

## Pro(gress) vs. Con(gress)

Gary K. Meffe

Opposites are often illustrative and clarifying in their power to magnify clear alternatives and to evoke strong images: up and down, hot and cold, black and white, alive and dead, good and evil, pro and con, progress and Congress. Wait. Progress and Congress? Those are clearly not opposites in the same vein as good and evil or pro and con. Is this a Freudian slip, the result of a cynical mind too long sceptical of political power, and too frustrated by not getting things his way? A minority thinker in a majority system, to be shunned and avoided? Perhaps not. Maybe the United States Congress is becoming a reasonable definition of the opposite of **progress**, because progress in the United States seems to have slowed or ceased, and even reversed in some areas, under the recent Congress. I argue that one area of clear regression is environmental and human health issues.

Natural America is now up for sale, and the salespersons are the United States Congress. Since the elections of November 1994 swept into power a majority of conservative Republicans, Congress – led by Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich – has embarked on a systematic dismantlement of national programmes protecting the environment and human health. Conducted under the guise of ‘less government’ and ‘lowered tax burdens’, this assault (with some Republican dissent and some Democratic support) is nothing less than a calculated effort to open up natural resources to nearly unrestricted use by anybody who wishes to exploit them. The League of Conservation Voters (LCV), a non-partisan organization that rates the voting records of legislators on environmental issues, indicates that the previous Committee Chairs in Congress had an average LCV score of 80 per cent (100 per cent being complete support for environmental legislation); the new, incoming Chairs have an average score of 10 per cent. This new Congressional leadership may lead to a free-for-all, a one-time bonanza to cash in on resources before the country regains its

senses and decides that the future is too important to gamble away in return for a short-term economic gain for the wealthy.

Am I exaggerating? Are these the mere ravings of a disgruntled conservationist who only bemoans lack of support for his special interest? Here are direct quotes from some of our national leaders who are now making resource decisions; you decide what they portend. Representative Don Young of Alaska, the Chair of the House Resources Committee (which makes critical decisions about natural resource use) says, in reference to the Endangered Species Act, that ‘We had envisioned trying to protect, you know, pigeons and things like that. We never thought about mussels and ferns and flowers and all these... subspecies of squirrels and birds’. He also calls environmental lobbyists ‘the most despicable group of individuals I’ve ever been around’. Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas states that ‘I am trying to say “time out”, so that silly things will not happen, so that bait fish and golden cheeked warblers and jaguars and salmon running the wrong way in a stream will not take precedence over the rights of farmers and ranchers’. She adds, ‘You won’t recognize the ESA [Endangered Species Act] at the end of this year’. Representative Bill Emerson of Missouri called employees of the National Biological Service an ‘eco-gestapo force’. Representative Sonny Bono of California, a former pop singer turned politician, says of endangered species, ‘Give them all a designated area and then blow it up. It sounds insane but that’s how insane these endangered species people are’. Representative J. D. Hayworth of Arizona has said, ‘It is time to stop the iron hand of the Environmental Protection Agency’. Representative John Doolittle of California adds that ‘I support the concept of the [ESA] when it talks about mammals, large mammals. When we’re talking about rodents and snails and esoteric forms of algae and so forth, I just believe it has got to be changed’.

What are the results of such diatribe? We are now witnessing a systematic dismantling of the heart of environmental protection in the United States, developed over the last 25

years. The US Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act (including wetlands protection), old-growth forests, the National Biological Service and many other aspects of national environmental legislation (and the scientific vehicles to support that legislation) are being singled out for crippling or outright destruction. Let's look at a few.

The US Endangered Species Act, often called the 'crown jewel' of US environmental laws, is arguably the single most powerful and important piece of environmental legislation in our history. But as of this writing (late July) the ESA is itself endangered by, among other things, legislation proposed by Senator Slade Gorton of Washington. This bill, if passed, would allow the Secretary of the Interior to decide whether or not a given species should receive protection, with no requirement for public input. The Secretary could, for example, essentially ensure extinction by protecting a species only from direct killing, but not from complete destruction of its habitat. Senator Gorton stated that the Secretary could ask, 'Is this species so important that a single person should lose their job over it?' If the answer is no, the Senator indicated that little or nothing would be done to save the species (*New York Times*, 13 April 1995). The bill was written for Gorton by lobbyists from the timber, mining, utility, chemical and other industries, with complete exclusion of scientific or environmental input. In fact, during hearings by a Congressional Task Force on the ESA, scientists were purposely excluded because, according to its Chair, Representative Richard Pombo of California, they wanted to hear from 'real people'. Scientists apparently do not fall under that category in this Congress. To date, a moratorium on new listings of endangered species and designation of critical habitat has been passed and is now the law of the land.

