Producing political climate change: the hidden life of US environmentalism

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Producing political climate change: the hidden life of US environmentalism

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Despite strong public support for environmental goals, critics of the US environmental movement are so frustrated by the apparent paralysis of the movement in recent years that some have suggested that environmentalism must die so that something better can replace it. This essay offers a different assessment of the situation. It argues that pessimistic assessments of the environmental movement may be a function of limitations in the way we understand the political life of social movements. It suggests that shifting our analytical gaze from the tactical activities of environmental groups – success in what we call traditional ‘ledger’ politics – to a more strategic understanding of the political activity of social movements reveals the largely hidden ways in which environmental categories enact meaningful social change by creating and changing public consciousness through movement framing and the discursive construction of new coalitions of ideas. It then explores these possibilities in the context of climate change and biodiversity conservation debates. Although the authors do not dismiss the importance of success in ledger politics, they conclude that greater attention to the hidden life of social movements may help analysts better understand how largely invisible movement framing activity is important strategically for agenda-setting.

Despite nearly a century of propaganda, conservation still proceeds at a snail’s pace. On the back forty we still slip two steps backward for each forward stride. (Leopold 1949/1970, p. 243)

The environmentalists’ job is to move the goalpost. Whenever you get near them (the goal posts), they celebrate briefly, and then they say you haven’t done enough. It’s part of the job. (Former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt in Marston 2001, p. 1)

Concern that efforts to protect the environment will always be insufficient is nearly synonymous with environmentalism in the United States, if not everywhere.

As Christopher Bosso (2005, p. 5) has observed, ‘organized environmentalism has been scrutinized and found wanting almost continuously since
environmental issues appeared on the nation’s agenda in the late 1960s’. In poll after poll, the number of people who say they identify with environmental objectives is so consistently high that pollsters call the environment a consensus issue (Guber 2003). The puzzle for environmentalists is that their consensus issues never seem to produce anything resembling consensus politics, and results always seem to fall short of expectations. This existence of this puzzle, which we call the conversion paradox, has produced an array of recommendations, but two themes tend to dominate the discussion.

The first we might label the revitalisation theme. Here critics charge that the environmental movement is now dominated by national groups that have grown too cozy with the agencies and industries they are supposed to be fighting. They have failed to mobilise the grassroots, and are instead content to solicit shallow, passive support, what Mark Dowie (1995) calls ‘checkbook activism’. They have succumbed to the sedimentary demands of organisation-building and issue advocacy, and have morphed from feisty, uncompromising protest groups into self-absorbed policy insiders with limited influence. For these critics, the movement must somehow revitalise itself to recapture its youthful, spontaneous, grassroots energy (Knudson 2001).

A second theme suggests environmental groups are failing because they are too narrowly focused on their own issues and thus unable to reach out to groups outside the movement to build political coalitions for electoral and governing majorities (Chaloupka 2002, Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2004). We might label this the coalition-building theme, which suggests that new political constituencies can be brought into the fold by directing attention to new issue areas, such as environmental justice, labour, women, etc. (Gottlieb 2001). To reach these new constituencies, the argument goes, environmental groups must re-think their priorities to attract coalition partners.

Both these themes aim to make environmental groups more effective politically, and as such, these ideas might constitute good advice. But it seems to us that there is another factor to consider here. Environmentalists have demonstrated a remarkable ability to embed environmental ideas in political discussions about nearly every aspect of our daily lives. As Chaloupka (2002, p. 123) notes, ‘green politics has succeeded as well as it has, in part, because it covers a very diverse field… it is a breathtaking list. It covers “how was work today”’, “what are we having for dinner”, and “what are we doing this weekend” – all at personal, community, national, and global scale’. Yet, this apparent diffusion of environmental ideas tends to make the conversion paradox all the more frustrating. If green thinking has become firmly stitched into the fabric of American life, then why isn’t there more consensus in environmental politics?

Deborah Stone (2002) argues that political paradoxes often can be resolved by realigning our analytical gaze. The problem is that we have a relatively well developed lexicon for describing group political activity, but discussions about movement political activity tend to be rather muddled. Consider two comments from Michael Kraft in a chapter entitled ‘The modern environmental movement and policy achievements’. At one point he

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observes: ‘The environmental movement of the late 1960s and 1970s represented one of those unusual periods in US political history when the problem, policy, and political streams ... converged’ (Kraft 2001, p. 86). In a subsequent passage, he argues: ‘The new environmental movement that was so crucial to bringing about the innovative policy changes of the 1970s drew much of it political strength and moral force from the American public itself’ (Kraft 2001, p. 88). We don’t disagree with Kraft’s assessment, but his phrasing is curious. The first passage treats the environmental movement as a more or less passive phenomenon, essentially a title used to describe a moment in political history. The second passage begins with an image of the movement as a proactive policy actor, but then attributes the source of its agency to a dramatic shift in public opinion. An interpretation that Kraft buttresses, in part, with Hazel Erskine’s (1972, p. 120) observation: ‘Alarm about the environment sprang from nowhere to major proportions in a few short years’. Kraft’s analysis makes it difficult to pin down the movement’s specific role in the policy process.

