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Civic Environmentalism:  
A New Approach to Policy

By Marc Landy and Charles Rubin



# **Civic Environmentalism: A New Approach to Policy**

**By Marc Landy and Charles Rubin**

**George C. Marshall Institute  
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## Introduction

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*What you do is as important as anything government does. . . . I ask you to be citizens: citizens, not spectators; citizens, not subjects; responsible citizens, building communities of service and a nation of character. . . . When this spirit of citizenship is missing, no government program can replace it. When this spirit is present, no wrong can stand against it.*

President George W. Bush, January 2001

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The challenge to take citizenship seriously, a challenge laid down by President George W. Bush in his first Inaugural, has presented a new opportunity for American environmental politics and policy.

Private individuals, voluntary associations, and local and state governments have long worked to protect nature and foster healthy ecosystems. Consider that The Nature Conservancy alone holds 12 million acres in the United States, while some 11.6 million acres of land are in state parks, forests, preserves and other nature areas. Put all that land together, and you have a territory larger than the state of Maine.

Yet despite this widespread civic action, environmental policy has come to be dominated by a network of national “command and control” regulations issuing from the centralized policymaking machinery of Washington. This web of regulation, growing over the course of more than three decades, has steadily strangled the ability of responsible citizens to work together to improve the environment. Too often, “grassroots” efforts now mean nothing more than lobbying the federal government. Individual initiatives are confined to symbolic efforts to “save the earth.” Major environmental groups, along with business and industry, work on the assumption that environmental policy is primarily a national (and largely a government) responsibility.

In fact, however, “the environment” is not a special realm reserved for experts and professional activists, but an essential aspect of public life – a place for citizens. Recognizing this fact, **civic environmentalism** provides a new way of thinking about the relationship between citizenship, nature, and community. It asks people to

think locally and act locally. It claims that serious and responsible deliberation in communities and states, mobilizing the efforts of as many citizens as possible, can improve environmental quality and civic life.

Civic environmentalism challenges us to see the obligations and responsibilities of protecting nature in much the same way as our obligations and responsibilities for community schools and public safety – and to give them the same importance. This emphasis on local, citizen mobilization is uniquely adapted to meeting today’s complex environmental issues.

“Thinking and acting locally” enables American policy to respond to the extreme variability among local ecosystems and habitats that characterizes the United States. Respecting the central role of citizen deliberation ensures that as we tackle today’s sometimes contentious and uncertain environmental decisions, the rules and behaviors being asked of people will be respected and enforced.

In ***Civic Environmentalism: A New Approach to Policy***, we look at the special strengths of civic environmentalism in meeting today’s pressing environmental needs – including examples of a thriving citizen movement that has arisen across the country. We continue on to discuss the deep American political traditions that underpin the power of civic environmentalism. Finally, we review the misconceptions about environmental policy that have contributed to our national detour away from these roots and toward failed national policies. In a concluding section, we suggest what may be done.

## The Special Strength of the Civic

Civic environmentalism is not an abstract ideal, but a viable, effective way of dealing with serious, often highly divisive political controversies. It places citizen deliberation and involvement at the center of environmental policymaking, and encourages decentralized local initiatives. These attributes are especially important as we enter a new phase in environmental policy, in which some of the most critical issues are uniquely local and individual – from “non-point” pollution control to regional ecosystem protection.

Despite federal indifference, and even in the face of federally imposed obstacles, civic environmentalism is already showing its value in a wide variety of urban and rural settings. Among the many examples of this thriving movement are these:

## Success Story I—Hardshell Conservation

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In Maine, lobstering accounts for about 2% of the gross state product. Regulation of this important state resource must take account of complex natural ecosystems and requires significant human cooperation if limits are to be respected and obeyed.

