deborah lynn guber

the grassroots of a green revolution

polling america on the environment

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The Grassroots of a Green Revolution

Polling America on the Environment

Deborah Lynn Guber

The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

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For my parents,
for reasons more than words can say.

And for my nephew Ethan,
who reminds me
so much of his mother.

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Introduction

Environmental Concern and the Politics of Consensus

In the main, the notion of consensus has sprung from the inventive minds of theorists untainted by acquaintance with mass attitudes.
—V. O. Key, Jr.[1]

In the generation that has passed since the first Earth Day in 1970, environmentalism has become woven into the fabric of American life. Concern for environmental quality has spawned extraordinary changes in how we think, work, and recreate, in what we buy, and how we govern. Words like "ecology," "acid rain" and "global warming" have become common in the lexicon of our language, sorting newspapers, bottles, and cans into bins a daily household ritual. Indeed, society has been so altered by environmentalism it is easy to overlook the distance of thirty years, backwards in time to the nascent social movement that was, and forward again to the mature evolution of science and law it has become.

Today, environmentalism is a part of our popular culture and a reflection of modern sensibility, reinforced by what we read, see, and hear in books and magazines, on television, and at the movie theater. Our collective consciousness has been raised by the writings of those Charles Rubin calls "popularizers," including Rachel Carson, Barry Commoner, Paul Ehrlich, and the Club of Rome.[2] The authors of children's books promote environmental themes,[3] product placements on popular television shows send subtle environmental cues,[4] motion pictures like *Erin Brockovich* and *A Civil Action* remind us of what we fear and who we should blame.[5] As one newspaper columnist wryly observed, "Motherhood and apple pie, baseball and the flag—all may be subjects of controversy. But the environment is almost beyond debate these days."[6]

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V. O. Key, arguably the founding father of modern scholarship on public opinion, had a word for such a pattern. He called it (simply enough) *consensus*, although he also warned that it was a "nebulous term" with many meanings, full of uncertainty, with the potential to obscure as much as it illuminates.[7] For Key, however, identifying the presence or absence of consensus was only the first step, and a relatively straightforward one at that, at least in comparison to the true task of determining its impact on the political system. While he found that under some conditions overwhelming public agreement on an issue performed a "decisive" function, forcing change in existing policies and programs, at other times its influence was less pronounced. In some cases, he speculated, the function of consensus was merely "supportive" of government; on other occasions it was surprisingly "permissive," allowing government to act largely without fear of popular dissent or electoral reprisal. In some ways, too, the appearance of consensus might even be "contrived" to suit political needs and purposes. The product of many different things, all consensus was not created equal.

Within that context, acknowledging that public attitudes on the environment approach consensus is clearly not enough. Given the need to translate words into action, to use the word *consensus* (even judiciously) reveals little about its long-term political impact, at least from the bottom up. On that note, confusion abounds. Since 1970, surveys have demonstrated widespread public concern for a growing list of environmental problems, including air and water pollution, nuclear power, energy conservation, deforestation, and urban sprawl. Public opinion polls likewise show that the environmental movement has earned the sympathetic support of a large majority of Americans, many of whom claim the label *environmentalist* as their own. But what do the numbers that underlie such research ultimately mean? Is environmentalism a shallow consensus likely to soften in the face of ambivalence, as American voters and consumers experience the costs of reform firsthand? Is it an enduring social concern or a fleeting political fashion subject to the nature-of-the-times as the economy shifts from prosperity into recession? Does growing support for environmental protection indicate a fundamental shift in American values and lifestyles, or is it merely an uncontroversial "motherhood" issue that engenders automatic support without personal commitment or lasting political consequences?

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Satisfying answers are not immediately apparent—to environmentalists committed to translating public sympathy into political currency, politicians held responsible for answering constituent demands, scientists and policymakers frustrated by public misperceptions and misdirected fears, marketing executives charged with identifying and satisfying environmentally concerned consumers, or academics who continue to disagree. No one quite seems to know what to make of the environment.

