

## Economic Conservatism Meets “Third Wave” Environmentalism

[The source of much of this exposition is *Ahead of the Curve: Shaping New Solutions to Environmental Problems* (1990) by Robert E. Taylor, from which we have lifted entire paragraphs.]

### **Synopsis:**

The "third wave" environmental movement was first described by Environmental Defense Fund executive director Fred Krupp in a 1986 *Wall Street Journal* article and popularized by Ronald Reagan's approach. **It hearkens back to the classical conservative's justification for free markets: simply, free markets are viewed as the best instrument for protecting the environment. Given that pollution is an inefficiency, and given that some consumers like "eco-friendly" or "organic" products, it makes sense to the third-wave environmentalist that being environmentally friendly is a boost to sales.**

In *A Fierce Green Fire: The American Environmental Movement*, Phillip Shabecoff asserts that the current "third wave" groups are **more pragmatic, more professional and more inclined to work within existing political and economic forces** than were the militant activists of the recent past. Addressing the effects of economic growth on the environment, Shabecoff concludes that **an ecologically sound society can also be economically sound.**

In the words of Jesse Alan Gordon in "The Steward: Journal of the Buffalo River Stewardship Foundation" (1995), **Third Wave Environmentalism is based on economics. The underlying philosophy is, "internalize the external costs." The policy prescription is to use market incentives and economic instruments to simultaneously achieve environmental and developmental goals.**

The Third Wave came of age with the "UN Conference on Environment and Development" in 1992. The Rio Declaration, UNCED's list of principles, defines in its first principle the economic concept of "sustainable development," which says that natural resources should be treated as "environmental capital." We may sustainably spend the growth, but we may not sustainably spend the capital itself -- our natural endowment should be treated like Harvard's endowment, where we spend the interest, but only convert the principal from one form of capital asset to another. The Third Wave view means that natural resources may be "sustainably" depleted to the extent that they are converted into other long-term capital resources.

The three waves of the environmental movement are described in greater detail below.

## ***First Wave Environmentalism (1864-1966)***

In *Man and Nature* (1864), George Perkins Marsh called attention to the human impact on the land. In the succeeding century the cause of conservation would be heralded by such thinkers and activists as Henry David Thoreau, Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, David Brower, Barry Commoner, and Rachel Carson.

Yellowstone National Park was established in 1872, eight years after California reserved the Yosemite Valley. Eventually the National Park Service was formed, though its domain grew only gradually, mostly through piecemeal acts of Congress.

Far larger tracts were taken up into what would become the national forests. Gifford Pinchot, first director of the U.S. Forest Service, recorded the awakening of the movement in the late 1800's in his memoir, *Breaking New Ground*. Public lands in the West, he wrote, were being despoiled by timber companies, railroads and miners. Placer mining of gold, for example, ravaged California landscapes with torrents of water, washing tons of earth into rivers for each ounce of gold recovered. "At a time when, in the West, the penalty for stealing a horse was death – death without benefit of the law – stealing the public land in open defiance of the law was generally regarded with tolerance or even approval." In 1891 – "without question and without debate," according to Pinchot – Congress authorized the President to reserve selected forest land against private ownership. The law freed presidents to take bold steps to conserve land for public uses. Benjamin Harrison reserved thirteen million acres. Grover Cleveland doubled that in the last ten days of his term. And Theodore Roosevelt, with characteristic vigor; jacked up the total to 194 million acres, created the Forest Service and put Pinchot at its helm.

**Roosevelt used his bully pulpit to preach a new ethic called "conservation."** In 1908, he hosted a week-long White House Conference on the subject. The star of the show was Pinchot, who had studied forestry in Europe. And the conservation ideal that he and Roosevelt preached wasn't preservation of pristine nature. It was optimal use: management of natural resources for the greatest good of the greatest number of people. **"Forest protection is not an end in itself," T.R. had proclaimed only a few months after taking office. "It is a means to increase and sustain the resources of our country and the industries which depend upon them. The preservation of our forests is an imperative business necessity."**

In the late 19th century a competing ideal began to grow: that nature should be preserved for its own sake. The leading proponent was Pinchot's friend and onetime hiking companion John Muir, the avid outdoorsman who founded the Sierra Club.

