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Around the Campfire

with Uncle Dave Foreman



The Myth of the Environmental Movement

Adapted from Chapter 1 in Take Back Conservation: Will Wildlovers Stand Up? The book, second in the For the Wild Things series by Dave Foreman will be published this fall.

In the years following Earth Day, environmentalism, once regarded as the self-serving indulgence of a privileged elite, became 'America's cause'....

--Phil Shabecoff [\[1\]](#)

The Myth in a Nutshell

Earth Day, April 22, 1970, gave birth to the long-in-the-womb overhauling of the American conservation movement into the environmental movement. By 1970 the conservation movement was tired, stodgy, and cut off from a growing and shifting America. Since Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which came out in 1962, folks had grown ever more aware of and worried about the evil banes befouling their air, water, soil, and bodies. With the Santa Barbara oil spill in 1969, thickening smog in coughing cities, and the Cuyahoga River through Cleveland flashing afire on June 22, 1969, the onslaught against our living space was in everybody's face. [\[1\]](#) The upper-crust conservation movement, which had never found a snug home with Americans, was straightaway made "relevant" with a new target on threats that mainly harmed *people*—smog, poisons in our food, filthy rivers, traffic jams, unsafe Pintos, and thoughtless, uncaring, and even evildoing big businesses. Conservationists had been a band of hikers, bird-watchers, mountaineers, and sportsmen. Environmentalists are mothers, fathers, and children. Deep woods with tall trees rolling on for miles, wildlife, and National Parks are okay, but when you get right down to it, what comes first are human health, safety, and quality of life. Today, the environmental movement has cast its net wider to haul in social justice, anticolonialism, feminism, animal rights, and Green politics, on top of fighting pollution and shielding wilderness.

So goes The Myth of the Environmental Movement. In sundry shapes it is ballyhooed by

academics and the news business, and believed in by the public, politicians, and many of those who belong to conservation and environmental clubs.

It is also wrong.

John Muir would sit down beside a blossom new to him and get to know it. Let's sit down here on our path by The Myth of the Environmental Movement, sunder it petal by petal, root by root, and try to tease it out. We can deal out this myth into four belief-heaps:

(1) First and foremost, The Myth of the Environmental Movement holds there is one widespread folk gathering that cares about pollution *and* Endangered Species, urban transportation *and* wilderness, human health *and* "ecology."[\[2\]](#)

(2) Earth Day 1970 is touted as when conservation broadened into the lively, likable, and mighty environmental movement. Veteran *New York Times* environmental reporter Phil Shabecoff wrote, "In the years following Earth Day, environmentalism, once regarded as the self-serving indulgence of a privileged elite, became 'America's cause'...."[\[3\]](#)

(3) Before Earth Day, the Myth says that conservation was waning, unknown to most Americans, and politically weak. In 1971, even mindfully farsighted and canny human ecologist Paul Shepard wrote, "By 1970 the long-standing but obscure crusade for conservation, once dominated by 'nature lovers' and modestly aimed at a mixture of amenities and improved land use, had abruptly graduated to the first rank of national concerns."[\[4\]](#)

(4) Environmentalism is above all about human health. Back in 1994, the founder of the National Association of Physicians for the Environment (NAPE), Dr. John Grupenhoff, said, "Every environmental problem is or will become a health problem. Therefore, pollution prevention is disease prevention."[\[5\]](#) (I don't know where NAPE is today, but it or something like it is sorely needed.)

Let me slice up each of these beliefs, and then we will look more thoroughly at this vampish little myth with our pocketknife, tweezers, and hand lens, so we can see how environmentalism and conservation are not the same.

First of all, I do not believe there is an "Environmental Movement." Rather, I see work to keep wildlands and wildlife as *the conservation movement or network*, and the job to halt the harm technology does to human health and quality of life as *the environmental movement*, which would be better called *the human health network*. My friend David Quammen, author of *Song of the Dodo* and maybe the best writer on biodiversity, thinks much like me. In a 1999 interview, he said, "The preservation of biological diversity and the cleaning up of the human environment are not a single enterprise....Conservation and environmentalism are not the same thing."[\[6\]](#) In his column for *Outside* magazine, "Natural Acts," he had a few years earlier written, "The term 'environment' implies a set of surroundings for some central, preeminent subject. That central subject...is human life. Therefore the very word 'environment' entails a presumption that humanity is the star of a one-character drama around which everything else is just scenery and proscenium." He went on, "Environmentalism is not in its essence perverted. It's just an understandable campaign of self-interest, by our species, with potentially dire implications for the world at large. What does seem perverted is confusing environmentalism with conservation."[\[7\]](#) I wish more of my conservation friends would take these words to heart and clean up their language. Muddling conservation with the name "environment" is not only wrong, it is harmful to shielding wild things.

