

Liberty and the Environment: Friend or Foe?

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Is liberty the cause of, or solution to, our environmental woes? Free market environmentalists champion economic liberty as the best means for achieving an eco-friendly future. Although not without appeal, I criticize this libertarian approach. I offer a liberal alternative that better mobilizes state respect for citizens' liberties toward environmentalist ends.

Keywords

[liberalism](#), [free market environmentalism](#), [eco-relational pluralism](#), [developmentalism](#), [sustainability](#)

Most readers will readily accept the premise that contemporary society is in the midst of an environmental crisis. As Eileen Crist (2019) describes it, "the richness of the living world is coming undone as the human juggernaut eclipses the stupendous diversity of our only cohort in the universe, turning the Earth into a biologically impoverished human colony" (p. 12). The threat of "human supremacy," as she calls it (Crist, 2019, p. 21), is plain to see. Hence, it is unnecessary to wade through the litany of studies and statistics demonstrating rates of deforestation, desertification, sea-level rise, ocean acidification, global warming, etc. It is, however, helpful to point to two recent reports illustrating the severity of the issue. First, E. O. Wilson (2018) estimates that during the past fifty years, more than half of the Earth's wild animals have disappeared. If current trends of environmental degradation continue, then, by the end of the twenty-first

century, more than half of the *remaining* species of plants and animals will have gone extinct. Second, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) *Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* (2019) finds that approximately 75 percent of the Earth's land surface and 66 percent of ocean area are being severely altered, degraded, or used in a fundamentally unsustainable manner.



Recent reports by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) reveal that the land surface and ocean areas of the Earth continue to be utilized unsustainably and subjected to profound change, destruction, and degradation.

Photo courtesy Getty Images.

The situation appears dire. But what is causing it? Many theorists blame the dominant sociopolitical philosophy of the day—*liberalism*. They worry there is no way of reconciling liberalism's core tenets, particularly its respect for individual property rights and personal autonomy, the rule of law, democratic self-governance, and state neutrality, with the environmentalist goal of halting ecological devastation. Andrew Vincent (1998) argues:

If the key values and aspirations of much contemporary liberal and environmental thought are compared then the prognosis looks dismal. There are implicit tensions over questions of the self, freedom, tolerance,

personal rights, work, markets, property ownership and even the character of our civil existence. For much environmental thought, it is the very values and practices of liberalism which now constitute the supreme environmental danger (p. 456).

Critics such as Vincent claim that liberalism, as the philosophical basis of our political systems, functions to obscure human dependence on nature and dissuades us from establishing eco-friendly values, institutions, practices, and policies. They furthermore worry that following the liberal ideal of state neutrality in the protection of citizens' liberties would prevent the state from pursuing environmentalist goals. This article aims to defend liberalism as a viable framework for confronting our ecological crises by disambiguating liberal environmentalism from the kind of *libertarian* (a.k.a. neoliberal) environmentalism that has become increasingly prominent in global institutions (e.g., World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization) since the 1980s.

This article begins by analyzing this dominant libertarian/neoliberal approach known as free market environmentalism, which seeks to unleash market forces in service of environmentalist aims. After identifying several issues with the free market approach, the article offers an alternative theoretical framework based on the classical liberal tenet of state neutrality, eco-relational pluralism, which conceives liberal pluralism as a means of promoting and protecting nonexploitative relationships with the natural world.

Free Market Environmentalism

Free market environmentalism, sometimes called neoliberal/libertarian environmentalism or eco-capitalism, emphasizes the role of economic liberty, private property rights, and the rule of law in incentivizing ecological stewardship (Anderson & Leal, 1998). Bill Wirtz (2017) explains how the framework “derives its philosophy from the classical liberal movement...[and] the theories of liberal authors such as Friedrich Hayek, Ronald Coase, Murray Rothbard, Milton Friedman or Adam Smith” (pp. 31–32). This demonstrates how the term “liberal” is ambiguous since it is precisely the perspectives of libertarian theorists, such as Friedman and Hayek, that preeminent liberal political thinkers (e.g., John Rawls, Richard Dworkin, Martha Nussbaum) reject. While liberalism sometimes is construed broadly to include libertarian frameworks, this article maintains that such

an expansion is conceptually misguided.