Maine lobstermen know more about local lobster habitat than do distant bureaucrats, and their cooperation is obviously critical in what is, essentially, a self-enforcement regime. Yet for decades fishery management has been subject to the traditional, top-down environmentalist approach. As fishery management stumbled and failed, in 1995, lobstermen won the authority, through local councils, to develop local fishing rules. The rules – for example, the number of traps that may be used and the times of fishing – are ratified by the district lobstermen, who must approve them by a 2/3 vote.

This framework allowed the lobstermen to decide in two years questions of trap limits that had been argued in the state legislature for thirty years. Indeed, in almost all cases trap limits are now lower than the state allowed maximum. The lobstermen, who are used to operating on their own, have become the chief enforcers of their own regulatory scheme. They are effective enforcers because they have participated in creating rules that reflect their intimate knowledge of local conditions.

*The fishermen are effective enforcers because they have participated in creating rules that reflect their intimate knowledge of local conditions.*

The process of setting up the councils was not easy, involving controversies between large and small boat owners and difficult boundary decisions. There remains impatience with a sometimes cumbersome decision making process (see “Decentralization of Environmental Policymaking: Civic Environmentalism in Theory and Practice, Proceedings of the Civic Environmentalism Working Group Conference, August 2000, available at [www.marshall.org](http://www.marshall.org)). However, the basic zone framework provides an empowering setting for what was once only talk around the harbor. It has drawn fishermen — not noted for being team players — into a common enterprise.

Currently, lobster populations are high. It remains to be seen how well the self-governing system will work if and when the lobster catch declines. But, for the first time, the civic strength of the lobstermen has been harnessed to the purpose of preserving and protecting this valuable resource.

## Success Story II – Spawning Fish and Tourists

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The private Sand County Foundation of Wisconsin works to find solutions to long-standing environmental problems. One such case is the Baraboo River, not far from where noted conservationist Aldo Leopold wrote his landmark volume, *A Sand County Almanac*.

The Baraboo River is a small tributary of the upper Mississippi that was slowly dying as a series of old dams began to deteriorate. These dams, small, privately owned barriers originally built to drive mill wheels, were obsolete, badly in need of repair, and in some cases, safety hazards. They disrupted habitat for native fish species along the river's course. Instead of merely lobbying the federal government or attacking dam owners, the Sand County Foundation began working with the owners, state and local agencies, local environmental groups and federal agencies to buy up the dams and remove them.

When the last dam was removed late last year, 120 miles of river became free-flowing and alive. Water quality has improved, fish species are recovering and local communities are beginning to see the economic as well as environmental benefit. But the benefits are not limited to restoring the river habitat; there is promise for the human habitat as well. While much of the town of Baraboo could serve as a model for Main Street, USA, parts of its waterfront have been stagnating. Restoring the river can revitalize the entire riverfront in Baraboo and other towns, welcoming visitors and spawning restaurants, shops and other local businesses to serve them.

## Success Story III - Thinking Locally Across the Globe

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Civic environmentalism is not an American monopoly. The International Crane Foundation works with villages in China, encouraging them to preserve wetlands and establish bird protection areas, so that tourists will come and see the magnificent cranes that make southwestern China their winter home. These efforts have yielded a host of benefits, from the development of small businesses to a healthy spirit of competition to develop local tourism facilities. Similarly, the Sand County Foundation works with farmers and villagers in Africa to consider the game animals in their vicinity as resources requiring and deserving stewardship. Some portion of tourism and managed hunting revenues are allocated to villages, which then get to decide how they are to be expended. The existence of such funds provides clear incentives for local governance to be taken seriously by the villagers.

These examples – a few of many – illustrate key features of effective environmental policy, both natural and human: the complex, often competing tradeoffs; the diversity among ecosystems as well as in community values and interests; and an increasing demand for individual responsibility and involvement. These are each areas where the approach of civic environmentalism excels.

## The Messy Particulars of Place

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Civic environmentalism is an effort to bring environmentalism down from the lofty heights of “saving the earth” to the messy particulars of place. It is easy for people to advocate saving an endangered species if their lives will not be touched by the consequences of that effort, and all that is at stake for them is the abstract satisfaction that somewhere the species persists. It is much harder, but more honest, to face all the consequences of that decision on the ground. But that is an argument for letting those on the ground make decisions, for if they can come up with a settlement, it will have the support of those who most need to support it.

