

# *A New Environmentalism*

Could a new green ethic provide common cause in our deeply divided nation?

BY CARL POPE

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**M**CLEAN COUNTY, KENTUCKY, IS SO RED THAT political operatives might call it crimson. You can't get much further from the image of a latte-drinking liberal than Bernadine Edwards, a local school-bus driver. She speaks with a soft Kentucky lilt as she looks out over the green valley that has been in her family for more than 60 years. "Something here just ain't right," she says.

What's wrong is the pollution that has slowly ruined her family's life, forcing her to wear a respiratory mask when she gardens outside and making her give up her seat on the porch swing next to her house. In just a few short years, Tyson Foods has built 98 factories within a three-mile radius of Bernadine's home, pumping so much toxic ammonia into the air that Bernadine has sealed her windows and shut her family inside. And when the Bush administration began meeting behind closed doors with the poultry industry to craft a deal that would let it off the hook for cleaning up the pollution it causes, Bernadine and other rural residents joined up to voice their outrage. Leaving Kentucky, she traveled to the East Coast for the first time so she could lobby administration officials in Washington about the need to put public-health considerations ahead of polluter profits.

Bernadine's concern about pollution and its consequences for the health of her family has trumped party politics and could provide a common cause in our deeply divided country. It looks like the bridge between red America and blue America just might be green.

**T**HE TRUTH IS, THIS COUNTRY IS NOT AS SPLIT AS MANY would have us believe. Our values unite us more than they divide us. We all care about our families, our kids, and our communities, no matter where we are on the political spectrum. We like knowing that there are solutions to our problems and that progress is possible. We believe that two heads are better than one, especially when the two heads see things a little differently. We value free speech and public participation and the well-being of all Americans, not just people who live in certain states. And, like Bernadine Edwards, people on all sides of the spectrum will speak out when they see injustice—

especially when that injustice is something felt as viscerally as the air our children breathe and the water we drink.

Beltway strategists might not want us to see it, but if you look around this country you will see more and more examples of how unusual allies are putting aside their political differences and coming together. Americans who can't agree on gun control or abortion are finding common cause in the need to protect our air, water, and land.

Take, for example, the ecumenical Christian network that recently sent a letter to President Bush with the line, "Protection of the global climate is an essential requirement for faithful human stewardship of God's creation on Earth." The National Council of Churches, which represents more than 100,000 congregations nationwide, has begun to describe stewardship of the earth as a critical "moral value." And the growing Interfaith Power & Light program has helped more than 300 congregations in California alone conserve energy and has prevented 40 million pounds of carbon dioxide from entering the atmosphere nationwide.

It's not just religious groups, either. Hunters and anglers are the most vocal proponents of wetlands protection, and they represent a formidable obstacle to anyone proposing to weaken protections. In South Dakota, Indian Creek is a beautiful open area of steep canyons and gullies, and a popular destination for big-game hunting of deer and antelope. The Sierra Club is working with Safari Club International and Backcountry Hunters and Anglers to designate the area as the first-ever grassland wilderness area. And no one is more excited about this than Indian Creek's odd couple, Jeff Olson and Carl Stonecipher—two local hunters on the board of the Blackhills Sportsmen's Club—one a passionate Democrat, the other a staunch Republican. Despite their political differences, both are firmly committed to the idea of protecting wilderness for future generations.

Historic foes are joining forces in communities across our country, even in the Wild West. Western ranchers and my organization have set aside our differences to fight a common threat: the surge in gas and oil drilling on federal and Indian land. In New Mexico's San Juan Basin, the number of wells in the region has jumped 15 percent in five years. Cattleman Chris

Velasquez, whose family has ranched in the area for more than a century, says sloppy drilling practices—such as leaving pools of toxic antifreeze—endanger the cattle. And conservationists say installing roads and drilling pads damages the piñon- and juniper-covered hills. Elsewhere in the region, ranchers and environmentalists are partnering to protect the land—opposing drilling in Wyoming’s Powder River Basin and Montana’s Rocky Mountain Front, for example.

