



fixing the bungled u.s. environmental movement

by robert brulle and j. craig jenkins

Senators John McCain and John Kerry slumped in chairs outside the Senate Chamber on March 13, 2002, having just lost a critical vote to increase the fuel efficiency of every vehicle on America's roadways. It was an especially difficult defeat. In conjunction with vigorous lobbying and a major public campaign by environmental organizations, Kerry and McCain had hoped to start the United States on the road toward dealing with global climate change.

But a lack of support and heavy opposition (from autoworkers, manufacturers, and the oil lobby, among others) resulted in the measure's defeat, ensuring the continued decline in the overall fuel efficiency of the U.S. automobile fleet. As a result, gas efficiency standards today remain where they were set more than 20 years ago, and a loophole that exempts light trucks and SUVs remains in effect.

This outcome, which came on the heels of the Senate's rejection of the Kyoto Protocol in 1999 by an overwhelming 95-0 vote, demonstrates the political obstacles that stand in the way of even the most basic baby steps toward addressing environmental problems at home and around the world. If Congress can't generate the political will to raise domestic fuel efficiency standards, then dealing with global climate change seems almost impossible.

What do these recent political defeats say about the state of environmentalism in the United States? More to the point of the present analysis, where is the U.S. environmental movement in all this?

When it comes to activists and organizers, the current situation stands in marked contrast to the 1970s, when the environmental movement displayed an extraordinary ability to mobilize support in Congress and created an impressive infrastructure of safety agencies and regulatory oversight. But despite a strong organizational base and widespread public support, most critics agree the movement's political clout has declined over the past decade. Some even claim environmentalism is dead.

Sociological research suggests the environmental movement's seeming lack of influence stems from some fundamental changes in the culture of its organizations and in the traditions of organizing itself. It also may be the result of a mismatch between movement ideals and actual environmental problems and associated public policy options. Recognizing these shortcomings is crucial to translating the energies, passions, and principles of the movement into concrete legislative outcomes and policy solutions.

early successes, present failures

Like the civil rights, women's, peace, and other movements, environmentalism was reborn in the 1960s. Building on the

Tracy Lerman of New York leads about 100 environmentalists in a march from Times Square to a park the United Nations in New York as part of Earth Day in 2001. Photo by Doug Kanter/AFP/Getty Images



Sen. John Kerry (D-Massachusetts), left, and Sen. John McCain (R-Arizona) in 2002.

earlier conservationist, public health, and preservationist movements, the decade saw a flourishing of new ideas about environmental problems and how to address them.

Intellectuals like Rachel Carson and Barry Commoner developed and promulgated a new perspective that later became known as "environmentalism." They helped the general public understand the links among environmental degradation,

ecosystem processes, and human health. Environmental organizations then repackaged these ideas in an effort to energize activists and the general public, thereby bringing about major policy changes.

The first Earth Day in April 1970 showcased an extraordinary mobilization over environmental issues and consolidated momentum that, in the few short years that followed, produced an impressive record of legislative victories. During the 1970s, environmental organizations appeared regularly before Congressional hearings and passed between 20 and 30 major bills every year with relatively limited challenge from corporations and other counterinterests.

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Water Act in 1972, and the Endangered Species Act in 1973. Legislators extended or strengthened many such landmark bills soon thereafter. By the end of the 1970s, environmental activists and legislators had created a system of federal regulatory oversight and safety agencies that included the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Nuclear Regulatory Agency, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. States also set up their own counterparts to the national laws, policies, and agencies.

These landmark laws and organizational networks significantly improved environmental quality across the nation. For example, in 1972 the Clean Water Act—passed by Congress a matter of hours after a presidential veto—required that all waters in the United States be swimmable, drinkable, and fishable by 1983, and that the discharge of pollutants into U.S. waters end by 1985. This significant, hard-hitting legislation required real changes to the standard operating procedures in nearly every American community.

But this legislation and enforcement of it was far from perfect. Indeed, 34 years after the Clean Water Act passed, more

than half of U.S. waters remain significantly degraded and EPA found in a 2006 study of streams that only 28 percent were in "good" condition. Also according to EPA, more than 146 million residents live in areas with unhealthy levels of air pollution.

