

THE COST OF GUTTING THE EPA: When I was a boy rivers caught fire

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As they say, “When I was a boy...” Ohio’s Cuyahoga River caught fire, again, fueled by its abundant industrial pollution. The Bald Eagle in the lower 48 was rare and on the edge of being wiped out. Lead was in the gasoline, paint, and even the water we drank and it was killing over 5,000 Americans each year. And then along came Richard Nixon signing into law The Clean Water Act, The Endangered Species Act (ESA), establishing the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and a cadre of other environmental actions. And lo and behold, across my life time, we Americans turned some important environmental problems around.



Our public waterways became cleaner and more suitable for drinking rather than sources of fire accelerants. Some 99% of the species protected by the ESA have not gone extinct and many, like the Bald Eagle, are rebounding. Through EPA regulation, the elimination of lead from gasoline and other consumer items fewer people are dead prematurely. Less lead in the environment has saved millions of American children from brain development damage.

And when I was a boy, they taught me in Sunday school from Matthew 25:40, "And the King will say, 'I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!'" And I have discovered across my adult life that the very people who were and remain the most impacted by environmental degradation are often the historically least powerful among us – the poor, people of color, and as our brothers and sisters at Standing Rock remind us, Native Americans.

We the people, through our elected officials cleaned up much of our air, water, and the very habitat we share with so many other species. In so doing we strengthened the natural systems that provide the essential ecological services our species requires to survive. When we care for the environment and the least among us we care for all of creation. It is never easy, there are costs, both economic and social, but there are also benefits, economic, social, and ecological.

Our modern world, one where we can afford such luxuries as a Bill of Rights, a green chili cheeseburger, and safe neighborhoods, has to be built upon the interlocking three-legged stool of a justice based human community, a healthy economy, and a sustainable ecology. For on that stool, humanity’s fate rests. To weaken any one of those legs is to doom us all.

The scientist David Suzuki puts it this way, “Now there are some things in the world we can’t change – gravity, entropy, the speed of light, the first and second Laws of Thermodynamics, and our biological nature that requires clean air, clean water, clean soil, clean energy and biodiversity for our health and well-being. Protecting the biosphere should be our highest priority or else we sicken and die. Other things, like capitalism, free enterprise, the economy, currency, the market, are not forces of nature, we invented them. They are not immutable and we can change them. It makes no sense to elevate economics above the biosphere, for example.”

Our work is not yet done. Nor will it ever be. Justice for all, a robust economy, the ability to strive for Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness, is the continuing contract we have with the generations to follow. Our essential requirement is to make sure we keep things running the best we can. And we cannot do any of that if we do not care for the environment upon which we depend so that it can provide us with the food we eat, the water we drink, and the air we breathe.

First off we need to recognize that greed and avarice are real and left unchecked cause real harm. Lead in gasoline was a known health hazard for decades before it was banned. And the captains of extractive industry pushed hard against a ban on lead in gasoline. Just like now, as they push hard against the knowledge we have had for decades that the over use of hydrocarbons will come to no good end for our environment and our species.

Second we must preserve the mechanisms we have in our laws and government that protect us. Really, people want to eliminate the EPA and the very rules it promulgates to keep our water free of chemicals that kill us or cause our children to become brain damaged? Are you kidding me, there are people among us who would doom their grandchildren to a hostile climate where hurricanes and other weather events become even more deadly and frequent? Are people so shortsighted they would allow greater parts of the planet to become inhospitable to agriculture? And what wisdom is there in adding to the pace of this planet’s sixth great extinction by eliminating the endangered species act? None of those actions are in our best interests.

This past Presidents’ Day weekend, my daughter and I put our battered old canoe into the Rio Grande and rode it through Rio Rancho, Sandia Pueblo, Corrales, and Albuquerque. In less than five hours we saw 16 porcupines, two muskrats, a raccoon and thousands of birds representing 27 different species. Three times we saw bald eagles ride the sky with their six foot wingspans.

As we took our canoe trip we were surrounded by hundreds of thousands of people; all within a few miles of us. The very water we rode on became part of the water supply I used to brush my teeth at the end of that day. The river those Bald Eagles flew over is all part of the healthy economy, human community, and environment I call home. Such a day is made possible through that interlocked priorities built into the strength of environmental laws and regulations adopted across my lifetime. We need to fight fiercely to address the emerging environmental issues of our day – not go back and undo the solutions that made our country stronger when I was a boy.

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