

# Conservatives and Environmentalists

Allies, Not Enemies

by John C. Vinson, Jr.



Igor Kopylovsky

Conservatives and environmentalists generally have as much in common as the Hatfields and McCoys. Environmentalists like to point to the career of conservative James Watt and the comment of Ronald Reagan that once you've seen one redwood you've seen them all. Most conservatives, on the other hand, view environmentalists as sentimental anti-modernists who want to take us back to living in teepees.

Despite the apparent polarity, there are good reasons for conservatives to be concerned about the environment—reasons that go beyond GOP election strategies. Through the ages, a prominent strand of conservative thought has been love of the land and attachment to the soil. In Europe and the United States, the small farmer and the landed country gentleman are archtypical conservative figures who sense the changeless cycles of the seasons and regard man as the partner, not the master, of nature. From my own observation, it is the desire for these same intangibles that prompts the average environmentalist toward the wilderness, away from the arrogant sophistries and passing sensations of modern urban living.

Another common interest of both groups is an abiding concern for future generations. If most environmentalists were only interested in their own enjoyment of the wilderness, they could relax and forget political action. Not even 100 James Watts could destroy all the wilderness in one lifetime. Thus when they take action, it is likely to be for the sake of lifetimes to come.

Yet, as a devil's advocate might inquire, why should anyone care for the unborn? Here the modern environmentalist would do well to heed the conservative's affirmation that individuals

can never achieve their full humanity as islands in time. Such fulfillment comes only when they join past and future by seeing themselves as temporary actors in the ongoing drama of generations.

As Edmund Burke observed, "People will not look forward to posterity, who do not look backward to their ancestors." We commune with our ancestors through tradition, the living wisdom of experience; through ethnic and national heritage, the wisdom of the group; and through religion, which orients all generations toward purposes of eternity. The affectionate memory of past generations will inspire those now living to love and guard their descendants. Environmentalists are right to care for the future, and traditional conservatism gives this sentiment a firm rationale.

The key nexus in the progress of the generations is the family. Unfortunately, some environmentalists have made common political cause with radical feminists, gay activists, and other groups which have, at the very least, a bias against the family. Whether anyone likes it or not, there is no convincing alternative to the family unit as an institution for forming the character of the young by weaning them away from their chaotic and destructive impulses. If the connection between environmental protection and personal character is not evident, failure to grasp the significance of character has led some environmentalists to think that passing more laws is sufficient to protect nature. Laws may well be needed, but these environmentalists are mistaken if they conceive the state to be God-like and its laws self-enforcing. Much closer to the mark is Thomas Jefferson's insight that laws are rarely more effective than the personal discipline and law-abiding habits of leaders and the mass of citizenry.

Environmentalists, of all people, should be aware of this

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point, as often it is their oversight and determination alone that prevent vested interests from evading the clear intent of environmental laws. If the criminal element reigns supreme, laws will be of little avail, as is the case in some African countries where poaching is rampant.

Several years ago, while I was visiting Georgia's Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge, a resident told me how the alligators of the refuge once faced extinction from poachers. What saved them, he said, was the single-minded determination of one park ranger who, at some risk to himself, put the poachers to flight. Merely doing the minimum to collect his paycheck would not have saved the gators. Something extra motivated him.

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And whether that same something is present in millions of other people will determine the fate of the environment. Consider, for example, a group of teenagers in a car. Will they carry their empty beer bottles home, or follow the easier course of tossing them out the window? Will a pesticide manufacturer act to delay production of a pesticide because of misgivings about its safety—especially if the letter of the law would allow him to produce it and delay would cost him money? Will a farmer employ sound conservation practices on his land, even though they may be unprofitable in the short run? Will backpackers make the effort to leave the wilderness as they found it? Laws can guide these decisions, but only character can provide the strength to resist temptation to despoil.

True, much that passes for conservatism today is more concerned with cash than character, possessions more than posterity. Its only close attachment to the land is on the fairway and the putting green at the country club. Environmental activists rightly despise this type of conservatism, but the reason it is despicable is that it really isn't conservative.

When 19th-century conservatives overreacted to the rise of their socialist and communist foes and embraced "rugged individualism" and the quest for personal gain, they forgot that character, personhood, and true individuality will never flower without the nurture of community. More than a few conservatives concluded that Big Business—even unsavory monopoly interests spouting Social Darwinism—could do no wrong.

Robber barons returned the favor by calling their greed conservatism.

With "conservatism" monopolized by monopolists, genuine conservative sentiment cast about for a means of expression. One was the Populist movement, which tried to protect the independent farmer and rural economy. Among its spiritual descendants are the "social issue" conservatives who sit in uneasy alliance with the corporate faction of the Republican coalition. Other populists reacted so strongly against "conservative" vested interests that they articulated their concerns in socialist rhetoric. Many of the socialist-leaning members of today's environmental camp are part of this reaction. They are mistaken, however, if they think that community can be restored through a planned economy. It is tainted as much by sterile materialism and ambition as monopoly capitalism. Far from being opposites, both plutocrat and planner try to monopolize wealth and power. Thus when we see Big Business "conservatives" struggle with Big Government "liberals," we merely witness a tangle of tentacles belonging to the same predatory Establishment.

