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# Exploring Anti-Environmentalism in the Context of Sustainability

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In the past few years, there has been much discussion about an emerging sociopolitical force popularly known as the anti-environmental movement. It can also be referred to as anti-environmentalism, the ecocontrarian movement and/or the countermovement against sustainability. This essay will analyze anti-environmentalism in the context of sustainability. It will begin with an examination of sustainability as an empirical project. More specifically, it will be argued that anti-environmentalism needs to be understood within the context of a vibrant, spirited and authentic definition of sustainability. Following this discussion, there will be a general examination of the countermovement against sustainability. This will lead into an investigation of wise use groups, corporative resourcists and resource libertarian think tanks. The final section of the essay will provide some tactical responses to anti-environmentalism.

## I

It seems obvious that one needs to have a clear understanding of sustainability in order to define the countermovement against sustainability. However, to post-modern cultural relativists sustainability is not firmly definable. The relativist position maintains that there are multiple and often competing social constructions of sustainability. It claims that sustainability is definable relative to a complex kaleidoscope of cultural patterns, processes and visions that shift over time and space. Under this scenario, a monolithic objective representation of sustainability becomes impossibility. Essentially, sustainability becomes that which is situated within particular realities, each with an elaborate means of constructing the world. As these realities change, sustainability also changes, constantly transforming itself to different situations, and being altered by unique political, economic and cultural influences. Yet, if there are many realities, and no characteristic, common, illustrative and intricate reality, then sustainability can be as many things as there are perspectives, and more (adapted from Drengson 1996). Essentially, a countermovement against sustainability to one person could be a movement towards sustainability for another. Situated knowledge taken

to an extreme - some forms of situated knowledge (i.e. those grounded in biophysical reality) may prove to be acceptable if not wholly desirable - allows people to embrace a myriad of virtual realities while nature and humanity (primarily along lines of race, class and gender) continue to be exploited for socioeconomic and political profit. By emphasizing the relativity of all beliefs and the validity of socially constructing sustainability, post-modern cultural relativism helps empower modernist actors, institutions and processes to continue with business as usual (adapted from Drengson 1996). For it is difficult to establish which social construction leads to sustainability. As Alan Drengson argues:

If there is no single natural reality which has integrity and evolutionary direction, and the world or Nature is just a social construction, then there is no moral reason we should not redesign it however we please... In New Age thought the 'many realities' language can become a way of avoiding responsibility for the present state of affairs (massive species extinction, e.g.) by living in a different 'reality', or by believing that we can change the world just by thinking in a certain way [or shifting consciousness as we desire] (Drengson 1996:2).

While sustainability is not a purely homogeneous concept, which can be defined in a resolute, deterministic and narrow manner, it nevertheless is bounded by one knotty, complex and multifold reality. There are certainly varying ways of organizing this reality and of achieving sustainability. We can create our own sur-reality, or experienced reality, if we subjectively inhabit the world, but survival requires that we live sustainably (Drengson 1996:2). In effect, reality is like a giant crystal, which shifts and changes as it turns, but nevertheless is always one crystal. Ultimately, even though there can be different interpretations of sustainability, in order for these visions to be viable they must be grounded within multidimensional reality. And, it is with an understanding of this reality, that sustainability does not become a desirous everything for everyone, but a concrete concept that recognizes the real need for environmental responsibility.

Out of the possible realistic interpretations of sustainability, one interpretation for instance, might indicate that there are limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the biophysical environment's ability to meet present and future needs (adapted from The World Commission on Environment and Development 1988). It might also suggest for an ecospheric egalitarian ethic, or some form of action to halt the abhorrent exploitation of nature and communities. In challenging neoclassical economic theory, an ecological economic interpretation of sustainability would likely reveal

that total remaining stocks of natural capital are not capable of sustaining the anticipated demands of the global economy into the next century (Rees 1995). It might contend that there is empirical evidence (greenhouse gas accumulation, stratospheric ozone depletion, falling water tables and fisheries collapse) to suggest that total consumption by the global economy already exceeds natural capital; the world is no longer living on sustainable income flows but rather by liquidating natural capital and destroying its' real wealth-creating potential (as well as its' basic life support) (Rees 1995). Consequently, this ecological economic interpretation may indicate that efforts to 'expand the way to sustainability' through deregulation and trade can only accelerate global decline (Rees 1995). Another interpretation might discuss the importance of environmental protection measures, wilderness preservation and environmental regulation. It may identify the need to address vital global environmental problems such as biocultural diversity loss, urbanization, expansionism and desertification. It might reveal that quite simply, widespread deforestation is destructive, toxic waste is harmful and urban pollution is a socioenvironmental problem.