The State of the Movement

If the celebrations marking the thirtieth anniversary of Earth Day are any indication, the news for environmentalists is both good and bad. Environmental causes resonate with most Americans, to be sure—83 percent of those polled in an April 2000 Gallup poll readily agreed with the broadest goals of the environmental movement—but when asked to rate their own commitment to the cause, just 16 percent said they were "active participants," while more than half admitted they were sympathetic but uninvolved.[10] These statistics run parallel with broader trends in declining membership among some national environmental organizations since 1990.[9]

Moreover, when asked to rate the seriousness of various problems on the national agenda in a comparative sense, respondents ranked the environment well behind other issues and concerns, including drug use, crime and violence, health care, and homelessness. If Americans are environmentalists, Hal Rothman suspects they are "half-hearted" ones, at best, and are unwilling to face difficult choices and altered lifestyles. In fact, he writes in *The Greening of a Nation?* (1998) that the contemporary environmental movement has become, ironically, a "victim of its own successes." By finding appeal in popular culture, he warns, it has become too easy, to pay "lip service to the concepts of environmentalism without engaging in the behaviors necessary to turn concepts into action."[10]

Motivating and sustaining the political activism of average Americans has been an uphill battle for the environmental movement from the start. Communicating the complex nature of environmental destruction to a lay public that is not expert in science and technology required "popularizers" like Rachel Carson and Barry Commoner to resort to stories

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and simplifications. According to Charles Rubin, the unintended consequence of this approach was to create a "public taste" for grand tales of ecological disaster. Books like Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Commoner's *The Closing Circle* (1971), he says, became

> the intellectual equivalent of a gothic romance, with a large cast of characters, involuted relationships, and a lurking menace. But the public's ability to appreciate the delicate balances and interrelationships of political and social structures has undergone a corresponding debasement, evident in rampant sloganeering, shameless emotionalism, and mindless panic and pessimism whenever "what is wrong with our society" comes under discussion. In this realm, only the crudest morality tales satisfy. Carson and Commoner have alerted us to matters that may well demand our attention. But they have done so at the cost of our ability to give that attention in a thoughtful way.[11]

In short, by downplaying environmental progress and by using exaggerated doomsday warnings to motivate public awareness and concern, the environmental movement has sacrificed its own credibility by giving in to the politics of chicken little.[12]

It is a common complaint among recent critics of the environmental movement, one voiced by Mark Dowie in *Losing Ground* (1995) and even more forcefully by Gregg Easterbrook in *A Moment on the Earth* (1995) and Bjorn Lomborg in *The Skeptical Environmentalist* (2001), but it is, in many ways, difficult to deny.[13] As David Brower, former executive director of the Sierra Club, remarked in an Earth Day 2000 interview: "All I've done in my career is slow the rate at which things get worse. Basically, that's all the environmental movement has done during the past thirty years."[14] Or as Donella Meadows, of *Limits to Growth* fame, recently wrote in her syndicated newspaper column: "If in the 30 Earth Day celebrations since 1970, the human population and economy have become any more respectful of the Earth, the Earth hasn't noticed." Ultimately, she too refuses to give in to the "die-hard optimists."[15]

In the end, the occasion marked by both Brower and Meadows—the annual celebration of Earth Day—is a prime example of the fundamental tension between popularity and ideology.[16] While environmentalists continue to blame many of the earth's problems on rampant overconsumption, organizers of recent Earth Day events were nonetheless quick to offer T-shirts, tote bags, coffee mugs, solar calculators, and hemp backpacks for sale to an appreciative audience, the gross sum of

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which prompted some observers to complain that Earth Day had become little more than a commercial occasion, overrun by “vacuous celebrities.”[17] In the past, too, others have noted the hypocrisy of allowing polluters the privilege of “greenwashing” their records by signing on as corporate sponsors of Earth Day events.[18] Following Earth Day 1990 in New York City, during which two hundred thousand people gathered in Central Park, creating almost forty-five tons of garbage, Rothman complained, “It is entirely possible that the planet might have been better off if they had just stayed home.”[19]

The Political Arena

If environmentalists have struggled in a public relations war, politicians have not fared much better in gauging their voting leeway on an issue marked by a combination of chronic low salience and high issue support.[20] It was low salience that led the Reagan administration in the early 1980s to assume that the public would be willing to back away from strict environmental regulations to revitalize the economy. Yet environmental concern and public furor soon galvanized over political appointees such as James Watt and Anne Burford, eventually forcing Reagan to change course by substituting administrators more sensitive to environmental causes.