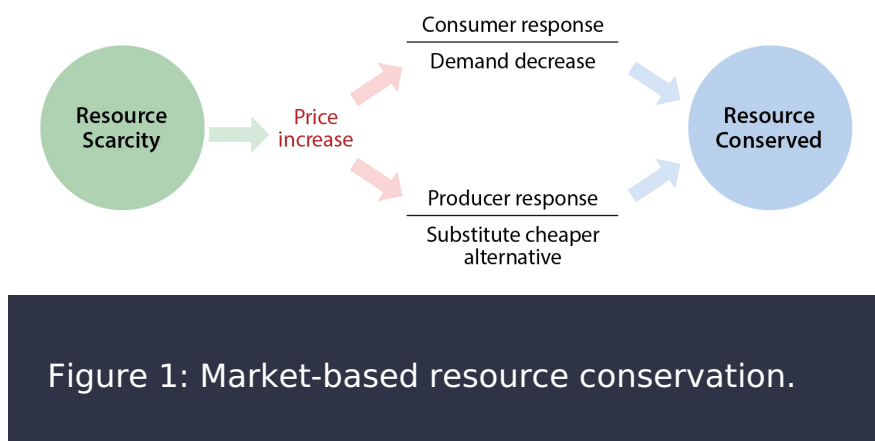
Free market environmentalists believe that open-access problems resulting from ill-defined private property rights are responsible for many of the environmental issues that society currently faces. They assert that government regulation of natural resources creates uncertainty regarding ownership, causing a reduction in value, as well as misuse. For instance, when Kenya attempted to protect its zebras by banning sports hunting in 1977, it surprisingly led to a *decline* in the country's overall zebra population (Schmidtz, 1997). Ranchers who once sold hunting permits for zebras on their land were forced to graze more cattle to make a profit, which meant less habitat for zebras to graze and flourish. David Schmidtz (1997) summarizes, "the ban transformed zebra: not from crops into sacred objects but from crops into weeds" (p. 329).

The zebra example highlights what free market environmentalists take to be the fundamental problem with increased government regulation: central planners cannot foresee the consequences of their policy decisions nor recognize the costs of social coordination. Free market environmentalists argue that governments ought to instead allow individuals the economic freedom to actualize their desires through unfettered voluntary exchanges that drive prudent resource management. Clare Brown and Walter Block (2019) explain, "through competition in the free market, those who succeed in putting resources to their most valued use are rewarded by profits, and those who fail are penalized by losses. Government decision-making receives none of these signals that profits, and losses provide because they are not subject to such direct and impactful consumer assessment of their activities" (p. 119).

Imagine, for example, a person who owns a pond. Through entrepreneurial effort, they begin to capitalize on the pond by charging fishermen to access it. If the pond became polluted or empty of fish, fishermen would no longer be willing to pay for access. The owner is thus economically incentivized to prevent such environmental harm from occurring. In other words, the property rights to the pond, in a free market economy, motivate its environmental protection.

Free market environmentalists claim that internalizing benefits and burdens to the market system will make self-interested actors more likely to engage in farsighted behavior than policymakers who have no personal stake in the outcome. If property rights are well-defined, enforced, and transferable, then society will more efficiently confront trade-offs in natural resource use. If a natural resource becomes scarce, for example, prices will rise, and consumers will adjust by shifting consumption to

comparable substitutes (see Figure 1). Suppliers will adjust by minimizing use and developing other goods and services. Free market forces can, in this way, work to conserve precious natural resources better than top-down regulation.