It is fundamental to begin any analysis of the countermovement against sustainability with one or more vibrant, spirited and authentic interpretations of sustainability. For to do otherwise, is to become vulnerable to accepting the legitimacy of these and other ecocontrarian questions:

What if global warming does not loom on the horizon, or if seasonal stratospheric ozone layer depletion is part of a natural cycle and not the creature of human created chemicals? What if pesticides really promote a more abundant and varied food supply for the world without causing cancer and ail in children? Or if hazards from abandoned wastes have been blown out of proportion? (Hager 1993: 10).

All in all, once sustainability is understood, and it has been established that there is a need for an empirical reading of sustainability, it then becomes easier to discuss, define and respond to anti-environmentalism. It is in the spirit of the previous visions of sustainability that I will now begin with an examination of the anti-environmental movement.

## **II**

The countermovement against sustainability has two primary and underlying aims. First, it has an interest in demonstrating the counter

productivity of environmental laws and government regulation. Secondly, it aims to undermine any green ideology that challenges neo-classical economic praxis, and that does not support, for example, private property rights, monetary rule and what might be termed 'rational resource development'. These aims are accomplished through various information outlets such as ecocontrarian conferences, workshops, projects and literature. This largely but not exclusively American movement receives much of its financial support from high-level U.S. sponsors. Brian Tokar writes:

The [anti-environmental] movement is closely allied with Republicans in the US Congress, several of whom were elected in 1994 - when Congress became Republican-dominated for the first time in 40 years - on an overtly anti-environmental platform. As a result, renewal of many of the landmark environmental laws passed in the 1970s such as the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts, the Endangered Species Act and Superfund [are] being held up by unexpected obstacles, delays and consistent efforts to weaken them (Tokar 1995:152).

Regardless of their form, anti-environmentalists and their respective groups are becoming increasingly sophisticated, and are even using some of the very tactics and strategies employed in the environmental movement to further their cause. For instance, there are groups that have become successful in achieving grassroots mobilization. One organization called People for the West! (PFW) has been particularly successful with its grassroots organizing efforts:

...PFW makes no secret that it is employing the tactics environmentalists have historically used to their advantage... Ecotactics by the Sierra Club, is cited in some of their literature as a tactical model... PFW is going door to door with petitions in rural and minority communities. They are courting mayors and commissioners on a one-to-one basis. They have assembled formidable phone trees and letter-writing events in a relatively short time. They seek out and court the aggrieved and disenfranchised (Baca 1995: 54).

Furthermore, the majority of anti-environmental groups have at the very least a basic understanding of environmental perspectives. Ron Arnold, Dixy Lee Ray and Ronald Bailey, all foremost critics of environmental ideology, have a formative grasp of popular environmental discourse (see Ray 1993; Bailey 1993; Arnold 1987). Moreover, key anti-environmentalists and their respective groups are gaining a strong understanding of the politics of language, and in turn are utilizing aggressive, expansive and dominating yang expressions as well as

compassionate, caring and loving yin phrases relative to their target audience. Michael Bruner and Max Oelschlaeger in their paper entitled "Rhetoric, Environmentalism, and Environmental Ethics" argue that anti-environmentalists: "have been effective in accomplishing their objectives at least in part because of their ability to articulate persuasive rationales through slogans, myths and narratives" (Bruner & Oelschlaeger 1994: 379). While there are a number of anti-environmental organizations (in particular wise use groups) that openly favor yang concepts, phrases and ideology, many others are far more interested in arguing that they are balanced organizations that embrace both yin and yang expressions. The larger anti-environmental organizations in particular (i.e. corporative resourcists and resource libertarian think tanks) have an interest in gaining broad public support, and they see it as being desirable to position themselves as sensitive, reasonable and acceptable groups that promote the image of being both formidable yet responsive organizations.