After a sustained period of public outrage, however, the environment failed to materialize as a significant issue during Reagan’s campaign for reelection in 1984. Looking at his meager environmental record, his unrivaled attention to deregulation and economic growth, and the lingering controversy over his appointments of Watt and Burford, many environmentalists believed the Reagan record would lead to political liability at the ballot box.[21] Even though polls suggested that voters were both aware and disapproving of Reagan’s record on the environment, in the end the issue had little effect on his political success.[22]

Nearly every politician on the national scene has had to contend with the public’s mixed signals on the environment ever since. Campaigning for president in 1988, Republican candidate George Bush pledged to be an “environmental president” in the grand tradition of Teddy Roosevelt, and yet during an economic slump just four years later Bush seemed to

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reverse course, insisting instead that it was "time to put people ahead of owls."[23] Even Al Gore, whose strong environmental convictions made him an attractive running mate for Democrats in 1992, has since turned cautious, tempering his environmental views during his own quest for the White House during the 2000 presidential campaign.[24] As *The Economist* noted: "Despite his talk of bold measures and radical solutions . . . what he offers is virtue without sacrifice. As a political programme this is hard to beat," but it does little to help the environment.[25]

Gore's political dithering notwithstanding, Republicans have traditionally faced the most significant ideological challenge on environmental issues.[26] An overwhelming number of Americans favor environmental protection through government intervention in the market economy, a principle resisted by fiscal conservatives. At the same time, however, "a strong backlash" has developed against environmental regulations that are viewed as "intrusive, bureaucratic, and overly protective," opening to the door to an odd triangulation.[27] Following a Republican sweep in Congress in 1994, the new partisan majority was quick to propose cuts in the budget for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and amendments that would have weakened the Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act. Republicans moved to safeguard private property rights, close parts of the national park system, and increase oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Yet under pressure not long after, House Speaker Newt Gingrich (Republican-Georgia) sought a rapid public relations retreat, admitting that Republican proposals were in fact "strategically out of position on the environment."[28]

Understanding Risk

Confusion and frustration over the political impact of environmental concern extends well beyond the strategies used by candidates to win elections. Given the need to justify federal regulatory decisions on the basis of science, it also includes the growing field of risk communication. "Any one of us might be harmed by almost anything," writes Stephen Breyer in *Breaking the Vicious Circle* (1993)—"a rotten apple, a broken sidewalk, an untied shoelace, a splash of grapefruit juice, a dishonest lawyer."[29] It is, of course, the responsibility of government (and by ex-

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tension the experts they employ) to decide which of those multitude of risks merit regulation and which do not. According to Breyer, however, several factors intrude on our ability to rank those risks wisely, not the least of which involve public misperceptions and exaggerated fears, factors he says "impede rational understanding."[30]

Scholars have long recognized that public perceptions of risk often collide with what experts judge to be objective probabilities of harm. While scientists cite motor vehicle use, smoking, and alcohol consumption as three of the riskiest activities of modern life, lay people instead believe nuclear power to top that list, often underestimating fatalities caused by less "dramatic" accidents and diseases, while overemphasizing the magnitude of danger to be found in new technologies.[31]

The same gap between the concerns of average Americans and those of policymakers can be found across a wide range of environmental problems. While environmentalists promote global warming, ozone depletion, deforestation, and loss of habitat for endangered wildlife, respondents in public opinion polls are far more likely to worry about mainstay issues like air and water pollution. As Jonathan Rauch, a columnist for the *National Journal*, recently observed: "The public's priorities almost perfectly invert the environmental movement's priorities. Perversely, the aspirations of Gore-era environmentalism are now blocked by the public's commitment to Nixon-era environmentalism."[32]

In the end, this disjunction has significant consequences for policymakers. According to Breyer, without better risk communication from the top down, public attitudes toward environmental risks often remain stubborn and unyielding, warping political priorities and pressuring scarce resources of time and money into all the wrong places.[33]

