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Market Environmentalism Is No Oxymoron



by Kai Weiss

This article is an adapted version of remarks given at the [Climate and Freedom Summit 2019](#) in Madrid, Spain, organized by Fundalib, Reason Foundation, and the Clean Capitalist Leadership Council on December 12.

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No other political topic has played as great of a role in 2019 as climate change and environmentalism at large. With a “[Green Wave](#)” of environmentalist parties gaining steam, Greta Thunberg traveling through the world – on a boat – as Fridays for Future protests, and, in more extreme forms of civil disobedience, Extinction Rebellion demonstrations increased in numbers, we can say that the fight against global warming is a topic that will be here to stay for (much) longer.

Precisely because of this, it is shocking how environmentalism has remained a topic that is largely only discussed by the political Left. Too often, particularly in the past but still often today, free market advocates have clouded themselves in ignorance, in a rejection of environmental stewardship, in a denial of global warming, or, if none of those, at least in insults against opponents on the political spectrum – for instance, constant *ad hominem* attacks against young activist Greta Thunberg. Yet, free marketeers need to realize this world and nature's many wonders are worth protecting.

In recent years, many things have thankfully changed. When the former President of the Property and Environment Research Center ([PERC](#)), Terry Anderson, was calling for “free market environmentalism” a few decades ago, he [was ridiculed](#) for promoting an oxymoron. The market and the preservation of nature could naturally not go hand in hand, the many critics argued. Today, many people realize the important role markets, or at least market mechanisms, can potentially play in protecting the environment. New organizations wholly dedicated to these ideas have sprung forth in recent months and years, such as the [American Conservation Coalition](#), the [Clean Capitalist Leadership Council](#), and the [British Conservation Alliance](#).

Looking at the [crucial UN Climate Change Summit](#) in Glasgow in 2020 and the future of free market environmentalism in general, free market advocates need to further intensify their efforts to make their voices heard. As part of this, flat-out global warming denialism as an argument against environmentalism has to stop. Even those who are – for whatever reason – skeptical of the largely existing scientific consensus need to realize that protecting earth's beauty is an essential task. This is not despite how wrong the solutions of

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those on the Left are, but precisely because they are and alternatives are dearly needed. We have to actively and civilly engage with their worries, not insult them. Civil discourse is always important. Environmental issues are no different.

Furthermore, we need practical solutions to environmental problems, not ideological utopias. Too often, free marketeers have been content in environmentalist discussions to simply demand privatization of everything – for instance, privatizing air and oceans, or anything else you might think of. These are interesting thought experiments and sometimes important truths lie in those demands – for instance, that environmentalism can only work when based on private property rights – but for the most part, these demands are, at least so far, simply unfeasible and thus add little to the discussion. We need actual solutions to today's actual problems. How do we incentivize entrepreneurs to innovate? How do we prevent wildfires? How can we improve national parks and outdoor activities with more private elements? What is preferable: **Clean Tax Cuts** or a carbon tax or playing markets through emissions trading systems – or a combination of some of these? In many regards, we have merely scratched the surface of these questions.

All of us need to think about possible solutions at home, on a national, state, communal, or even local level on how to improve the environment. We tend to think of this being an issue that can only be solved globally – but particularly when we go beyond global warming, environmentalism is often best served being done in more local settings, as the great **Elinor Ostrom** showed. As in most other areas, decentralization can be a great boon for nature as well, as people figure out ways to take care of resources and nature on the ground, rather than leaving it to technocrats messing it up from a capital city far away.

As for global warming, of course, this is a global issue – the name says it already. And yet, here again, private and pro-market solutions are available, for instance through free trade agreements on environmental goods and services. To work out more solutions and promote these in the global policy realm, collaboration between free market advocates from around the world is essential. This cooperative effort has

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thankfully been picking up steam as well. For instance, in December, the Brussels-based network [EPICENTER](#) organized a seminar in Paris where about 15 pro-market think tankers met to discuss environmentalism. Just a few days later, the first [Climate and Freedom Colloquium](#) took place in Madrid in light of the UN Climate Change Summit, with free market thinkers coming together from all across the world (the remarks you are reading were prepared for that event). And in a moment of shameless self-promotion, the [Austrian Economics Center](#) is currently working with the British Conservation Alliance and about 15 more of the most prominent free market organizations from the U.S., UK, Brussels, and Continental Europe, on an introductory book to free-market environmentalism, to be released early next year. The enthusiasm we have received for this project is another proof of how environmentalism is an opportunity to go beyond useless (in-)fighting and conflicts, and to instead collaborate to promote a much-needed alternative to the environmental status quo.

Thus, a discussion on environmentalism and global warming by those in favor of the market economy is finally happening. This can only be good news. Environmentalism is crucial, now more so than ever. But it is not incompatible with markets and property rights. The two fit together perfectly well. Let's work for an environmental vision that escapes the apocalyptic tenor of today and shows an optimistic future through the voluntary collaboration between people and communities and through entrepreneurship, innovation, and philanthropy.

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