These disappointing and unexpected outcomes were part of a larger, quite unsettling trend in the 1980s in which the policy advances of the previous decade suffered from a lack of enforcement or retrenchment, and few new advances. In part this was a result of the "wise use" countermovement, in which corporations launched new advocacy organizations, such as the Capital Research Center and the Mountain States Legal Foundation, to attack environmental initiatives. Playing on the media's reporting balanced accounts, these countermovements successfully cast doubt on scientific studies documenting environmental problems.

Political transformations also played a role. Since the mid-1990s, in fact, legislative successes for the environmental movement have been few and far between. After Republicans took control of the House of Representatives in 1994, environmentalists virtually disappeared from Congressional hearings and won passage of less than a dozen priority bills per year.

In any case, the results are clear when examining the continuing, unsustainable growth of America's "ecological footprint" (right). The footprint collects the use of all non-renewable natural resources—imported oil being the major source—and compares it against the ecological productive capacity of the United States since 1961. In 1968, the United States moved beyond existing resources; in other words, we began exporting our environmental problems abroad by consuming imported, non-renewable resources. Overall, the U.S. ecological footprint has increased by more than 240 percent over the 40-year period.

strong movement, lacking clout

The environmental failures and shortcomings of recent years belie what appears to be a strong and vibrant movement, at least institutionally speaking. More than 10,000 tax-exempt environmental organizations are registered with the Internal Revenue Service, and they boast a combined support base of approximately 15 percent of the U.S. population. Based on our recently completed analysis published in *Mobilization*, the movement has a total annual income of more than \$2.7 billion and assets of more than \$5.8 billion. More than 100 new organizations are formed each year to address a wide spectrum of environmental problems.

A March 2007 Gallup poll found fully 70 percent of Americans are either active in or sympathetic to the environmental movement. Since 1980 membership in environmental groups has grown from 5.1 percent to 15.9 percent of U.S. adults and those donating time has grown from 1.4 percent to 8.8 percent, according to the World Values Surveys from 1980,

1990, and 2000.

Yet, for all this support and organizational strength, the political clout of the environmental movement appears to have eroded steadily since the early 1990s. Indeed, most critics agree the environmental movement is at best currently on the defensive—and this at a time when we face growing and perhaps irreversible environmental degradation.

Part of the problem is that the environmental successes of the 1970s were over issues that might be considered "low-hanging fruit"—easy wins against problems that were plain as day to the average citizen and politician. Dumped chemicals caused rivers to catch fire, major cities' air quality was so poor you could see it in the sky and feel it in your lungs, and waterways simply weren't suitable for fishing or swimming.

Beginning in the 1980s, the issues facing environmentalists became more complicated and challenging. A new set of environmental problems emerged that didn't fit into the 1960s environmental paradigm and prototype. Global warming, loss of biodiversity, tropical deforestation, ozone depletion, and acid rain were global, far more abstract, and less tractable problems. They were also outside the authority of the existing regulatory agencies, and thus required new types of political mobilization and policy solutions. For example, no single agency has jurisdiction over tropical deforestation or ozone depletion, so it's difficult to know who or what to target in lobbying and public-policy making.

The movement responded with public education projects, monitoring, lobbying for international treaties, and promoting "green" consumerism, but these have yet to make major institutional inroads. Indeed, critics suggest that the movement has become "Chicken Little," trumpeting an ever-growing litany of doomsday warnings without offering concrete solutions.

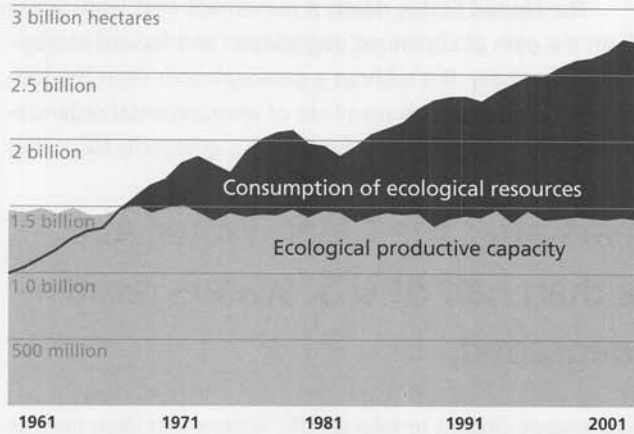
In 2004, environmental activists Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus published a widely circulated article titled "The Death of Environmentalism." They contended "the environmental movement's foundational concepts, its method of

The movement's other crucial ailment is a failure to translate general public support and organizational strength into specific effective actions.

framing legislative proposals, and its very institutions are outmoded!" Substantial evidence supports their claims.