In Search of the Green Consumer

While environmentalists measure support for the environment using membership rolls, politicians rely on votes, and scientific experts depend on public trust, corporate America has hoped to translate rising environmental concern into increased sales in the marketplace. Driven by the desire of American businesses to exploit consumer demand, great effort over the past two decades has been spent on identifying and targeting

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the "ecologically concerned consumer." Despite what some environmentalists feel is an obvious oxymoron, today's eco-market offers an unusually diverse collection of products and services—from phosphate-free detergents and recycled paper products, to electric cars, environmentally responsible mutual funds, solar mosquito repellents, and herbal flea collars.[34]

The results have been decidedly mixed, despite the involvement of visible corporate giants like Proctor & Gamble, Wal-Mart, and McDonald's. While most studies find that deep commitment to the environment is concentrated in the hands of a privileged few—ranging from 5 to 25 percent of the U.S. population, depending on the stringency of the criteria used[35]—public willingness to purchase certain environmentally friendly products runs surprisingly deep, even at slightly higher cost. A 1992 survey, for example, found that nearly three-quarters of consumers were "at least sometimes" influenced by environmental claims in the marketplace, and most appeared willing to pay at least 5 percent more for products known to be environmentally safe.[36]

While some have welcomed environmentalism as "the political, economic, and social trend of the '90s," others suspect that when pressed Americans fail to put their money where their mouth is.[37] For example, despite evidence that many Americans prefer and indeed are willing (when asked in surveys) to pay a premium price for environmentally safe products, Universal Product Code (UPC) scanner data and panel studies that trace actual buying behavior often paint a more lackluster picture. The "Study of Media and Markets" by Simmons Market Research Bureau finds that the products that consumers purchase "most often" (such as aerosol sprays and radial tires) are frequently at odds with their environmental preferences and their stated willingness to purchase substitutes.[38] As one observer put it, environmental concern alone does not always "make the cash register ring."[39]

Getting It Right

The four brief vignettes presented above crisscross a wide range of experiences and disciplines, and yet all illustrate the importance of

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achieving a better understanding of public opinion on environmental issues.

First and foremost, to study the success of the environmental movement from the bottom up means confronting a movement that is, paradoxically, both strong and weak. Widespread and well-meaning public concern at the grassroots level has become one of the most impressive findings in recent survey research, and yet it is a resource environmentalists have been unable (or unwilling) to capitalize on fully. On the one hand, the discomfort some environmentalists feel toward the ideological impurity of their rank and file leads, at times, to evangelical and exclusionary rhetoric. On the other, motivating public outrage by instilling fear seems a short-sighted solution to a long-range problem, one that ultimately risks the credibility of the movement itself and leaves sympathetic supporters feeling demoralized about the insignificance of their efforts.

As Matt Ridley and Bobbi Low remind us, "At the center of all environmentalism lies a problem: whether to appeal to the heart or to the head—whether to urge people to make sacrifices on behalf of the planet or to accept that they will not, and instead rig the economic choices so that they find it rational" to behave responsibly in any event.[40] Environmentalists, they believe, will never achieve their goals simply by occupying the moral high ground. If they are to motivate and mobilize latent support among average Americans, environmentalists need to become more proficient at communicating with the public by first understanding the root of its concerns.[41]

Second, politicians unsure of whether to court, fear, or ignore the "green" vote would also do well to scrutinize the factors that underlie public attitudes toward the environment. As politicians from both sides of the political fence learn to embrace the environmental issue as their own, the ability to harness latent public concern seems likely to become an increasingly important political and electoral skill, creating, in Christopher Bosso's words, "opportunities for leadership that may or may not be exploited."[42] While motivating environmentally conscious voters at the ballot box may not be easy or fail-safe, it is surely a strategy worth research and investigation, especially in close races, where victory is won at the margins.

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On other political fronts, as the arena of science and policymaking becomes ever more democratic, the need for effective risk communication between experts and the lay public likewise becomes critical. Faced with a public that is unable to distinguish good science from "junk science," the political process designed to mediate between both sources of information is frequently plagued by uncertainty and distrust. As Breyer notes, "To change public reaction, one would either have to institute widespread public education in risk analysis or generate greater public trust in some particular group of experts or the institutions that employ them."[43] But to achieve either goal requires a firm understanding of how attitudes develop and how they adapt in response to new knowledge and information.