The late, steadfast Canadian naturalist John Livingston, thirty years ago wrote in his unyielding book *The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation* that "'environmentalism'...should not be confused with wildlife preservation."[\[8\]](#) Lots of other conservationists nod their heads that conservation and environmentalism are not one thing (though far fewer environmentalists do so). So, I will call the yoked networks "The Environmental Movement" (in quotation marks and capitals to show it is ersatz), shielding wildlands and wildlife *conservation*, and fighting pollution *environmentalism*. Now, to most folks, conservation and environmentalism are the same thing (that's some of why I'm writing this book, after all). I've sparked some warm squabbling with my belief—mostly from a handful of environmentalists and a few academics. Thoughtful conservationists, with a tighter, deeper, and more *inside* understanding, are more likely to see the two as two. Some of these worry, nonetheless, that making too much of the cleavage is harmful. In these bad days, they feel that we wildlovers need all the friends we can find. Seeing the two as others, however, says nothing about how they can work together.

Second, this bit about conservation being an "indulgence" with little to show for it is so much hogwash as I have shown in my books, *The Big Outside*, *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior*, and *Rewilding North America*. Indeed, over the last one hundred and fifty years it is conservationists who have given America most of what is best about our country on the ground. Conservationists had racked up many wins and had made many gains by 1970.

From the early 1950s on, they stopped a dam in Dinosaur National Monument, put away almost ten million acres in the Arctic wilderness of northeastern Alaska, worked the Wilderness Act and the National Wilderness Preservation System through Congress and signing by President Johnson, and started a National Wild and Scenic Rivers System thereby keeping dams off some free-flowing streams. Each of these wins was big, BIG. I do not believe we could pass the Wilderness Act today. In the late 1960s, great fights were won to set aside new National Parks in northern California's Redwoods and Washington's North Cascades, and to stop dams in the Grand Canyon. These struggles made the news all over America. Even with the white-hot clashes over Vietnam and civil rights filling newspapers and television sets, Redwoods and the Grand Canyon broke through as news.

Widely overlooked by those who sniff at the "irrelevance" of the "elitist," pre-Earth Day conservationists are so-called "wildcat" Wilderness bills by members of Congress for their backyards (and voters) from 1965 to 1971. These wildcat Wilderness Area bills were put together and boosted by outdoorsmen and –women who knew the lands, and were fought tooth-and-nail by the Forest Service from rangers in the field to the Chief in Washington. The weight of the wildcats cannot be overstated since they led straight to the Forest Service's roadless areas inventories and at long last to the 2001 Roadless Area Rule, which in one fell swoop did more to keep wild America wild than any other single doing in the Lower 48 states.^[9] All of these struggles drew national heed and backing from folks all over the land.^[10]

It is also true that Earth Day along with the wrath-wave about pollution led to landmark legislation in the early 1970s for clean air, clean water, and such things. I would love to see that sparkle and gale burst out once again—this time against greenhouse-gas pollution. So, I'm not belittling the 1960s unhappiness over how big business was poisoning us, I only want to show here that public land shielding was chugging along well on its own before and after Earth Day 1970.

Moreover, the conservation team was not heavily behind Earth Day. Dr. Edgar Wayburn, Sierra Club Vice-President at the time and even then a wise, never-weary wilderness warrior, warned, "We cannot let up on the battles for old-fashioned wilderness areas," in answer to the call to leap onto the antipollution bandwagon.^[11]

Third, the conservation movement before Earth Day had gathered a sweep of Americans. Conservation after Earth Day kept on drawing ever more folks—not only those upset by pollution or jazzed about Earth Day, but by the swelling throngs of backpackers, birders, river runners, and flyfishers fighting to keep their loved spots from harm, and by those roused after learning about widespread extinction of wildlife and wholesale wiping out of ecosystems. In the 1960s, the campaign for the Wilderness Act and to set aside new Wilderness Areas under it became a growing grassroots network, which kept growing throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. The belief that the conservation team before Earth Day was elitist is shallow and overblown. It is held and written about by those who were not there, who have not talked to those who were, and who have not read *The Living Wilderness*, *Sierra Club Bulletin*, and other conservation writings from the time. The folks I've known who had worked for Wilderness Areas before I came along in 1971 were overall middle-class; any who could be thought of as bluebloods were few and far between. What elitism they had was in woodcraft, goodness, wisdom, and farsightedness, which, truly, is the elitism that means something, the kind of elitism—or *natural aristocracy*—that Thomas Jefferson hoped would rise in the new Republic as it grew.

