

The Skunks at the Garden Party

Local activists have unleashed a green shitstorm by declaring the death of environmentalism. So where do they go from here?

These are dark days for the environmental movement. US voters recently elected arguably the most eco-hostile president and Congress in history, capping a presidential campaign in which the environment went all but unmentioned. Polling data, meanwhile, shows a seemingly inexorable trend toward "conservative" values among Americans, including a near-doubling, over the last several years, in the number of people who agree with the statement: "To preserve people's jobs in this country, we must accept higher levels of pollution in the future." Many environmentalists privately concede they are losing the policy wars, particularly when it comes to global warming.

But try telling these same enviros that their very identity -- the noble cause for which they've long worked overtime for nonprofit peanuts and sacrificed a healthy family life -- is dead. That, literally, is what longtime East Bay environmental activists Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus recently did, unleashing a torrent of anger and defensiveness, as well as a hearty stream of debate and self-reflection -- which was, of course, the point.

A few years back Shellenberger, a media consultant who has worked with nearly every major environmental organization including the National Resources Defense Council and the Sierra Club, and Nordhaus, a progressive pollster, saw the writing on the wall and concluded that the time was ripe for a radical new approach to environmental politics. It would need to harness mainstream concerns such as jobs and the economy in the service of environmental solutions -- global warming being the big kahuna.

So, in 2003, they helped cofound the Apollo Alliance, an ambitious environmentalist-labor coalition that advocates a ten-year, \$300 billion federal investment in clean-energy technologies and jobs. Apollo has since garnered active involvement from labor unions and environmental groups, and support from national politicians.

But the alliance had thus far failed to capture headlines, let alone the popular imagination. Shellenberger and Nordhaus blame this failure, among many others, on a movement that is, in Nordhaus' words, "ossified, bureaucratic, slow-moving, and heavily invested in its existing brands."

The solution: Do away with environmentalism. "What's *not* part of the environment?" Shellenberger explains. "If everything is part of the environment, then the term is misleading because it gives the impression that the environment doesn't include humans, and [that] environmentalists don't care about humans."

The eco-conspirators chose last October's Environmental Grantmakers Association conference in Hawaii as the place to drop their bomb. All the movers and shakers were there: the nonprofits, the luminaries, and the people holding the purse strings. Shellenberger and Nordhaus arrived armed with an elegantly produced, self-published booklet titled *The Death of Environmentalism*, in which they argue that by focusing on "technical policy fixes," the environmental movement has devolved into a "special interest" that has outlived its usefulness. "Environmentalists ask not what

we can do for non-environmental constituencies, but what non-environmental constituencies can do for environmentalists," they wrote. "As a result, while public support for action on global warming is wide, it is also frighteningly shallow."

The overall gist was that eco-warriors, unlike their Republican adversaries, have neglected to articulate a vision that mainstream America can relate to.

As expected, they pissed off a lot of people. Sierra Club president Carl Pope fired back with a lengthy, blistering rebuttal that called into question both their thesis and their motives. Describing the duo's dissertation as "self-serving," Pope observed: "Given that the chosen audience of the paper was the funders, it will be hard for many readers to avoid the suspicion that the not-so-hidden message was 'fund us instead.'" Pope also cited several milestone labor-environmental alliance-building efforts over the past two decades, and dismissed the notion that environmentalism is obsolete.

Oddly enough, several of the pair's most indignant critics also are key players in the Apollo Alliance. Pope is a cochair. Veteran environmental political strategist Dan Carol, who shares Pope's sentiments, is a board member. "The work of the Apollo Alliance is moving forward despite this debate," Carol insists. "Declaring things to be dead -- whether it's the environmental movement or the Democratic Party or the animal rights movement -- is provocative and interesting, but I care about getting things done."

The deliberately provocative tone set by *The Death of Environmentalism*, and the manner of its unveiling, has resulted in media coverage and an enduring shitstorm among activists and movement insiders. In December, former Sierra Club boss Adam Werbach upped the ante when he publicly joined forces with the dissenters in an address to San Francisco's Commonwealth Club titled *Is Environmentalism Dead?* His unqualified answer: yes.

Shellenberger and Nordhaus are pleased with what they've started -- they say the dialogue is healthy, and hope it will be productive. Yet some local enviros fail to see the value in what they view as essentially a semantic debate. Karla James of the Oakland-based Rose Foundation for Communities and the Environment is one. "Addressing complex issues like poverty, world trade policies, alternative energy, land use, and transportation will be critical," she says, "but the point is that global warming does affect everyone, and everyone will have to become an 'environmentalist' for us to succeed."

Karen Pickett, director of the Berkeley-based Bay Area Coalition for Headwaters and a longtime member of the radical group Earth First, complains that the pair entirely overlooks grassroots activism, "where the exciting ideas and inspirational directions come from," and that much of what they wrote wasn't really new -- their arguments and even their language, Pickett claims, were echoes of the rationale used to create Earth First back in 1980.

What really irks her is that, in criticizing mainstream environmental groups, the pair stops short of calling for their dissolution, or even "calling them out" by naming them. "Activists have got to be willing to go to the mat with the corporations," she says. "So if they want to criticize mainstream environmental groups for being too staid and comfortable and sucking up foundation funding, why not also mention that

some of the worst corporations are actually connected to the foundations that fund big environmental groups? They don't even touch that, because their own essay was foundation-funded and they presented it to funders. They don't really bring up any ideas that are risky, much less proposals for action."

There seems to be little dispute, though, over the pair's key assertions: Single-issue environmental politics have proven ineffective; environmentalists need to build broader coalitions, reframe their issues in terms of *values*, and to *actually care* -- and demonstrate that they do -- about the day-to-day problems of union workers, the working poor, and other constituencies they deem natural allies rather than simply make concessions to "other people's issues." To this end, Ted Nordhaus deems the Apollo Alliance "version 1.0 of a strategic initiative."

As for stirring up their peers, the two are unrepentant. "Enviros are a very sweet group of people," Shellenberger says. "But I think that's actually part of the problem, because the culture tolerates a lot of mediocrity. We're really weaker as a movement than at any point in the last forty years. So I look at what's at stake, and then I think, 'Oh, so Ted and I are the skunks at the garden party?' Well, you know what? I'm honored to play that role."

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