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Wake Up and Smell the Progress

Why won't America's environmentalists accept positive developments?

BY LISA RENSTROM AND BOB PERKOWITZ

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There are winners, there are losers, and there are people who just don't get it.

If you've been paying attention, you know that in spite of the best efforts of tens of thousands of dedicated environmentalists and the spending of literally hundreds of millions of philanthropic dollars, the environment has been losing.

Not to stretch a point, but if America's environmentalists were more effective, we might not be suffering from the wars and trade deficits our dependence on oil brings. We might not be spending quite so much -- the highest percentage of GDP of any country in the world -- on health care.

Face it: environmentalists have been outgunned and outsmarted. But there is hope. Things are starting to change. Powerful people with black hats are trading them in for [green capes](#).

Topping that list is the popular evangelical minister [Pat Robertson](#). He publicly stated last week that, "We really need to address the burning of fossil fuels. It is getting hotter, and the icecaps are melting and there is a buildup of carbon dioxide in the air." That alone has to give one pause. Could it be that [the scientists were right](#)?

Then there's Frank Luntz, spinmeister extraordinaire of the authoritarian Republicans, recently admitting that, "It's now 2006. I think most people would conclude that there is global warming taking place and that the behavior of humans are affecting the climate." Say what?

If that isn't enough to challenge your worldview, try [Wal-Mart](#). No paragraph is long enough to contain the cultural and environmental destruction of their massively efficient consumption and international worker exploitation machine. But that self-same Wal-Mart is embarking on a comprehensive sustainability program that includes emission reductions and organics -- the whole shebang.



Hey greens, open your eyes.
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And finally we have the Sierra Club, America's preeminent environmental organization, [daring to endorse a Republican senator](#), Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island.

The conversion of Robertson, Luntz, and Wal-Mart and the leadership of the Sierra Club are beyond the cognitive dissonance resolution capabilities of some environmentalists. All these people getting in touch with reality is [more progress than some progressives can understand](#), much less support.

Here in Grist last month, John Sellers and Barbara Dudley, two credentialed environmentalists, lamely [took revenge on Adam Werbach](#) for his support of Wal-Mart's greening efforts. Nearly two years ago, [Adam spoke out in the "Death of Environmentalism" controversy](#), daring to criticize the movement for its myopia and ineffectiveness. Unable to argue that the movement actually was effective, Sellers and Dudley finally found grounds on which they felt they could challenge Werbach.

Then, in his ["Centrism is for Suckers"](#) column in the *New York Times* on August 4, the otherwise respectable Paul Krugman slugged the Sierra Club for its Chafee endorsement. Republican moderates like Chafee have repeatedly put their fingers in the levees to slow the Bush/Cheney/Inhofe/DeLay/Pombo flood of environmental destruction. Krugman's criticism is counterproductive.

Sellers, Dudley, and Krugman need to get real. If environmentalists want to win, we need to avoid being ineffective, effete purists unable to discern between real progress, bad policies, and destructive demagoguery.

We all know that America has the financial and technical wherewithal to stop global warming. We can end our addiction to oil and get back on the path to saving our natural legacy. It is, however, going to take more time and be more difficult if progressives become reactionary and inhibit progress instead of supporting it.

Moan and groan if you want. We're heading over to Wal-Mart.

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