

Creating prosperity: How capitalism can protect the environment

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There's a terrible misconception held by most on the Left. It's the idea that the environment will suffer if left unprotected by government because profit-seeking capitalists will consume every last natural resource they can get their greedy hands on, which will lead to unfathomable ecological disaster.

Therefore, we need our betters in Washington D.C. to regulate how much energy we consume, what kinds of cars we drive, how much and what kinds of food we eat, what kinds of houses we live in, how much we pay for gasoline, how much water we use, and so on. It may be difficult, but, hey, it's all for Mother Earth.

Enter Thomas L. Friedman, famed author and columnist, with the latest version of this classic eco-guilt trip. In a recent New York Times [column](#), Friedman repeated the doomsday propaganda by warning young people that their "[...] climate future is being decided right now in the cloakrooms of the Capitol, where the coal lobby holds huge sway." For that reason, America needs the [Waxman-Markey](#) cap and trade bill that is making its way through Congress.

We've already discussed how miserably [expensive](#) taxing carbon emissions will be and why the [scientific evidence](#) is unsupportive of such rash political efforts to fight global warming. But it seems a more remedial lesson is in order. With so many people like Mr. Friedman calling for the creation of a green Soviet Union, it may be useful to briefly explain how capitalism can afford environmental protection measures without making Americans poorer and less free.

Former NASA Climatologist Dr. Roy Spencer [summed up](#) the solution beautifully last week: "Encourage economic growth, and burn fossil fuels like there is no tomorrow! Increased demand will lead to higher prices, and as long as the free market is allowed to work, new energy technologies will be developed."

Using America's economic growth over the last century as an example, we can see why Dr. Spencer's recommendation is a solid one. The truth of the matter is that a cleaner environment corresponds directly to increasing living standards, and this is verifiable if we consider the economic literature on the subject. As the Cato Institute's Jerry Taylor [points out](#):

"There are dozens of studies showing that, as per capita income initially rises from subsistence levels, air and water pollution increases correspondingly. But once per capita income hits between \$3,500 and \$15,000 (dependent upon the pollutant), the ambient concentration of pollutants begins to decline just as rapidly as it had previously increased. This relationship is found for virtually every significant pollutant in every single region of the planet. It is an iron law.

Socialism on the other hand—which is precisely what the [environmental movement](#) is pushing for—has no comparable ability to make people wealthier, and thus no ability to save the planet. There's been plenty of research conducted which indicates that achieving economic prosperity is increasingly made possible as government controls over the economy are loosened. The Fraser Institute's [Economic Freedom of the World Report](#), for example, indicates that the wealthiest countries—and thus those with the best environmental conditions—are those with the freest economies.

Even inconvenient truth pitchman himself, [Al Gore](#), has admitted as much as we are arguing here: "Free market capitalist economics is arguably the most powerful tool ever used by civilization. As the world's leading exemplar of free market economics, the US has a special obligation to discover effective ways of using the power of market forces to help save the environment."

Such wisdom could save America a lot of trouble. Hopefully, Congress will heed it and act accordingly.

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