
Edward Humes

Eco Barons

ISBN13: 9780061350290

Q: What prompted you to tackle this subject?

A: The environmental "story"—which is so big it includes pollution, climate change, extinctions, wilderness loss, deforestation, fossil fuel dependence, mountaintop removal, the dying oceans, energy, air quality, sprawl, globalization, industrial agriculture, and much, much more—is clearly the story of our age. It is our generation's toughest challenge, our biggest threat, our greatest opportunity. The decisions we make in this area in the next ten, five, even two years, as individuals and as a country, will profoundly affect our future, and that of our children. I felt I could add something to the telling of this immense story, something mostly missing: an approach that humanizes it, that's character-driven, hopeful, graspable, and that provides a counter to the paralysis many feel at the scope of the challenge before us. That's what drew me to these men and women I call Eco Barons, because they are the opposite of the old Robber Barons, selfless and impassioned visionaries who are making a difference. They show the rest of us what is possible—and that you don't have to be a billionaire to make a difference. Many of the Eco Barons I chose to write about are far from wealthy, and none of them started out that way. Yet they all have had tremendous impact.

Q: What surprised you the most during your research process?

A: One surprise was learning that some of the most hyped "solutions" to environmental and energy crises are really making things worse, not better. Hydrogen, to cite just one example, has been touted as the fuel of the future, so clean that burning it leaves only water vapor. But as one of my Eco Barons, Professor Andy Frank, explained to me, no one mentions that *obtaining* hydrogen is a terribly dirty process that consumes more energy than it produces. It's really just a bait and switch: Instead of building practical electric and hybrid vehicles, the technology for which has existed for twenty years, Detroit focused on researching (but never marketing) an essentially unattainable hydrogen system. That allowed them to continue business as usual, selling SUVs and Hummers that get 11 miles to the gallon. And we've all seen how well that's worked out for the near-bankrupt American auto industry.

The other big surprise was tracing the history of Washington's role in protecting (or failing to protect) the environment and our energy security. Ever since Reagan, environmental regulation has been portrayed as a burdensome, anti-business, politically liberal impediment to commonsense economic growth. This perception has achieved the status of conventional wisdom, and it was the Bush Administration's mantra as it flouted one environmental law after another for eight years. But what I learned in researching *Eco Barons* is that this mantra is nothing more than rewritten history. Most of our big environmental laws passed in the 1970s and were signed—and championed—by a conservative president, Richard Nixon. The supposedly liberal Endangered Species Act of 1973 was a bipartisan measure that passed *unanimously* in the Senate—a Senate then inhabited by Barry Goldwater—and with only a few dissents in the House. In the seventies under Carter, there were tax breaks and other incentives to stimulate solar, wind and geothermal energy industries, and by the time Carter left office, America led the world in those technologies. We had a thriving green industry that we can now only dream about, not because government was in the way but because government got them started. Then Reagan killed those programs, ripped Carter's solar panels off the White House, surrendered America's lead in solar and wind, and used his regulatory powers to relax fuel efficiency standards, encouraging continued production of gas-guzzlers. That's a surprising bit of history no one much talks about. But it marks a critical and harmful turning point for climate change and energy security from which we have yet to recover, arguably Reagan's most momentous act.

Q: Why has the Bush Administration been so rabidly anti-environment for the past eight years? What transgressions have they committed that are most egregious?

A: Emulating Reagan's anti-regulatory stance—it was Reagan who once told Americans (falsely) that trees cause more pollution than cars—George Bush filled his administration's environmental posts with industry representatives and deregulation advocates. Bush and his appointees were ideologically opposed to the environmental measures they were supposed to enforce, rejecting, among others, the notion that protection of endangered species and wilderness should take precedence over economic concerns. The problem they are rejecting the core principal behind such measures as the Endangered Species Act, which recognizes that shopping malls come and go, but extinction is forever. This principal is the reason why, for example, the Bald Eagle, our national symbol, is still alive and thriving. And rejection of this principal is why the Bush Administration was in constant violation of environmental law, and constantly at war (and, after many delays, almost always losing) in court. Every species listed as endangered over the last eight years—just over sixty—was protected only because Bush was sued and lost. The administration was compelled to accept the reality of global warming because of litigation, and it was ordered by the U.S. Supreme Court to consider greenhouse gases to be a pollutant, something Bush had refused to do. The Center for Biological Diversity, whose founders I profile in *Eco Barons*, was chiefly responsible for holding the administration's feet to the fire on these issues.