We propose a different and hopefully more useful way to understand the political activity of movements. Our approach is based on two interrelated assumptions. First, groups and movements engage in related, but qualitatively different, kinds of activity. Second, understanding the difference requires shifting our analytical gaze from the more visible and intuitively obvious forms of political activity toward more subtle discursive framing processes. Stated differently, in our view group activity tends to be tactical in character. Groups seek to solidify environmental ideas by securing enactment of laws, regulations, policies, etc. In contrast, movement activity tends to be strategic in character. The movement’s role is to create a framework that makes environmental ideas meaningful across a broad array of contexts, and in doing so, structure the discourse in ways that support group activity.

To briefly illustrate our point, recall Erskine’s suggestion that public environmental concern ‘sprang from nowhere’. Our approach suggests a different possibility. The seemingly sudden emergence of public concern can be read as a measure of the environmental movement’s effectiveness in creating a frame that encouraged the public to interpret various events and situations in environmental terms. The analytical problem here is that the movement framing process tends to be subtle and elusive in comparison to our conventional images of politics, movements, and coalition-building. Nevertheless, we will attempt to demonstrate that movement framing is an important and vital form of political activity that should not be overlooked in discussions about the future of US environmentalism.

**Beyond the ledger: the hidden life of social movements**

The influential are those who get the most of what there is to get. (Harold Lasswell 1950, p. 3)

It is precisely in the creation, articulation, formulation of new thoughts and ideas – new knowledge – that a social movement defines itself in society. (Eyerman and Jamison 1991)
Seeking to unlock the mysteries of the conversion paradox, most analysts conceptualise politics as an arena where interests, defined as demands for government action, compete with other interests for the state’s limited attention, resources, and administrative capacity. Power is conceptualised as simply the ability to achieve specific objectives in the formal policymaking process, usually (but not necessarily) at the expense of competing interests. In this context, strategy is primarily a matter of translating power assets into policy achievements, either by relying on one’s own assets or by combining with other interest groups to work toward common objectives. This is classic opposition politics – Lasswell’s politics of getting – in which the results of political battles (and by inference, the power of participating interests) can be tallied on a metaphorical ledger.

While this ‘ledger politics’ framework certainly captures visible and important aspects of politics, we think it offers a rather limited view of a much larger sphere of activity that is clearly important strategically (Lukes 1974). Of particular importance to us is the question of just where movements fit into the ledger model. The more or less standard convention is to define movements as constellations of groups that share common interest(s). This image makes it possible to apply a ledger model metric of political power – outcomes of policy disputes – to movements. For example, the body of environmental policies adopted in the 1970s is generally used as a measure of the movement’s power. But this measure is also something of a double-edged sword. If policy ‘success’ is a measure of movement power, then calls to modify and/or eliminate those policies can be interpreted as an indication that the movement’s power is waning.

What we want to suggest is that fitting movements into the ledger model works only so long as we are willing to overlook some of the distinct characteristics of social movements. Most important in this regard is that movements do not have formal structure, leadership, or resources. As such, movements can not participate directly in policy disputes, and therefore, it is not at all clear that the give and take of the policy dialogue provides a meaningful measure of movement power. Moreover, from time to time disagreements emerge among groups within a movement, and thereby create confusion about who speaks for the movement, and just what the movement’s official position might be. At the same time, internal disagreements are often interpreted as an indication that the movement is suffering from pathologies that threaten its vitality and power. In short, it seems to us that the rather nebulous organisational structure of movements suggests that they don’t fit well with the ledger images of politics.

One possibility here is that movements are primarily an abstract category – a kind of analytical shorthand for describing the collective activity of groups that share common interests. However, there is ample evidence in our public discourse to support the proposition that movements represent real and meaningful categories. Indeed, people identify themselves as being members of movements, even if they can not produce tangible evidence of their membership (Teske 1997). Someone can be a ‘card-carrying’ member of the Sierra
Club, but no one is a ‘card-carrying’ environmentalist. If a membership card does not determine who is an environmentalist, then what does? The short answer is that individuals find the set of ideas articulated by the environmental movement to be meaningful in terms of both understanding the world around them, and deciding what constitutes appropriate public action.

For example, Sylvia Tesh argues that movements are of course about demands for government action, but they encompass much more than that. Social movements are primarily about the creation of new ideas and the locomotion of these ideas through the body politic and through society writ large. Tesh writes, ‘if a movement actually creates a set of ideas that give new meaning to the world, if it spreads those new ideas so widely that they become familiar to the general public . . . the movement has accomplished a great deal more than mobilize people into protest groups. It has initiated social change’ (Tesh 2000, p. 126). Tesh then suggests that movements begin when key intellectual figures take previously disconnected ideas and combine them to create powerful new frames of reference that restructure the terms of discourses and disciplines.