### **III**

Wise use groups, corporative resourcists and resource libertarian think tanks form much of the anti-environmental movement. The anti-environmental movement has been characterized as being composed of various legal foundations, PR firms, industry associations, companies, endowments and charities. Still, others insist that anti-environmentalism is rooted within the ecoestablishment and legitimate grassroots environmental organizations. For the purposes of this essay, the anti-environmental movement is investigated as it is found in wise use groups, corporative resourcists and resource libertarian think tanks.

Wise use groups are a coalition of local grassroots populist groups based mainly in the western part of North America. The wise use movement (as it is commonly termed), emerged in the late 1980s as an alliance of disgruntled ranchers, miners, loggers, hunters, off-road vehicle owners, oil workers and farmers who agreed to put aside their differences to fight a common enemy, so-called eco-freaks (O'Keefe & Daley 1993). According to Edward Grumbine, the wise use movement "has grown quickly from a handful of individuals to a coalition of some 250 loose-knit groups with a common agenda" (Grumbine 1994: 239). One of the movement's most outspoken devotees is Ron Arnold, former board member of the Sierra Club and head of the Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise. As a consultant to U.S. and Canadian timber companies, Arnold advises them to contribute to a wise use group because it can do

things the industry can't (Deal 1993: 19). Arnold argues that it can evoke powerful archetypes such as the sanctity of the family, the virtue of the close-knit community, the natural wisdom of the rural dweller and it can turn the public against your enemies (Schneider 1992). Furthermore, in his book entitled *Ecology Wars*, Arnold writes:

Our goal is to destroy, to eradicate the environmental movement. We're mad as hell. We're not going to take it anymore. We're dead serious- we're going to destroy them. Environmentalism is the new paganism. Trees are worshipped and humans sacrificed at its' altar. It is evil. And we intend to destroy it. No one was aware that environmentalism was a problem until we came along (Arnold 1987).

Such comments are not to be taken lightly. While not all wise users are militant, there are quite a few members who not only blatantly question environmental perspectives but promote violence against environmentalists. Wise use activist Jess Quinn is quoted as saying: "when the hour strikes, there will be public (environmental) officials dead in the streets" (Ellenbogen 1995). In Burns, Oregon, Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Manager Forrest Cameron was told he was going to be killed; in addition, his wife and children received threatening calls at their home (Ellenbogen 1995). David Helvarg during research for his book entitled *The War Against the Greens: The Wise-Use Movement, the New Right, and Anti-Environmental Violence* received threatening letters and telephone calls from wise use activists. He writes:

If I've failed to acknowledge about 480 other people who were essential to the writing of this book, I hope their contributions are well reflected in the following pages. I salute the courage of some and remind others that it is a crime to use the U.S. postal system or telephonic communications for purposes of making a terrorist threat (Helvarg 1994).

It is critical to understand the source of anger and frustration that lies within the hearts and minds of many wise users. It is important to know why, more specifically, U.S. government employees are being targeted with violence. The wise use movement springs from a venerable American ideology associated with John Locke and Thomas Jefferson. Rooted within this ideology is the belief that a small and non-interventionist government is just and a large bureaucracy impedes on individual rights and freedoms. It is said that the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness includes the individual's right to appropriate wealth from nature (Roush 1995). Essentially, the individual has the right to stake out a piece of territory or property under the provision that no one else has made such a claim. Government is by no means meant

to interfere with the right of the individual to own or utilize such property (e.g. land-use legislation/control). In fact, government's role is to help convert natural resources into private property, and then to help the individual protect her/his property (Roush 1995). This deep-seated pioneer tradition drives wise use groups. It is a tradition that has largely challenged efforts at helping achieve sustainability. Essentially, it implies that the individual has the freedom to exploit a private piece of nature at the expense of the commons. This pioneer tradition has led to the development of the following goals from the Wise Use Agenda (it is claimed that the Wise Use Agenda acts as the manifesto or 'official printed conscience' of the wise use movement):