It is often noted that there is a high degree of generalized concern for the environment, but that such concern does not always show itself in a willingness to do (or refrain from doing) specific things. That should not be a surprise. To have a good-natured “environmental concern” is nearly cost-free; to act in responsible ways will always have costs. Willingness to bear such costs will depend on an understanding of why they are necessary and what the corresponding benefits are.

Such understandings are most easily obtained when they can be directly related to places and problems with which one is intimately familiar. It is not hypocritical to waver from strong “environmentalist” sentiments when one sees the immediate impact of those sentiments on oneself, one’s friends, and neighbors. Rather, such a moderation of viewpoint can be the opening to a greater maturity in understanding the tradeoffs that democratic policymaking necessarily involves.

Reasonable tradeoffs, tradeoffs that are sustainable in the long term, are most likely to occur where people are empowered to make decisions for themselves about the places to which they are attached. Many of us feel a “poetry of place” about the sites we care about – from prosaic woodlots to awesome peaks, from familiar city streets to grand natural vistas. This poetry of place is not mere sentiment; it connects our private concerns with a larger public good.

*Many of us feel a “poetry of place” about the sites we care about. This is not mere sentiment; it connects our private concerns with a larger public good.*

Civic environmentalism provides a mechanism to make good on such attachments, while recognizing that protecting the environment does not come free of charge. It enhances the likelihood that reasonable tradeoffs will occur as people try to protect loveable places in ways that also strengthen the social and economic bonds of the community.

## Diversity

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Civic environmentalism understands that there are environmental goods that are reasonably sought in the public sphere, and to which purely private concerns may be properly subordinated. On the other hand, it also understands that markets and purely private efforts can often moderate or overcome the inefficiencies and sometimes injustices of national action.

By encouraging thinking about environmental problems in terms of what can be done at a private, local or state level, civic environmentalism expects and encourages a diversity of outcomes. This diversity is the result of people having real authority to make decisions, rather than simply providing them opportunities to be heard or to “participate” in decisions made by others. Citizenship is not about finding new ways to milk the federal government, having a pro-forma say at hearings, or being a third party helping to fund litigation. It is about meetings that make decisions, negotiation among principals, and taking responsibility in the public and private sphere.

Such activity is necessary because environmental decisions and policies have an irreducibly political component (political here does not mean partisan – as if all disagreements could be reduced to party politics). Issues that arise in our relationship with nature are not essentially scientific and technical in character, and therefore cannot sensibly be left to experts to decide. Instead, these issues will almost always involve diverse and irreconcilable normative visions of how the world should be, of how best to balance various desirable goods. Debates and disagreements about a new subdivision or landfill are only to be expected; the key thing is to place them in a context where citizens know that they own the outcome.

Such talking will not necessarily lead to general agreement. Nor will it be possible to satisfy everyone when a public decision is necessary. In some instances, the resulting environmental policies will not be as stringent as some participants in the decision making process (and some outside of that process) would have wished. In other instances, it may mean tougher standards.

Thus, civic environmentalism is not a commitment to, or a guarantee of, specific outcomes. It is likely to produce results that most closely reflect the intentions of those who must abide by them. Similarly, it does not aim toward or guarantee that the decisions that are reached will save money. It does, however, promise to produce leaner, more efficient solutions, by liberating the local knowledge needed to achieve results within the constraints of smaller funding streams and fuller accountability. Civic environmentalism makes it more difficult to implement million-dollar solutions to \$100,000 problems.

In sum, civic environmentalism is about developing the capacity of communities to handle on an ongoing basis the challenges *they* see to environmental quality. Not only is this likely to lead to more sustainable environmental improvement but it will also engage citizens, developing the “nation of character” that America’s future demands.