## ***Second Wave Environmentalism (1967-1986)***

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, was what first alerted the public to the broad destruction of wildlife being caused by toxic pesticides such as DDT. The book drove home a simple message: Man does not exist apart from nature, but is himself a part of it. Pesticide manufacturers quickly mounted an attempt to discredit *Silent Spring* and its author. President Kennedy set up a panel of his Science Advisory Committee to study

the problem. The panel's report was described by Rachel Carson's biographer as "a complete vindication of her thesis," but it did not result in any immediate corrective action. **"A chorus of concern for the environment is sweeping the country," the President's Council on Environmental Quality wrote in 1970, the year of the first Earth Day. "It reaches to the regional, national and international environmental problems. It embraces pollution of the earth's air and water, noise and waste and the threatened disappearance of whole species of plant and animal life."**

Between the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and Earth Day 1970, **the Second Wave Environmental movement arose, characterized by legal action and sweeping legislation and regulation.** Robert E. Taylor documents that in 1967, three scientists living on Long Island and a fourth in Michigan, who were as alarmed as Carson had been by the effects of DDT on wildlife, conceived of a new way to put these concerns into motion. They formed the Environmental Defense Fund, joined with an attorney, and became the first group to take scientific evidence into the courts to achieve environmental goals. With support from the Ford Foundation through National Audubon's Rachel Carson Memorial Fund, EDF's founders brought case after case seeking to replace DDT with pest control methods less dangerous to wildlife. Before they were through, their efforts would lead to the nationwide banning of DDT and to the first established precedents of environmental law.

According to co-founder Dr. Charles Wurster, EDF "was born from the frustration of a group of environmentalists unable to move the system, to make it respond, to force environmental protection." And EDF's founders weren't alone in their frustration. A groundswell was building in response to Carson's writing, augmented by public revulsion at calamities such as the 1969 oil well blowout that blackened Santa Barbara's beaches.

Environmental groups grew and multiplied, and lobbying Washington became a major new activity. The Sierra Club lobbied so aggressively that, prodded by President Richard M. Nixon, the Internal Revenue Service stripped the group of its tax-exempt status.

**Ironically, the move to curb pollution rose to full force during Nixon's presidency. It was Nixon who signed the National Environmental Policy Act, which required that major federal actions be studied for their possible environmental impacts. The Environmental Protection Agency was established. The Clean Air Act of 1970 and the Clean Water Act of 1972 were enacted.**

The legislative gains continued into the 1980's, after Love Canal had helped turn the federal focus to the safe handling and disposal of toxic substances. President Ronald Reagan's Interior Secretary James Watt and EPA administrator Anne Gorsuch Burford largely failed to roll back environmental protections, but their efforts to do so made environmental group membership surge anew.

**Litigation flourished. In the late 1960's and early 1970's, EDF's success fighting DDT helped spur a host of groups to arm themselves with attorneys.** The Natural Resources Defense Council was launched with Ford Foundation funding. The Sierra Club

spawned its Legal Defense Fund. The National Wildlife Federation and National Audubon Society started going to court. Environmentalists blocked dams, nuclear power plants and highway projects. They forced regulators to tighten pollution controls to meet ambitious statutory demands for clean air and rivers.

"The legal victories won in the late sixties and early seventies formed the foundation on which the modern environmental movement is built," declared NRDC executive director John Adams in *Crossroads: Environmental Priorities for the Future*. The same volume quotes David Sive, one of the first successful environmental litigators, saying: "In no other political or social movement has litigation played so important and dominant a role. Not even close."

The Second Wave culminated with the "UN Conference on the Human Environment" in 1972. The Stockholm Declaration, the list of principles that resulted from that Conference, states as its first principle a moral imperative: "Man has a solemn responsibility to protect and improve the environment." (As described by Jesse Alan Gordon.)

**But as time went on, many environmental lawyers began to complain about diminishing returns. While courts could block actions, they often proved ill-suited to crafting solutions.** And using courts in an attempt to steer government agencies could be clumsy and frustrating.

In 1986, for instance, EPA administrator William Ruckelshaus was threatened with a contempt of court citation and jail for refusing to set standards for radioactive emissions from uranium mines and some federal facilities. Ruckelshaus got the court off his back by pegging standards at existing emission levels. The lesson for one environmental lawyer was that you can force agencies to write rules, but you can't force them to write good rules.

Some observers also complained that environmental gains were diminishing – or disappearing – as government added new layers of legislation and new ranks of regulators.

As described by Jesse Alan Gordon, Second Wave Environmentalism was based on morality. The underlying philosophy is, "Everything is connected to everything else, so when we hurt the Earth we're hurting ourselves." The policy prescription is to use "command and control" methods for ordering and enforcing environmental protection in an ongoing struggle against economic development. The means of controlling air pollution, for example, is to legislate that industry must use smokestack scrubbers, or some other technology determined by a central agency.

