Eight Principles of the American Conservation Ethic

Principle I: People Are the Most Important, Unique, and Precious Resource.

All environmental policy should be based on the idea that people are the most important, unique, and precious resource. The inherent value of each individual is greater than the inherent value of any other resource. Accordingly, human well-being, which incorporates such measures as health and safety, is the foremost measure of the quality of the environment: A policy cannot be good for the environment if it is bad for people. The best judge of what is or is not desirable policy is the individual who is affected by said policy.

Moreover, whether it be managing a habitat, responsibly securing affordable and reliable energy, or providing for food, minerals, and fiber, human intellect and accumulated knowledge are the only means by which the environment can be willfully improved or modified.

Environmental policies should inspire people to be good stewards. Through human creativity, we develop new sources of needed materials, more efficient means of collecting them, or substitutes for them—as well as the technology necessary to do so. Within the framework of equity and liability, individuals create incremental benefits in the quality or quantity of a resource or improve some aspect of the environment. Cumulatively, this improvement results in progress and provides direct and indirect environmental benefits to society.

Principle II: Renewable Natural Resources Are Resilient and Dynamic and Respond Positively to Wise Management.

Renewable natural resources—trees, plants, soil, air, water, fish and wildlife—and collections thereof, such as wetlands, deserts, forests and prairies, are the resources upon which we depend for food, clothing, medicine, shelter, and innumerable other human needs. Indeed, human life depends on both the use and conservation of these resources. Such resources are regenerated through growth, reproduction, or other naturally occurring processes that cleanse, cycle, or otherwise create them anew.

While all living organisms and activities produce byproducts, nature has a profound ability to carry, recycle, recover, and cleanse. These characteristics make it possible to use renewable resources now while ensuring that they are conserved for future generations. As Teddy Roosevelt, a founding father of conservation, recognized, "The Nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation increased, and not impaired, in value."[1]

Principle III: Private Property Protections and Free Markets Provide the Most Promising New Opportunities for Environmental Improvements.

Ownership inspires stewardship: Whether for economic, recreational, or aesthetic benefit, private property owners have the incentive both to enhance their resources and to protect them. Polluting another's property is to trespass or to cause injury. Polluters, not those most vulnerable in the political process, should pay for damages done to others. Good stewardship is the wise use or conservation of nature's bounty, based on our needs. With some exception, where property rights are absent, they should be extended. If such extension proves elusive, the forces of the market should be brought to bear to the greatest extent possible.

There is also a direct and positive relationship between free-market economies and a clean,

1 Theodore Roosevelt, "Quotes: Wildlife Conservation," U.S. National Park Service, http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/npsg/quotes/sec1a.htm (accessed June 19, 2012).

healthy, and safe environment.[2] Open and free-market systems that are rooted in economic freedom are superior at generating economic dynamism. Economic growth driven by such vibrancy is positively correlated with life expectancy, which is one of the most critical measurements of environmental policies.[3] Despite assertions to the contrary, economic growth is generally good for the environment.[4]

Finally, there is a direct and positive relationship between the complexity of a situation and the need for freedom. Markets reward efficiency, which is environmentally good, while minimizing the harm done by unwise actions. In the market, successes are spread by competition, and since costs are borne privately rather than subsidized, unwise actions are typically on a smaller scale and of a shorter duration.

We must work to decouple conservation policies from regulation or government ownership. In the aggregate, markets—not mandates—most accurately reflect what people value, and therefore choose, for their environment.

Principle IV: Efforts to Reduce, Control, and Remediate Pollution Should Achieve Real Environmental Benefits.

The term "pollution" is applied to a vast array of substances and conditions that vary greatly in their effect on man. It is used to describe fatal threats to human health, as well as to describe physically harmless conditions that fall short of someone's aesthetic ideal. Pollutants can occur naturally or can be a byproduct of technology or industry. Their origin does not determine their degree of threat. Most carcinogens, for example, occur naturally but do not engender popular fear to the same degree that man-made carcinogens do. Microbiological pollutants, bacteria, and viruses, though natural, are by far the most injurious form of pollution.

Technology and its byproducts must be respected, not feared. Science is an invaluable tool for rationally weighing risks to human health or assessing and measuring other environmental impacts.

When we measure the impact of environmental policies, the well-being of real people is of greater weight than the well-being of theoretical ones. Human health and safety, as well as other interrelated aspects of well-being such as economic well-being and liberty, should be the primary criteria by which we evaluate environmental measures. Science also provides a means of considering the costs and benefits of actions designed to reduce, control, and remediate pollution or other environmental impacts so that we can have a cleaner, healthier, and safer environment.

Principle V: As We Accumulate Scientific, Technological, and Artistic Knowledge, We Learn How to Get More from Less.

Society tends to become more efficient as it accumulates scientific, technological, and artistic knowledge. In the words of economics writer Warren Brookes, "the learning curve is green." Technology promotes efficiency, and through efficiency we substitute information for other resources, resulting in more output from less input—which also means less waste and greater conservation. Technological advancement confers environmental benefits like more miles per gallon, more board-feet per acre of timber, a higher agricultural yield per cultivated acre, and more GDP per unit of energy.

