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RESEEDING ENVIRONMENTALISM

By Richard Louv

Summary: The movement has suffered losses lately, but new strategies -- including "enterprise environmentalism" and spiritual ecology -- could revitalize it

Many of us around the nation look to Oregon for environmental inspiration. For example, since 1973, Oregon has led the nation in the prevention of urban sprawl. But in December, Measure 37 went into effect, requiring money-strapped Oregon officials either to compensate landowners retroactively for regulations that reduce a property's value or to waive those restrictions.

As the reality of the Oregon retrenchment set in, I spoke with Michael Shellenberger of the Breakthrough Institute in El Cerrito, Calif. He and his associate, Ted Nordhaus, vice president of Evans/McDonough, an opinion-research firm, had just released a broadside called "The Death of Environmentalism." To Shellenberger, Oregon's Measure 37 was one more nail in the coffin of the environmental movement. He and Nordhaus contend that, after a string of stunning successes in the 1970s and '80s, environmentalists are losing ground.
Their thesis: "The environmental community's narrow definition of its self-interest leads to a kind of policy literalism that undermines its power." What the movement needs most, they say, is to take a collective step back to rethink its strategy and tactics.

Response by many environmentalists has been less than enthusiastic. Instinctively, they prefer solidifying and marshalling their base; considering the intense challenges posed by the Bush administration, this is no time for a wave of self-doubt or analysis-paralysis. And they point to such positive achievements as the growth of the land conservancy movement.

Still, the thesis deserves attention. Many polls suggest that most Americans continue to support the environment; what they're less sure about are environmentalists. The Environics Research Group, based in Canada, reports that from 1996 to 2000, the percentage of Americans willing to accept higher pollution in the future to preserve jobs rose from 17 percent to 25 percent, and that the number of Americans who say people who belong to environmental groups are extremists rose from 32 percent to 41 percent. On both questions, a subsequent Nordhaus study reported that the negative numbers had increased another 2 percent by 2004. Declining support for environmentalists may now be cutting into the nation's commitment to a clean environment.

Whatever the cause, the E-word has lost its luster.

The problem with the "Death of Environmentalism" critique is that its proposed alternative is as sketchy as the essay's title is provocative.

In December, Adam Werbach, 31, who served in 1998-99 as the Sierra Club's youngest president, attempted to flesh out a specific philosophical framework for the future. In a San Francisco speech titled "Is Environmentalism Dead?" Werbach argued that environmentalism is endangered because the commons are threatened. By commons, he means the assets we inherit as a community, rather than as individuals. He says American democracy and culture have relied on "commons values" for economic and cultural growth since the Great Depression: "From Social Security to public education to the Clean Water Act, the framework for progressive political action has been the commons." Werbach says the best way to fight for the environment at this point in our history is to fight for the broader commons values.

In practical terms, this means that in addition to working for the direct protection of land, water and air, environmentalists should place more emphasis on championing massive investments in the creation of new alternative-energy industries.

One example is the Apollo Alliance. This cabal of labor organizations and environmentalists proposes what it calls a New Apollo Project. Modeled after President John F. Kennedy's pledge to put an American on the moon before the decade of the 1960s was done, this New Apollo Project would strive to create an energy-independent United States within 10 years.

Importantly, the alliance sells the Apollo Project as a jobs program and calls for an investment of $30 billion annually (far less than what we're spending on the Iraq war) for alternative energy research and production, mass transit and the required manufacturing and construction. Proponents claim this investment would create more than 3 million good new jobs, rebuild decaying urban centers, restore U.S. economic competitiveness globally and reduce the trade and budget deficits. Theoretically, energy savings would cover much of the cost.

"The first wave of environmentalism was framed around conservation, and the second around regulation. We believe the third wave will be framed around investment," says Van Jones, co-founder of the Apollo Project, as quoted by Shellenberger and Nordhaus.

