

The Wrong Kind of Green

Johann Hari | March 4, 2010

Editor's Note: As the [1]Washington Post reports today, the major conservation group The Nature Conservancy faces "potential backlash as its supporters learn that the giant oil company and the world's largest environmental organization long ago forged a relationship that has lent BP an Earth-friendly image and helped the Conservancy pursue causes it holds dear." The Nation's Johann Hari recently investigated financial ties between environmental groups and environmentally unfriendly corporations for the magazine, offering a wider lens on the relationship between BP and the Nature Conservancy. Hari's piece appears below.

Why did America's leading environmental groups jet to Copenhagen and lobby for policies that will lead to the faster death of the rainforests--and runaway global warming? Why are their lobbyists on Capitol Hill dismissing the only real solutions to climate change as "unworkable" and "unrealistic," as though they were just another sooty tentacle of Big Coal?

At first glance, these questions will seem bizarre. Groups like Conservation International are among the most trusted "brands" in America, pledged to protect and defend nature. Yet as we confront the biggest ecological crisis in human history, many of the green organizations meant to be leading the fight are busy shoveling up hard cash from the world's worst polluters--and burying science-based environmentalism in return. Sometimes the corruption is subtle; sometimes it is blatant. In the middle of a swirl of bogus climate scandals trumped up by deniers, here is the real Climategate, waiting to be exposed.

I have spent the past few years reporting on how global warming is remaking the map of the world. I have stood in half-dead villages on the coast of Bangladesh while families point to a distant place in the rising ocean and say, "Do you see that chimney sticking up? That's where my house was... I had to [abandon it] six months ago." I have stood on the edges of the Arctic and watched glaciers that have existed for millenniums crash into the sea. I have stood on the borders of dried-out Darfur and heard refugees explain, "The water dried up, and so we started to kill each other for what was left."

While I witnessed these early stages of ecocide, I imagined that American green groups were on these people's side in the corridors of Capitol Hill, trying to stop the Weather of Mass Destruction. But it is now clear that many were on a different path--one that began in the 1980s, with a financial donation.

Environmental groups used to be funded largely by their members and wealthy individual supporters. They had only one goal: to prevent environmental destruction. Their funds were small, but they played a crucial role in saving vast tracts of wilderness and in pushing into law strict rules forbidding air and water pollution. But Jay Hair--president of the National Wildlife Federation from 1981 to 1995--was dissatisfied. He identified a huge new source of revenue: the worst polluters.

Hair found that the big oil and gas companies were happy to give money to conservation groups. Yes, they were destroying many of the world's pristine places. Yes, by the late 1980s it had become clear that they were dramatically destabilizing the climate--the very basis of life itself. But for Hair, that didn't make them the enemy; he said they sincerely wanted to right their wrongs and pay to preserve the environment. He began to suck millions from them, and in return his organization and others, like The Nature Conservancy (TNC), gave them awards for "environmental stewardship."

Companies like Shell and British Petroleum (BP) were delighted. They saw it as valuable "reputation insurance": every time they were criticized for their massive emissions of warming gases, or for being involved in the killing of dissidents who wanted oil funds to go to the local population, or an oil spill that had caused irreparable damage, they wheeled out their shiny green awards, purchased with "charitable" donations, to ward off the prospect of government regulation. At first, this behavior scandalized the environmental community. Hair was vehemently condemned as a sellout and a charlatan. But slowly, the other groups saw themselves shrink while the corporate-fattened groups swelled--so they, too, started to take the checks.

Christine MacDonald, an idealistic young environmentalist, discovered how deeply this cash had transformed these institutions when she started to work for Conservation International in 2006. She told me, "About a week or two after I started, I went to the big planning meeting of all the organization's media teams, and they started talking about this supposedly great new project they were running with BP. But I had read in the newspaper the day before that the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] had condemned BP for running the most polluting plant in the whole country.... But nobody in that meeting, or anywhere else in the organization, wanted to talk about it. It was a taboo. You weren't supposed to ask if BP was really green. They were 'helping' us, and that was it."