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### ***Third Wave Environmentalism (1986-present)***

By the mid-1980's some environmental group leaders started talking about new approaches that wouldn't rely on federal regulators, court orders or laws. A few prototypes were cited. In California, the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) had demonstrated that electric utilities didn't have to build massive new power plants to meet future demand. The Institute for Local Self-Reliance, a Washington, D.C., group, had shown Chester, Pennsylvania, how to develop and finance a trash recycling plant instead of an incinerator. The Sierra Club had helped a California timber company design a financial restructuring plan to ward off a corporate takeover.

**In 1986, Fred Krupp, executive director of EDF, wrote in The Wall Street Journal about a third stage of the environmental movement.** He suggested the environmental past could be seen in two stages. The first was the conservation era launched by T.R. and Pinchot. The second was the explosion of pollution control laws and regulations that followed Silent Spring and Earth Day 1970.

**Krupp wrote that in the third stage, environmentalists should "recognize that behind the waste dumps and dams and power plants and pesticides that threaten major environmental harm, there are nearly always legitimate social needs – and that long-term solutions lie in finding alternative ways to meet those underlying needs. Otherwise, we are treating only symptoms; the problems will surface again and again. Answer the underlying needs, and you have a lasting cure."**

As other environmentalists picked up on the theme, it became known as the Third Wave theory, after futurist Alvin Toffler's best seller. Different Third Wave concepts emerged, but **the unifying theme was that the new wave should be solution-oriented.** "We have won the struggle for acceptance with Main Street America, and now people are looking to us for solutions," said Lucy Blake, chairman of the League of Conservation Voters, in a 1986 interview with The Los Angeles Times. "It's not enough anymore to stand on the outside and take potshots."

Another fan of the Third Wave concept was later to become administrator of the EPA – William K. Reilly. As President of the Conservation Foundation, he led efforts to mediate between industry and environmental interests.

"Environmentalists have been enormously successful at passing new laws," Reilly told the L.A. Times in 1986. "Yet real progress has been extraordinarily slow. What we've seen is endless litigation, and when the litigation is over everybody runs back to Congress to change the law. We concluded there must be a faster way to make progress."

Third Wave enthusiasts believe that unconventional approaches can dispel tension between economic growth and environmental protection. As Krupp wrote in The Wall Street Journal, "The American public does not want conflict between improving our

economic wellbeing and preserving our health and natural resources. The early experience suggests it can have both."

- 1987 a grassroots campaign began in Vermont by citizens, schools, churches, county governments to stop the use of styrofoam packaging by McDonalds, and it resulted in the announcement by McDonald Nov, 1, 1990, that it would stop using styrofoam sandwich boxes; the Montreal Protocol was signed by 24 nations pledging to reduce chlorofluorocarbons that endangered the ozone layer
- 1988 Congress passed the Plastics Pollution Research and Control Act that prohibited the dumping of plastics in the ocean.
- 1989 the tanker Exxon Valdez on March 24 ran aground off the coast of Alaska and spilled 37,000 tons of oil into Prince William Sound, killing 50,000 birds and other fish and wildlife
- 1989 Congress voted to halt timbering in the Alaskan Tsongass National Forest, the last temperate rain forest in the U.S.
- 1990 Congress tightened the Clean Air Act to further reduce levels of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides in the atmosphere

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- 1995 the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change of 2,000 scientists reported that global warming was increasing due to the "greenhouse effect" of increased CO2 emissions and the loss of oxygen-producing forests.
- 1997 Kyoto Protocol was signed by the United States and 121 other nations on Dec. 11 to reduce CO2 emissions, but Congress refused ratification
- 2000 National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration reported in mid-April that January-February-March were the warmest months in the 105 years that records have been kept

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This exposition was compiled and edited by Dan Fauchier.

**Many well-known environmental groups have spanned all three waves:**

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Founded</b>	<b>Recent Membership</b>
American Forestry Association	1875	35,000
Sierra Club	1892	450,000
Wildlife Conservation International	1895	34,000
National Audobon Society	1905	550,000
National Parks and Conservation Association	1919	70,000
The Izaak Walton League of America	1922	50,000
The Wilderness Society	1935	220,000
National Wildlife Federation	1936	5,800,000
Ducks Unlimited	1937	610,000
Defenders of Wildlife	1947	80,000
The Nature Conservancy	1951	343,000
Friends of Animals	1957	120,000
Trout Unlimited	1959	58,000
World Wildlife Fund-U.S.	1961	500,000

Source: *Conservation Directory*