Finally, understanding environmental attitudes as a stimulus to marketplace behavior is clearly important to Madison Avenue, where advertisers struggle to hone and refine their environmental messages on product labels. With a number of visible false starts and missteps, corporations looking to expand their markets further need to understand more than narrow consumer preferences. Given that many environmental issues span the chasm between public and private, blurring lines of distinction between citizen and consumer, political attitudes toward the environment will likely become important in understanding individual economic decisions.

The Academic Divide

Given increased attention and a continued state of controversy, it might seem reasonable to assume that in the academic disciplines considerable progress already has been made toward understanding the origins and importance of public opinion on environmental issues. "Instead," as Kent Van Liere and Riley Dunlap deplore, even on relatively simple questions, such as the social and demographic bases of environmental concern, "one finds considerable dissensus with respect to both the evidence itself and its interpretation."[44]

For instance, in *Progress and Privilege: America in the Age of Environmentalism* (1982), William Tucker insists that "At heart,

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environmentalism favors the affluent over the poor, the haves over the have-nots."[45] Yet Mark Sagoff disagrees, despite a lingering misperception, and argues that environmentalism "serves as a common rallying ground for groups usually thought to be at odds with one another: educated professionals and the lower middle class; affluent suburbanites and inhabitants of small towns in the American heartland."[46] As such, he adds, environmentalism represents an entirely new breed of populism. Strengthened by cross-cutting cleavages, it is a movement centered not on elitist principles but rather around a sense of community and the integrity of place.

Other disagreements continue to be fought in the pages of scholarly books and journals as well. A few examples illustrate the point:

· David Gelernter contends that "There is no such thing on the political scene as an 'anti-environmentalist,' no cogent intellectual position by that name,"[47] and yet Jacqueline Vaughn Switzer charts a growing ideological challenge from the grassroots—a resentment and distrust of political and environmental leaders that she believes amounts to an effective "green backlash."[48]

· Anthropologists Willett Kempton, James Boster, and Jennifer Hartley believe that environmental activists "have more or less the same beliefs as other Americans," despite media stereotypes to the contrary.[49] Richard Ellis and Fred Thompson, however, disagree. They find that "Americans do not behave more like environmental activists because culturally they are quite unlike them." To suppose otherwise, they say, is to "miss the rival value systems that undergird environmental policy debates."[50]

· Laura Lake comments on the "depth and longevity of the environmental mandate,"[51] and yet polling expert William Schneider speculates that "because the consensus is so broad, it is not likely to have much impact on politics."[52] Like Lake, Riley Dunlap insists that success on key environmental initiatives and referendums proves that Americans are willing to take a stand on environmental issues, especially when elected representatives fail to do so,[53] but in *Earth Rising* (2000) Philip Shabecoff notes that the environment has been a "minor, rather ineffectual player in the electoral process."[54]

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In short, despite a growing field of academic expertise spanning politics, economics and the sciences, few uncontested answers have emerged to a ever growing laundry list of questions.

An Overview of This Book

"To speak with precision of public opinion," said V. O. Key, is a task not unlike coming to grips with the Holy Ghost."[55] This book faces that challenge head on—by exploring the ironies, myths, inconsistencies, and tensions that characterize public thinking on environmental issues. To reach that goal, the essays that follow use original analyses of public opinion polls to break the problem into component parts—into those descriptive pieces Key referred to as "properties" or "qualities" of public opinion. Then, much like a jigsaw puzzle, the conclusion of this book reassembles those pieces back into a coherent whole, one that ultimately weighs the significance of environmental concern in the arena of U.S. politics and policy and provides some pragmatic advice for decision makers. It proceeds in the following order.

Direction

Chapter 1 opens with the deceptively simple task of characterizing the direction of public attitudes on environmental issues. Surely we might expect clear answers and little variance here, since a preponderance of surveys demonstrate that almost "everybody is an environmentalist these days."[56] But in the end, results are surprisingly complex, demonstrating that while environmental consensus exists on the idea of environmental protection, it does not always extend to the means used to achieve those goals. Conclusions here also reinforce the need to pay careful attention to potential biases embedded in survey questions and design, particularly in those polls sponsored by organizations with a vested interest in the outcome.