## Rights and Roles: Self-Interest Rightly Understood

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Civic environmentalism is indebted to the property-rights and free-market environmentalist perspectives. From them, it has imbibed the necessity of respecting the importance of private property, not only as a source of liberty but as a tool for environmental improvement as well. Market principles are often a far more efficient means for achieving environmental quality than the cumbersome and intrusive bureaucratic methods that still pervade the environmental policy arena.

At the same time, civic environmentalism seeks to broaden the political and philosophical premises that underlie environmental issues – pushing beyond a narrow perception of self-interest to “self interest rightly understood.”

In the real world, people don’t view themselves simply as property owners or as consumers, but as neighbors, friends, parishioners, and citizens. These self-understandings influence how we think and act about the places where we live, work and play. Only a fool would ignore the effect of environmental decisions upon the value of his own property, but that by no means exhausts the concerns that a person would want to bring to the environmental policymaking table.

Civic environmentalism relies heavily on the self-reliance and practical tools that the property rights and free market environmentalists have so brilliantly fostered and developed, but it seeks to expand the purposes to which that vigor and creativity are applied.

## Civic Environmentalism and the American Political Tradition

The central difference between civic environmentalism and other approaches to environmental policy is that civic environmentalism fully embraces an essential aspect of the American political tradition, **limited government**. As described and defined by the greatest American political thinkers – including Madison, Jefferson, Marshall and Hamilton — limited government means that there are clearly defined boundaries to what government can do. Those boundaries are established by constitutions that specifically enumerate the powers of government.

Underlying these specific principles of limitation and enumeration is the fundamental principle of rights as outlined in the Declaration of Independence. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” The fundamental task of government is to secure those rights and the fundamental limit on government is the stricture against alienating them.

*Civic environmentalism fully embraces an essential aspect of the American political tradition, limited government.*

Conventional environmentalism and its free-market alternative commit only partially to limited government. For conventional environmentalism, the difficult word is “limited.” If saving the Earth is the overarching principle dictating what government should and should not do, as Al Gore argued in *Earth in the Balance*, government cannot be limited by anything so narrow as civil and political rights. The safety and security of Spaceship Earth overrides the liberty of its passengers. For free market environmentalists the rub is “government.” Although they are not anarchists, they do not share the Framers’ appreciation of the positive role of government.

Rooted in the principles of the Declaration of Independence, the concept of limited government permeates the entire Constitution. The limits are set out most explicitly in the Bill of Rights, which provides a specific list of what government cannot do. But it is also the strategic premise for the elaborate system of checks and balances that keeps any one branch of government from amassing power sufficient to push government beyond its prescribed limits.

Limits to federal authority go deeper than the checks placed on the individual branches of the federal government. They are embedded in the concept of federalism itself, which enables state government to challenge and check federal power. But the great defenders of the states, Madison and Jefferson, did not limit state government to a purely defensive role. Small government could and should be more active and creative than large government. As Jefferson wrote in his *Autobiography*:

... it is not by the consolidation, or concentration of powers, but by their distribution, that good government is effected. Were not this great country already divided into states, that division must be made, that each might do for itself what concerns itself directly, and what it can so much better do than a distant authority. Every state again is divided into counties, each to take care of what lies within its local bounds; each county again into townships or wards, to manage minuter details; and every ward into farms, to be governed each by its individual proprietor. Were we directed from Washington when to sow, & when to reap, we should soon want bread. It is by this partition of cares, descending in gradation from general to particular, that the mass of human affairs may be best managed for the good and prosperity of all.

Of course, not all of the founding generation were equally sanguine about the place of state and local government within the federal system. Some, like Madison, looked to the national government to moderate the factious and passionate politics that could

occur within the smaller frameworks. But that the disagreement over the relative strength of states and the national government goes deep into our constitutional past is precisely the point. The Framers expected this issue to be a live one; they counted on a certain mutual jealousy to check the excessive accumulation of power at whatever level.

