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Electronic Green Journal

Title

From the Editor

Permalink

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Journal

Electronic Green Journal, 1(3)

Author

Prorak, Diane

Publication Date

1995

DOI

10.5070/G31310192

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From the Editor

Earth Day 1995: Could Twenty-Five Years of Progress Be Lost?

Earth Day, 1970, in the United States -- a nationwide "teach-in" on the environment. People were marching in the streets to save our air, water and wildlife. They were learning about the consequences of pollution and protesting the environmental mistakes of the past; I still remember a picture of a marcher wearing a gas mask. Earth Day, 1970, was a springboard that launched the already-growing environmental movement and many, like myself, were inspired -- filled with optimism that the nation was moving to undo the environmental degradation of the past.

The United States Congress had already passed the Wilderness Act in 1968, which set up the framework for lands to be protected in their primitive state -- "untrammelled by man." In the late 1960's and early 1970's, the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), the Clean Water Act, and the Clean Air Act were passed. NEPA set up a process for citizen oversight of the government's actions which affected the environment, and the Clean Air and Water Acts began the process of cleaning up and protecting vital environmental resources. The Endangered Species Act, which requires the federal government to take action to ensure the survival of a species in danger of extinction, passed Congress by a wide margin in 1973 and was signed into law by President Richard Nixon. Later in that decade, laws to improve the management and preservation of our national forests were enacted. In the 1980's, public support continued for environmental protection, even though there were serious setbacks during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. In 1990, the world celebrated the twentieth anniversary of Earth Day with events across the globe. In one poll that year (EARTHLINE, the Earth Day 1990 newsletter, issue no.5), seventy per cent of Americans called themselves "environmentalists."

On the 25th anniversary of Earth Day, the United States may be on the verge of reversing many of its environmental accomplishments. The elections of 1994 changed the majority party in many governing bodies at both the state and national level, which in turn has changed legislative priorities. For example, the new Republican Party majority in the U.S. Congress is working to eliminate many "federal regulations" in order to reduce federal government control. However, many of the targets are regulations protecting our air and water, flora and fauna. The current majority in Congress feels these regulations are too costly and that they restrict the rights of both private businesses and the States. The American public seems unaware of the potential results of proposals to change or force the reauthorization of environmental regulations -- even though recent polls cited in an editorial by Vice President Albert Gore (NEW YORK TIMES, April 23, 1995) show 53 percent of Americans think the government could do more to protect the environment, 23 percent feel we are on the right track and only 16 percent think there is too much government regulation of the environment. The Endangered Species Act is now "endangered" itself because of the charge that it is a threat to the economy -- while most environmentalists see the Act as the "canary in the mine," which indicates when humans have gone too far and have upset nature's balance. Humans are a part of nature, and as increasing numbers of other species are dying off, our time may soon come. Furthermore it seems our economy will not be healthy if our ecosystem is unraveling. But Congress currently seems determined to weaken this law which environmentalists feel helps provide balance -- giving a hapless species a chance against the oncoming train of economic development.

At both the state and national level, new legislation has been proposed to strengthen the rights of private property owners. These proposals, for example, ensure that property owners are compensated for losses in value to their land due to environmental protection. The proponents of this legislation feel property owners are currently subject to too many environmental laws, regulations and costs affecting their property. However, private property has connections to and effects on the lands and inhabitants around it and therefore it seems private property owners have responsibilities to be stewards, not just owners, of their land. Is there not more value to land than just its economic worth? These "property rights" proposals could weaken or eliminate current zoning practices in our cities and counties, allowing incompatible land uses located next to one another. They could also force taxpayers to pay a business to obey pollution laws, if regulations reduced its profit margin.

Using popular slogans like "less government" and "state's rights," Congress may quietly remove those laws and regulations that ensure that citizens in every U.S. state enjoy the benefits of basic environmental protections. After federal laws are gone, states may relax pollution standards to attract businesses, and citizens may pay the price in the air they breathe and the water they drink. "Downstream" states may have no recourse if a state upstream decides to allow a river to be polluted. In addition, this emphasis on state and local sovereignty has given a rallying cry to those who oppose federal ownership of some public lands -- such as national forests -- located mostly in the Western United States. Several Western counties have passed resolutions asserting their right to take control of federal land located within their jurisdiction. American taxpayers own this land and provide funds to maintain it. In addition, on National Forests, for example, U.S. taxpayers provide counties with funds for federal land within their jurisdiction to help make up for taxes that could be collected on the land if privately owned. Therefore, U.S. taxpayers should be very concerned that these counties are trying to assert local control of their land.

Finally, many of the environmental laws which govern forestry practices in U.S. National Forests also face possible alteration or repeal. These laws currently require that timber harvest plans must consider the effects of the logging on wildlife, water quality, and other forest components as well as establish the concept that U.S. National Forests should be managed for "multiple uses." Without these laws, logging would have far higher priority than other uses of the forests. Other new laws have been proposed which would require the salvage logging of large amounts of dying or dead timber. This may sound acceptable, but the laws also specifically state these harvests will be exempt from existing environmental laws. If so much logging is a good idea, why the need to ignore environmental laws? Besides, dead trees are an essential natural component of the forests, first serving as homes for many creatures, then becoming the nutrients for future plants. Current U.S. environmental laws require citizen involvement in planning timber harvests and have therefore slowed logging outputs (while protecting other forest components such as water, fish and wildlife). Some representatives of the timber industry have lobbied to change these laws, but, because trees grow slowly, fewer outputs now could mean sustainable output, over a longer period of time, preserving more jobs for the long-term future, even if some jobs are lost today. If we cut too fast, will we run out of trees before the next generation of seedlings mature?

These political developments in the United States may have international ramifications as well. In many arenas, like the reduction of emissions of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) for the protection of our ozone layer, the world's nations are just starting to make progress. In addition, the new potential "anti-environmental laws" or changes in current environmental laws proposed by this U.S. Congress may violate existing international agreements. For example, environmentalists claim that the current "salvage logging" bills

mentioned earlier violate a side agreement in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The United States may also stall current discussions on new agreements. For example, at a recent United Nations Climate Conference, the U.S. sided with OPEC (petroleum exporting) countries like Iran in opposing new, deeper cuts for developed nations in greenhouse gas emissions. The U.S. Congress' current anti-environmental stance was blamed for this position.

Earth Day 1995 should generate a wake-up call to the American public and the rest of the world. People should be informed about the consequences of loosening regulations and weakening environmental protection laws. There should be a thorough discussion of these issues and those of us who are U.S. citizens should let our Congressional representatives know if we still support, and are willing to pay for, environmental protection. Citizens of other countries should be aware of the possibility of their governments following the U.S. trends. If we do not act, Earth Day 1995 might well be as significant as Earth Day 1970, but instead of serving as a springboard, it could be the start of our dive.

Diane Prorak , University of Idaho Library