Technological developments also made it possible for the modern American farmer to feed and clothe a population more than twice the size of what existed in

2 Terry Miller, Kim R. Holmes, and Edwin J. Feulner,, *2011 Index of Economic Freedom* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation and Dow Jones and Company, Inc., 2011), http://www.heritage.org/index/download.
3 Angus Deaton, "Global Patterns of Income and Health: Facts, Interpretations, and Policies," National Bureau of Economic Research *Working Paper* No. 12735, December 2006, http://www.nber.org/papers/w12735.pdf (accessed June 20, 2012).
4 International Monetary Fund, "Relationship Between per Capita Energy Consumption and GDP Growth," Figure 3.3, http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2011/01/c3/fig3_3.pdf (accessed June 20, 2012).

1949[5]—all while increasing exports almost twentyfold.[6] Yet, despite this impressive output, over that same time period, the total acreage used in production *decreased*, falling from 387 million cultivated acres to 330 million cultivated acres.[7] That is a decline of 57 million acres, an area larger than the state of Idaho, which is now available for other uses.

American agriculture has demonstrated that seeking more efficient means of production often yields unintended environmental benefits. To ensure that such technological breakthroughs continue, Americans must continue to accumulate scientific, technological, and artistic knowledge—a process fueled by restless competition in the free market.

Principle VI: Management of Natural Resources Should be Conducted on a Site- and Situation-Specific Basis.

Resource management should take into account the fact that environmental conditions will vary from location to location and from time to time. A site- and situation-specific approach takes advantage of the fact that those who are closest to a resource or pollution problem are also those who are best able to manage them. Such practices allow for prioritization and the separation of problems into manageable units.

Natural resource managers on site and familiar with the situation are best able to determine what to do, how to do it, and when to do it—whether tending to the backyard garden or the back-40 pasture. For example, local landowners and stewards have specialized skill sets that allow them to identify multiple solutions to environmental problems more easily.

A site- and situation-specific management approach also allows conservation efforts to reflect unique environmental characteristics and variables as well as the needs and desires of local populations. Rigid government mandates and standards lack this flexibility. Additionally, a site- and situation-specific approach is more consistent with policies carried out at lower levels of government. Centralized management is more likely to be arbitrary, ineffectual, or even counterproductive as it lacks the insight of local populations.

A site- and situation-specific approach avoids the institutional power and ideological concerns that dominate politicized central planning. Where laws and regulations to achieve environmental goals must be set, they should be meaningful, measurable, and objective and should contain bright legal lines—rather than bureaucratic requirements—as to how such standards are to be met.

Principle VII: Science Should Be Employed as One Tool to Guide Public Policy.

Science should inform societal decisions, but ultimately, such decisions should be based on ethics, beliefs, consensus, and other processes. Understanding science's proper role is central to developing intelligent environmental policies. Specifically, science is the product of the scientific method, the process of asking questions and finding answers in an objective manner. It is a powerful tool for understanding our environment and measuring the consequences of various courses of action. It can help policymakers, for example, to assess risk and weigh costs against benefits. But it should not dictate public policy.

While science should not be substituted for public policy, public policy on scientific subjects

5 Population comparing 1949 and 2006 as reported in U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical National Population Estimates: July 1, 1900 to July 1, 1999," June 28, 2000, http://www.census.gov/popest/ (accessed June 22, 2012), and U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2012,* October 1, 2011, p. 8, http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/12statab/pop.pdf (accessed June 21, 2012).

6 Comparing agricultural exports from 1949 and 2006 as reported in U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, *Value of U.S. Agricultural Trade, By Calendar Year*, February 2011, http://www.ers.usda.gov/Data/FATUS/#calendar (accessed June 21, 2012).

7 Comparing 1949 and 2006, the most recent year, as reported in U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, *Crop Land Use*, 2006, http://www.ers.usda.gov/data/majorlanduses/spreadsheets/croplandusedforcrops.xls (accessed June 21, 2012).

should reflect scientific knowledge. A law is a determination to force compliance with a code of conduct. Laws go beyond that which can be established with scientific certainty; indeed, laws are based on normative values and beliefs and are a commitment to use force.

Commitments to use the force of law should be made with great caution and demand a high degree of scientific certainty. To do otherwise is likely to result in environmental laws based on scientific opinions rather than scientific facts. Such laws are likely to be wasteful, disruptive, or even counterproductive, as scientific opinions change profoundly and often at a faster pace than public policy. The notion behind the maxim "first do no harm" should govern the enactment of public policy.

Principle VIII: The Most Successful Environmental Policies Emanate from Liberty.

Americans have chosen liberty as the central organizing principle of our great nation. Consequently, environmental policies must be consistent with this most cherished principle. Choosing policies that emanate from liberty is consistent with holding human well-being as the most important measure of environmental policies. There is a strong and statistically demonstrable positive correlation between economic freedom and environmental performance.[8]

Restricting liberty denies Americans their chosen environment and constrains their opportunities to improve it. Freedom unleashes the forces most needed to make our environment cleaner, healthier, and safer. It fosters scientific inquiry, technological innovation, entrepreneurship, rapid information exchange, accuracy, and flexibility. Free people work to improve the environment, and liberty is the most powerful energy behind environmental improvement.

8 Ben Lieberman, "A Free Economy Is a Clean Economy: How Free Markets Improve the Environment," chap. 4 in Terry Miller and Kim R. Holmes, *2011 Index of Economic Freedom* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation and Dow Jones and Company, Inc., 2011), http://www.heritage.org/index/download.