While we agree with Tesh, it also seems to us that the process does not follow a simple cause/effect pattern. Frames are constructed by specific political actors, but strategic breakthroughs occur when a wide variety of individuals latch on to a set of ideas because it helps them make new sense of the world and their lives in it. This factor helps explain why movements do not need membership cards. Effective movement frames are radically open and inclusive, even at the risk of appearing somewhat contradictory from time to time. As such, they afford myriad ways in which ordinary people can participate in, and indeed constitute, social movements. Movement actors, in turn, encompass anyone whose thinking and/or actions are animated by the new frame.

Rather than pursuing demands for government action directly, then, movements are engaged in changing the consciousness, values, and behaviour in society at large (Dalton et al. 1990, Dryzek et al. 2003). This activity imparts structure to, even creates, political ledgers. Yet because it takes place largely in the ether of ideas through highly decentralised agents, identifying its specific influence is difficult to measure. Herein is why we refer to the process as the hidden life of movements.

Equally important, movement frames are emergent phenomena in a constant state of change and evolution. Intellectual figures or key movement leaders may create frames, but these ideas become a kind of discursive commons utilised by groups and political actors pursuing ledger politics; journalists reporting on ledger politics; professors in classrooms; and individuals in daily conversations. In the process, the original meaning/content of the frame is often reinterpreted and altered. However, these changes generally help make the frame more inclusive, and therefore more effective.

One way to get a better sense of movement framing activity is to compare it with the more familiar issue framing tactics used by competitors in ledger policy
struggles. Issue framing seeks to structure the dialogue in an attempt to make one policy option appear to be the obvious choice. Movement framing, in contrast, operates in the background by supplying more subtle ideas and meanings to the ledger dialogue. Robert Duffy (2003, p. 5) offers a good example of issue framing: ‘In debates over wilderness in the 1960s, environmentalists worked to frame policy alternatives as an either-or choice, between preservation of wilderness on the one hand, or its complete and utter destruction on the other’. A tangible measure of the tactic’s effectiveness was the Wilderness Act of 1964, yet the wilderness effort also played out against the background of the emerging environmental movement frame.

The nascent environmental movement employed new insights from the science of ecology to construct an interconnected set of meanings organised around the idea that natural systems could be severely disrupted, damaged, or even destroyed (Tesh 2000). This frame, in and of itself, did not suggest any specific policy proposals, but it did create a crucial and decisive context for interpreting situations and events. For instance, it suggested that wilderness ‘destruction’ carried broader implications than the loss of recreational opportunities. More important, it also created a reference point for interpreting a subsequent event that is widely recognised as important in mobilising popular support for the environmental movement. In the late 1960s, the federal government approved oil drilling in the Santa Barbara channel, and one of the wells ruptured, saturating the coastline with crude oil. Our point is that the emerging environmental frame – that nature could be damaged – provided a backdrop for interpreting the blowout as an environmental disaster, rather than a waste of a valuable energy resource.

These examples also help illustrate the dynamic and evolving character of movement frames. In an historical sense, both events occurred before the contemporary environmental movement had coalesced into an identifiable phenomenon. Indeed, the dominant frame at the time was the one associated with the traditional conservation movement. But as we suggested above, new movement frames do not emerge suddenly. Moreover, since the policy discourse seldom offers a blank slate, constructing new movement frames often entails infusing new and/or different ideas into existing frames. For example, by paying attention to the play of ideas, rather than ledger analysis, we can trace glimpses of how the traditional conservation frame was transformed into the contemporary environmental frame.

A key premise of the older conservation frame was that science could be used to insure the efficient use of resources. However, the older conservation frame took shape prior to the development of scientific ecology. The science of ecology, in turn, emerged from a process not directly connected to the conservation frame, a point supported by Aldo Leopold’s now classic essay, ‘The land ethic’. Therein, Leopold expressed a concern that the traditional conservation frame seemed to be losing some of its effectiveness in the ledger arena. Noting that the usual response to this situation was ‘more conservation education’, Leopold added: ‘No one will debate this, but is it certain that only
the **volume** of education needs stepping up? Is something lacking in the **content** as well?" (Leopold 1949/1966, p. 243, emphasis in original). Leopold’s call was to infuse the conservation frame with new ideas derived from the science of ecology. The most important of these ideas was the ethic: ‘A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise’ (Leopold 1949/1966, p. 263).

Although Leopold’s essay was not immediately influential, it did help to diffuse ecological ideas throughout the conservation discourse. For instance, Leopold’s work underpinned, in part, then Secretary of Interior Stuart Udall’s (1962, p. 2, Udall 1963) assertion: ‘[Conservation] is a concept that grows. Each generation has to redefine it because it has new meaning.’ Udall’s assertion emerged in the context of a debate in the 1960s that pitted advocates of **new** conservation against advocates of **traditional** conservation (Cawley 1993, pp. 15–33). By the early 1970s, this debate was supplanted by the new **environmental frame** and movement (Hays 1990). In fact, within our current discourse conservation and environmentalism are frequently used as interchangeable terms.

