

COMMENTARY

An Earth Day Agenda Conservatives Can Be Proud Of

By Todd Myers

Earth Day provides clear evidence of how strange the environmental debate is these days.

Left-wing environmentalists, living in cities where concrete has largely replaced nature, will brag about their environmental successes while claiming the planet is doomed.

Conservatives, more likely to live in rural areas, surrounded by nature, will downplay environmental politics – but will live the values they express in their private life.

We got to this strange place because the political value of environmentalism is now greater than actually helping the environment. Symbolic gestures and self-indulgent rhetoric are more prevalent than sound science and economics.

There are put-downs, like Governor Inslee saying those who disagree with him on climate change “don’t believe in gravity.”

There are costly and failed projects, like “green” school mandates the legislature’s own auditing agency says increase energy use.

Some claims are just strange. Tom Watson, who taxpayers pay as the King County Eco-consumer, once claimed the traditional Korean dish kimchee is the most environmentally friendly food, although he did not explain why.

Those who believe in the free-market have a powerful alternative to rigid left-wing environmentalism. An approach that combines innovation, doing more with less, and personalized choices is more respectful of individuals and more environmentally effective.

First, technology is the best way to do more with less.

Alternatively, the left demands others change their lifestyle to fit the left’s notion of a “green” life. The left-wing Guardian newspaper notes getting “consumers to change their behavior is a significant component of the sustainability agenda.” Such efforts, however, have failed repeatedly.

Technology has been the driver of real environmental results.

Hybrid cars were created when Toyota saw the opportunity to let consumers save money on gas and help the planet. Soda cans today use much less aluminum, reducing the use of energy. Coca-Cola developed PlantBottle, a plastic bottle made

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partially with renewable resources.

Similar to the ethic shown by Native Americans, technology allows us to use every part of the animal or resource. Timber mills cut logs to maximize lumber, sell leftover bark for use in landscaping and use the rest to generate energy at the mill.

Technology is so powerful that while the economy grew sevenfold between 1946 and 2006, the total weight of inputs to create those goods in 1946 was only slightly less than in 2006.

None of these earth-saving trends came from politicians, although they jumped on the bandwagon later.

Second, we must prioritize to get the most bang for the buck. The very definition of “waste” is to spend resources without receiving the benefit. Conservatives intuitively understand this simple principle of responsible use of resources.

Left-wing environmentalists, however, frequently make excuses for wasting resources on symbolic gestures.

Washington state wastes money subsidizing the rich, giving tax breaks to millionaires who buy \$90,000 luxury electric cars. Those millionaires would likely buy electric cars anyway, meaning we get no carbon reduction for the tax cut. I could mention many more examples.

Some environmental activists justify wasteful spending, saying it shows “leadership.” They actually embrace waste because they say it sends a message, even as it spoils opportunities to make real environmental gains.

In a free market, people must prioritize based on effectiveness, not symbols, because they are accountable to the bottom line. Wasteful, ineffective businesses are bankrupt businesses.

Finally, the left loves big, government-run projects that impose one-size fits all policies, like spending billions on light rail, to reduce transportation carbon emissions by only one or two percent. These costly projects are impressive and dramatic, perfect for politicians.

Most citizens, on the other hand, support smaller, personalized solutions, choosing individual approaches that work best to reduce resource use.

For some that means buying a hybrid. Others will use ridesharing services. It could mean telecommuting. The combined impact of these efforts is greater, costs less and doesn’t treat people as cogs in a larger system.

This Earth Day, those of us who believe in the free market, who often live surrounded by nature every day, should proclaim a modern alternative to 1970s environmentalism. That approach would create an Earth Day the environment could truly celebrate.