



Commentary on the Issues

Free-Market Conservation: A New Approach to Environmental Protection

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Recent environmental policy changes proposed by the Bush administration have many environmentalists up in arms. Instead of using traditional environmental restrictions that limit land use with strict government regulations, the new administration is proposing solutions that protect the environment while also protecting private property rights. This is a shift to a new type of environmentalism - free-market conservation.

Examples of this new model are highlighted by many small organizations from around the country that wield considerable intellectual and practical influence but are not heavily entrenched in the political process. These organizations are supported by conservationists and landowners that want to protect the environment while also providing a living for themselves and their children. Some of them include the Political Economy Research Center, the Foundation for Research on Economics and the Environment and locally, Stewardship Partners and Washington Water Trust.

All are dedicated conservationists working to establish a relationship between environmental interests and traditional business and property owners. Some on the left dismiss these organizations as pawns of "big business" or members of a radical property rights activist network, but the encouraging facts show their solutions simply work. Species are being saved, land is being conserved and new supporters are being converted to the free-market environmental movement every day.

One important example is located right here in our own back yard. Stewardship Partners is working with private landowners in the Nisqually River Basin to preserve natural habitat along the river. By providing incentives for local landowners to voluntarily protect undeveloped land, the private, non-profit organization is achieving conservation goals without additional government regulation.

Another local example is the recent purchase by the Evergreen Forest Trust of 100,000 acres of undeveloped forestland in Northwest Washington. The \$185 million

purchase is believed to be the largest private land acquisition for conservation purchases in United States History, and represents an encouraging example of private landowners and conservationists working together to accomplish common conservation goals on a large scale.

These examples contrast with the adversarial relationships created by traditional environmental regulations. Instead of lining up big, politically powerful environmental organizations against local landowners and rural businesses, free-market conservation offers opportunities for traditionally competing interests to work together to conserve land for future generations.

The reaction of the entrenched environmental movement is predictable. As power is shifted away from the central commissions and federal regulatory agencies they control, and into the hands of individual landowners and local conservation organizations, traditional environmental groups issue dire forecasts about the imminent demise of the world environment and the future destruction of large swaths of pristine natural treasures.

Fortunately, the wild projections of extreme environmental groups are without basis. First, respected scientists and scholars are calling much of the science used to justify confiscatory environmental regulations into question. Second, the free-market model for environmental conservation continues to gain support because it successfully protects property rights, encourages development and prosperity and also maintains a vibrant natural environment that can be enjoyed for generations to come.

Using common sense to promote good ideas will help thwart the government land grabs that are becoming more common across the United States. No longer will private land be taken from hard-working taxpayers without compensation. With new solutions, these taxpayers can conserve their land while maintaining the productive value of the property.

It is time for the entrenched interests in the traditional environmental movement to take notice. There is a better way, and it has proven results. By shifting the power of conservation decisions away from the federal government and into the capable hands of local landowners and private conservation organizations we can all start working toward a policy that recognizes the needs of business, individual landowners and the environment. By using market mechanisms we can bring all those interests together for a common solution.