She soon began to see--as she explains in her whistleblowing book *Green Inc.*--how this behavior has pervaded almost all the mainstream green organizations. They take money, and in turn they offer praise, even when the money comes from the companies causing environmental devastation. To take just one example, when it was revealed that many of IKEA's dining room sets were made from trees ripped from endangered forests, the World Wildlife Fund leapt to the company's defense, saying--wrongly--that IKEA "can never guarantee" this won't happen. Is it a coincidence that WWF is a "marketing partner" with IKEA, and takes cash from the company?

Likewise, the Sierra Club was approached in 2008 by the makers of Clorox bleach, who said that if the Club endorsed their new range of "green" household cleaners, they would give it a percentage of the sales. The Club's Corporate Accountability Committee said the deal created a blatant conflict of interest--but took it anyway. Executive director Carl Pope defended the move

in an e-mail to members, in which he claimed that the organization had carried out a serious analysis of the cleaners to see if they were "truly superior." But it hadn't. The Club's Toxics Committee co-chair, Jessica Frohman, said, "We never approved the product line." Beyond asking a few questions, the committee had done nothing to confirm that the product line was greener than its competitors' or good for the environment in any way.

The green groups defend their behavior by saying they are improving the behavior of the corporations. But as these stories show, the pressure often flows the other way: the addiction to corporate cash has changed the green groups at their core. As MacDonald says, "Not only do the largest conservation groups take money from companies deeply implicated in environmental crimes; they have become something like satellite PR offices for the corporations that support them."

It has taken two decades for this corrupting relationship to become the norm among the big green organizations. Imagine this happening in any other sphere, and it becomes clear how surreal it is. It is as though Amnesty International's human rights reports came sponsored by a coalition of the Burmese junta, Dick Cheney and Robert Mugabe. For environmental groups to take funding from the very people who are destroying the environment is preposterous--yet it is now taken for granted.

This pattern was bad enough when it affected only a lousy household cleaning spray, or a single rare forest. But today, the stakes are unimaginably higher. We are living through a brief window of time in which we can still prevent runaway global warming. We have emitted so many warming gases into the atmosphere that the world's climate scientists say we are close to the climate's "point of no return." Up to 2 degrees Celsius of warming, all sorts of terrible things happen--we lose the islands of the South Pacific, we set in train the loss of much of Florida and Bangladesh, terrible drought ravages central Africa--but if we stop the emissions of warming gases, we at least have a fifty-fifty chance of stabilizing the climate at this higher level. This is already an extraordinary gamble with human safety, and many climate scientists say we need to aim considerably lower: 1.5 degrees or less.

Beyond 2 degrees, the chances of any stabilization at the hotter level begin to vanish, because the earth's natural processes begin to break down. The huge amounts of methane stored in the Arctic permafrost are belched into the atmosphere, causing more warming. The moist rainforests begin to dry out and burn down, releasing all the carbon they store into the air, and causing more warming. These are "tipping points": after them, we can't go back to the climate in which civilization evolved.

So in an age of global warming, the old idea of conservation--that you preserve one rolling patch of land, alone and inviolate--makes no sense. If the biosphere is collapsing all around you, you can't ring-fence one lush stretch of greenery and protect it: it too will die.

You would expect the American conservation organizations to be joining the great activist upsurge demanding we stick to a safe level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere: 350 parts per million (ppm), according to professor and NASA climatologist James Hansen. And--in public, to their members--they often are supportive. On its website the Sierra Club says, "If the level stays

higher than 350 ppm for a prolonged period of time (it's already at 390.18 ppm) it will spell disaster for humanity as we know it."

But behind closed doors, it sings from a different song-sheet. Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity, in Arizona, which refuses funding from polluters, has seen this from the inside. He told me, "There is a gigantic political schizophrenia here. The Sierra Club will send out e-mails to its membership saying we have to get to 350 parts per million and the science requires it. But in reality they fight against any sort of emission cuts that would get us anywhere near that goal."

