



**Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D.**  
Greening the Media

# Love the Environment; But Environmentalists?

Many Americans question climate change. Why?

 Like 10

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Comprehensive legislation to cut carbon emissions has been the principal aspiration of US environmentalists since, well, Bill Clinton was "the Comeback Kid." Twenty bills to limit the damage we do to the environment have been proposed in Congress. None have passed.

Many Americans doubt the very idea of climate change or the need for state action to mitigate environmental despoliation (though the majority are more sensible than their political representatives). Given how clear the science is on this subject, why is there such division within the population? There are several reasons, not the least of which is the pro-carbon lobby—spending three billion dollars on something tends to skew the conversation.<sup>1</sup> More on that later.

In an earlier column, we explored some of the ways that folks come to believe or disbelieve in climate change, and how those tendencies relate to apparent differences in mental processing associated with conservative versus progressive thought.<sup>2</sup>

Here we want to look at how "ordinary" people respond to environmental science and activism.

It is commonplace to propose a correlation between economic comfort and environmentalism—that working stiffs just want to survive and are too busy making a living to invest in a movement that appears to run counter to the model of economic growth on which they rely.

But that assumption is old-fashioned. As environmentalism has developed, it has shown increasing concern for just those workers whose livelihoods depend on the extractive and manufacturing sectors—and with that change has come a diffusion of environmental understanding across class boundaries.<sup>3</sup>

We are also peddled a bunch of myths about "American exceptionalism," which argue that the country is different from everybody else. The grounds for this mystic claim are that the US is an immigrant nation (who isn't?) and a beacon for the rest of the world (an improbable fantasy if ever there were one; these people need to get out more).

In fact, US citizens' environmental behavior and attitudes are remarkably consonant with the rest of the world's—if you take out the influence of money, which is so hideously extreme here.<sup>4</sup>

One related difference is the incompetence of our mainstream media. Because they persist, by and large, in allowing equal time to different perspectives along a right-left continuum, however absurd some of the claims they report may be, the press all too frequently poses scientific questions of climate change in political terms, thereby stratifying reactions to policy along a Democrat-Republican continuum.<sup>5</sup>

Things don't have to be that way. Politics is necessarily part of the picture in mitigating the damage done to our world, but has no part to play in adjudicating scientific research.

We know that people tend to embrace environmental values when stimulated to think beyond their own lives and engage the cross-generational impact of climate change in order to consider the lives of those yet to be.<sup>6</sup>

This should be a hallmark of conservatism. Two centuries ago, one of its founders and patron saints, Edmund Burke, famously called for “a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born” to sustain “the great primeval contract of eternal society.”<sup>7</sup> Such inter-generational care is a hallmark of sustainability. So what hinders so many Republicans from confronting the truth and dealing with it in a conserving way?

Along with corporate propaganda, brainwaves, and the media, the self-presentation and imagery of environmental activists also matter. What does the general public think of activists, who are so often stereotyped as treehugging hippies, dangerous eco-terrorists, anti-growth evangelists, economic ignoramuses, middle-class layabouts, or romantic dreamers (tick only one of the above, please, to describe yourself or your loved ones)?

Many people experience activists as militant and eccentric, which emphasizes their otherness. While that otherness may be a core part of these environmentalists’ identities (behaving differently in public, grabbing attention, securing column inches) it severely limits their ability to communicate effectively with others and step outside a self-fulfilling vanguardist politics.<sup>8</sup> Such vanguardism may preach to the choir, gain press coverage, and buttress fundraising potential among true believers. But it doesn’t persuade ordinary people. It’s not “grassroots” as per activist mythology.

Just as major environmental organizations must become more like the diverse nation they claim to represent, rather than a group of white people lecturing everybody else, they must learn that while dressing up in silly clothing, skirting or breaking the law, and becoming media spectacles may feel as though it achieves something, the outcome probably alienates the very folks in whose name such activism is purportedly undertaken.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, if we want to secure the globe’s future, then in addition to worrying about the psychology of the US population and the pranks of activist cadres, we might need to do something about the hundreds of millions of dollars dedicated to anti-scientific propaganda that could be redirected to fund scientific research and education in the US. Lest we forget.<sup>10</sup>

1. [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2200690](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2200690); <http://www.pewresearch.org/key-data-points/environment-energy-2/>.

2. <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/greening-the-media/201304/how-rally-...>

3. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/666506>.

4. <http://iss.sagepub.com/content/28/4/484.short>.

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6. <http://pss.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/01/05/0956797614561266.abstract>.

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10. [http://www.pewinternet.org/files/2015/01/PI\\_ScienceandSociety\\_Report\\_012...](http://www.pewinternet.org/files/2015/01/PI_ScienceandSociety_Report_012...)



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