Several points emerge from this brief historical discussion. First, by adopting a different analytical gaze it is possible to see how the distinction between movement framing activity and ledger politics illuminates a political sphere of activity that is crucial strategically. Movement frames focus less on specific ledger positions than on revising ideas and meanings as a way to make new/different positions possible. Second, movement frames are emergent phenomena, constantly in the process of change. At yet another level, we are also laying groundwork here for a different way of thinking about the conventional activity of coalition-building. Movement frames that form in the unseen ether of ideas can alter the ledger politics landscape both by repositioning existing interests and creating new political spaces for new individuals, groups and coalitions. We now turn to this possibility.

**Coalition-building: new discursive dimensions**

The environmental community must invest in outreach to other constituencies affected by these policies. We must get to know anti-deficit groups, community development organizations, labor unions, and trade associations for new industries. We must celebrate and join in common cause with those in evangelical communities who assert a scriptural basis for the sustainable and responsible stewardship of the earth. (Gelobter 2005, p. 24)

A common theme among friendly critics of the environmental movement is that environmentalists must expand their tent if they want to achieve their policy objectives. Many suggest forming coalitions with other groups that organise themselves around justice frames, such as civil rights, labour, women’s rights, and animal rights (Gottlieb 2001). Others suggest reaching out to constituencies that for one reason or another have traditionally been outside the environmental fold – business and trade associations, fiscal conservatives, farmers, ranchers, evangelicals, and so on (Gelobter *et al.* 2005).
Coalition-building at this level is an important aspect of politics, and it is certainly necessary if one wants to participate successfully in the ledger politics game. However, ‘outreach’ assumes that the interests and identities of both the object and the subject are already largely fixed. In consequence, compatible unions in this context often require difficult and mutual adjustments that potential coalition partners are rarely willing to contemplate. A well-known example serves to illustrate our point.

During the spotted owl crisis in the Pacific Northwest in the 1990s, environmentalists sometimes urged loggers and mill workers to join environmental groups to fight corporate exploitation of forest workers. The green argument was sensible but spectacularly naïve: industry mechanisation and over-harvesting are a much greater threat to forest employment than new environmental restrictions designed to protect the spotted owl. Slower and more sustainable harvesting, combined with greater investment in value-added processing, greens argued, would create more stable employment, albeit in reduced numbers, over the long run. Workers, for the most part, were not interested in such arguments. In the ensuing controversy, workers earned a reputation among greens for false consciousness and greens earned a reputation for arrogance and elitism among workers (Satterfield 2002).

But Beverly Brown (1995), on the basis of in-depth interviews with timber workers, suggested another possibility. She noticed what she called an ‘inarticulate streak’ when these workers talked about their views of the forest. Loggers clearly had attachments to the forest that fit well with environmental movement frames. But in interviews, they could find no way to express them because the spotted owl debate was dominated by environmental discourses, and they were not about to go there. In short, no discursive space was yet open where they could express their feelings about the forest without betraying their rural, working class identities. With no way to express their views outside environmental frames, workers instead joined with industry-sponsored ‘yellow ribbon’ campaigns and other ‘wise use’ groups who, ironically, identified themselves as the ‘real environmentalists’ (White 1996).

We think this debacle offers a useful strategic lesson. As long as coalition-building ideas are limited to the realm of ledger politics, it is difficult to see how new political coalitions in this context will be political force multipliers. However, if we shift our attention away from possible coalitions of established interests toward the latent possibility of new coalitions of ideas and discourses, different strategic possibilities emerge. Discourse theorist Maarten Hajer shows us one way this works by arguing that coalitions don’t just happen, but are instead discursively constructed.

Hajer sees ideas, embodied and animated by discourses, as floating freely in a metaphorical social ecosystem. Through random sequences of speech situations, identifiable discourses appear, defined as ‘a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities’ (Hajer 1995, p. 44). He conceptualises politics as
an argumentative struggle that focuses on creating compelling story-lines, defined as ‘a generative sort of narrative that allows actors to draw upon various discursive categories to give meaning to specific physical and social phenomena’ (Hajer 1995, p. 56). ‘Story-lines’, he continues, ‘are narratives on social reality through which elements from many different domains are combined and that provide actors with a set of symbolic references that suggest a common understanding. Storylines are essential political devices that allow the overcoming of fragmentation and the achievement of discursive closure . . . Story-lines fulfil an essential role in the clustering of knowledge, the positioning of actors, and, ultimately, in the creation of coalitions’ (Hajer 1995, pp. 62–63).

Hajer’s story-lines are a form of what we call movement framing activity. More important, from our perspective, movements are better situated to carry out this kind of activity than groups. Social movements survive and thrive in the context of discursive openness, situations where existing ideas and identities are constantly open to creative iterations and adaptations from a diverse constellation of participants or agents. As such, movements provide fertile conditions for condensing and consolidating a confusing array of new ideas into charismatic symbolic packages that a wide spectrum of individuals use to alter their cognitive maps. The new political contexts created by this activity expand what is possible for cultivating new actors previously understood as outside the fold. This is indeed a form of coalition-building, but of a different order. In our view, successful coalitions must be initially constituted by mutually reinforcing ideas and discourses, which in turn is work that often takes place before interests, identities, and organisations solidify.

