

# Ideas Matter: A Political History of the Twentieth-Century Environment

*Excerpted from an essay by J. R. McNeill in the November 2000 issue of Current History.*

**D**omestic politics in open societies proved mildly more responsive to environmental problems that annoyed citizens than did more authoritarian societies, especially after 1970, but there were clear limits to the ecological prudence that citizens wanted. Regardless of political system, policymakers at all levels responded more readily to clear and present dangers (and opportunities) than to more subtle and gradual worries about the environment. The prospect of economic depression or military defeat commanded attention that pollution, deforestation, or climate change could not. More jobs, higher tax revenues, and stronger militaries all appealed, with an immediate lure that cleaner air or diversified ecosystems could not match.

By 1970, however, something new was afoot. The interlocked, mutually supporting (and co-evolving) social, ideological, political, economic, and technological systems that we conveniently call industrial society spawned movements that cast doubt on the propriety and prudence of business as usual. Some of these movements demanded the antithesis of industrial society, denouncing technology, wealth, and large-scale organization. Others called for yet more and better technology and organization, and more wealth for those who had least, as solutions to environmental problems. To date these new movements exercise only modest influence over the course of events, but they are still young. ■