Strength

The direction of opinion is refined further by adding attitude strength into the mix in chapter 2. A crucial consideration to early scholars such as James Bryce and A. Lawrence Lowell, as well as to more modern

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academics like V. O. Key, Howard Schuman, and Stanley Presser, the question of intensity, says Key, clearly "puts us on the trail of a significant aspect of the place of opinion in the governing process."[57] Using measures of willingness-to-pay (WTP) as well as counterarguments and trade-offs that force respondents to consider the costs of achieving environmental goals relative to other priorities, survey data here largely confirm what scholars have suspected all along: Americans are quick to embrace environmental issues but reluctant to accept the consequences of their demands.

Stability

To probe the limits of popular support further, chapter 3 tracks the aggregate stability of environmental attitudes over time, especially in the face of economic recession and rising energy costs. Here survey data are used to explore the conventional wisdom that public enthusiasm for the environment is transient and that it responds to trends in the business cycle, rising policy costs, media attention, or simple boredom as new issues rise to complete for scarce public attention.[58]

Distribution

The distribution of public opinion on the environment among social and demographic groups is described in chapter 4, revisiting long-standing debates about the elitist character of the environmental movement and its key supporters.[59] Factors such as age, education, income, race, gender, and partisanship are all used in empirical models to explain variance in a variety of measures of environmental concern, ultimately with little effect. Making up in breadth what it lacks in depth, environmentalism on the surface appeals to nearly everyone.

Constraint

Taken together, do all of these pieces suggest (at least in nascent stages) the development of a fundamentally new social paradigm or belief system—one that might grow in commitment with time and patience? Chapter 5 draws attention to that issue by examining the consistency of environmental attitudes—what Key called "interrelations of opinion."[60] Scholars have long puzzled over low correlations between different

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environmental measures used in surveys, with some suggesting that public attitudes on the environment are rather crude, disconnected, and narrowly focused.[61] Yet after developing a more sophisticated model to test the dimensionality of environmental concern, results presented in this chapter largely demonstrate the opposite. Although notably lacking in knowledge and sophistication, public opinion on the environment is surprisingly consistent and "constrained."[62]

Behavior

Part II of the book moves one step further toward understanding the real impact of consensus by exploring the link between public opinion and political behavior. Chapter 6 examines the impact of environmental attitudes on American political parties and their candidates. That focus is expanded in chapter 7 to include other electoral arenas and political forums, including statewide referendums and initiatives. Finally, chapter 8 examines the impact of environmental concern on consumer decisions in the marketplace. That Americans prefer activism on the consumer front is surprising to scholars, perhaps, but this pattern of behavior reveals much about the factors that motivate citizens to act in an environmentally responsible way.

"In its most uncomplicated form," wrote Key, "'consensus' means an overwhelming public agreement upon a question of public policy." Yet, he added, it is also a "magic word" full of the uncertainty of interpretation.[63] With high issue support but low intensity of belief, with broad appeal but narrow participation, and with consistent opinions nonetheless ungrounded by clear knowledge and understanding, the long-term success of the U.S. environmental movement from the bottom up remains unclear. Growing environmental consensus may force elected officials from both sides of the political fence into action, but it might also allow political leaders a considerable degree of latitude in designing environmental policies free from a watchful public eye. Sympathetic public support may invest the environmental movement with valuable political currency, but an environmental consensus based on broad symbolism alone might prove to be shallow and manipulable in the long run, endangering the legitimacy and political base of environmentalists who place too much faith in public mandates and grassroots support.

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Ultimately, the importance of these lingering, unresolved issues ensure that the legacy of American environmentalism will be determined not only by the success of its legislative record but also by its ability to persuade average citizens to change their voting patterns, buying habits, and lifestyles. As Pogo the Possum once said in a famous cartoon: "We have met the enemy and he is us." Whether or not those enemies have in fact become allies in the shadow of this "great environmental awakening" will be a matter debated throughout the coming pages.[64]

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