A major problem is the lack of deep public support for initiatives with major economic costs. Despite broad public support for environmental protection, the depth of this support is modest when it comes to actually paying for environmental protection or sacrificing economic growth. The figure at right shows the drop since 2000 in members of the general public willing to pay for environmental protection with decreased eco-

U.S. ecological footprint



economic growth. Contemporary environmental challenges, such as global warming, species loss, and tropical deforestation, can't be addressed without significant economic sacrifices. How these will be paid and by whom is a major political challenge. Moreover, most are transboundary problems, which means they require international cooperation, and thus considerable political clout.

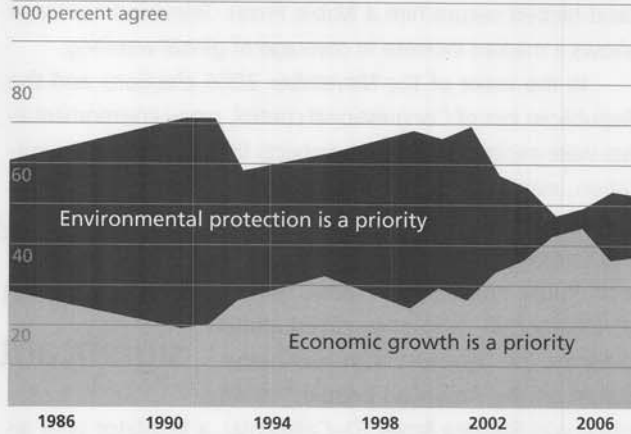
Scholars have long argued that social movements and movement organizations have a tendency to become timid and conservative with age. Today's environmental movement seems to have become complacent and overly bureaucratic, a movement dominated by "protest businesses" that substitute professional advocacy for citizen action. Few of the leading national environmental organizations offer members the chance to participate in a concrete, meaningful way. Members are check-writers, not activists. Funding comes from foundation and corporate grants, wealthy donors, and "checkbook activists." The majority of grassroots members simply come along for the ride.

Some scholars suggest "free riding" is inherent and even effective in environmental action. Environmental protection is a collective good—if it improves for one person, it improves for all. This is clearly not an optimal mobilizing strategy, however. To the contrary, social movement scholars Gerald Marwell and Pamela Oliver argue that with free riding "each contribution makes others' subsequent contributions less worthwhile, and thus less likely." And indeed today one of the paramount problems of the movement is the perception among potential supporters that their individual contributions won't make a difference.

Shellenberger and Nordhaus argue that the environmental movement needs to reframe its agenda to appeal to core progressive values and create a broader, more engaged political coalition. This "respinning" of the environmental message might help generate a new, more committed grassroots constituency, but our research suggests another change is needed as well.

The movement's other crucial ailment is a failure to translate general public support and organizational strength into

U.S. attitudes toward environment and economy



specific effective actions. Though not dead, the environmental movement's organizations, ideals, and projects have failed to speak to or match current environmental challenges, legislative priorities, and public policy realities.

The task for the environmental movement, therefore, is not just to be a cheerleader for the grassroots, rank-and-file membership, but also—and perhaps more importantly—to devise initiatives and proposals that target specific environmental problems and actors, and then challenge and encourage its supporters to undertake them.

Successful campaigns in the movement's earlier years were organized around the workplace, schools, and churches and largely by volunteer activists. But they focused on specific, meaningful issues and targets. Today's movement has some of these types of networks (the Sierra Club and local environmental justice groups, for instance) but lacks the projects and initiatives connected to people's lives and the relevance in the political culture required to mobilize real action and change.

Engaging citizens in the contemporary environmental movement in the United States will require instituting local democracy and fostering civic engagement, broadening commitments and agendas, and linking environmentalism to social justice, workplace equity, and broader social protections. It ultimately could require restructuring civic politics in America—focusing not only on passion and mobilization but also on law and public policy. But in the final, sociological analysis, getting Americans involved in a movement that will affect real environmental change will require reorganizing the environmental movement, shifting from a "top-down" structure to a grassroots approach emphasizing concrete social problems and real-world, public policy solutions.

an opportunity for revitalization

The environmental movement has recently attempted to mobilize around the issue of global warming, with the mass media playing a leading role. In May 2004 the fictional dramatic film *The Day After Tomorrow* was released. Then came Al

Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, which gained a wide audience (and helped secure him a Nobel Prize). Television coverage shows a marked increase in coverage of global warming.

