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## **Is “the Environment” a Collectivist Idea?**

**by Sheldon Richman**

No issue has been more prominent the last several decades than “the environment.” Almost every day a new environmental “threat” arises, spelling the end of life as we know it, if not literally. We are being poisoned by polluted water and air; man-made carcinogens hide in our food; our ozone protection from the sun is eroding. And then there’s the Big One: global warming dooms us in any number of ways. It’s hardly an exaggeration to say that virtually every ill today is blamed on the greenhouse effect on the climate. The newest danger is that because of the man-made climate change, less warm tropical water is moving to northern Europe. That’s right: global warming somehow is causing northern Europe to cool. Go figure.

The idea of a mounting environmental catastrophe ought to be harder to maintain in light of the fact that people throughout the world are living longer, healthier lives. Six billion people live better than a billion did just a couple centuries ago. As Bjørn Lomborg points out in *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, infant mortality and the death rate are falling nearly everywhere, including sub-Saharan Africa with its (alleged) AIDS epidemic. (I say “alleged” because people are not routinely tested for the HIV virus in Africa.)

Aside from increased longevity (the cause of population growth), the other indicators of environmental integrity are positive. Known reserves of most resources are high. Despite spikes in oil and gas prices, the long-term downward trend of the real prices of resources continues. Human ingenuity — Julian Simon’s “ultimate resource” — continues to push back the limits of scarcity. The only real barriers to human progress remain government intervention prompted by social engineers and special interests.

All of this has been pointed out many times. The latest demonstration that we do not suffer an environmental crisis came from Lomborg, whose story makes his case particularly noteworthy. As a professor of statistics in the political science department of the University of Aarhus in Denmark, Lomborg and his top graduate students set out in the late 1990s to prove that Julian Simon was wrong to say that environmental and health data contradict the claim that the planet is falling apart and threatening human life.

As Lomborg writes,

I was provoked. I'm an old left-wing Greenpeace member and had for a long time been concerned about environmental questions.... Honestly, we expected to show that most of Simon's talk was simple, American right-wing propaganda. And yes, not everything he said was correct, but — contrary to our expectations — it turned out that a surprisingly large amount of his points stood up to scrutiny and conflicted with what we believed ourselves to know. The air in the developed world is becoming less, not more polluted; people in the developing countries are not starving more, but less, and so on.

The result of Lomborg's herculean effort was a 500-page, 3,000-note book documenting the grounds for Simonian optimism. But what is impressive about the book is not so much the reams of data Lomborg presents. Rather, it is his understanding that trade and economic development are the best ways of preparing ourselves for a future that is uncertain no matter what we do. Wealth, he points out, is what makes people and societies resilient enough to adapt to unforeseen change. He still considers himself a left-winger, but his book is a call for economic freedom. (The Left's reaction to Lomborg was shameful. It included character assassination and even death threats, but he weathered the storm well. See [www.lomborg.com](http://www.lomborg.com).)

The particular claims of the environmental alarmists can be refuted with economic argument and readily available data. This is not to say that there is no dirty air or water in this place or that. But it is to say that there is no global crisis, and it is to say further that the answer to local problems is economic freedom, which leads to wealth and environmental cleanup.

However, to get a real handle on environmentalism, it is helpful to step back from the trees and look at the forest. What is "the environment" anyway? It's not a single thing, but lots of things. When people talk about environmental damage, what do they mean? It's not always clear. In a moral sense, you cannot damage a rock or polar icecap. You can hurt a dolphin or a polar bear or a spotted owl, but that's not the same thing as harming "the environment."

The question is, why should we *care* about that harm? Why should *we* care? You can spoil a beautiful landscape, but it's spoiled for *people*. The landscape surely doesn't suffer. I'm not saying that people shouldn't care, only that "the environment" is incapable of doing so. Yes, it's all about people. In other words, a proper discussion of the environment ought to focus on individual persons, their interests, their rights, and their property.

Many environmental activists slip into the fallacy of intrinsic value. This is the view that environmental amenities are values in themselves, rather than of value *to* someone. But it is hard to make sense of the claim that a pristine wilderness that no human being is anywhere near is intrinsically valuable. What does that mean?

As Austrian economics (as well as the philosophy of Ayn Rand) notes, "value" indicates a relationship between something and a being capable of valuing. As Rand puts it, it is something

one “acts to gain and/or to keep.” Value presupposes a valuer. No valuer, no value. There is no intrinsic value. One problem in arguing this point is that many people don’t understand the implications of intrinsic value. I once heard a student object that a wilderness has intrinsic value; he feels great peace when he walks through it. Clearly, he did not know what “intrinsic” means.

Once we dispense with the doctrine of intrinsic value, we are closer to making sense of environmental issues. At least now we are talking about people and their interests. I can’t harm a rock by breaking it. But I can harm your interests by breaking a rock that you value. The question, then, is how best to protect people’s interests. No better way has been found than the institution of private property. Here is the irony: ideological environmentalists either dislike or deprecate property rights. But property rights should be the best friend of a sincere (and not just an anti-industrial) environmentalist. A key function of private property is to internalize externalities. In the economist’s lingo, a negative externality is damage imposed on others without their consent. Polluting across one’s property line is a prime example. It’s no different in principle from one person’s dumping his garbage into his neighbor’s yard. The polluter-trespasser is able to get rid of his waste without cost, leaving the neighbor to pay for disposal. A legal regime that protected private property would hold the polluter responsible after the victim showed that the externality damaged his property or interfered with his use of his property.

The common-law courts in America once looked at industrial pollution that way. But as Harvard historian Morton Horwitz has written (in *The Transformation of America Law*), the legal culture changed perspectives, holding that the industrial advancement of society should not be held back by an individual property owner. This collectivist, “Progressive” orientation shifted the focus away from private property. It was only a matter of time before the collectivist paradigm tilted toward what we now call “environmentalism.” Notice that whether the object is industrial progress or environmentalism, private property gets short shrift. (It is inaccurate to think of environmentalism as anti-industrial. In fact, certain industrial interests favored government regulation as a way of maintaining their dominant position and harming smaller and potential competitors.)

The upshot is that focus on “the environment” is inherently collectivist. Strict application and enforcement of property rights would protect people from harm. The “tragedy of the commons” has been well known since Aristotle’s day. Where there is no private property, there is environmental degradation and harm to people and their values. Property protects — in more ways than one.

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