The environmental movement is rich in such packages. Examples include conservation, biodiversity, sustainability, sustainable development, and even concepts we might intuitively think of as physical realities, such as acid rain and climate change. Moreover, the environmental movement has demonstrated the utility of these packages as vehicles to continually shape and reshape policy discourses for many years. To illustrate our point, we briefly consider two particularly productive packages, biodiversity and global climate change.

**Biodiversity and new coalitions for nature**

Old ways of seeing do not change because of evidence; they change because new language captures the imagination. (Turner 1996)

Decades of pitched battles pitting environmentalists against loggers, miners, ranchers, and developers have left deep scars that will make dialogue difficult, to say the least. Until now, however, the opposing sides had no way of seeing how their landscape fit into the broader ecological puzzle, or how to judge its importance relative to the larger whole. (Adams 2006, p. xxii)

Since the 1980s, the effort to set aside large tracts of wilderness lands in the US seemed to lose momentum and stall in divisive battles about how many acres of federal land in ‘wilderness study areas’ should receive permanent designation.
Even during the relatively friendly Clinton administration, wilderness groups were frustrated by their inability to pass major pieces of wilderness legislation, especially in key battleground states such as Utah. The wilderness movement, so effective for nearly a generation, appeared to have lost momentum. But in the 1990s, a new initiative seemed to replace wilderness designations at the vanguard of conservation efforts: large landscape conservation, where people and nature live together, not separately. Instead of asking which areas are eligible for wilderness designations, the new large landscape conservation effort shifted attention, and the public policy agenda, to a new set of questions: what does nature need to survive? What new approaches to land conservation will be required to meet these needs? How do we plan for disturbances? These new questions have recruited many new individuals to the environmental movement, though many of them might not necessarily identify themselves as such. These new recruits have animated ambitious on-the-ground conservation efforts on the US–Mexico Borderlands, in the Florida Everglades, in the Greater Yellowstone area, and elsewhere (Adams 2006).

How did this shift in the conservation agenda happen, and what larger strategic lessons might be gleaned from this? The short answer is that conservationists let their script adapt and evolve with changing conditions and new information. Movement leaders didn’t literally sit down in a boardroom strategy session and self-consciously decide to ‘reframe’ wilderness politics, though in hindsight it is certainly it is possible to identify individuals such as E.O. Wilson, and Michael Soule who were essential agents in shifting the wilderness frame in new directions. Instead, this shift came about as a more gradual, adaptive process, with many contributing voices, including wilderness activists, ecologists, biologists, land use planners, philosophers, and many more. All these voices were unified by the emergence of a remarkably charismatic and new way of representing nature: biodiversity. Twenty years after this term first entered public discourses, this term is so widely used across the political spectrum that some environmentalists worry that it has too many meanings, echoing earlier concerns about conservation. But that is precisely the genius of the term. Biodiversity is a compelling symbolic package, open to multiple interpretations and an important discursive bridge connecting a wide variety of discourses and practices. Once the term entered the political ecosystem, wilderness advocates wondered aloud if ‘biodiversity reserves’ should replace ‘wilderness areas’ (Callicott 1998). Land managers at many levels (federal, state, county) began to ask how they might manage public lands and plan private developments to protect and enhance biodiversity. Biologists organised their research around it and established the now influential journal, *Conservation Biology*, to articulate their ideas and priorities. Journalists repeated the term in their stories. Eventually, many farmers and ranchers began using the concept to describe concerns and aspirations of their own. In short, biodiversity became a way to express concern for nature in a way that calls upon both the authority of science and the ethical imperatives implied by culturally well-accepted values implicit in the term diversity. So in essence,
everyone who uses the term *biodiversity* to re-imagine their work, their interests, and their political activity, becomes an agent, though not necessarily a card-carrying one, of the movement itself.

In the late 1980s, wilderness advocates were inspired by new ideas emerging from the field of population biology called island biogeography. This field questioned whether national parks, wilderness areas, and other nature preserves, as protected islands, could prevent the extinction of the species because genetic exchange among island populations would be too limited to prevent inbreeding. Working from this assumption, other ecologists, most notably Reed Noss, proposed linking nature reserves with buffer areas and corridors between reserves where animals, especially large predators such as the Florida panther or the grizzly bear, could travel. Many environmentalists then argued that reserve systems must be quite large because recent developments in the field of ecology suggested that disturbance, chaos, and randomness, not stability, balance and order, best characterise patterns found in nature.

