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Environmentalists Mull Future of Movement

Americans Display Mixed Signals on Environment's Importance

By TERENCE CHEA, AP

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Some environmentalists are expected to make their feelings known with protests and signs throughout the day.

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SAN FRANCISCO (April 22) - As the world marks the 35th anniversary of Earth Day on Friday, environmentalists are debating the future of a movement that seems to be losing the battle for public opinion.

President Bush's re-election, the failure to slow global warming and the large number of Americans who dismiss them as tree-hugging extremists have environmental leaders looking for new approaches.

And while polls show most Americans want clean air, clean water and wildlife protection, environmental issues rank low on their list of priorities - behind jobs, health care, education and national security.

"There's this paradox where Americans hold these views, but when it comes time to take action, there are many, many issues that trump environmental concerns," said Peter Teague, environmental programs director at the Nathan Cummings Foundation.

Some think it's a message problem - that environmental groups simply need to improve their communication with the voting public. Others are calling for more fundamental changes in how the groups operate.

The challenge goes beyond the environmental movement, said George Lakoff, a University of California, Berkeley linguistics professor who has written about how language colors political discourse.

Lakoff argues that the entire public agenda has been seized by what he calls a "right-wing ideological political movement that's extremely powerful and well-funded."

The Bush administration's environmental philosophy has centered on the idea that most environmental decisions are better made by the marketplace, landowners and state and local governments.

And certain proposals that the Bush administration has floated - such as changes to the Clean Air Act - would lead to weaker regulations than required by laws already in place, many environmentalists argue.

Many green leaders say they deserve some of the blame for the situation.

Bush "was re-elected in a campaign in which neither candidate talked much about the environment," said Buck Parker, executive director of Earthjustice, who chairs a coalition of 30 national environmental organizations called the "Green Group."

It wasn't always this way.

In the decade after Sen. Gaylord Nelson, D-Wis., started the first Earth Day with a series of teach-ins on April 22, 1970, environmental activists achieved some of their biggest victories - the passage of the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act and Environmental Policy Act.

Lately, environmental groups have been fighting to hold on to the gains of the 1970s and 1980s, but the battles have not been resonating with the voting public.

To win public support, leaders say they are trying to present the problems and potential solutions in language that connects to people's lives.

"We haven't done a good job communicating about the solutions," said Carl Pope, who heads the Sierra Club.

Many environmental groups are also finding new allies outside their old political coalitions.

The Sierra Club has paired up with ranchers and hunters against increased oil and gas development in some Western states. The environmental law firm Earthjustice is working with Hispanic groups and public health advocates to fight air pollution in California's Central Valley, with American Indians to restore salmon runs in the Pacific Northwest, and with native Hawaiians to protect wildlife in Hawaii.

"We're building bridges and finding how you can work with other organizations that don't define themselves as environmentalists," said Earthjustice's Parker.

Others believe more fundamental changes are necessary. Last fall, pollster Ted Nordhaus and public relations consultant Michael Shellenberger prompted a heated debate with their paper called "The Death of Environmentalism."

"What the environmental movement has failed to do is give Americans a compelling sense of what's in a post-global-warming world for them," Nordhaus said. "We live in an aspirational culture. Gloom and doom narratives don't work. We need to give Americans a vision of the world that is optimistic and hopeful."

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