

# THE DAILY CALLER

## **We can't save the environment without freedom**

By Randal O'Toole

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The first Earth Day took place in 1970, when I was a high school senior, and that day set the course of my life for the next 25 years. Convinced of the need to protect the environment and realizing that forests were a key part of the environment in my home state of Oregon, I elected to attend forestry school, graduating in 1974.

Over the next two decades, I helped almost every major environmental group in their efforts to save public forests from what we thought were the rapacious hands of timber companies. But I soon realized that the real problem was that Congress had inadvertently given public land agencies budgetary incentives to lose money harming the environment, and disincentives to either make money or do environmental good.

This insight helped me see that creating markets for all resources would allow them to compete on a level playing field. Recreation fees, for example, could reward public land managers for protecting things that recreationists care about, such as scenery, diverse wildlife habitat, and clean water. Though economists estimated that recreation was worth more than any other public land resource, Congress didn't allow managers to charge for most recreation.

Many environmentalists in the 1970s and 1980s were receptive to my ideas of reform. Our common goal was to protect the environment, and they happily accepted any tools that would solve a particular environmental problem best. Soon, Congress passed a law allowing federal land agencies to charge recreation fees and to keep those fees.

Unfortunately, things changed in the early 1990s because of two events: the fall of the Soviet Union and the election of Bill Clinton to the White House.

Polls showed that the fall of the Soviet Union persuaded most Americans that government was a poor solution to most problems. One of the few exceptions was environmental protection, which many Americans still believed needed government regulation. This led many self-described

“progressives,” who believe in more government control, to push their agenda by joining the environmental movement.

Meanwhile, Clinton’s election changed the financing of the environmental movement. From 1981 through 1992, environmental groups raised much of their money by charging that Republicans in the White House threatened the environment. With a Democrat as president, grassroots funding for environmental groups plummeted.

To make up the difference, most groups turned to foundation grants. But foundations demanded that the groups they funded all adopt the same strategy. Progressives took this opportunity to demand that their strategy — transferring power from on-the-ground forest managers to political appointees — be the one that was adopted. For example, they opposed recreation fees because, with everything controlled from Washington, they didn’t think they needed to rely on incentives.

The progressive goal was not environmental protection but government control. They believed they knew how every acre of land in the country should be managed, which forests should be cut, which crops should be planted on which farms, and how many urbanites should live in apartments instead of single-family homes.

The constitutional rights and personal desires of property owners, the expertise of public land managers, and the housing preferences of homebuyers were unimportant compared with the greater good that could be achieved through central control of our natural resources.

When free-market environmentalists showed that most environmental problems could be solved with better incentives, progressives latched onto climate change as the one issue that demanded complete government control. “Climate change is a collective problem that demands collective action,” enthuses Naomi Klein, and it “supercharges the pre-existing case for virtually every progressive demand on the books.”

Giving government power to solve a problem is not the same as actually solving the problem. Instead, that government is more likely to make the problem worse as it abuses its power. Klein’s own proposals for climate change — “subways, streetcars and light-rail ... everywhere” and high-density “housing along those transit lines” — will have practically no effect on climate but devastating effects on our economy.

Air, water, wildlife, forests, and other things we call “the environment” are precious and deserve our care. But freedom is also precious. The most important lesson of my four decades as an environmentalist is that you can’t have one without the other.

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