Biodiversity has played a key role in revitalising the conservation script in perhaps unexpected ways. What is particularly striking is the new embrace of disturbance ecology, which until the term biodiversity appeared, was threatening longstanding conservation scripts at the jugular. How can we assign intrinsic value to a nature that is chaotic, disturbance-prone, and headed in no particular direction? Similarly, what moral or political authority can be harvested from such images? Yet to continually describe nature in Clementsian terms threatened conservation’s traditional alliance with the ecological sciences. Biodiversity’s strategic brilliance is that it reconfigures conservation’s symbolic package in a way that embraces disturbance ecology, but continues the highly productive synergy between science, ethics, and politics that has long been conservation’s mainstay. In the new package, it is *biodiversity* that is threatened, both by man and (ironically) by an unforgiving and disturbance-prone nature. Similarly, it is *biodiversity* that has intrinsic value, again threatened by the sins of man and the indifference of nature’s fury. And at the same time, *biodiversity* conjures the authority of ‘objective’ scientific knowledge better than *nature*, which is more amenable to political struggles. *Nature* exists without biologists, but *biodiversity* does not (Takacs 1996, pp. 9–40).

Conservation’s new frame, biodiversity, is a dramatic re-imaging of nature. As David Takacs (1996, p. 1) writes, ‘conservation biologists have generated and disseminated the term *biodiversity* specifically to change the terrain of your mental map, reasoning that if you were to conceive of nature differently, you would view and value it differently’. Once the idea of biodiversity was left to roam in the political ecosystem, the self-propelling process we described above was set in motion. Biodiversity not only transformed cognitive maps, it started changing landscape maps as well. The Wildlands Project, a group co-founded by Dave Foreman, produced the first visionary map of conservation on a continental scale in the inaugural issue of the journal *Wild Earth*, which became a key forum for people from many disciplines to add their energy and
expertise to the idea (Noss 1992, Foreman 1999). The process was aided by the increasing accessibility of new geographic information systems (GIS) technology. New maps made possible by this technology inspired all kinds of people to appropriate the concept of biodiversity and apply it to their work. Military planners responsible for stewardship of military reservations started referring to core-corridor maps developed by environmentalists to complete their environmental impact statements. County planners contemplating new subdivisions in rural areas began to refer to them as well. A particularly striking example of this is the Pima County, Arizona Sonoran Desert Habitat Conservation Plan. Similarly, conservation organisations began to use ‘eco-regional planning’ to set priorities, with biodiversity as the stated aim.

As biodiversity gained currency in a wide variety of settings, the political ecosystem itself changed. New discursive spaces began to open. Farmers and ranchers noticed that environmentalists had finally recognised what they had known all along: nature is chaotic and unforgiving, and cannot always be left to its own devices. They initiated new conversations with environmental groups and new collaborative organisations formed with new understandings of nature at their foundations. The story of the Malpai Borderlands Group (MBG) is particularly instructive.

In this well-documented experiment in collaborative conservation, environmentalists didn’t have to ‘reach out’ to ranchers to help realise their large landscape biodiversity goals: the ranchers were already there with their own ideas of how keep a huge expanse of land, which includes parts of four states (Arizona, New Mexico, Sonora, and Chihuahua), ecologically intact (Sayre 2005). Changes in the conservation script, facilitated by new images of nature, paved the way for new coalitions to work together to protect habitats on a scale few imagined just a decade earlier. It is interesting to note that the MBG is a conservation organisation by activity but not identity, and this clearly disturbs some in the environmental movement. But as conservationists are learning, it might be more important to focus on the end result instead of on how new players might compete with existing groups. As Chinese reform leader Deng Xiaoping once advised, ‘it doesn’t matter if the cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice’.

The MBG is just one example of many new groups that are emerging to occupy the new discursive spaces opened by the biodiversity package. New collaborative conservation groups have spread across the country in recent years to address a wide variety of concerns, including salmon fisheries, forest management, and water policy. These new ‘coalitions of the unalike’, animated by new discursive possibilities, exemplify the strategic importance of movement frames, which organise new actors into environmental political life. It is certainly possible that this new activity will eventually become visible on political ledgers in the form of demands for governmental action. Collaborative groups have had some notable successes in this regard (Brick et al. 2000). At a broader level, however, the most important strategic changes go largely unseen: our basic understandings about how key conservation work should
proceed, and who should do it, have been profoundly transformed. This has unleashed the creative potential of countless individuals animated by the new frame. These countless individuals, in turn, become agents of change, even though they may not necessarily identify themselves as such.

It is particularly interesting to note, moreover, that the biodiversity frame re-energised the conservation agenda at a time when the Bush–Cheney administration tended to make the more visible conservation ledger appear rather depressing. In this context, perhaps the conversion paradox may be better interpreted as a general failure of ledger analysis to account for the hidden work of social movements than as a failure of environmental groups to convert popular support into specific policy wins.

We now turn our attention to climate change, a second example where we believe the American environmental community, supported by a much wider global effort, has made much more progress than conventional policy ledger analysis would suggest.