Clear cutting old growth on national forest lands (old-growth stands are termed 'decaying and oxygen using forest growth' and young ones are called 'oxygen-producing, carbon absorbing trees' which help 'ameliorate the rate of global warming and prevent the greenhouse effect').  
Rewriting the Endangered Species Act to remove protection for such 'non-adaptive' species as the California condor. Immediate oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Opening all public lands- including national parks and wilderness areas to mineral and energy production, under wise use technologies in the interest of domestic economies and in the interest of national security. Development of national parks under the direction of private firms with expertise in people-moving, such as Walt Disney. Civil penalties against anyone who legally challenges economic action or development on federal lands (Political and Social affairs Division, Research Branch, Library of Parliament 1992: 39).

Unlike wise use groups, corporative resourcists are far more concerned about reaching the urban-dweller, the academic community and others who are likely to have moderate leanings on land use issues (Hammond 1992). They also do not paint themselves as anti-environmentalists. 'We are all environmentalists' insists Fred Smith, head of the Washington, D.C. based Competitive Enterprise Institute (Hager 1993:10). Essentially, corporative resource groups advertise themselves as green environmental organizations, but have an agenda which even challenges established international environmental laws and obligations. (International environmental laws and obligations can be found in the following documents: the Convention on Biological diversity (signed June 1992, ratified December, 1992, in force, December 1993); Agenda 21; the Rio Declaration; the World Charter of Nature; the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (signed June 1992, in force March 1994); Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (Sept.16,1987) (MPSDOL); the Convention for the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage (Paris 23 November 1972) (CPCNH);



the International Chamber of Commerce: Business Charter for Sustainable Development (ICCBCSD); NGO Treaty on Population, Environment and Development (PED), etc.)

While arguing that mainstream environmental groups have overstated environmental problems, corporative resourcists utilize green marketing techniques to convince the public of their high level of environmental responsibility. In essence, these organizations create what is evidently disputatious information and in turn refer to it as environmental or green ideology. The British Columbia Forest Alliance, the Evergreen Foundation and the National Wetlands Coalition have been cited as such corporate front groups. The British Columbia Forest Alliance argues that it is:

... an independent citizen's organization established to put an end to the rhetoric and bring common sense solutions to the forest land use debate in the province of [British Columbia]. Our group believes that British Columbia can have a strong forest industry and a healthy environment. Part of this process is ensuring that media reporting of forest issues and controversies is balanced and accurate (Ley 1991).

Like the Forest Alliance of British Columbia, the Evergreen Foundation in Medford, Oregon is also a timber-industry group. It suggests that forest resources are abundant, and conventional forestry practices are acceptable. Its motto is healthy environments and healthy economies go hand in hand. According to Carl Deal, "Evergreen's true message is that environmental protection laws are unreasonable, based on extreme views, founded [on] bad science and made without consideration of their social and economic impacts" (Deal 1993: 53). This organization relies on a 'no worries' form of green advertising to convince the public of its commitment to responsible forestry:

In its 1991-92 annual report, the Evergreen Foundation invites supporters to: take a walk through the enlightened forest, a world where there is beauty, peace and mystery... people make decisions on the basis of what they know, not what they fear. There is nothing to worry about, because we plant more than we harvest. In this nirvana, the only dangers to forests are insects, fire and natural disaster; the only threat to the spotted owl is disease; and the only bad policies are those that reflect the irrational fears of environmentalists (Deal 1993: 53).

On a less forestry-related note, the National Wetlands Coalition suggests that wetland laws should be based on sound science and common sense. It argues that it is "a group of public and private sector entities who have joined together to advocate a comprehensive and balanced

wetlands policy for the nation" (National Wetlands Coalition 1995: 1). However, Thomas Lewis insists, "the National Wetlands Coalition, on whose logo a duck flies over cattails, is a leading opponent of attempts to preserve wetlands" (Lewis 1995: 20). It embraces the following policies:

- Expand the activities covered by the permitting program to include drainage, excavation and canalization of wetlands.
- Regulate wetlands in the context of and consistent with private property rights.
- Improve the efficiency of the permitting process.
- Focus the regulatory program on mitigation and mitigation banking, rather than solely 'avoiding' all economic activities in wetlands areas (National Wetlands Coalition 1995).

