C. Greens face to face with the consequences of their policy over power emphasis. Defending the Arctic Refuge has been the game plan in D.C. for so long that offensive strategies have been mostly overlooked.

Whether or not Arctic drilling is approved this year, the movement needs to begin to see the oil industry for what it is: the prime funder and beneficiary of our political opposition on climate change. Poll after poll shows that the vast majority of Americans distrust Big Oil and blame it for higher gas prices, a host of environmental problems, and even, to a lesser but still significant degree, war. And yet in election after election, ChevronTexaco

and ExxonMobil give millions to politicians, mostly Republicans, who suffer no ill effects for accepting these tainted donations.

Yes of course we need to permanently defend the Refuge and dramatically increase our use of renewables, but to get there we need a much more fundamental shift – we need a separation of oil and state. Political donations from, and the appearance of being influenced by, the oil industry, needs to be as politically toxic as association with tobacco money is today. A victory on this issue, would set up a series of cascading victories on others.

We Are the Ones We've Been Waiting For

As environmentalists we share an awesome responsibility with organizers from every movement for justice to shift human consciousness (also referred to as values by pollsters). At its core, environmentalism has always been about changing the way that our species relates to the Earth and all her creatures (including ourselves). This shift will never be accomplished through legislative, policy or regulatory victories – rather it is this shift that will enable those tangible, political gains.

We are all dependent on a planet with finite resources that is presently dominated by a socio-economic system which prescribes infinite exploitation of everything. We are running out of room and running out of time and we'll have to look our children in the eye one day soon and explain to them what happened during our watch. If not us - then who? If not now - then when?

And if we despair, look out the window at the spring flowers. This winter that brought us four more years of George Bush and lots of recriminations and blame is fading away. Our collective impact on the climate has not yet stopped spring and the seasons. Take heart from that, and get ready to fight like hell to keep it that way.

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