Starting over: A second environmental movement

In their essay, *The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World*, available at www.thebreakthrough.org, Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus came to the conclusion that the environmental movement has failed to inspire a vision in the U.S. over the past 15 years and that environmentalists should admit defeat and reevaluate everything. Although urban air quality has improved, the most critical environmental issue of our time, reining in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and mitigating global warming, has eluded any progress. Shellenberger and Nordhaus have a point.

Our current unsustainability should be enough to convince folks it is time to reevaluate the situation: A million acres of new pavement and impervious cover pop up in the U.S. every year; thousands of species are funneling toward threatened or endangered status; a global commons (the atmosphere) annually receives 7 billion metric tons of carbon from the planetary exhaust pipe; and the climate is already warming, especially in the Arctic, through an experiment set in motion years ago and destined to last hundreds more. But such trends do not convince folks. These nightmares have failed to gain traction with the public. The “environment” as a political issue does not rise to the same level of priority in people’s minds as the economy and security. If we only tell horror stories, the citizenry eventually becomes fatigued and skeptical; they lose any feeling of personal power and responsibility, and they tune out. A new vision would celebrate the improvements of the first environmental movement and then embrace dreams, not nightmares—dreams of purer air, better jobs, fishable waters, cleaner cars, distributed power, and a whole new economy based on renewable energy. Dreams that would excite and motivate people and speak of what we could be, rather than the next apocalyptic about to overtake us. A new environmental vision offers hope and solutions and does not belong to any single party or ideology.

We need to galvanize the American people around an environmental vision that creates jobs while transitioning from the fossil fuel age and that builds trust in international relations. Mitigating GHG emissions could be the Marshall Plan of the 21st century, a model of international commitment and strategic purpose. A “second environmental movement” must demonstrate to people that the environment and natural resources are linked to everything else in the economy and are precious to all that represents the human condition. It’s mandatory for a prosperous and secure future.

The timing may be right, and industry and the states seem to be leading the way. Last May, Jeffrey Immelt, CEO of General Electric (GE), warned that mandatory controls on emissions of CO2 are both necessary and inevitable. He is doubling GE’s investment in the development of energy and novel environmental technologies for application in the U.S., as well as India and China.

If the first environmental movement encompassed Earth Day 1970 through 2004, let the Kyoto Protocol on climate change (which took effect February 16, 2005) mark the beginning of the second environmental movement 35 years later. It marks a time when countries (except for the U.S. and Australia) agreed that the global commons is imperiled and that action is required. Kyoto provides a prototype for how nations can cooperate in the future.

In the coming months, I would like to open a dialogue in this space on a second environmental movement—one that embraces markets (Republicans and Democrats love markets), avoids command-and-control regulations, builds alliances, prevents pollution, and celebrates globalization managed by the triple bottom line of economic, social, and environmental concerns. Let us hear your ideas at the email address below, or send a letter for publication in *ES&T*.

Gandhi once said, “If the people will lead, the leaders will follow.” Let’s build our case for the second environmental movement from the grassroots up by appealing with promise and vision to all citizens. The alliance should be broad and include industrialists, economists, bankers, security specialists, the left and right, the religious and agnostic, and, most of all, environmental leaders who are willing to adopt a whole new strategy and begin again.

Jerald L. Schnoor
Editor
est@uiowa.edu