

# Introduction

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All Americans want a clean, healthy, and safe environment. Yet an important question remains: Which public policies will realize our environmental goals most effectively?

Since the 1970s, the volume of public policy addressing environmental issues has experienced explosive growth. These policies, however, are the products of an outdated and misguided command-and-control mindset. They all too often empower and enlarge bureaucracies, impose mandates, and cripple free markets.

The results of such policies are higher energy prices, lower incomes, less access to resources, and technological stagnation—all while often failing to produce tangible environmental benefits. Whether applied in the context of managing natural resources, industrial policy, or health care, this bureaucrat-centric approach is inherently destructive to a free and vibrant society.

Despite Washington's infatuation with heavy-handed public policy, history has shown that command-and-control policies are inherently inefficient and often counterproductive: Time and time again, the well-being of societies and individuals has depended on individual freedom, free markets, property rights, and limited government. With regard to environmental issues, an obvious reality—that the protection of liberty makes for superior policy—continues to be ignored.

Consequently, environmental policies often run roughshod over fundamental American values, an unfortunate development that has produced ineffective environmental policies. In order to realize our nation's primary environmental goal—a clean, healthy, and safe environment—policymakers should pursue regulations based on economic and individual freedom.

## The American Conservation Ethic

The American Conservation Ethic is built around eight principles that are grounded in experience, science, wisdom, and the enduring values of a free people. The Ethic affirms that people are the most important, unique, and precious natural resource and maintains that Americans must be good stewards of the world around us—not only for the well-being of the current generation, but for the health of future generations as well.

The American Conservation Ethic is founded on a deep respect for the wonder, beauty, and complexity of our environment and is dedicated to the wise use of nature's bounty. It reflects every American's aspiration to make America's environment cleaner, healthier, and safer for future generations, and it draws its strength from the most powerful force for improving our environment—free people.

Central to the American Conservation Ethic is the fact that renewable natural resources, such as air, water, and soil, are not fragile and static but resilient and dynamic. These resources are continually regenerated through

growth, reproduction, and other naturally occurring processes that cleanse, cycle, or create resources anew. Because these resources are continually renewed, they can be used in a wise and responsible manner without fear that they will be lost forever.

The key to effective environmental stewardship is to better understand these renewable natural resources and the relationships among them. Applying this knowledge improves our ability to use these treasures wisely and conserve them for the benefit of current and future generations.

The American Conservation Ethic applies the tried and true values of individual rights and responsibilities to the conservation of these natural resources. Property rights create incentives that both reward good stewardship and empower individuals to protect their property from the harmful acts of others. The guarantee that people can reap the fruits of their own labor inspires the investments of time, money, and effort necessary to expand upon centuries of accumulated wisdom. As we learn more about our environment, we Americans are better able to be good stewards of natural resources.

The American Conservation Ethic relies on science as one tool to guide public policy. Science is an invaluable instrument for rationally weighing risks to human health and measuring other environmental impacts. The most important measurement of environmental quality is human well-being. Science also provides a means of assessing the costs and benefits of actions designed to reduce, control, and remediate environmental impacts.

In neither case, however, should science be the sole consideration. Scientific development, technological innovation, and economic growth are essential for a cleaner, healthier, and safer environment. As knowledge grows, productivity, efficiency, and the potential to innovate increases, thereby allowing Americans to better use energy, raw material, and other resources.

Rather than depending on an inefficient and restrictive centralized environmental bureaucracy, the American Conservation Ethic promotes workable means to reach environmental goals. By relying on the firsthand knowledge and practical experience of local people and accounting for widely varying conditions, a “site and situation”—specific approach provides practical solutions to environmental challenges. The greater the degree to which solutions reflect the knowledge, needs, and desires of those individuals most affected, the more successful these solutions will be.

Finally, the American Conservation Ethic recognizes that a sustainable and productive system of environmental stewardship depends on a free people. To this end, the Ethic empowers individuals to use, enjoy, and conserve the environment, and it inspires and challenges individual Americans to improve their surroundings and lives. This cumulative effort of individuals is the most effective and dependable means of ensuring a cleaner, healthier, and safer environment; conserving America’s unique resources; and protecting that which we all treasure most—people and liberty.

America has unsurpassed natural wealth. From her abundant mountains, plains, forests, and coasts to her lakes, rivers, and streams, America’s resources are unlike any others in the world. Along with America’s wildlife, these resources have provided for and have been cherished by millions of Americans. But our people—living, growing, and creating within our rich culture of liberty—are our greatest resource.

Americans aspire to improve upon our tradition of wisely using and conserving the world around us for generations to come. The American Conservation Ethic is the way to fulfill these aspirations.