The most egregious environmental transgressions of the Bush Administration revolved around its suppression and politicization of science in order to favor development over conservation, deny the threat of global warming, minimize threats to water and air quality, expand the devastating practice of mountaintop removal to extract coal, and cover up extinction threats to endangered species. The goal was to open up public lands to private exploitation without triggering environmental and species protections. To do this, scientific reports were censored, rewritten or falsified by political appointees with no scientific training; scientists were bullied, threatened and suspended; reports mandated by Congress were buried; and documents were leaked to private companies to help them sue the very agencies that leaked the information. Again, it was the Center for Biological Diversity that played a key role in exposing this scandal and the administration's manipulation of science in more than fifty endangered species cases.

Q: What are the most destructive eleventh-hour rules and regulations pushed through by Bush? How difficult will it be to overturn or undo these acts?

A: The worst of these last-minute rules adopted in the last days of the Bush presidency sought to gut the Endangered Species Act by removing a requirement that government agencies consult with federal wildlife biologists before approving a project that could affect endangered species. Under the new rules, agencies that want to move forward with a project can consult with themselves—turning a scientific question into a political and bureaucratic one. The new rules also would remove global warming—a major cause of extinctions—from the list of possible extinction threats that can be considered under the Endangered Species Act.

Some of these midnight rules will take years to undo because of the lengthy federal rule-making process, but others can be undone by a simple executive order from the new president. Some of the most egregious could be nullified by Congress, thanks to a Clinton-era law championed, ironically, by Newt Gingrich and his fellow Republicans, which allows for filibuster-proof regulatory review. And many of the new rules have led to lawsuits, including the changes to the Endangered Species Act.

Q: How worried should we all be about the planet's future?

A: The message of Eco Barons like Doug Tompkins, the founder of The North Face and Esprit and a world-leading conservationist, is that it is late, but not too late, so long as America gears up to lead the world, as we did in defending freedom during World War II and in pioneering space travel in the sixties. But it will take that level of commitment to slow global warming and to wean ourselves and the world from addiction to oil and coal. The consequences would likely be dire otherwise. Tompkins says we have to redefine our approach from the old way of thinking—that if it's good for man, it's good for the world—and flip it to: if it's good for the world, it's good for mankind. Sweden, with its nationwide embrace of the "natural step" philosophy, has moved its economy and government toward sustainability and protection of nature with spectacular results—prosperity coupled with the lowest carbon footprint among developed countries. American could learn much from this model.

Q: Is offshore drilling really the solution to our oil addiction? Or does the disruption to the eco-system outweigh any potential gains?

A: This is another bait-and-switch distraction from the main task at hand: channeling our resources and manpower into developing alternatives to oil. The amount of oil that can be obtained from drilling in sensitive offshore habitats, and in other protected places, such as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, is minuscule and would have no meaningful impact on our supplies. But it could be devastating to endangered whales, penguins, polar bears and fisheries on which many species. Including humans, depend. Meanwhile, a real commitment to energy conservation in American homes and businesses could save much more energy than could ever be found through offshore drilling.

Q: One of the Eco Barons you showcase, Professor Andy Frank, has been working for decades to perfect a plug-in hybrid car. Why has Detroit been so ambivalent about this innovation, and will their current financial woes finally force them to embrace it?

A: As Andy Frank sees it, Detroit has been slow to embrace electric and plug-in hybrid cars out of fear of change, out of arrogance, and because selling a clean, zero-emissions electric car that really works would make all their other products look dirty and inefficient. This is why the Big Three has continually claimed that electric cars were impractical, even though Frank has been building great prototypes for years (sometimes under contract with the same Detroit automakers). The truth is that technology is no longer a barrier, and that practical electric and plug-in hybrid cars could have long ago been the standard had Detroit put its marketing muscle behind the idea: A century ago, the internal combustion engine won because gas was cheap and plentiful while electricity was expensive and scarce. Today that situation is reversed: Electricity is far cheaper and far more plentiful. It is also far more efficient than gasoline: the typical Detroit car wastes a staggering 80 percent of the energy produced by burning gas; an electric car uses a full 90 percent of its battery output. Detroit automakers chose a policy of delay, political lobbying, heavy marketing and lawsuits to avoid retooling to produce electrics and plug-in hybrids and to obtain from the Bush Administration large tax-breaks for the purchase gas guzzlers like the Hummer with little or no incentives for electric and hybrid vehicles.

Q: Obama has selected a group of heavy hitters for key environmental jobs and even created new White House-based positions. What are the top priorities for this team?

A: Barack Obama has said he believes our economic recovery and national security depend upon growing a vibrant green economy and restoring American leadership in renewable energy and alternative transportation. This would accomplish multiple critical goals: create jobs that cannot be exported, begin to wean Americans from foreign oil dependence, and help roll back carbon emissions. The last president to take meaningful steps to make renewable energy a national priority was Jimmy Carter. An Obama Administration is expected to reverse most Bush environmental and endangered species policies and to champion meaningful curbs to greenhouse gas emissions.

Q: Why does America lag so far behind the rest of the industrialized world in the global warming battle?