Fourth, I happen to go along with Dr. Grupehoff. Environmentalism *is* about human health. Environmentalists should be even more willing to say so. It is *not* conservation. It is not about wilderness. However, it need not be at odds with sheltering wildeors and letting evolution keep rocking along. *Environmentalism is a big friend of conservation, as is conservation of environmentalism.*

I am taking on The Myth of the Environmental Movement on a handful of grounds. Foremost, it is wrong, as I have shown. It is a sock drawer full of socks, brassieres, underwear, gloves, light bulbs, screwdrivers.... It is a map that does not draw the land—if you follow it, you're going to get lost. "The Environmental Movement" is not a good way to understand folks working together either to shield wilderness and keep whole threatened wildlife, or to clean up pollution and make our cities livable. By cramming two whole-in-themselves movements into one, squabbling follows, as in a bad marriage. So we hear some environmentalists sneering at work for Wilderness Areas and for Endangered Species as paltry and piddling, or worse.

Some consultants, pollsters, and funders, who come from environmental or community-

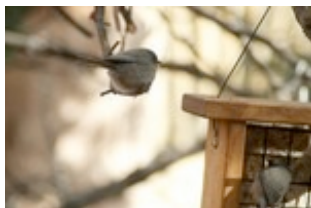
nonprofit instead of outdoor backgrounds, are telling doughty conservation outfits to soften their tongues and to sit down, jaw, and work out deals with other “stakeholders.” They tell us to talk about people, not wildlife, and to hide our love of wild things for their own sakes.

By thinking that there is one, seamless “Environmental Movement,” those who love wilderness and wildlife have a hard time seeing and understanding trends within “The Environmental Movement” that belittle and thwart the shielding and rebuilding of wild things.

And last, “environmentalist” has a shady if not outright unwholesome name among some who might back much land and wildlife conservation. Among such folks are some hunters and fishers, small town dwellers who like birds and trees, and thinking Republicans and independents who yet believe in prudence and responsibility.

So, as long as conservation is muddled up with environmentalism, I worry that it will become ever tougher to get out the true conservation tale and to keep wilderness and wildlife from being overlooked.

Happy trails,
Dave Foreman



twenty bushtits on the seed block and a new Bullock’s Oriole learning how to get sugar water out of the feeder

[1] From the late 1800s to the 1950s, it was not odd for industrial rivers to flash afire. The earlier unheard-of hullabaloo over the Cuyahoga in 1969, however, was a beacon for the big shift in Americans’ thinking. Christopher Maag, “From the Ashes of ‘69, a River Reborn,” *The New York Times*, June 21, 2009.

[2] *Endangered* and *Threatened* are legal designations under the Endangered Species Act for those Earthlings we are driving to extinction. So, when I write them with this law-book meaning, I will capitalize.

[3] Shabecoff, *A Fierce Green Fire*, 114.

[4] Paul Shepard, “Preface One,” in Paul Shepard and Daniel McKinley, eds., *Environ/Mental: Essays On The Planet As A Home* (Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1971), vii. Shepard became unhappy with conservation clubs in the late 1950s when he felt they did not do enough to fight commercial logging in Olympic National Park. He also believed that conservation had been too shallow in what it fought, that we needed a much deeper look at what was wrong with modernism.

[5] Michael Castleman, “Dr. Clean,” *Sierra*, January/February 1994, 22.

[6] “An Interview David Quammen,” *Wild Duck Review*, Winter 1999.

[7] David Quammen, “Dirty Word, Clean Place,” *Outside*, August 1991, 25-26.

[8] John A. Livingston, *The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation* (McClelland and Stewart Limited, Toronto, 1981), 19.

[9] I’ll go into wildcat wilderness bills in one of my next books, *Conservation vs. Conservation*.

[10] The film about David Brower, *Monumental: David Brower’s Fight for Wild America*, shows how public lands fights in the 1950s and 1960s were widely known, as does Roger Kaye’s book, *Last Great Wilderness: The Campaign To Establish The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge* (University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks, 2006).

[11] Mark Dowie, *Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century* (The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1995), 25.



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