Conservatives and Environmentalism:
A Complicated Relationship


**Primary Sources:**

- American Views toward the Environment, a public opinion chart from the American Environmental Values Survey
- Political Views and Environmental Issues, a public opinion chart from the American Environmental Values Survey

**Class Discussion/Analytical Questions**

1) During the 1960s and 1970s, environmental management was seen as a major federal responsibility. Since 1980, the government has redefined its environmental role, shifting away from direct regulation. Should environmental regulation be one of the primary roles of the federal government? If you answered yes, why so? If you answered no, why not?

2) Many scholars see the conservative “conservationist ethic” epitomized by Gifford Pinchot and Theodore Roosevelt as the beginning of the environmentalist movement, yet modern conservatives are rather hesitant to identify with the environmental movement. Have environmentalism’s values and ideals forced the movement out of the mainstream? Explain your answer.

3) Perception holds that conservatives often fight against environmental regulation, while liberals tend to fight for environmental protection. What inherent political values differentiate the terms environmental regulation and environmental protection? Are these perceptions accurate? Why or why not?

4) Must conservatives, like Barry Goldwater, compromise their anti-statist beliefs in order to effect environmental change? Can conservatives cope with environmentalism’s growing desire for government policies tied to proactive regulatory legislation? Is environmentalism becoming a movement solely for liberals? Explain your position.
Activities

1. Barry Goldwater’s Life: Conservative Ideals VS Environmental Sympathies

Drake splits Barry Goldwater’s life into six titled sections in his article. Break the class into five groups, assigning each group a different section beginning with “Desert Genesis.” Inform group five that they should analyze the last two sections, “New Green Shoots” and “Sunset,” because of their brevity. Explain that each group has four tasks to complete.

Tasks

1) Explain the significant events occurring in your section of the article.
2) Describe and evaluate Goldwater’s actions and decisions in regards to the historical events.
3) Analyze how Goldwater balanced his environmental sympathies with his conservative ideals through these actions and decisions.
4) Teach the class your section of the article. Be sure to include your analysis of Goldwater’s decisions and reactions to the historical events.

2. Party Politics and American Perceptions

Break the class into small groups or partners and have them read and discuss the public opinion chart “American Views toward the Environment.”

Questions to Prompt Active Engagement

1) Which questions seem to elicit the highest degree of agreement, implying the most care towards the environment? Why?
2) According to this chart, what is the general American attitude toward the environment? Remember to look at the chart as a whole.
3) Look at how the questions are worded. Do any of them seem to be inherently biased?
4) What are the drawbacks of using polls as a source of information? What are the benefits of using polls as a source of information or as a source for historical analysis?

After the groups have finished discussing “American Views toward the Environment,” have them read and discuss “Political Views and Environmental Issues.”

Questions to Prompt Active Engagement

1) Overall, how would you characterize Republican views on environmental issues? How would you characterize Democratic views on environmental issues?
2) Compare and contrast Republican and Democratic views on environmental issues. Which issues seem to show the greatest division? Which issues seem to show the least division? Why do you think this dichotomy exists?

3) Do Independents seem to agree more with Republicans or Democrats? What does this say about America as a whole?

4) Solely paying attention to the “All” column, how would you characterize the overall American view on environmental issues? Which questions elicit the highest degree of agreement? Why do you think this is?

Have the class discuss the apparent bipartisan support for the environment, based upon the “Total Agree” column in “American Views toward the Environment.” Compare and contrast these findings with the “All” column in “Political Views and Environmental Issues.”

Questions to Prompt Active Engagement

1) If Americans overwhelmingly support the environment, and Americans agree that something must be done to fix the environment, why does the modern environmental movement face so many challenges to achieving its goals (if it does)?

2) What are the short-term implications for the environmental movement in an increasingly polarized society? How about the long-term implications?

3. Bringing Environmentalism Back into the Mainstream

Break the class into small groups and ask each group to list three conflicts between environmentalism and conservatism. After the class has a general understanding of what hurdles stand between conservatives and the environmental movement, ask the small groups to come up with a plan for overcoming some of these hurdles. Each group should write a detailed plan as well as an explanation as to how their plan will encourage conservatives to embrace the environmental movement. This can also be made into individual projects or assignments.