

What Is Environmentalism?

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Wiki's definition of environmentalism, which is the usual one, says "Environmentalism is a concern for the preservation, restoration, or improvement of the natural environment..." This, however, is far from the truth. Environmentalism is not a neutral, benign concern for the environment, as the Wiki definition would have us believe. This article argues that environmentalism is an activist political movement, with moral and religious overtones, aimed at alleviating perceived and fancied human woes falsely attributed to misuse of the natural environment; a movement which uses the power of state laws to regulate individual economic choice to the diminishment of human values and life. This definition differs radically from the Wiki definition. It defines environmentalism as it is and as it does, giving us a more accurate concept to consider, think about, debate, and evaluate.

We need a more accurate definition because environmentalism is an extremely serious threat to freedom, and freedom is no mere abstraction. Freedom is absolutely essential to the fruition of human lives and to the realization of values within the life of each and every human being. The more that the state enforces the environmentalist agenda, the more that it restricts freedom; and the more that it restricts freedom, the more that it destroys human life. Environmentalism is therefore fundamentally destructive. If we do not understand it as it is and does, we suffer.

I am clearly anti-environmentalism. Will Al Gore then ask me "Mike, do you favor dirty air, foul water, pollution, and energy waste?" Of course not. Most people don't, but Gore's question is a straw man debating trick. How so? Because environmentalism does not essentially entail clean air and water, low pollution, and energy conservation; and because these are not the aims of mainstream environmental supporters, even though these items may well be mentioned as environmental goals by environmentalists. In fact, environmentalism is better defined as above: by its immoral and counterproductive means of attaining strategic objectives such as climate

control, energy independence, and sustainability, that have only a tenuous connection with maintaining the capital stock of natural resources; and that are incorrectly connected up, in the minds of environmentalists, with the ultimate goal of a better life for themselves and their children. Many execrable movements have high-sounding strategic objectives and ultimate goals; but if the objectives are falsely connected to the goals and the means used to achieve them involve abominable methods, then we are justified in condemning the enterprise. So, Mr. Gore, if my neighbor's barbecue wafts smoke into my lungs, does that give any level of government the right to make everyone buy expensive smokeless barbecue equipment? Or should I instead have been more careful when I moved next to him? Or should I close the window? Or should I ask him to move it a few feet away from my window? Or is the irritation serious enough to merit a case for a local judge?

Environmentalism does not mean the normal and conscionable human concern for the God-given bounty and beauty of the creation that we have been made stewards of. It does not mean voluntary and free human action to further such concerns. If that were what environmentalism truly meant, I could not and would not oppose it.

In defining environmentalism, we must recognize that it is not a monolithic movement. It contains numerous cross-currents and divergent views. Reasonable environmentalists exist who endorse peaceful and free-market methods to achieve their goals. But these voices are weak and out of the mainstream of the movement. They are not what environmentalism means.

Nor is environmentalism defined at the opposite end by its most lunatic elements, those communist-oriented primitives who wish to reduce the world's population drastically and return mankind to some sort of (probably mythical) Paleolithic non-industrial life style. Such proponents wish to end the division of labor; and ending the division of labor means ending market exchange and private property, all of which are the major engines that all free peoples use to improve their lives and create life-enhancing civilizations. (See George Reisman's treatment of these relations and his extended essay on environmentalism in his book *Capitalism*.) Hear, for example, such words as these from a primitivist: "But my working hypothesis is that division of labor draws the line, with dire consequences that unfold in an accelerating or cumulative way. Specialization divides and narrows the individual, brings in hierarchy, creates dependency and works against autonomy. It also drives industrialism and hence leads directly to the

eco-crisis. Tools or roles that involve division of labor engender divided people and divided society."

Such primitivists even come to criticize art, numbers, and language. They routinely use the fruits of civilization, give interviews, and presumably make money while extolling the hunter-gatherer way of life. They could easily drop out of the civilization they despise, fashion a primitive life for themselves, and practice what they preach. They don't.

We cannot define environmentalism by such primitivist voices without thereby constructing a straw man of our own. Instead we need to locate the mainstream of environmentalism. The mainstream appears in the decades-long environmental legislation that our Congress has passed to make us use ethanol or to subsidize fuel made from garbage or to fund research into hydrogen-powered cars or any number of hundreds of other similar measures. The mainstream appears in the environmental legislation passed by 50 state legislatures and by thousands of cities, towns, and counties.

This brings us to our first conclusion. Environmentalism is a political movement that uses the state's monopoly on violence as its primary means of action. The existence of Green Parties illustrates this fact. Or consider an organization that epitomizes environmentalism, the Sierra Club. Its web site instructs readers: "Raise Fuel Economy Standards." "Restore the Clean Water Act!" "America Needs a Stronger Senate Energy Bill." "Keep Public Lands in Public Hands." "Protect Our Coasts from Drilling." This is only a sample of a long series of recommended political actions to be put in place by the state. Mainstream environmentalism is profoundly statist.