Moreover, even if well-defined property rights do not presently exist for a particular natural resource (e.g., breathable air, relaxing ocean breezes, or scenic views), a market solution conserving them as commodities might still develop in the future. Free market environmentalists point out that previously unowned natural goods tend to become new forms of private property as changes in technology, preferences, and prices provide incentives for entrepreneurs to develop new products. For instance, entrepreneurs are currently finding ways to take discarded biowaste and transform it into renewable energy and organic fertilizer. Innovative practices like this one exemplify the free market environmentalist vision that creative solutions from entrepreneurs will bring about a more eco-friendly future, such as by increasing the privatization of natural goods in novel ways and attempting to satisfy environmentally concerned consumers.

Although free market environmentalism represents the dominant global institutional approach to environmental problems, many contend that it has failed to deliver on its promises. Alexander Stoner (2021) laments, “environmental degradation has not only increased but accelerated throughout the neoliberal period. The persistent failures of market mechanisms, technological optimism, and market-oriented environmental governance, expose the inability of neoliberal environmentalism to adequately address our contemporary ecological predicament” (p. 492). If Stoner is correct that free market environmentalism has failed in its mission to stem the tide of destruction and protect the natural world, one must then ask, why?

Problems with Free Market Environmentalism

Markets have found solutions to many environmental issues: air quality is bad, so companies begin selling bottled air canisters; there is too much noise, so companies invent noise-canceling headphones; there is an oil spill, so entrepreneurial hairdressers manufacture giant pillows stuffed with human hair to absorb it. But the idea that markets can work to prevent, halt, and ameliorate all forms of environmental harm seems far-fetched. It appears, rather, that market-driven preference satisfaction is often *the cause* of those very harms, e.g., the industrial processes that produced the toxic air pollutants, the noise, and the oil spill, in the first place.

There are several practical reasons why market approaches to environmental problems may fail: actors may be unable to establish a property regime, the regime may be ineffective or poorly enforced, or the accepted property regime may be unconcerned with environmental considerations (Rose, 2009). This article, however, will focus on two underlying theoretical weaknesses of the approach and demonstrate why it does not qualify as a liberal sociopolitical framework: (1) it erodes social solidarity by reducing citizens to consumers, and (2) it pursues economic growth to such an extent that it threatens to undermine key liberal aspirations, such as promoting social welfare, protecting inalienable rights, and fostering autonomy.

The first worry is that free market environmentalism reduces political and moral questions to matters of personal choice and narrow self-interest. Matthew McDonald et al. (2017) claim this transformation has already taken place: “citizenship became conflated with the consumer who was encouraged to pursue their self-interest through economic freedoms conferred by the market in consumer choice” (p. 366). This framing of citizens as consumers only interested in their material interests “atomizes” individual decision-making and dissuades actors from considering broader political questions, such as how their actions impact their community. It encourages citizens to view themselves as in constant competition to maximize their interests rather than cooperative actors working collectively to alter, transform, and improve their society. A sociopolitical framework of this kind is anathema to the central doctrine of liberalism that holds society as a “cooperative venture for mutual advantage” (Rawls, 1999, p. 4).

The second worry is that free market environmentalism's pursuit of "win-win outcomes" through voluntary exchanges relies on economic growth to avoid having to mediate conflicts over scarce resources. In other words, growth is utilized as a means of generating more social resources so that difficult questions of distribution may be skirted. At a certain point, however, further economic growth and expansion may cause more harm than good. As Jonathon Porritt (1984) writes,

There may well have been a time, at the start of the Industrial Revolution, when Adam Smith's assertion that the sum of individual decisions in pursuit of self-interest added up to a pretty fair approximation of public welfare, with the 'invisible hand' of the market ensuring that individualism and the general interest of society were one and the same thing. But in today's crowded, interdependent world, these same individualistic tendencies are beginning to destroy our general interest and thereby harm us all (p. 116).

Essentially, Porritt (1984) argues that free market environmentalism could very well work in a less crowded world where there are always untouched resources ready to be exploited. In a full world, however, this approach to resource management can be devastating, increasing strain on already burdened ecosystems. While the market may offset or correct some environmental issues, there is no guarantee it will correct them all. In many cases, even if a solution is forthcoming, it may be implemented too late, with irreversible damage having already been done.