**Producing political climate change**

Over the last 15 years environmental foundations and organizations have invested hundreds of millions of dollars into combating global warming. We have strikingly little to show for it. (Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus 2004, p. 3)

This is nothing short of the beginning of an effort to transform the world energy economy, vastly improving efficiency and diversifying it away from its exclusive reliance on fossil fuels. The campaign to get carbon emissions capped and then reduced is literally a 50-year non-stop campaign. This is not one that everybody will be able to declare victory, shut up shop, and go home. (Phil Clapp, cited in Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2004, p. 9)

The presumed failure of the environmental movement to make significant political progress toward addressing the urgent problem of climate change is the primary concern that inspired Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, famously, to suggest that environmentalism should die so something better can replace it. An important part of that failure, the authors suggest, is the movement’s difficulty forming political alliances to pass strict carbon emissions legislation. While it is certainly true that political institutions, especially in the United States, have been slow to respond to the threat of global warming, we argue that the nature of global warming issue, as suggested by the Phil Clapp’s comments above, merits strategic analysis that transcends traditional ledger politics analysis. Climate change isn’t just a measurable phenomenon, it is also a strategy, and it has been a remarkably productive one.

In fact, 2005–2010 may go down in environmental history as a ‘tipping point’ period for political climate change on the path to a new energy economy. Shellenberger and Nordhaus come to their dark conclusions because they focus almost exclusively on temporal political ledgers where failures to build electoral majorities to pass meaningful carbon legislation have indeed been dismal. Looking beyond such ledgers to more important strategic dimensions of political change, however, our analysis suggests much brighter conclusions.
Here we see new coalitions of ideas, individuals, and organisations, energised by the climate change frame, coming together to take action well ahead of formal political institutions. In this context, the tactical failures on existing political ledgers that cause so much concern among environmentalists are akin to taking a few steps north on a southbound train. In short, the climate change frame has been a crucial strategic success and it will continue to play a vital role in environmental politics for the foreseeable future.

Climate change, like biodiversity, originally emerged from scientific discourses to become a key environmental frame. However, global warming, like concerns about species loss, did not immediately catch on. Initially, each was a concern that inspired more complacency than action, even among some environmentalists. Greenhouse issues were often buried in scientific discourses, whose uncertain conclusions were diluted by industry-funded sceptics with relative ease. Then the environmental script evolved, again largely in response to new scientific information that global warming could have differential effects around the globe, involving warming in some places, but perhaps cataclysmic cooling in others. The term climate change was promoted by environmentalists as a more encompassing term, and has become much more productive than its creators could have imagined. Climate change has become a breakthrough frame, a discursive bridge connecting all kinds of ideas and events that were not previously understood as connected. It has set in motion a self-propelling process that has reinforced and diffused environmental ideas.

Prior to the climate change frame, when freak storms, heat waves, cold snaps, or flooding occurred, they were interpreted simply as isolated events. No longer. Climate change links seemingly random events into a single interpretive schema. Now when strange weather events happen, environmental ideas are nearly always implicated, reinforcing the frame itself. As Al Gore recognised, ‘what changed in the U.S. with Hurricane Katrina was a feeling that we have entered a period of consequences’ (Gore 2006).

Hurricanes, of course, are nothing new to the Gulf Coast, and Katrina was comparable in size to hurricane Betsy, which struck New Orleans in 1965. But no one at that time connected Betsy, which also flooded the city, to our preferences for gas-guzzling vehicles and fossil-fuelled lifestyles. In short, hurricane Katrina may be remembered as a seminal event in environmental history, just as we remember the oil spill off Santa Barbara in 1968.

Like the original environmental frames that animated a whole generation of activists after 1968, climate change has been remarkably productive in encouraging people from many walks of life to re-imagine their lives, and to join with others similarly inspired. Ecologists have been inspired to study shifting vegetation mosaics. Environmental activists have devised websites where ordinary citizens can calculate their ‘ecological footprint’. The most interesting of these have follow-up programmes to show participants how to change everyday behaviours to reduce their carbon footprint. Businesses and universities have begun to look for ways to make their operations less carbon intensive or even carbon-neutral. Many people are trading in perfectly good
cars and paying a premium to own fuel-saving hybrid cars. Venture capital is now streaming into research and development of biofuels and other alternative energy sources. Even wedding planners are now offering carbon-neutral nuptials. When carbon legislation finally does arrive, it will be chasing a broad swath of the American public already active in myriad ways on this issue.

All the new climate change talk is also producing some seemingly unlikely political coalitions. In January 2007 a group of environmental and business leaders announced a coalition to push for firm emission limits with ‘cap and trade’ provisions to maximise flexibility in meeting emission targets. Strikingly, business partners in this coalition include large utilities, construction, chemical, and financial concerns. Critics point out that businesses are merely trying to get ahead of rising momentum for federal regulation. On the other hand, the coalition has helped create a momentum of its own. As Peter A. Darbee, chief executive of Pacific Gas and Electric put it:

my hope and expectation is that Congress, the White House, and the public will look at these chief executives and note that companies with a motive to oppose emission controls are nonetheless saying, ‘Here’s a serious problem; it needs to be dealt with, and it needs to be dealt with now’. (quoted in Barringer 2007, p. C1)

Mr. Darbee’s commitment to climate change action nicely demonstrates our point: One need not be an environmentalist to participate in a political coalition with environmental objectives. From our perspective, the more open the environmental tent, the stronger the movement, though Greens will certainly be tempted to defend the purity of their turf when traditional foes such as corporate executives use environmental frames to articulate their firm’s interests (Barbaro 2007, p. A1).

