

# Environmentalism: Achievements and Mistakes

**By John Merrifield,  
Professor of Economics  
Director, Entrepreneurial Conservatism Institute**  
May 7, 2006

Thirty-six years ago, the first Earth Day energized the environmental movement. The event gave form and substance to long-simmering concerns about the environmental side effects of free enterprise. It empowered the leaders of the environmental movement to pursue safeguards through the political process.

Unfortunately, environmental leaders made a fundamental error at the outset. They misdiagnosed the problem. They attributed environmental problems to uncontrolled pursuit of profit, while the true source of the problems was poorly defined and un-enforced property rights. Consequently, they sought (with the best intentions) controls on behavior, rather property rights corrections.

There were many easily vilified targets, and the most widely recognized tool of government is its police power, so public officials gladly accepted the increased power that came with the authority to prescribe the behavior of others. To environmental leaders and the public it seemed quite sensible to have the government determine the best available control technologies, and then command polluters to install them (for example, the Clean Air and Water Acts), or demand that landowners consult with experts (for example the Endangered Species Act).

Despite their preference for a flawed approach, environmental leaders deserve credit for successfully going after the easy targets, and thereby achieving some major improvements. But subsequent resistance to reform was much less understandable or forgivable. Mounting evidence of failures to reach objectives, excessive costs, and rising public resentment should have at least led to an admission that command-and-control (CaC) approaches had become obsolete.

Except in the few cases where CaC is the only option, we should abandon the behavior-prescribing, CaC approach. Since the cause of most environmental problems is poorly defined or unenforced property rights, environmentalists should be the first to support policies that strengthen property rights in environmentally friendly ways. That will allow environmentalists to harness, rather than fight, strong forces like the profit motive, and political support for property rights protection.