Unfortunately, in the past century the life has been taken out of the question by the steady accumulation of power by the national government. Madison foresaw the danger and its result. A central government could never reflect the diversity of a large, commercial nation. Were it to make the attempt, “the impossibility of acting together might be succeeded by the inefficacy of partial expressions of the public mind, and this at length, by a universal silence and insensibility, leaving the whole government to that *self directed course*, which, it must be owned, is the natural propensity of every government.”

*The Framers counted on a certain mutual jealousy to check the excessive accumulation of power at whatever level.*

Because states and smaller, local bodies were more easily made accountable and were to have no armies, it was thought safer to put more power in their hands. Therefore the positive side of government — providing education, engaging in public works; today, environmental protection — was best delegated to the states. The broadest governmental powers were left in the hands of local government. Governments at all levels were subject to strict limitation — states after all had their own constitutions — but the closer government was to home, the more discretion it was accorded.

Where does environmental policy fit in this design? Clearly, some overarching national matters — those that transcend individuals, communities and states — will remain subjects for national attention. But the temptation to assume that all environmental matters, because of interest to all Americans, are federal in scope must be resisted. The fallacy that, by their very nature, environmental questions must be addressed on the federal (or even global) level will be discussed in the following section. What is relevant here is a key insight of the founders: that decentralizing political decision making is beneficial, not only because it avoids the problems of federal intrusion, but because it takes advantage of the strengths of government on the small scale.

The clearest articulation of federalism in the context of limited government was provided by Alexis De Tocqueville in his classic *Democracy in America*. At the heart of his understanding of federalism was a distinction between “government” and “administration.” Government encompasses the great tasks that only a powerful central government can perform: national security, diplomacy, protecting the rights of

citizens, and regulating interstate commerce. “Administration” encompasses all other public responsibilities – fixing the roads, putting out fires, educating children. By assigning these to localities, ordinary citizens are enlisted in performing them – not only learning to become effective administrators but becoming more thoughtful citizens as well.

This division of labor between central and local authority, by decentralizing administrative tasks, deprives central government of the resources and opportunities it might otherwise apply to usurping local privileges and prerogatives. But because it does only a limited number of things, central government can then husband its strength to do those things wisely and well.

For Tocqueville, the upshot of these arrangements is found in a classic formulation that speaks directly to empowering people to deal with issues that shape their day-to-day lives – including environmental issues:

Only with difficulty does one draw a man out of himself to interest him in the destiny of the whole state, because he understands poorly the influence that the destiny of the state can exert on his lot. But should it be necessary to pass a road through his property, he will see at first glance that he has come across a relation between this small public affair and his greatest private affairs, and he will discover, without anyone’s showing it to him, the tight bond that here unites a particular interest to the general interest.

Civic environmentalism’s adherence to these principles of limited government has several clear and specific implications. There can be no trumping of what the Framers called natural rights in the name of other things, even nature. Other rights claims, whether they be to the rights of species or to clean air, do not have the same fundamental status as “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” and the other rights specified in the Bill of Rights, including a protection against the taking of property without just compensation.

*There can be no trumping of what the Framers called natural rights in the name of other things, even nature.*

Although the theory of limited government does not preclude national government action, it does imply a preference for non-governmental approaches. Only if voluntary action fails should government take up a problem, and that government should be a local one. Policy moves up the chain from local to state to national only when the lower levels have demonstrably failed. An issue rises to national proportions only if its scope renders local or state control unrealistic.

# Overcoming Environmental Misconceptions

Freeing civic environmentalism to achieve its potential requires improving public understanding of environmental problems. If Americans believe that only national policies can genuinely protect the environment – despite the plentiful evidence of the failure and the inefficiency of such policies – this is because we have been mis-educated. Behind that mis-education lie two apparently powerful ideas that support the status quo:

- 1) With the fate of the earth at stake, environmental policymaking cannot be made on a “politics as usual” basis, and must be left to those with the necessary expertise and disinterested outlook; and
- 2) Since “everything is connected to everything else,” decentralized efforts to improve environmental quality do not make sense.