One of many depressing examples of government-corporate collusion was the sale of advanced technology to the former Soviet Union, some of it with direct application to nuclear weaponry. Pure greed may be one explanation, but the mutual affinity of monopolists, American and Soviet, could have been another. In any case, concern for the environment or future generations was never an issue.

Clearly, it is imperative for genuine conservatives and environmentalists to unite for their common goal. This is not to minimize real differences between the two groups, but both need to exchange ideas and arguments to overcome these barriers.

Conservatives might listen to an environmentalist plea to modify their view of property rights. Specifically, the heirs of Burke and Jefferson might expand their notion of these rights to protect not only real estate, but also lungs and livers. The point is that uncontrolled industrial pollution is as deadly to conservatives as anyone else. The rights on a plot of ground are not worth much if it is the plot where you are buried.

On the other hand, environmentalists should look past the rhetorical excesses of the Christian right to see legitimate concerns of religious conservatives. The former need not share the latter's religion to share the conservative's misgivings about drugs, violence, and licentiousness. Admittedly, bringing God into the equation is controversial, but it is necessary to do, for to plunder the environment is to place ego above Creation and even the Creator. The religious sentiment commonly confirmed by the conservative is a needed corrective toward humility and reverence. Its moral teachings prompt stewardship over the land and its fauna and flora and concern for the well-being of others, not the least of which are future generations.

Patriotism is another conservative force for the environment, for a man will surely think twice before injuring what he regards as his Fatherland and Motherland. Of course scoundrels have used patriotism as a cloak for warmongering and other vile aims. But what good name haven't scoundrels used and abused? The attachment to our native land is a deep and primal tie; to forsake it is to be outcast and alienated.

One cause both conservatives and environmentalists should support is the protection and revival of the family farm. Jefferson hailed it as a school of character where discipline, strong ties of kin, and healthful living would produce good citizens.

He doubted that a highly urban society could impart the virtues necessary to maintain a free Republic. Once again, Jefferson had greater faith in character than constitutions. The Southern agrarian prophets of *I'll Take My Stand* echoed Jefferson and predicted 50 years ago with uncanny accuracy the social and psychological malaise that would result in a wholesale flight to the city. Wendell Berry, in recent years, has sounded a similar theme.

The family farm today is moving toward extinction, a trend that should be of utmost concern to environmentalists. How futile it would be to protect parcels of wilderness and parks if the vastly larger tracts that feed us are stripped of fertility by wind, water, and human abuse. Moreover, environmentalists often forget that family farmers have as an incentive for using their land wisely the desire to pass it on to future generations; corporate farming is not so motivated.

A revival of rural community is a task that will require something better conceived than the failed back-to-the-land movement of the 60's communalists. Nevertheless, one detects among many Americans a deep yearning to escape the sterility of the urban secular city; to escape paper-shuffling jobs for genuinely satisfying labor; and to escape the fantasies of video-addiction for a truly human life lived firsthand. Society desperately needs the perspective of a self-reliant rural class, with its knowledge of nature and her workings.

Rural revival will require hardheaded economic and political appraisal. Tax breaks for current family farms and for individuals wishing to enter farming should be expanded; new strategies for finance, cooperation, and marketing must be instituted. Until these and other changes come about, the full-time family farm will be a difficult proposition. However, opportunities for part-time farming may open up with the advent of home-based computer work and other types of long-distance employment to supplement incomes. Finding ways back to our homesteads could be the next chapter in our saga as a nation of pioneers.

Time will doubtless reveal other areas for conservative-environmental cooperation. As a conservative, I have never understood why some in my camp miss the profound but basic connection between a respect for nature and conservatism. If we are not conserving the natural grandeur of the nation and the nature that sustains us, then what are we conserving? Similarly, it is hard to understand why some environmentalists lean toward varieties of leftist thinking which strain and mold life into tight ideological dogmas. Nothing could be so foreign to the rich, organic vitality of nature.

But despite their differences, both real and imagined, the genuine conservative and the genuine environmentalist share piety toward the same natural order, and love of the land. Here they stand together on common ground. c

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## Love song of the modern woman to her partner

*by PJ Martyr*

There'll be no masculine nonsense,  
Nor feminine yielding of self.  
This arrangement's based purely upon sense,  
And business, and fashion, and wealth.  
Our bodies well-sealed against children,  
We'll advocate freedom to think  
That babes must be wanted, and if, when,  
As long as they're our shade of pink.  
Our lives secured safe against upsets,  
Our minds will be filled with debris.  
I insist upon separate sunsets—  
In modern love, nothing is free.