

Jenny Price

Stop Saving the Planet!: Nature, History, and the Future of American Environmentalism

In *Stop Saving the Planet*, I aim to set forth a cultural critique of contemporary American environmentalism. The project asks, “What have we talked about when we’ve talked about environmentalism?”

Green this, green that, green everything. On one hand, the twenty-first-century change-your-light-bulb brand of environmentalism seems to have shifted American environmental advocacy away from wilderness protection—the heart and soul of the twentieth-century movement. And yet, the enduring, powerful American vision of nature as a separate non-human realm—which William Cronon and others have critiqued so usefully—retains a troubling grip on environmental goals and rhetoric. And the crusade to “save the planet” has so often discouraged US environmentalists from thinking about how to use, preserve, alter, and fundamentally inhabit environments as fairly and sustainably as possible.

In this project, I plan to showcase at least two major threads of this dominant rhetoric—and to track them through green initiatives that can be ineffective, unfair, or just plain counter-productive. One, I will hone in on how the crusade historically to rescue an authentic, timeless natural realm from destruction has tended (as Susan Davis and others have pointed out), to make environmental advocacy a supremely virtuous venture—which has powered a greener-than-thou, individual-oriented everyday environmentalism that over-emphasizes the significance of versus systemic and regulatory action (and that also justifies a wildly resource-intensive green consumerism).

Second, I will track how the passion to save the environment as a separate unitary realm has encouraged quotidian actions and also official policies that tend, oddly, to treat all environmental measures as essentially fungible. All green acts accomplish the same goal—to save the planet—so they benefit everyone, everywhere. This logic lies, I will argue, at the heart of the popular but highly questionable and contentious enchantment with trading and offsets. Greenwashing, too, derives much of its power from the “we can do *this* to compensate for *that*” style of thinking—while also from the outsize virtue, of course, that accrues to environmental acts.

Above all, I'll focus on how these two common threads of the American "save the planet" logic tend to ignore the dramatic inequities in environmental troubles—in who contributes to the problems, and who suffers the consequences, and who benefits from the solutions. Lower-income Americans, for example—not to mention poverty-stricken communities internationally—tend to contribute least to our environmental messes, and to bear the lion's share of the consequences at home and work. At the same time, they do not generally enjoy the financial resources to buy organic food or green up their houses, and thereby to enjoy the supreme virtue of being environmentalists. And carbon trading, as a policy example, can potentially make the dirtiest places dirtier—which is why environmental justice advocates, in the US and abroad, almost universally object to it.

In the current political climate in the US, the ultra-right wing arguably has made "environmentalism" the code word for "they do not care about you." Environmental scientists and policy-makers—in the fiery climate-change debates, for example—generally have responded by urging environmental advocates to explain the obviously urgent problems more clearly. *Stop Saving the Planet!*, armed with the tools of history and cultural analysis, attempts to unearth and showcase the deep cultural and historical roots of policies and everyday environmental actions that—however well-intentioned—often marginalize, offend, or actively work against the interests of lower-income and working-class communities. It tries to understand very logical reasons for the alienation and resentment, for the consequent lack of critical public support, and for why so many Americans who breathe the country's worst air and drink the most polluted water do not think that environmentalism is about *them*.

Narratively, my working plan is to mimic the popular American "50 easy ways you can save the planet" genre, packed with concrete examples, to talk about the essential need for environmental rhetoric that we can use to stop saving the planet and start inhabiting it. While Ursula Heise, Rob Nixon, and other scholars have addressed similar problems brilliantly, I have seen almost none of this critique in the general discourse. And while environmental justice scholars and activists have showcased the unconscionable inequities, I wish to focus on the closely connected question of why justice has to be crucial to addressing environmental troubles.