These strong alliances are developing in cities as well as rural communities. Labor unions have taken up the environment as a cause; they know better than anyone that developing clean-energy technologies will create quality jobs. And Latino and African American families continue to be the ones on the front lines battling air and other pollution that disproportionately affects their communities.

Residents of a predominantly African American neighborhood in the nation’s capital have taken action to reconnect their community to the Anacostia River. Considered one of America’s most endangered waterways, the Anacostia is Washington, D.C.’s “forgotten river.” Older community members remember swimming and fishing in it, but heavy-metal contamination and sewage overflow have left local fish deformed and dangerous to eat. The Anacostia, however, remains a focal point for the neighborhoods nearby. African American citizen groups in the heart of the inner city are coming together to fight for improved water quality and increased access to the riverfront.

The environmental movement is full of other new faces—and they differ from the image that you may have in your head of a “typical conservationist.” Consider the recent work the Sierra Club has done to protect mothers and children from mercury poisoning. Mercury is a dangerous toxin that causes developmental problems and learning disabilities. A byproduct of coal-fired power plants, it rains down into our rivers and makes its way into our bodies via contaminated fish. One in six American women already has enough mercury in her body to put a baby at risk. Across the country, my organization has been hosting community testing events, often at beauty salons, where mothers can get a strand of hair tested and find out how much mercury is in their bodies and what they can do about it. The response has been overwhelming—and not just in big, “liberal” cities. In Salt Lake City, the line of 150 moms snaked so far out the door that the salon couldn’t accommodate everyone. In Bismarck, North Dakota, dozens of women showed up at a local park to get tested. And in Virginia, women brought their kids with them to the salon and asked how they could make a difference. “This is not just about tuna,” a mother named Julia Smith said. “We have to make the government accountable for cleaning up the power plants.”

The bottom line is that these days, the most compelling voices for environmental stewardship are as likely to be those of a mother, a minister, a nurse, or a union shop worker. And what binds them together are American values stronger than hatred

or anger or fear. We don’t have to buy into the idea that this is an all-or-nothing game, half of our country wins, half loses. We need to tell fewer stories about victims and more about heroes, about the men and women who are affecting real, lasting change.

**C**LEARLY, WE FACE CHALLENGES. THERE ARE UNDENIABLE obstacles in the way of this vision being carried out—namely, a defiantly pro-business, anti-regulatory administration in Washington. But across the spectrum, a growing chorus is calling for a halt to policies and practices that put polluters before the public.

In recent days, our nation has been shocked and saddened by images of families struggling to survive in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. This disaster will test the limits of our national resources, and national unity and grass-roots partnerships like the ones described here will be more imperative than ever in our history. In addition to being a human and economic tragedy, Katrina is an environmental disaster of un-

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precedented proportions. Although the extent of the environmental devastation remains unknown, it is clear the storm is a wake-up call and a warning not to repeat the mistakes of the past. America, Louisiana, and the Gulf Coast have an opportunity to be visionary and think well into the future in our recovery efforts. In rebuilding New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, we can work with unions to help make America more energy independent—by using “green building” practices that rely on conservation and renewable sources of energy, for example. We can work with churches and associations to ensure that every citizen, rich or poor, can live in safe, healthy neighborhoods. And we can rethink how toxic chemicals are stored and shipped through our communities.

We have learned over and over again that everyone has a stake when it comes to protecting our air, water, and natural places. The values we are talking about—like fairness, responsibility, health, and safety—are universal. And many of the solutions to our environmental challenges are well within reach, if we work together. Thirty-five years after the first Earth Day, the movement for cleaner and safer communities is more alive than ever. The vibrant partnerships that are flourishing in grass-roots campaigns across the country are proof that we all have a stake in a healthier future and a legacy for our children.

“When we try to pick out anything by itself,” John Muir famously said, “we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.” That’s truer today than ever. **TAP**

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