These two premises have been main props of the present centralized, command and control system.

*If Americans believe that only national policies can genuinely protect the environment, this is because we have been mis-educated.*

## Apocalypse Abuse

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For decades now, global environmental apocalypse has been a trump card for environmental activists. With “earth in the balance,” environmental goals have been put forward as those to which all other purposes need to be subordinated. Because the “fate of the earth” is at stake, those who question this priority must be either ignorant, self-interested, or both.

It should give us pause, however, that none of the worst global environmental nightmares have in fact taken place. Worldwide “time bombs” have not exploded. This is not to say that problems like population growth, desertification and hazardous waste are not serious. They are. But they have not resulted in the global catastrophes so confidently predicted by the doom-mongers.

Apocalypse abuse has two bad side effects. It produces cynicism, a “boy who cried wolf” mentality that might someday cause us to underestimate a genuinely dangerous situation. More importantly, when everything is treated as a matter of life and death, one loses the ability to discriminate among threats of widely different magnitude, severity and certainty.

Civic environmentalism is an attempt to restore that ability to discriminate by allowing people to make policies at levels where assumptions and consequences are most transparent and palpable. One cannot tell for sure whether national efforts to “do something” about greenhouse gases are having any effect, but one can see trees growing or streams becoming cleaner in one’s own community.

Civic environmentalism is about finding out what can be accomplished when we do not assume that every problem is equally grave and global in scope. It opens the door to taking advantage of concrete local knowledge of the ways in which ecosystems work and relate to human activities, and allows for flexibility and diversity of methods to protect and improve the quality of our natural surroundings. It recognizes that efforts to sensationalize environmental risk forestall genuine debate regarding important matters about which people can reasonably disagree: How serious is the problem? How much improvement is required, and at what price? What are the tradeoffs with other community goals? Because these questions are subject to serious and sober scrutiny, the community is more likely to stick by the solutions chosen, even if those are costly and difficult. These local actions are likely to be sustainable in the long term precisely because communities “own” them.

## **Not Every Thing is Everything**

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However, decentralized policies of the sort suggested by civic environmentalism make no sense if “everything is connected to everything else.” The concept of interconnectedness has been a powerful one for the environmental movement, but it is a metaphor, not a truth – and like any metaphor, it can mislead.

The argument that “everything is connected” obscures the fact that environmental connections may be strong or weak, direct or attenuated. Were nature characterized only by strong interconnections, it would exhibit an overall fragility, as the whole would be vulnerable to the slightest perturbations of the parts. This degree of fragility simply does not square with the facts.

Ironically the stress on fragile natural interconnections has lead many environmental activists to ignore our even more fragile social interconnections – the sometimes-delicate balances that exist within community life. These complex and subtle webs of human relationships may be seriously disrupted by the single-minded pursuit of environmental goals.

## What is to be Done?

Not all environmental problems are amenable to civic environmental approaches. Yet even where a national presence is needed, an appreciation of the benefits to be gained from civic environmentalism would encourage carving off those parts of any policy issue that can be addressed locally. Even those problems most global in scope have aspects that require an infusion of local knowledge, knowledge of particulars, regardless of whether that knowledge is of a scientific or anecdotal variety.

The most obvious places to apply civic environmentalism are those policy areas where conventional command-and-control has most completely failed. Not even the most ardent Washington-oriented environmental advocate would claim that the Clean Water Act has succeeded in controlling “non-point” sources of water pollution or that the Endangered Species Act is a productive means for encouraging habitat conservation on private lands. In contrast, civic environmentalism has shown its ability to deal effectively with these and similarly diffuse, varied, and local matters.

“Non-point” is bureaucratese for “us.” We are the non-point polluters – the tens of millions of us who fertilize our flowers or change the oil in our cars. Non-point pollution is responsible for significant environmental problems. It is, for example, according to the federal EPA, the leading cause of water quality problems. Yet government is simply not geared to control the activities of tens of millions of farmers and suburban gardeners. That is the work of communities and networks of communities, who can find ways to provide incentives to individual property owners to reduce polluting runoffs from their properties.