Free market environmentalists extoll the virtues of innovation and entrepreneurship as a means of creating or at least devising solutions to all our environmental troubles. But despite past successes, there is no assurance that technological solutions will always be forthcoming. A well-managed and sustainable society must plan for the indefinite future. Such preparations are deterred by the assumption that new technologies can be developed to solve any potential environmental problem.

Even if technological solutions can always be devised, one must still ask the question of whether they are desirable. Are the "solutions" offered what communities want or prefer? Once this kind of question begins being asked, it becomes clear that these are matters of political contestation rather than mere consumer preference. Avner de-Shalit (1995) emphasizes that discussions regarding "the state of the environment [are] closely related to our view of 'the

political' and the political process, including the debate over the good life, and that the issue of the environment involves the goals of our political life rather than merely the means of achieving certain goals" (p. 302). Accordingly, one should be hesitant to think the market dictates how society ought to respond to environmental issues.

For instance, some may argue that if there were more roads for people to travel more easily, then individuals would be less stressed. Conversely, others might argue that stress stems from increased noise and the fast-paced rhythm of our lives; therefore, to reduce stress, *fewer* roads should be built. The point is that these two conflicting perspectives are not preferences that can be bargained over but opposite *conceptions of the good life*. Liberalism requires adjudicating these disputes between rival conceptions of the good life in the public sphere instead of abdicating responsibility for political decision-making to market forces.

Eco-Relational Pluralism

A central tenet of liberalism espoused by prominent thinkers (e.g., John Rawls and Joseph Heath) is that states ought to remain neutral in their treatment of various reasonable life plans. The goal of neutrality is meant to ensure that states structure society in a way that is unoppressive and that shows respect for citizens' liberties. In other words, states must avoid undermining citizens' self-conception and autonomy by compelling observance and performance of values they can reasonably choose not to endorse.

Rodeiro (2021, 2022), building on the Rawlsian framework, argues that state neutrality should extend to tolerating and respecting citizens' desire to sustain intimate bonds with specific habitats and natural entities. Many culturally well-established conceptions of the good life prominently feature relationships with the natural world. Martha Nussbaum (2011) acknowledges this fact by including relations with "other species" and "control over one's environment" as two of her central human capabilities, constitutive of a good life (p. 34).

Environmentalists critics of liberalism argue that following the liberal tenet of state neutrality means states would be disempowered from intervening in environmental disputes, resulting in untrammelled environmental destruction carried out by those who value economic growth and development over the preservation of the natural world (Welburn, 2013). This article contends, however, that such concessions to

economic interests imagined by critics would fail to adhere to the ideal of liberal pluralism by intentionally promoting one reasonable conception of the good over others.

People living in the “developed” world frequently assume that nearly all humans alive today derive their sustenance from participating in a globalized, industrialized economy. It is helpful to correct this misconception by acknowledging the multitudes who rely on localized subsistence practices. Glenn Albrecht (2019) estimates that “about half of the world’s population still lives in a small town or rural village and is mainly sustained by its hinterland. These people are already intensely local in their survival orientation and will be highly motivated to protect their patch should the need arise” (p. 173). Many are not only *materially* dependent on their local ecosystem but have their culture, traditions, personal identity, and even religion/spirituality bound up with their natural surroundings as well (see Figure 2). Achieving the liberal ideal of state neutrality requires that states recognize and respect the environmental element in citizens’ reasonable comprehensive doctrines. States must furthermore realize what is *absent* from such citizens’ conceptions of the good.