For example, in 2009 the EPA moved to regulate greenhouse gases under the Clean Air Act, which requires the agency to ensure that the levels of pollutants in the air are "compatible with human safety"--a change the Sierra Club supported. But the Center for Biological Diversity petitioned the EPA to take this commitment seriously and do what the climate science says really is "compatible with human safety": restore us to 350 ppm. Suckling explains, "I was amazed to discover the Sierra Club opposed us bitterly. They said it should not be done. In fact, they said that if we filed a lawsuit to make EPA do it, they would probably intervene on EPA's side. They threw climate science out the window."

Indeed, the Sierra Club's chief climate counsel, David Bookbinder, ridiculed the center's attempts to make 350 ppm a legally binding requirement. He said it was "truly a pointless exercise" and headed to "well-deserved bureaucratic oblivion"--and would only add feebly that "350 may be where the planet should end up," but not by this mechanism. He was quoted in the media alongside Bush administration officials who shared his contempt for the center's proposal.

Why would the Sierra Club oppose a measure designed to prevent environmental collapse? The Club didn't respond to my requests for an explanation. Climate scientists are bemused. When asked about this, Hansen said, "I find the behavior of most environmental NGOs to be shocking.... I [do] not want to listen to their lame excuses for their abominable behavior." It is easy to see why groups like Conservation International, which take money from Big Oil and Big Coal, take backward positions. Their benefactors will lose their vast profits if we make the transition away from fossil fuels--so they fall discreetly silent when it matters. But while the Sierra Club accepts money from some corporations, it doesn't take cash from the very worst polluters. So why is it, on this, the biggest issue of all, just as bad?

It seems its leaders have come to see the world through the funnel of the US Senate and what legislation it can be immediately coaxed to pass. They say there is no point advocating a strategy that senators will reject flat-out. They have to be "politically realistic" and try to advocate something that will appeal to Blue Dog Democrats.

This focus on inch-by-inch reform would normally be understandable: every movement for change needs a reformist wing. But the existence of tipping points--which have been overwhelmingly proven by the climate science--makes a mockery of this baby-steps approach to global warming. If we exceed the safe amount of warming gases in the atmosphere, then the earth will release its massive carbon stores and we will have runaway warming. After that, any

cuts we introduce will be useless. You can't jump halfway across a chasm: you still fall to your death. It is all or disaster.

By definition, if a bill can pass through today's corrupt Senate, then it will not be enough to prevent catastrophic global warming. Why? Because the bulk of the Senate--including many Democrats--is owned by Big Oil and Big Coal. They call the shots with their campaign donations. Senators will not defy their benefactors. So if you call only for measures the Senate could pass tomorrow, you are in effect giving a veto over the position of the green groups to the fossil fuel industry.

Yet the "conservation" groups in particular believe they are being hardheaded in adhering to the "political reality" that says only cuts far short of the climate science are possible. They don't seem to realize that in a conflict between political reality and physical reality, physical reality will prevail. The laws of physics are more real and permanent than any passing political system. You can't stand at the edge of a rising sea and say, "Sorry, the swing states don't want you to happen today. Come back in fifty years."

A classic case study of this inside-the-Beltway mentality can be found in a blog written by David Donniger, policy director of the climate center at the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), after the collapse of the Copenhagen climate summit. The summit ended with no binding agreement for any country to limit its emissions of greenhouse gases, and a disregard of the scientific targets. Given how little time we have, this was shocking. Donniger was indeed furious--with the people who were complaining. He decried the "howls of disaster in European media, and rather tepid reviews in many U.S. stories." He said people were "holding the accord to standards and expectations that no outcome achievable at Copenhagen could reasonably have met--or even should have met."

This last sentence is very revealing. Donniger believes it is "reasonable" to act within the constraints of the US and global political systems, and unreasonable to act within the constraints of the climate science. The greens, he suggests, are wrong to say their standards should have been met at this meeting; the deal is "not weak." After fifteen climate summits, after twenty years of increasingly desperate scientific warnings about warming, with the tipping points drawing ever closer, he says the world's leaders shouldn't be on a faster track and that the European and American media should stop whining. Remember, this isn't an oil company exec talking; this is a senior figure at one of the leading environmental groups.