The National Biological Service (NBS) was created in 1993 as an amalgamation of parts of several other existing agencies to conduct research on and develop an inventory of the nation's biological resources. It was to develop a strong scientific basis for protection of natural resources so that present and future gen-

erations may use them in a knowledgeable and sustainable manner. The NBS is presently under attack throughout Congress, and may be dismantled and all funding deleted. The major source of scientific information to be used by the government to judge the status of endangered species and their habitats will thus be eliminated if this proposed action is approved, and ignorance will guide natural resource use and management.

Massive, unregulated logging on some of our few remaining tracts of old-growth forests has also been approved, in what is termed a 'salvage logging' operation. Most environmental regulations and oversight governing US national forests have been suspended to permit salvage logging for the next few years. Dead and dying trees are targeted, but harvest can extend to nearby live trees. This has been called a 'forest health' bill, because dead and dying trees create higher fire danger in these forests. Of course, this ignores the ecological fact that fire is a natural and necessary part of the dynamics of these forests, and that logging operations are far more damaging to forest ecosystems than any fire. Wetlands protection is also in grave jeopardy, as new definitions of wetlands will release millions of acres for development and destruction, reversing a policy of the previous (and Republican) presidential administration of 'no net loss of wetlands'.

Where legislation is not making inroads against environmental protection, cutting of appropriations are being vigorously pursued. Funds for most environmental and health programmes are being reduced or cut entirely. At this writing, a House of Representatives Appropriations Subcommittee has proposed no funding for the Marine Mammal Commission and no money for endangered species work by the National Marine Fisheries Service. What might happen to change these subcommittee actions in full committee and in the Senate is not yet clear. Other proposed changes in Congress would strike all funding for education (including environmental education) at the Department of Energy, and slash funding at the Department of the Interior, which oversees most endangered species research and management.

The list of outright attacks on environmental concerns, unfortunately, could go on, but you get the picture. The United States is in the midst of the worst regression of environmental protection in our nation's history, and the assaults have only begun. A Congress that seems 'anti-everything that does not produce short-term economic gains' has been released upon the lands by a public that cannot have realized what it did. Polling of voters last November indicates that some 83 per cent considered themselves environmentalists, yet Congress inexplicably is acting in the opposite manner. I maintain that today, Congress is the opposite of progress.

Perhaps it is appropriate to end with another pair of opposites, a pair that could have critical bearing on the American state of the environment: independence and dependence. Americans are fiercely proud, and rightfully so, of their historical struggles for independence. We even celebrate an Independence Day on 4 July, the day when our Declaration of Independence from Great Britain was

signed in 1776. We are indeed an independent people. But perhaps it is time that we celebrated a Dependence Day, a time when we recognize and celebrate our complete and utter dependence on our environment for our lives and prosperity. Our strong patriotism should extend to humble recognition of the vital role played by the natural world in our existence. Our continued abilities to provide for our basic needs such as clean air and water, food, functional biogeochemical cycles, climate control, and aesthetic pleasures are all derived from an intact nature. And there is no better place to begin this new patriotism and recognition of dependence than in the halls of the United States Congress. It is high time for Congress and progress to become synonyms, rather than opposites.

*Gary Meffe is an Associate Professor at the University of Georgia and the Savannah River Laboratory, and is senior author of Principles of Conservation Biology (Sinauer Associates, 1994).*

## NEWS AND VIEWS

### The (dis)information age: a reply

*Sidney J. Holt*

The article by *Oryx* Deputy Editor Gary Meffe in the July 1995 issue, 'The (dis)information age' sounds a timely warning, but with insufficient urgency and scope. The so-called 'Wise Use' network is by no means confined to the United States or to non-governmental players. Links extend across both oceans of the northern hemisphere. A trans-Pacific node is, for example, the Global Guardian Trust in Japan, started by Kunio Yonezawa, one time senior officer in the Fisheries Agency of the Japanese Government, Japanese representative to the International Whaling Commission (IWC), and staffer of the FAO of the UN. In the other direction we find the High North Alliance, led by Norwegian journalist Georg Blitchfeld, located in northern Norway and purporting to 'represent' regional fishing interests. Many

other nodes could be named.

While the constituents of the group within the United States mainly, as Meffe explains, defend land-owners' 'rights' to do as they wish, unregulated, with the property they occupy, elsewhere the interests tend to have a different primary focus: for example ensuring that fisheries are not regulated conservatively, and that the current moratorium on commercial whaling is overturned before guarantees of monitoring and enforcement of regulations are in place. For these reasons the IWC is a universal lobbying target, to which may now be added the Fisheries Committee of the European Union, and the UN in its role of seeking effective controls over destructive fishing on the high seas.

Several such groups receive funds from 'official' sources, as well as from corporations and political formations. Thus it is known that funds – incompletely laundered – have surreptitiously been made available from time to