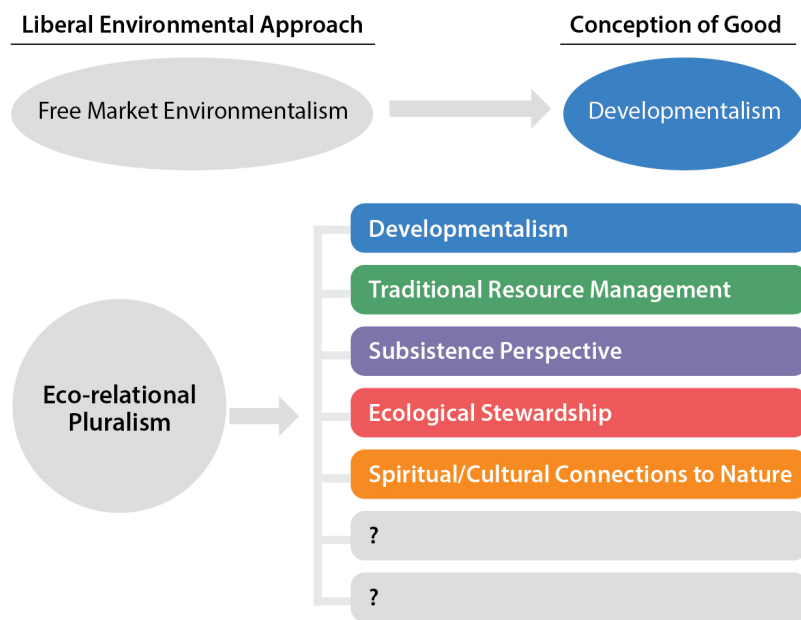


Figure 2: Recognizing eco-relational diversity.

Although policymakers often discuss economic growth and development as if it were a universally affirmed good, this is far from the truth (Escobar, 1995). Increasing economic growth (i.e., expanding the goods and services available in a society) and spurring industrial/technological development has been widely regarded as a morally neutral and uncontroversial means of increasing social well-being. This, however, fails to account for those citizens who are not dependent upon, nor interested in being integrated into, the global industrial system. The culture, values, and way of life of such people undermine the justification for continuously sacrificing ecosystems and disrupting the natural world to maintain and expand industrial society. Continually approving and tolerating environmentally destructive projects and policies would thus constitute an abdication of states' responsibility to remain neutral regarding various reasonable life plans.

Respect for *eco-relational pluralism* demands states remain neutral in tolerating a plurality of relationships with nature. This means that states cannot, in fairness, aim to promote one reasonable comprehensive doctrine at the expense of another (Rawls, 1993). Although this would not invalidate the reasonability of destructive relationships with nature (i.e., viewing nature as nothing more than a stock of resources to be depleted and destroyed for economic gain), it would prevent the state from pervasively privileging and facilitating those relationships as it does currently.



Eco-relational pluralism promotes the notion that humans possess diverse, multifaceted relationships with the natural world; thus, no particular relationship may be sought out or favored over another in an equitable manner.

Photo courtesy Getty Images.

Respect for eco-relational pluralism demands states recognize that pursuing economic growth and development at the expense of ecosystem functioning is not a morally/culturally neutral aim. It is an aim informed by a *particular* conception of the good that is by no means universally shared. The notion of eco-relational pluralism furthermore highlights the developmentalist assumptions underlying free market environmentalism (i.e., the idea that more mining, drilling, building, and manufacturing is indubitably socially beneficial because it expands the economy). Truly liberal environmentalism must recognize that economic growth and development are not an absolute good and thus, in fairness, cannot be intentionally promoted at the expense of other legitimate relationships with the natural world.

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Manuel Rodeiro is an assistant professor of philosophy at Mississippi State University. He received his PhD from the CUNY Graduate Center and his JD from Fordham University School of Law. Rodeiro's research brings liberal political principles and ideals to bear on contemporary social problems through novel theoretical interpretations, such as the notion of eco-relational pluralism. His journal publications can be found in *Environmental Ethics*, *Ethics and the Environment*, and *Environmental Justice*. He teaches the following eco-centric courses: Environmental Ethics; Environmental Law, Policy, and Ethics; and Environmental Philosophy.