There is a different way for green groups to behave. If the existing political system is so corrupt that it can't maintain basic human safety, they should be encouraging their members to take direct action to break the Big Oil deadlock. This is precisely what has happened in Britain--and it has worked. Direct-action protesters have physically blocked coal trains and new airport runways for the past five years--and as a result, airport runway projects that looked certain are falling by the wayside, and politicians have become very nervous about authorizing any new coal power plants [see Maria Margaronis, "The UK's Climate Rebels," December 7, 2009]. The more mainstream British climate groups are not reluctant to condemn the Labour government's environmental failings in the strongest possible language. Compare the success of this direct confrontation with the utter failure of the US groups' work-within-the-system approach. As

James Hansen has pointed out, the British model offers real hope rather than false hope. There are flickers of it already--there is an inspiring grassroots movement against coal power plants in the United States, supported by the Sierra Club--but it needs to be supercharged.

By pretending the broken system can work--and will work, in just a moment, after just one more Democratic win, or another, or another--the big green groups are preventing the appropriate response from concerned citizens, which is fury at the system itself. They are offering placebos to calm us down when they should be conducting and amplifying our anger at this betrayal of our safety by our politicians. The US climate bills are long-term plans: they lock us into a woefully inadequate schedule of carbon cuts all the way to 2050. So when green groups cheer them on, they are giving their approval to a path to destruction--and calling it progress.

Even within the constraints of the existing system, their approach makes for poor political tactics. As Suckling puts it, "They have an incredibly naïve political posture. Every time the Dems come out with a bill, no matter how appallingly short of the scientific requirements it is, they cheer it and say it's great. So the politicians have zero reason to strengthen that bill. If you've already announced that you've been captured, then they don't need to give you anything. Compare that to how the Chamber of Commerce or the fossil fuel corporations behave. They stake out a position on the far right, and they demand the center move their way. It works for them. They act like real activists, while the supposed activists stand at the back of the room and cheer at whatever bone is thrown their way."

The green groups have become "the mouthpiece of the Democratic Party, regardless of how pathetic the party's position is," Suckling says in despair. "They have no bottom line, no interest in scientifically defensible greenhouse gas emission limitations and no willingness to pressure the White House or Congress."

It will seem incredible at first, but this is--in fact--too generous. At Copenhagen, some of the US conservation groups demanded a course of action that will lead to environmental disaster--and financial benefits for themselves. It is a story buried in details and acronyms, but the stakes are the future of civilization.

When the rich countries say they are going to cut their emissions, it sounds to anyone listening as if they are going to ensure that there are fewer coal stations and many more renewable energy stations at home. So when Obama says there will be a 3 percent cut by 2020--a tenth of what the science requires--you assume the United States will emit 3 percent fewer warming gases. But that's not how it works. Instead, they are saying they will trawl across the world to find the cheapest place to cut emissions, and pay for it to happen there.

Today, the chopping down of the world's forests is causing 12 percent of all emissions of greenhouse gases, because trees store carbon dioxide. So the rich governments say that if they pay to stop some of that, they can claim it as part of their cuts. A program called REDD--Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation--has been set up to do just that. In theory, it sounds fine. The atmosphere doesn't care where the fall in emissions comes from, as

long as it happens in time to stop runaway warming. A ton of carbon in Brazil enters the atmosphere just as surely as a ton in Texas.

If this argument sounds deceptively simple, that's because it is deceptive. In practice, the REDD program is filled with holes large enough to toss a planet through.