Let's call this approach "enterprise environmentalism," because it presents nature as the solution to social and economic problems not normally associated with the outdoors. Rather than shaming SUV owners (an approach that tends to backfire), enterprise environmentalists would prefer to use the movement's marketing skills and mobilize its constituencies to accelerate mass-market acceptance of alternative engines and fuel. They would push more aggressively for tax incentives for and investment in the use and development of alternative transportation -- and not a minute too soon. Japan now dominates the solar photovoltaic industry, Europe claims 90 percent of wind-turbine manufacturing and, as the Apollo "blueprint" points out, Japanese automakers Toyota and Honda seized the initiative in the hybrid and zero-emissions vehicle markets, and may soon become the second- and third-largest U.S. automakers.

In other words, America will go green or go bust.

Architect William McDonough, former dean of the University of Virginia School of Architecture and guru of the sustainability movement, contends that a new industrial revolution is under way, holding enormous promise for environmental entrepreneurs. His firm, MBDC, based in Charlottesville, Va., is helping such companies as Nike, Honeywell, Herman Miller and Steelcase adopt sustainable-design principles. His team helped design a 99 percent recyclable chair and a compostable fabric, produced in a factory "where the water going out is as clean as the water going in." McDonough also led the design team at Ford's Rouge River site in Dearborn, Mich., what he calls "ground zero for the first Industrial Revolution."

At Rouge River, the team created the world's largest green roof. Using live vegetation, the 10.5-acre roof absorbs particulates from the air, provides animal habitat, makes oxygen, sequesters carbon, purifies water and protects the roof from ultraviolet radiation and thermal shock. The roof will probably survive decades after a typical roof would have needed replacing. "We saved Ford millions of dollars from day one by using natural systems," he says.

The most interesting aspect of McDonough's approach is that it incorporates traditional conservation, recycling and other familiar eco-concepts, but goes beyond them, to offer hope. In the new industrial revolution, he says, our cars, our houses, our commercial buildings, our lawn-mowers -- the list goes on -- will offer such regenerative benefits; in their production or operation, they'll clean the environment, generate energy, or both. Forget the eat-your-peas and do-with-less approach to the environment; nature is the answer, not the barrier.

"I want to stress that Adam, Ted and I consider ourselves 'post-environmentalists' as a recognition of where we come from and recognition that we are abandoning the category of 'the environment,' " Shellenberger says.

As proposed by him, McDonough and others, enterprise environmentalism is easier preached than pursued, even in such high-tech, nature-oriented cities as Portland and San Diego. Essentially an engineering or accounting approach, it lacks some, well, soul.

This is no small point. In 1995, the MIT Press published the results of one of the most extensive surveys of how Americans think about environmental issues. The researchers were stunned by what they discovered.

A substantial majority of people surveyed justified environmental protection by explicitly invoking God as the creator, with striking uniformity across subgroups. "What is going on here? Why should so many nonbelievers argue on the basis of God's creation?" the researchers asked. "It seems that divine creation is the closest concept American culture provides to express the sacredness of nature. Regardless of whether one actually believes in biblical creation, it is the best vehicle we have to express this value."

If the MIT report is correct, spiritual arguments for the environment, seldom used by the environmental movement, will be far more effective than utilitarian arguments. Made on behalf of our children and our children's children, this spiritual argument is the most emotionally powerful weapon we can deploy in defense of the Earth and our own species.

Environmentalists should reduce their over-reliance on apocalyptic scenarios "that tend to create feelings of helplessness and isolation among would-be supporters," Shellenberger advises. "Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' speech is famous because it put forward an inspiring, positive vision that carried a critique of the current moment within it. Imagine how history would have turned out had King given an 'I Have a Nightmare' speech instead."

Indeed, the key to a revitalized environmental movement will be the application of a belief King often expressed: Warnings of impending catastrophe, along with shame, protests and lawsuits, all have a role to play, but any movement will fail if it cannot paint an intensely attractive vision of the future, one that appeals to the mind and to the spirit.

ABOUT THIS ESSAY

Richard Louv is the author of "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder," to be published by Algonquin in May. He is a columnist for The San Diego Union-Tribune and can be reached via www.thefuturesedge.com.