In the wake of the November 2006 elections and the Republican loss of Congressional control, many environmentalists were excited about the prospects for environmental legislation, especially on the topic of global warming. Gone from the chairmanship of the Senate Committee on Environmental and Public Works was James Inhofe (R-Oklahoma), who once called global warming the "greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people." In his place was Barbara Boxer (D-California), a legislator with an impressive national profile and strong environmental record. In her first statements after the election Boxer promised swift and strong action to deal with global warming.

Recent polling still shows little change in public opinion in the aftermath. Every month Gallup asks what respondents consider the "most important problem" facing the nation. Over the past 10 years they've mentioned the environment no more than 2 percent of the time. A November 2007 Gallup poll showed the environment ranks 14th in major problems, with only 1 percent saying environmental improvement is our country's most important problem. Opposition to strong measures, such as instituting a carbon tax, is high. Fully 68 percent of those polled in March 2006 opposed a policy to "increase taxes on gasoline so people either drive less, or buy cars that use less gas." Moreover, 81 percent opposed a policy that would "increase taxes on electricity so people use less of it." A soft majority of 52 percent responded to the 2006 Gallup poll that they supported environmental protection over economic growth.

So despite strong scientific consensus on the basics of global warming theory, a Gallup poll from as recently as March 2006 showed 62 percent of the U.S. public still did not believe global warming was a problem. Perhaps it isn't surprising that Congress has been slow to act or that the presidential nomination debates have essentially ignored global warming. A carbon tax may be unpopular, but it's impossible to imagine significant reductions in carbon emissions in the near future that don't entail increased energy costs. However, the groundwork may be coming into place.

Environmental activists—working with scientists and politicians as well as writers and reporters—are not only continuing to raise public attention about global warming, they are beginning to think seriously about public policy innovations in the United States and elsewhere. As concrete analyses and political solutions come into circulation, we may well find ourselves in a situation similar to the period from 1963 to 1967—Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* had been published and there was a great deal of media interest in her book, but it was only beginning to translate into the increased environmental mobiliza-

tion of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The United States needs a movement that leads away from the path of continued degradation and toward ecological sustainability. But without a paradigm shift from the top-down approach where members of environmental organizations are treated as budget funders to a grassroots focus that

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will engage citizens to take specific actions that stem the tide of environmental degradation, our environmental movement won't have the right approach to get us there.

Organizationally and in terms of broad public support, the environmental movement has been a remarkable success. But in terms of political clout for tackling the big issues, the movement is weak, losing critical policy battles while failing to provide strategies that can transform potential public support into environmental action. This makes it all the more incumbent on the environmental movement to help the general public connect the dots between their personal, local concerns and the dramatic, global threats to which environmental groups devote their resources and energy.

recommended resources

Christopher J. Bosso. *Environment Inc.: From Grassroots to Beltway* (University of Kansas Press, 2005). Shows the process by which the U.S. environmental movement shifted from a grassroots effort to an inside-the-beltway lobby.

Robert J. Brulle and J. Craig Jenkins. "Foundations and the Environmental Movement: Priorities, Strategies, and Impact," in *Foundations for Social Change: Critical Perspectives on Philanthropy and Popular Movements* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005). Details the nature and amount of foundation funding of the U.S. environmental movement, and how this funding has impacted its strategy and tactics.

F. Buell. *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Environmental Crisis in the American Century* (Routledge, 2004). An historical and textual analysis of the anti-environmental movement and the decline of the U.S. environmental movement.

Aaron M. McCright and Riley E. Dunlap. "Defeating Kyoto: The Conservative Movement's Impact on U.S. Climate Change Policy," *Social Problems* 50 (2003): 348–373. Describes the rise and impact of the anti-global warming political coalition.

David S. Meyer. "How Social Movements Matter," *Contexts* 2 (2003): 30–35. Provides an excellent overview of the factors that affect a social movement's effectiveness.

Robert Brulle is in the culture and communications department at Drexel University. He is the author of *Agency, Democracy, and Nature: U.S. Environmental Movements from a Critical Theory Perspective*. **J. Craig Jenkins** is in the sociology department at Ohio State University. He is the author of *Identity Conflict: Can Violence Be Regulated?*