To understand the trouble with REDD, you have to look at the place touted as a model of how the system is supposed to work. Thirteen years ago in Bolivia, a coalition of The Nature Conservancy and three big-time corporate polluters--BP, Pacificorp and American Electric Power (AEP)--set up a protected forest in Bolivia called the Noel Kempff Climate Action Project. They took 3.9 million acres of tropical forest and said they would clear out the logging companies and ensure that the forest remained standing. They claimed this plan would keep 55 million tons of CO₂ locked out of the air--which would, in time, justify their pumping an extra 55 million tons into the air from their coal and oil operations. AEP's internal documents boasted: "The Bolivian project...could save AEP billions of dollars in pollution controls."

Greenpeace sent an investigative team to see how it had turned out. The group found, in a report released last year, that some of the logging companies had simply picked up their machinery and moved to the next rainforest over. An employee for San Martin, one of the biggest logging companies in the area, bragged that nobody had ever asked if they had stopped. This is known as "leakage": one area is protected from logging, but the logging leaks a few miles away and continues just the same.

In fact, one major logging organization took the money it was paid by the project to quit and used it to cut down another part of the forest. The project had to admit it had saved 5.8 million tons or less--a tenth of the amount it had originally claimed. Greenpeace says even this is a huge overestimate. It's a Potemkin forest for the polluters.

When you claim an offset and it doesn't work, the climate is screwed twice over--first because the same amount of forest has been cut down after all, and second because a huge amount of additional warming gases has been pumped into the atmosphere on the assumption that the gases will be locked away by the now-dead trees. So the offset hasn't prevented emissions--it's doubled them. And as global warming increases, even the small patches of rainforest that have technically been preserved are doomed. Why? Rainforests have a very delicate humid ecosystem, and their moisture smothers any fire that breaks out, but with 2 degrees of warming, they begin to dry out--and burn down. Climatologist Wolfgang Cramer says we "risk losing the entire Amazon" if global warming reaches 4 degrees.

And the news gets worse. Carbon dioxide pumped out of a coal power station stays in the atmosphere for millennia--so to genuinely "offset" it, you have to guarantee that a forest will stand for the same amount of time. This would be like Julius Caesar in 44 BC making commitments about what Barack Obama will do today--and what some unimaginable world leader will do in 6010. In practice, we can't even guarantee that the forests will still be standing in fifty years, given the very serious risk of runaway warming.

You would expect the major conservation groups to be railing against this absurd system and demanding a serious alternative built on real science. But on Capitol Hill and at Copenhagen, these groups have been some of the most passionate defenders of carbon offsetting. They say that, in "political reality," this is the only way to raise the cash for the rainforests, so we will have to work with it. But this is a strange kind of compromise--since it doesn't actually work.

In fact, some of the big groups lobbied to make the protections weaker, in a way that will cause the rainforests to die faster. To understand why, you have to grasp a distinction that may sound technical at first but is crucial. When you are paying to stop deforestation, there are different ways of measuring whether you are succeeding. You can take one small "subnational" area--like the Noel Kempff Climate Action Project--and save that. Or you can look at an entire country, and try to save a reasonable proportion of its forests. National targets are much better, because the leakage is much lower. With national targets, it's much harder for a logging company simply to move a few miles up the road and carry on: the move from Brazil to Congo or Indonesia is much heftier, and fewer loggers will make it.

Simon Lewis, a forestry expert at Leeds University, says, "There is no question that national targets are much more effective at preventing leakage and saving forest than subnational targets."

Yet several groups--like TNC and Conservation International--have lobbied for subnational targets to be at the core of REDD and the US climate bills. Thanks in part to their efforts, this has become official US government policy, and is at the heart of the Waxman-Markey bill. The groups issued a joint statement with some of the worst polluters--AEP, Duke Energy, the El Paso Corporation--saying they would call for subnational targets now, while vaguely aspiring to national targets at some point down the line. They want to preserve small patches (for a short while), not a whole nation's rainforest.

An insider who is employed by a leading green group and has seen firsthand how this works explained the groups' motivation: "It's because they will generate a lot of revenue this way. If there are national targets, the money runs through national governments. If there are subnational targets, the money runs through the people who control those forests--and that means TNC, Conservation International and the rest. Suddenly, these forests they run become assets, and they are worth billions in a carbon market as offsets. So they have a vested financial interest in offsetting and in subnational targets--even though they are much more environmentally damaging than the alternatives. They know it. It's shocking."