While corporative resource groups green themselves, resource libertarian think tanks attempt to convince the public that environmental problems do not exist. There are only a handful of resource libertarian think tanks such as the Science and Environmental Policy Project (SEPP) and Citizens for the Environment (CFE) that exclusively focus their efforts on dismissing environmental problems. SEPP "attempt[s] to discredit ozone depletion, global warming, acid rain, pesticide exposures, and toxic waste as real or potential threats to human health" (Helvarg 1994: 21). Moreover, its director Fred Singer claims that global environmental regulation will have catastrophic impacts on the world economy, on jobs, standards of living and health care (Deal 1993). Both SEPP and CFE question the necessity of environmental regulatory initiatives.

Founded in 1990 as an offshoot of Citizens for a Sound Economy, CFE advocates strict deregulation of corporations as the solution to environmental problems. It rallied opposition to the Clean Air Act of 1990 and to California's Proposition 128, a broad environmental package to improve state regulation of toxins. Congress passed the Clean Air Act, but Proposition 128 was defeated. Moreover, CFE scientist Jo Kwong urges the public to "discard the hype" circulated by environmentalists. She identifies sixteen environmental problems that she says are a sham. According to Kwong, these "myths" (e.g. acid rain, natural-resource depletion and shrinking landfill space) "dictate public policy" (Deal 1993).

The majority of resource libertarian think tanks embrace a fairly large agenda, which includes discussions on fiscal policy, energy, monetary policy, education, health care and global economic liberalism in addition

to environmental issues. The Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation are leading resource libertarian think tanks that not only question various environmental perspectives, but also have a strong market-liberal policy agenda. The Cato Institute (home of Ronald Bailey- author of *Ecoscram: The False Prophets of Ecological Apocalypse*) is one of the most influential organizations in North America. The Cato Institute's research focus (written in its' own words) includes:

- demonstrating the counter productivity of most business regulation and licensing.
- looking at the need for principled judicial activism, protecting both civil liberties and economic liberties, but rejecting a legislative role for the courts.
- supporting an open, competitive market for energy...
- documenting the need for consumer choice in education...
- developing private incentives and responsibility rather than a socialized approach to legitimate environmental concerns; challenging environmental claims based on faulty science (Cato Institute 1995).

The Heritage Foundation shares many of the Cato Institutes perspectives. Under the leadership of Edwin J. Feulner and Philip Truluck, Heritage's 155 member staff concentrate their efforts on promoting conservative public policies based on free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values and strong U.S. defense (Heritage Foundation 1996). Heritage pursues this mission by performing research on key policy issues and marketing its finding to members of Congress, key congressional staff members, policy makers in the executive branch, the news media, the academic and business communities, and the general public (Heritage Foundation 1996). Heritage's findings include criticisms of the extremist mainstream environmental groups. In 1990 it issued a report on "Ecoterrorism" timed for the twentieth anniversary of Earth Day, and more recently, in its *Policy Review* magazine, it singled out the environmental movement as "the greatest single threat to the American Economy" (Helvarg 1994).

#### **IV**

It has been suggested that if environmentalists wish to effectively counter the movement against sustainability, they will have to embrace radically alternate (but ethical, democratic and nonviolent) strategies and tactics. Essentially, they will have to become that much more clever

in their approaches to achieving socioecological change. For example, an environmental strategic plan may involve the creation of anti-environmental groups. At the 1st Conference of the Complexity and Interdependence of Issues: Brazil/Canada Project which was held in Clayoquot Sound, British Columbia in the summer of 1995 (Ecological Rights Association 1995), a number of the conference delegates concluded that environmentalists should form organizations which on the surface appear to be ecocontrarian, but are clearly grounded in socioecological praxis. Similarly, there was also mention of the need for the environmental community to understand and adopt anti-environmental terminology. Anti-environmentalists have redefined much of the vocabulary used by environmentalists along developmentalist lines. Words like balanced, biodiversity and empowerment have been redefined according to the interests of anti-environmentalists.