The same logic applies to habitat protection. The Endangered Species Act is the mother lode of perverse incentives. In essence, it tells landowners that if they even suspect the presence of an endangered species on their properties, they should destroy its habitat before the government finds out. Civic environmentalism offers alternatives to government-sponsored encouragement of shameful behavior. It seeks to encourage landowners to think of themselves as stewards of the plants and animals they live with. Since species do not respect property lines, it is imperative that landowners cooperate to ensure that habitat is preserved in large enough swaths to allow such species to thrive.

To reach its maximum potential in these and other arenas, civic environmentalism needs the right kind of support from Washington. At a minimum, that means an end to rigid, blanket federal policies that hamper state and local civic action. More effectively, it means an active program of proper encouragement, cooperation, and assistance.

The Bush Administration can do much to advance civic environmentalism. First of all, it can require a thoroughgoing review of the regulations and procedures of all federal agencies with environmental responsibilities to identify those impeding civic environmentalism. It can then require agencies to desist from such counterproductive activities. Where those activities are the result of congressional mandate, the Administration can lobby Congress to get those mandates changed. Where it is not feasible to simply reduce federal oversight, random auditing of results should replace ongoing second-guessing of methods and activities.

As William Ruckelshaus so brilliantly demonstrated during the Reagan years, federal environmental officials occupy a “bully pulpit” for preaching sensible environmental policy strategy. Ruckelshaus used his to educate the public about environmental risk. Today, key environmental officials can use theirs to increase public awareness of the opportunities available for engaging in civic environmentalism.

That is the pleasant part of providing leadership around this issue. The harder part will be for environment officials to defend civic environmentalism against critics in Congress, the media, the environmental organizations and their own agencies who will attack civic environmentalism every time they think that a decision, no matter how well-informed and democratically arrived at, is the “wrong” decision. The Administration must defend the principle that civic environmentalism is about freedom and democracy, not “right” answers.

Over the longer haul, civic environmentalism would greatly benefit from a strategic reorientation of EPA and other environmental agencies. Local efforts do not need “Big Brother” watching over them, but they often do need data and technical assistance. The resources saved from reducing and streamlining federal oversight and meddling could be fruitfully applied to improved data gathering, analysis and dissemination so that local deliberation and decision making could take place on a sounder scientific footing.

There will still be a role for EPA in setting standards for air and water quality. But for the myriad of environmental questions best handled locally, the agency’s role should shift from resident scold to information provider.

Finally, the great successes of organizations like the International Crane Foundation and the Sand County foundation suggest that there are many other such opportunities for civic environmentalism abroad. An appreciation of these efforts by the foreign policy apparatus could yield important opportunities for the U.S. to provide such efforts with financial assistance and diplomatic support.

Civic environmentalism is an unapologetic effort to decentralize environmental policy and to stop shielding it from the normal political process to which other concerns of vital public interest are rightly subjected. In so doing, it offers an opportunity to strengthen our national life by engaging citizens in stewardship of the places they love.

Today, throughout the country, individuals, communities, citizen groups, and states are already at work. To ignore them – worse, to hold them back – is to abdicate a public trust that goes back to our republic's founding principles. We believe it would betray America's responsibility to a healthy natural world as well.



## Biographies

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Professors Landy and Rubin are founding members of the **Civic Environmentalism Working Group**, a bi-partisan group of experts and activists who came together to consider new, decentralized, bottom-up solutions to environmental problems. More information is available on its website, [www.civcenvironmentalism.org](http://www.civcenvironmentalism.org).

The Civic Environmentalism Working Group is a project of the **George C. Marshall Institute**, a non-profit institution dedicated to providing rigorous, unbiased technical analyses of scientific issues that impact public policy. GCMI is directed by senior scientists of international renown. More information is available on its website, [www.marshall.org](http://www.marshall.org).



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