In coming years, we can expect the climate change frame to continue to evolve and adapt. The outlines of this new frame are already visible. New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman has been working tirelessly to create a new coalition of ideas connecting climate change, energy, and national security. Friedman links climate change with energy concerns and foreign policy debacles in the Middle East and the failed war on terrorism more generally. He argues for a new energy economy that would address all three problems simultaneously (Friedman 2007; see also Schlosberg and Rinfret, this volume).

There are signs that this new frame is catching on, especially as businesses increasingly recognise that there is a lot of money to be made in re-tooling the economy. This new coalition of ideas (comprising part of ‘ecological modernisation’ frame as discussed by Schlosberg and Rinfret in this volume) nicely exemplifies the emergence of new frames such as ecological modernisation. Each idea in the coalition is nothing new; frames are not created from thin air. New frames emerge when existing or evolving ideas find new resonance when combined with other ideas to create a force multiplier effect. When this happens, social reality changes, which is precisely what movements set out to accomplish.
Can shifts in public consciousness produced by environmental frames such as biodiversity and climate change, combined with the myriad ways in which people from many walks of life are beginning to act on newly acquired meanings, fears, and hopes, really be understood as a strategic success? Detroit still spends millions convincing us we need fuel-inefficient vehicles, and people continue to buy them. Carbon legislation strong enough to actually reduce trends in global temperature is unlikely in the United States, and emerging industrial economies in China and India remain a challenge looming on the horizon. According to the 2007 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, even if concentrations of all greenhouses gases are kept at year 2000 levels, the globe is projected to continue warming at the rate of 0.1 degree C per decade (IPCC 2007). Similarly, even the most optimistic forecasters predict continued loss of species worldwide at an unprecedented rate. Thus the anxiety among environmentalists and those who track the environmental political ledgers we described at the start of this essay is likely to continue unabated. Our analysis, however, suggests that this paradox, and the anxiety it produces, may be less troublesome than it otherwise appears.

Conclusion

While this article was undergoing peer review, Al Gore received an Academy Award and the Nobel Peace Prize. The focal point for both awards was the film An inconvenient truth. The film itself contains very little new information about global warming and it does not advocate any specific policy proposals. As such, neither the film nor the awards offer evidence useful for a traditional ledger political analysis approach. But it seems to us that both provide a tangible example of movement framing activity.

The film brings together the diverse array of issues associated with global climate change in a way accessible to an equally diverse array of individuals. Moreover, the awards, especially the Peace Prize, challenge our usual views about the boundaries of the environmental movement. Neither of the institutions that grant the awards are normally categorised as part of the environmental fold, yet their choices have helped to diffuse the global warming frame. But can this kind of activity be understood as an indicator of strategic success? As we have argued here, the answer to this question depends upon where we cast our analytical gaze.

If we look for success only in terms of specific policy initiatives and electoral outcomes, then movement framing activity appears tangential to political activity. For instance, it seems unlikely that Gore’s film and the awards it has received will be major factors in the 2008 presidential election, nor will they directly help usher stringent carbon legislation through Congress. Yet, if we reframe our gaze looking for new coalitions of ideas, interests, and actions that expand the space for participation by new ‘members’ to the movement, it is possible to see significant changes taking place.
While WalMart is not generally identified with the environmental movement, the corporation has worked closely with the Natural Resources Defence Council (NRDC) to reduce electricity usage in their stores by 20% by 2013 and to double the fuel economy of their trucks by 2015. Another key player in climate change activism, Environmental Defence (ED), brokered a deal in the buyout of TXU, a Texas utility, that involved persuading the buyer to reduce the number of planned coal-fired power plants from eleven to three, and to promise to work toward climate legislation in Congress (Hajim 2007). And despite criticisms from established political actors (McCloskey 1996, Foreman 2005), collaborative conservation efforts have restructured land conservation debates in productive ways throughout the western United States.

We want to be clear about our point here. From a ledger perspective, the resolution of the conversion paradox emphasises people demonstrating movement support through the ballot box. This is certainly an important part of the overall effort. However, the approach to movement activity we have sketched out here suggests that there are other kinds of conversion actions that need to be considered. Business leaders using green frames to shape business models, farmers using biodiversity to help organise their operations, and consumers self-consciously choosing energy efficient products are all examples of tangible results produced by the subtle play of movement frames. They also suggest that when left to evolve in open and flexible discursive settings, environmental frames can create social change. Our point, then, is that combining attention to inclusiveness and evolution of movement framing activity with traditional ledger concerns provides a more diverse foundation for developing future strategies. Stated differently, diversity is widely recognised as a positive force in the life of ecosystems. Our analysis suggests that much is the same for political ecosystems.

References