What are they doing to ensure that this policy happens--and the money flows their way? Another source, from a green group that refuses corporate cash, describes what she has witnessed behind closed doors. "In their lobbying, they always talk up the need for subnational projects and offsetting at every turn and say they're great. They don't mention national targets or the problems with offsetting at all. They also push it through their corporate partners, who have an army of lobbyists, [which are] far bigger than any environmental group. They promote their own interests as a group, not the interests of the environment." They have been caught, he says, "REDD-handed, too many times."

TNC and Conservation International admit they argue for subnational accounting, but they claim this is merely a "steppingstone" to national targets. Becky Chacko, director of climate policy at Conservation International, tells me, "Our only interest is to keep forests standing. We don't [take this position] because it generates revenue for us. We don't think it's an evil position to say money has to flow in order to keep forests standing, and these market mechanisms can contribute the money for that."

Yet when I ask her to explain how Conservation International justifies the conceptual holes in the entire system of offsetting, her answers become halting. She says the "issues of leakage and permanence" have been "resolved." But she will not say how. How can you guarantee a forest will stand for millenniums, to offset carbon emissions that warm the planet for millenniums? "We factor that risk into our calculations," she says mysteriously. She will concede that national accounting is "more rigorous" and says Conservation International supports achieving it "eventually."

There is a broad rumble of anger across the grassroots environmental movement at this position. "At Copenhagen, I couldn't believe what I was seeing," says Kevin Koenig of Amazon Watch, an organization that sides with indigenous peoples in the Amazon basin to preserve their land. "These groups are positioning themselves to be the middlemen in a carbon market. They are helping to set up, in effect, a global system of carbon laundering...that will give the impression of action, but no substance. You have to ask--are these conservation groups at all? They look much more like industry front groups to me."

So it has come to this. After decades of slowly creeping corporate corruption, some of the biggest environmental groups have remade themselves in the image of their corporate backers: they are putting profit before planet. They are supporting a system they know will lead to ecocide, because more revenue will run through their accounts, for a while, as the collapse occurs. At Copenhagen, their behavior was so shocking that Lumumba Di-Aping, the lead negotiator for the G-77 bloc of the world's rainforest-rich but cash-poor countries, compared them to the CIA at the height of the cold war, sabotaging whole nations.

How do we retrieve a real environmental movement, in the very short time we have left? Charles Komanoff, who worked as a consultant for the Natural Resources Defense Council for thirty years, says, "We're close to a civil war in the environmental movement. For too long, all the oxygen in the room has been sucked out by this beast of these insider groups, who achieve almost nothing.... We need to create new organizations that represent the fundamentals of environmentalism and have real goals."

Some of the failing green groups can be reformed from within. The Sierra Club is a democratic organization, with the leadership appointed by its members. There are signs that members are beginning to put the organization right after the missteps of the past few years. Carl Pope is being replaced by Mike Brune, formerly of the Rainforest Action Network--a group much more aligned with the radical demands of the climate science. But other organizations--like Conservation International and TNC--seem incapable of internal reform and simply need to be

shunned. They are not part of the environmental movement: they are polluter-funded leeches sucking on the flesh of environmentalism, leaving it weaker and depleted.

Already, shining alternatives are starting to rise up across America. In just a year, the brilliant 350.org has formed a huge network of enthusiastic activists who are demanding our politicians heed the real scientific advice--not the parody of it offered by the impostors. They have to displace the corrupt conservationists as the voice of American environmentalism, fast.

This will be a difficult and ugly fight, when we need all our energy to take on the forces of ecocide. But these conservation groups increasingly resemble the forces of ecocide draped in a green cloak. If we don't build a real, unwavering environmental movement soon, we had better get used to a new sound--of trees crashing down and an ocean rising, followed by the muffled, private applause of America's "conservationists."