



# THE WOODS HOLE RESEARCH CENTER

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## Environmental Dreams

### Environmentalism is about as moribund as the human spirit

George M. Woodwell

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Recent editorials, including Nicholas Kristof's "I Have A Nightmare" in last Saturday's New York Times, claim that environmentalism is moribund because of errors in appraising environmental problems including the explosive growth of population and the hazards of DDT.

The authors are mistaken on all counts.

Those perspectives reveal an attitude that is difficult to understand in light of even a casual acquaintance with the contemporary world. How can one overlook population growth as a major factor in the multiple crises of Africa, Asia, and South America? Consider the resettlement program of Indonesia, the overwhelming problems of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Israel, Haiti, Mexico, and a hundred other progressively impoverished nations, all burdened with still increasing human numbers with no place to live. How can one advocate use of DDT, ignoring even the logic advanced by the EPA Administrator in his decision to proscribe that pesticide as an unmanageable poison that inevitably causes systematic biotic impoverishment of land and water and equally inevitably accumulates in human tissues? Far from an error, banning DDT was evidence that scientists could recognize a technology that was in fact unmanageable and ban a class of poisons as inconsistent with life on this planet. That ability is real, necessary, progressive and rapidly accumulating to the benefit of all, including industrial interests.

The critics point to the failure of the US to control emissions of carbon and to move toward stabilization of the composition of the atmosphere. They overlook the massive effort at disinformation mounted by petroleum interests, aimed at undermining the clear facts of science. Following the 1992 adoption of the Framework Convention on Climate Change, which was ratified almost immediately by virtually all nations including the United States, the enormously wealthy oil industry formed the Global Climate Coalition to prevent implementation of steps to strengthen it. The environmental community could not then, and cannot now, marshal enough money to counter the campaign promulgated by the Global Climate Coalition. The effects of that campaign linger in the form of adamant and self-defeating opposition to the Kyoto Protocol, the first small step in implementing the Convention. Despite the ideological stance of the current US administration, the treaty is now in force globally, and surprisingly effective steps are being taken locally, by many states and industries in the US to exceed by far the requirements of the Protocol. Failure of environmentalism? Not at all.

As the human enterprise expands onto a finite earth, the protection of the rights of each of us, and the interests of all, in equitable access to essential resources of air, water and land transcends the specialized realm of conservation. The challenge of building a post-fossil fuel world is more than a dream, and environmentalists are in the forefront of creating that dream as reality. I am, for example, writing these words in a modern office and laboratory building on a campus that burns nothing on nine acres and in the course of a year produces thirty percent of its own electrical energy and all of its own hot water. A proposal is well advanced for wind turbines that will produced energy equivalent to three quarters of the



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energy used by Cape Cod, and it is possible to think of making Cape Cod independent for electrical energy in a very few years. As a nation, we could in a very short time, if leadership were available in Washington, reduce reliance on fossil fuels nationally by 20 percent, thereby making a major contribution toward cleaning the environment and stabilizing climate. The nation would be ahead financially, politically and environmentally.

Yes, the environmental and conservation movements have had shortcomings, perhaps most disappointingly that these great issues were not made more central in our last election. But claiming that the entire movement is ineffectual is simply wrong. More than that, environmentalism is the core purpose of government, and administrations that deny that essential responsibility are doomed by biophysical facts that are inevitably emerging despite the flood of naiveté so popular at the moment.