This means that (everyday) environmentalism is inconsistent with libertarianism, no matter how we might characterize its objectives and goals. It means that libertarian critiques of the negatives of statism apply to environmentalism. If, starting in 1960, the U.S. had made determined efforts to free up markets and create appropriate justice in the face of damages wrought through environmental infringements on private property, rather than doing the very opposite, using statist measures and relying on legislative law, the wealth of the country would have been far above where it now is, and our stewardship of the creation would have been much greater.

We did not follow the path indicated by American ideals of freedom and private property. Instead we entangled ourselves in a thicket of laws and

regulations from which there is no easy escape but massive repeal. Surveying all of the state's environmental regulations at all levels of government reveals an absolutely stunning degree of control by government. It reveals the slow but steady strangulation of freedom. It reveals the death by a thousand cuts of consumer control over products produced and sold. It reveals a retrogressive and destructive anti-freedom and anti-property motion.

To identify mainstream environmentalism, I turn to a mainstream media voice, namely, Newsweek magazine. Let us consider one article about environmentalism published in Newsweek on July 17, 2006. If we closely examine what this article says, as a kind of case study, we will find that it leads us in many illuminating directions and helps us define what environmentalism truly is.

The article's title is "Going Green." The emphasis is on going. Environmentalism means endorsing "green," it means changing our lives so as to "go green." This is not a matter of attitude, thought, or intellect. It means changes in concrete activities. It means making those changes in behavior, lifestyles, and choices that are included in becoming more green. We discover that environmentalism is an activist movement. This inference accords well with defining it as a political movement. It also accords well with the Sierra Club web site which features the Sierra Club Action Center in which numerous political actions are urged upon supporters.

The subtitle of the article tells us a little bit about what green means: "With windmills, low-energy homes, new forms of recycling and fuel-efficient cars, Americans are taking conservation into their own hands." The emphasis here is actually not upon the environment, or at least not directly. It is not on natural beauty, not on the value of natural vistas, gorges, mountains, stately forests, wild game, bird life, pure air, pristine lakes and rivers stocked with fish, or any other such goods that many of us value, indeed value highly, and that could and would exist in a well-functioning free-market order. Classic appreciation of the bounties and beauties of the creation is not what environmentalism is about.

No, instead the subtitle equates conservation with energy-related activities that typically involve government mandates justified rhetorically by ill-conceived attempts to save energy and prevent air pollution. Consistent with this emphasis, about half of the Sierra Club's action initiatives relate to

energy use (such items as "Tell Congress to Support Legislation to Stop Global Warming," "Tell the Senate to Guarantee Oil Savings!" "Tell Congress to Support a Renewable Energy Standard," and so on.)

The focus on autos and energy goes back to the early environmentalist attacks on automobiles and air pollution, among other things. Environmentalism is simple-minded. The simple-minded "solutions" to such "problems" were lower speed limits, catalytic converters, fleet mileage standards, smaller and less safe cars, reformulated gasoline, ethanol, closing oil refineries, stopping nuclear plants from being built, and so on; and now the equally simple-minded answers to other imagined problems are climate control, sustainability, and energy independence.

But the relations that link energy and resource use with transportation and other facets of the economy are incredibly complex, not amenable to blind interferences with multiply-connected free market and politically-influenced economic relations. It has never been clear from the outset of the environmental movement who was being damaged by whom and how great the damages were. The so-called problems were ill-defined. Even less clear, but very important, was how much of the perceived problems was caused by the state. The state's own rules and its own failures to enforce private property justice were and are root causes of resource misuse and pollution.

The individuals in our economy in part take the government framework as given and make their economic decisions within that framework. It is by no means a free market framework. Consider for a moment. Government rules affect transportation (ports, airports, rail traffic, road ownership, road building, automobiles, gasoline), location (property taxes, zoning, industrial subsidies, homebuilding subsidies, building codes), education (school location, taxation), energy supply (nuclear licensing, regulation, electricity regulation, plus much, much more), energy use, banking and insurance, only to name a few items that impact on where people settle, where their work is located relative to their dwellings, where their schools are located, what sorts of cars they buy, and how much they decide to travel and by what means. All of these many state-made restrictions distort economic activity, producing problems of resource misuse. Environmentalism, which involves even more state-made restrictions, goes exactly in the wrong direction and makes these problems worse.

Furthermore, in practical terms, if (for whatever reasons) the state or a hundred Sierra Clubs with a thousand petitions takes aim at the automobile and air pollution, there is no rational way for them as legislators to identify who is responsible for what so-called problems, much less fashion rational solutions. The complexities call for judges who can consider individual cases and fashion remedies where damages are involved.

The legislative solutions that have been imposed are impossible, costly, and one-size-fits-all, making them simple-minded and perverse. A law, for example, forbids a restaurant from using throwaway ware. It does not realize that disposable restaurant ware may be preferable, that it saves time, water, washing, and spreads fewer bacteria. Another law makes ships travel at slow speeds to avoid hitting whales. It does not realize that making ships travel at slower speeds decreases ship maneuverability and increases whale hits, or that stronger bow waves at higher speeds signal whales to get out of the way.