A: It's difficult for Americans to view our country as failing to lead the world in vital areas, but when it comes to reigning in global warming and fossil fuel dependence, we have truly relinquished our role as world leader—technologically, politically and morally. Even China has more stringent automobile fuel efficiency standards. Part of the problem is the amorphous nature of global warming—it is slow, inexorable, not easy to perceive as a clear and present danger, lacking the immediacy of a terrorist attack or a hurricane. Global warming is more like cancer—insidious, systemic, creeping below the radar, a slow-motion disaster, and therefore easy to ignore or dismiss. Another part of the problem is the sort of lifestyle change required by a commitment to slowing global warming: less reliance on driving cars and more use of public transportation, walking and biking; a resurgence of local rather than global economies (remember when we only ate fruits and vegetables in season?); denser real estate development and less sprawl; architecture that emphasizes energy efficiency rather than aesthetics; composting toilets rather than flushing with water. It's a long list, and most of us have shown little appetite for such disruptive change. Meanwhile, we remain the most wasteful country in the world in terms of per capita energy use and production of waste; we lag far behind Mexico, to cite just one example, on the simple matter of switching out inefficient incandescent light bulbs for compact fluorescent bulbs. Finally, there is the attitude that Ronald Reagan brought to Americans: his notion that government is the problem, not the solution. For the last three decades, this has resonated with the country's spirit of individuality, but it also ignores the fact that government programs such as the WPA, Social Security, Medicare, public schools, and the World War II-era GI Bill played the dominant role in fostering the prosperity, home ownership, widespread college education, and expansion of the middle class we now take for granted. Just as it required a robust government role to open up the housing market and the colleges after World War II, to reach the moon in the sixties, and to save creatures like the Bald Eagle in the seventies, such a government commitment will again be required to defeat this new enemy, global warming. Market-based solutions will help, but just as they are not enough to win a war, neither will they stop the worst effects of climate change. Burt's Bees founder and Eco Baron Roxanne Quimby told me she believes Americans will have to experience a humbling climate-based disaster of epic proportions before we wake up and take action. She may be right, but I hope not.

Q: Eco Baron Terry Tamminen developed a groundbreaking climate change program in California that tackles fuel efficiency, tailpipe emissions, alternative energy, water quality, and pollution. This sweeping plan has subsequently been copied by many other states. Can his model work on a national level?

A: It is working on a national and international level (California and other states are joining cap and trade programs with Canada and Europe), as a majority of states, tired of inaction and obstruction by the Bush Administration, essentially sidestepped Washington in the global warming battle. But concerted federal action is required as well, and with so many states on board and a new president in the White House, the tensions that existed between the states and the feds on the issue have rapidly faded.

Q: An Eco Baron like Carole Allen, a widowed single mom who took on the powerful shrimping industry to save a rare sea turtle, shows that ordinary folks can make a tremendous difference. Along those lines, what steps can every American take to save money and lower his or her carbon footprint?

A: Here's ten good ones, courtesy of Terry Tamminen:

1. Adjust your thermostat by two degrees (cooler in winter, warmer in summer), to save one ton of greenhouse gas emissions a year.
2. Switch out incandescent light bulbs for compact fluorescents and save three hundred pounds of greenhouse gases *per bulb*. Switching ten bulbs saves 1.5 tons of greenhouse gases and cuts the household electric bill by seventy-five dollars a year.
3. Insulate your hot water heater with a simple thermal "jacket" and save 550 pounds of greenhouse gases a year.
4. Replace air-conditioner filters to save 350 pounds of greenhouse gas emissions a year.
5. Unplug "vampire" electronics that suck up electricity even when turned off—TVs, VCRs, DVD players, cable boxes, chargers—anything that is instant-on or that has a blinking light. The typical household will save a half ton of greenhouse gases just by making sure "off" is *really* off.
6. Wash clothes in cold water and save one ton of greenhouse gases.
7. Dry clothes on clotheslines and save nearly one and a half tons of greenhouse gases.
8. Take mass transit or telecommute once a week to save one ton of greenhouse gases.
9. Check tire inflation every week to increase fuel efficiency by three percent and save a quarter ton of greenhouse gases (as most drivers have chronically under-inflated tires, which makes the engine work harder and burn more gas).
10. Lose ten pounds—the average weight gain for Americans in the past ten years. Airlines use 350 million more gallons of jet fuel every year hauling around those extra pounds.

Bonus items to substitute where necessary: eat fresh food, not frozen (fresh consumes ninety percent less energy); eat less beef (the production of beef, pound for pound, uses up more energy than any other food); avoid bottled water and disposable grocery bags; buy local produce and other foods to avoid the 1,300 miles the average American plate travels on its way to the dinner table, using fossil fuels all the way.

More substantial steps: plant a vegetable garden, weatherize your home, install a solar water heating system or solar electric panels.