The environmental community may want to redefine industrial/developmentalist terms and phrases along ecological lines. For example, the notion of free market enterprise that is so often embraced by anti-environmentalists could be redefined to mean the spreading of small-scale local markets (e.g. markets that are functioning according to indigenous and bioregional theories). In essence, environmentalists are allowed to be as equally perceptive, flexible and adaptable as anti-environmentalists at embracing terms, phrases and/or images that have not been traditionally a part of their discourse.

In addition, conference delegates also discussed the advantages of radical environmentalists tactfully joining anti-environmental groups. There was talk of the need to 'demystify the enemy' through attending anti-environmental gatherings. Anti-environmentalists who are or once were members of environmental groups are an asset to their respective organizations. Patrick Moore, one of the founding members of Greenpeace, is an effective spokesperson for the British Columbia Forest Alliance. Environmentalists can also proclaim themselves as members (or better still former members) of anti-environmental organizations. In a democracy, both anti-environmentalists and environmentalists have the freedom to assemble in their respective opposing organizations. Environmentalists may also choose to form alliances with other progressive social change seekers who might be, for example, environmentally aware labor activists, feminists, local progressive businesses, indigenous people, the poor, social progressives in the health care profession, minorities and radical academics. As Robert Feagan of Simon Fraser University writes:

Environmentalists have often been faulted for their traditional lack of

involvement with issues such as social justice [and] equity... While some writers note that environmentalists have become more conscious of these issues, there continue to be those who criticize the movement for being aloof from the concerns of other social movements. Such writers urge that environmentalists 'broaden their horizons and work with those who adhere to fundamentally compatible principles to build a political coalition capable of challenging the values, priorities and interests championed by the prevailing order' (Feagan 1994: 26).

Moreover, it has been suggested that environmentalists should learn about, for example, feminist, labor and/or indigenous perspectives on human/environmental resourcism, libertarianism and neoclassical economic theory in order to have a greater understanding of the interdependence of issues. Environmentalists may find that there are a number of parallels between the anti-environmental movement and other counter movements against radical social change. Environmentalists may choose to draw on the understanding of these various counter movements in order to successfully respond to anti-environmentalism. Lastly, it might be also worthwhile for environmentalists to learn the art of debating. Debating can be an aggressive form of communication and discourse. However, anti-environmentalists are cleverly using this form of communication as a means of engaging environmentalists and defaming their positions. Choosing not to debate an anti-environmentalist might very well be the appropriate response. However, there are and will be times when this might not be possible (i.e. public forums), and the knowledge of 'how to debate' becomes crucial in countering anti-environmental claims.

## V

It should be said that some anti-environmental organizations have embraced free market approaches that on the surface appear to have some merit. Moreover, the anti-environmental movement's attempt to empower the citizenry also warrants attention. Essentially, many anti-environmental perspectives appear to be in line with environmental ideology. Studying this information can be rather confusing, and difficulties often arise in deciphering the rhetoric from reality. Sometimes one wonders whether an 'anti-environmental' perspective could lead to sustainability and an empowered citizenry. Perhaps, there are hints of truth in the anti-environmental movement. Indeed, environmentalists should be prepared to be open to the possibility that an ecocontrarian perspective may be tied a sustainable future. However with this said,

behind much of the promotional anti-environmental discourse and information lies an interest in individual property rights, public lands access and multiple use which largely perpetuates the belief in life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and more critically consolidates socioeconomic and political power at the expense of the commons.

All in all, to date the anti-environmental backlash has been a bracing if dangerous reminder to environmentalists that power concedes little without a demand and that no social movement, be it ethnic, civil, or environmental, can rest on its past laurels (Helvarg 1994). Clearly, only where 'impression is multidimensional reality' could a movement against sustainability present itself as a populist movement. As David Helvarg suggests, if the countermovement against environmental regulation and reform is ever fully exposed to the citizenry, the public's reaction will almost certainly force the powers at large into abandoning anti-environmentalism and constructing new and more promising actions (Helvarg 1994). In the best case scenario, effort will take the form of dialogue, education, and inquiry, carried on among the citizenry, governments, and a business community newly sensitized to the demands of its customers and employees for a clean, healthy, bicultural diverse world (Helvarg 1994).

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