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Earth Day's 30th Anniversary

Earth Day at 30: A Progress Report

April 14, 2000

As we celebrate Earth Day 2000 on April 22, we can look back with pride on three decades of environmental progress in America—and look forward with confidence that these trends will continue. Across the nation, the environment is far better today than it was 30 or even 100 years ago. And these improvements are occurring as America's wealth and population increase. We do indeed have cause to celebrate—as a look at the relevant environmental media shows:

Air Quality

According to EPA data, between 1970 and 1997 the emissions of all but one major air pollutant decreased. Between 1988 and 1997, the total number of "unhealthy" air quality days decreased an average of 66% for major cities across the United States. In 1979, Los Angeles had no fewer than 120 days of "Stage 1" smog alerts—meaning that air quality was so poor as to make vigorous outdoor exercise inadvisable. But twenty years later, in 1999, there were *no* smog alerts in Los Angeles—for the first time since records began to be kept in the mid-50s.

These gains in air quality occurred despite significant increases in economic activity and population: Since 1970, the total U.S. population has increased 31%, vehicle miles have increased 127%, and the gross domestic product has increased 114%.

Much of the credit for this improvement belongs to Presidents Bush and Nixon, who signed the innovative 1990 Clean Air Act Amendments and the landmark Clean Air Act of 1970. And much of the credit belongs as well to American ingenuity, which has found ways to improve production processes and reduce pollution. Indeed, thanks to these improvements, air quality was improving at least as fast or faster before the 1970 Clean Air Act was passed: for example, average ambient total suspended levels of particulate matter fell by about 22% between 1960 and 1970. From 1966 to 1971, annual average sulfur dioxide concentrations fell by 50%.

Land Use

The news on land use is encouraging, as well. Less than 5% of the nation's land is developed, and three-quarters of the nation's population lives on 3.5% of its land area. Over three-quarters of the states have more than 90% of their land in rural use, including forests, cropland, pasture, wildlife reserves, and parks. Indeed, based on U.S. Geological Survey estimates the rate at which land is being developed is about 0.07%.

The "sprawl index," a comparison of population growth and rate of urbanization, has actually declined since 1980. Moreover, since the end of World War II, the amount of land set aside for parks, wilderness and wildlife has grown twice as fast as urban areas. In 1969, there were 2.6 acres of conservation land for every acre of urbanized land; today there are about four acres of conservation land for every acre of urbanized land.

Wetlands

Wetland losses slowed since the mid-1950s, primarily because of the decreased conversion of wetlands to farmland. Annual loss rates dropped from 500,000 acres annually between 1954 and 1974, to less than 100,000 annually since the mid-80s. From 1992 through 1996, private voluntary restoration programs restored an estimated 160,000 acres of wetlands per year at a relatively low cost of \$1,000 per acre or less. This compares with a cost of \$30,000 per acre for government regulatory programs.

Today, the United States is within 47,000 acres of achieving President Bush's visionary "no net loss" of wetlands acreage, even after state, local, and private restoration efforts are excluded. Because these efforts are substantial, it is more than likely that more wetlands are being created than are being converted to other uses.

Forests

Fully two-thirds of the deforestation in the United States took place between 1850 and 1910, often in virgin forests. Today, the nation has more forested land than we did in 1900; the national park system has more than doubled since the first Earth Day in 1970, and the amount of protected wilderness has increased more than tenfold. According to the White House Council on Environment Quality, the United States planted 2.4 million acres of trees in 1995, up 1 million from 1970. And 62% of current timber harvests today occur in second-growth forests, most of which were developed with some degree of active forest management by private organizations. Overall, net tree growth exceeds tree cutting by 37%, despite annual harvests of 16 billion cubic feet of timber by an industry that employs over 1.6 million people and generates sales of \$100 billion annually.

Water Quality

Water quality has been a success story, as well. Where only a third of America's waters were suitable for swimming and fishing in 1970, today two-thirds are. Indeed, today 86% of America's rivers, 91% of its lakes, and about 90% of its estuaries fully or partially support their designated uses in 1994. According to the government's water quality administrators, between 1972 and 1992, 98% of miles of rivers and streams sustained or improved their quality. During this same period, 96% of miles of lakes maintained or improved quality. By 1992, the EPA reported, wastewater treatment had reduced the release of toxic organic wastes by 99%, and of toxic metals by 98%. Again, the improvements have come about thanks to a combination of American ingenuity and political will—in the form of the Safe Drinking Water Act Amendments of 1996, the Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974 and the Clean Water Act of 1970.

Solid Waste

The same story holds for waste generation. For example, growth in the quantity of household waste has slowed in recent years; it is less than the growth of GNP, not much more than population growth. Waste per person in New York City at the beginning of the century was greater than the national average today. Thanks in large part to technological progress and public insistence on environmental protection, the United States is not an extravagant producer of waste. The average household in Mexico City produces one-third more garbage a day than does the average American household. And recycling has increased more than 600%, from 8 million tons in 1970 to 49 million tons today. All told, the U.S. output of solid waste for the entire 21st century would require a landfill of only nine square miles out of 3.5 million square miles in the United States.

Conclusion

The good news about environmental progress doesn't mean that we don't have more to do—in such areas as biodiversity and protection of species, further improvements in air and water quality, and above all in helping to arrest far more severe environmental devastation caused by Communist environmental policies in nations such as the People's Republic of China, and the legacy of those policies in the Newly Independent States.¹ But today's progress disproves, once and for all, the outmoded notion that economic progress and capitalism are inimical to environmental protection. To the contrary, America's history over the past few decades conclusively proves that the growth of America's free-market economy has accompanied and enabled the growth of both public support for environmental protection and the means to implement that public consensus. Free enterprise has made both America's economy *and* America's environment the envy of the world.

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¹ See also, Policy Perspectives "China's Environmental Destruction," July 6, 1998; "The Environment at a Crossroads: Where We Are, And Where We Need to Go," April 23, 1998; "Celebrating Earth Day 1997," April 22, 1997; and "The Challenge to Our Earth," April 22, 1996.