There were (and still are) two rational ways to address any and all conceivable problems associated with energy use and pollution, and neither one involved the state. These were (i) free markets, and (ii) a system of justice that recognized suits for damages caused by pollution and rose to the challenge of adjudicating them and discovering the appropriate law. By free markets, I mean totally free markets. Free markets can handle the immense complexity that stems from trillions of individual economic decisions. Governments cannot.

There is nothing per se wrong with any energy initiatives that Newsweek mentions, be they windmills, fuel cells, ethanol, or electric cars as long as individuals are free to assess them. We cannot argue with anyone who might wish to implement such choices as they personally view the options they face and their costs. Indeed, most individuals regard it as only right, fitting, and proper to conserve resources, especially their own. People do not ordinarily heat the streets or replace their wardrobes each week. Nor do they have to be counseled to conserve or made to do so. There is no need for government subsidies to encourage energy-saving uses, and such state actions destroy wealth.

It is only common sense that free individuals operating in free markets will choose the energy methods that they deem to be cost-efficient and value-effective. If there is anything we are sure of in economics, it is that people tend to engage in economizing behavior. Empirically this does not usually reveal itself as indulgence in vast amounts of energy waste as an item that

brings people inherent utility. We do not usually see people leaving their car engines run all night because they enjoy the sound and smell, or leaving their refrigerator doors open all day for convenience or because they like to pay high electric bills. If people find that it pays to build roofs with solar panels, will they not flock to this alternative? Don't they rapidly flock to other products that provide them with value? Why should energy-related products be any different?

The Newsweek article leads off with an anecdote about a commuter who commutes 24 miles to work. She starts her commute at 5 a.m. and rides her bike for 8 miles. She then takes a bus for the remaining 16 miles. It is not clear why she does this. Maybe she likes to, or perhaps this method is economical. We simply do not know. But when told how little impact that her efforts have on carbon dioxide, she says that she still wants to be "doing something." This suggests an internalized feeling of guilt if she does nothing, or a feeling that it is her duty to do something. It accords with a quote that leads off the article in which Jimmy Carter in 1977 says that energy conservation is "the moral equivalent of war." In other words, environmentalism has gone deeply enough into people's minds that they (or at least a significant number) do not look upon it as a matter of efficiency, cleanliness, or energy independence, but as a matter of right and wrong. Environmentalism has attained a moral dimension to its adherents. This turns environmentalism into a more potent political force.

The article cites Republicans who are entering the environmentalist fold, being convinced by spectres like global warming, American oil dependence, and modernization among Asian economies. President Bush has encouraged this movement toward environmentalism. President Nixon created the EPA. It is clear that environmentalism is a mainstream American political movement endorsed by both major parties.

Other persons are cited as supporting environmentalism through religious links, concerns over food, and concerns over health, including cancer death. But a more common source of support is said to be people who read about projections of global climate change over the next century and worry over how it might affect their children. This is a case where environmentalism uses false science and/or falsely uses science to gain adherents. If this reporting is correct, and I think it is, then environmentalism is a doctrine that blames various current and fancied human woes on our economic way of life, relating them to the use of natural resources, and promising deliverance

from those woes by state regulation and control over resources and economic life. The religious overtones of environmentalism are clear: Mankind is sinning against the environment, being punished for those sins, and redemption lies in environmentalism. Environmentalism is basically a pseudo-religion and a false religion at that.

Next, we learn that sustainability is an environmental concept that attracts people to environmentalism. Sustainability makes perfect sense if a person freely evaluates cost factors and determines that it pays to buy more durable goods or that it pays to eliminate waste by inventive means. But environmentalism precludes such free market thinking. Sustainability goes well beyond rational considerations into the irrational premise that nothing should be used up, which in turn precludes making cost-efficient transformations of resources into more valuable forms. In other words, sustainability is at odds with the basic economics of wealth and value creation. This suggests that environmentalist doctrine is anti-life, anti-value creation, and anti-wealth creation. The earlier analysis of the anti-free market orientation of environmentalism tells us the same.

It is time to sum up. The limited scope of this article was to sketch a few of the defining features of American environmentalism. The main conclusions are as follows:

Environmentalism is a mainstream, activist, political movement, endorsed by both major political parties. It uses and endorses the state's monopoly on violence as its primary means of action.

Environmentalist doctrine is anti-free market and anti-libertarian. Its doctrine cultivates and has succeeded in attaining a moral dimension among its adherents.

Environmentalist doctrine blames various current and fancied human woes on our economic way of life, relating them to natural resources, and promising deliverance from those woes by state regulation and control over resources and economic life.

Environmentalist doctrine is anti-life, anti-value creation, and anti-wealth creation.

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This brings us to a close to the end of part 3 on the Coming One World Religion.