GREENER THAN YOU THINK: AMERICA'S ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRESS

KITE & KEY MEDIA

[SCRIPT]

The country is facing an environmental crisis.

Dirty air. Unsafe water. Sharply rising carbon emissions.

Polluting the oceans. Threatening the future of fish and wildlife species. Even potentially reopening the hole in the ozone layer.

Oh, sorry. The country we're talking about is … China.

Oh my God, did you think we were talking about the U.S.?

No … no … Really?

[OPENING SEQUENCE]

How optimistic are you about the state of America's environment? If you're like most Americans … not very. Polling shows that nearly 60 percent of us think it's only getting worse.[i]

Whether those polling numbers are more reflective of environmental realities or Americans' dispositions is an open question. At no point in the 20 years that Gallup has polled this question have a majority of respondents said things are getting better. The environmental concern that worries the most Americans: ocean pollution. The one that worries the fewest: climate change.

Now, the U.S. definitely has environmental problems — most countries do. But here's where things get tricky: The media loves bad news. But what they don't often tell you is that for every story of impending doom that grabs the headlines … there's also often a story of steady, unsexy progress that you never hear about.

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For instance, every single politician seems to sum up the case for protecting the environment with the same phrase.

[Montage of politicians using the phrase "clean air and clean water"]

Now, when you hear that for decades at a time you could be forgiven for thinking there's a real problem. But, actually, the state of America's air and water is … pretty good.

America's air quality has dramatically improved in recent decades. Since 1980, carbon monoxide emissions decreased 75 percent,[ii] lead went down 99 percent, nitrogen dioxide went down 72 percent, and sulfur dioxide went down by 93 percent. The result: air so much cleaner that research suggests it may have actually extended our life expectancy.[iii] (Even if you wouldn't always know it in L.A).

How did these reductions occur? Each has a different story. The decline in carbon monoxide owes to technological and regulatory innovations that led to cleaner-burning fuels, as well as a reduction in fires in the world's tropical regions. The biggest factor behind reductions in lead was its removal from gasoline. Nitrogen dioxide fell because of lower emissions from power plants and automobiles. And sulfur dioxide was limited by the cap-and-trade program used to combat acid rain.

The story with water isn't much different. The CDC reports that America has one of the safest water supplies in the world.[iv] So, how do we reconcile that with horror stories like the one out of Flint, Michigan? Actually, Flint is a pretty instructive example.

The big issue there was lead leaching into the water from old pipes that were overdue for replacement. And, according to a survey of water industry professionals, this is actually the biggest issue facing the country's water supply: not the water itself, but replacing old *infrastructure* that has the potential to taint it.[v]

How did America's water infrastructure wind up in such bad shape? At least part of the answer is that politicians get plaudits for building new projects but tend to get far less attention for the boring work of maintaining existing infrastructure. The result: Many cities are still using pipes that date to the 1800s. As a consequence, the American Society of Civil Engineers has given America's water infrastructure grades of D or below for over a decade.

One way to understand the progress we've made is to think about all the environmental issues you don't hear about anymore.

In the 1970s and 80s, the country was freaked out about acid rain, precipitation that contains acidic components that can kill off trees and fish. The reason you no longer hear those concerns? Because we limited how much of the chemical compounds that cause acid rain could be released into the environment.

And we got creative about it, setting a cap on the allowable level of emissions and then allowing companies that fell under that cap to sell the rights to companies that went over — meaning you could make pretty good money by polluting less. And as a result the levels of acid rain dropped by about 2/3 over roughly 30 years.[vi]

The "cap-and-trade" program used to limit sulfur dioxide is considered an innovative way to use the tools of market economics for environmental ends. Other applications of this principle include the use of property rights to protect endangered species in Africa and the use of landfill waste to generate energy.

And, hey, remember the hole in the ozone layer? In the 1980s, we were all pretty sure it was going to kill us. Newsweek ran a story comparing it to "AIDS from the sky."[vii] It was even alleged that the ultraviolet light that came through the hole was making sheep go blind.

(Yeah, that part wasn't true).[viii]

But then we figured out that the thinning of the ozone layer was caused by a type of coolant used in things like refrigerators and air conditioners. As a result, an international treaty in the late '80s began phasing it out — and now the ozone layer is expected to be fully healed by the middle of this century.[ix]

Can we make the same kind of progress on the issues facing us today? **In many cases, we already are.**

Deforestation? Actually, the size of America's forests has been basically stable since 1910 — despite the fact that the country's population has tripled since then.[x]

Wildlife extinctions? 99 percent of the species placed under the protection of the Endangered Species Act have been saved, though there's still more work to do to get them off the endangered species list entirely.[xi]

Perhaps the greatest flaw of America's Endangered Species Act is that only a few dozen of the more than 1,600 species protected by the law have seen their populations recover enough to no longer require protection. Critics allege this is because endangered species laws usually punish property owners who have endangered animals on their land rather than giving them incentives to help protect the wildlife.

PEREGRINE FALCON
FORMERLY ENDANGERED

Climate change? While you wouldn't always know it from news coverage, America has actually cut its total amount of carbon emissions more than any other country in recent years.[xii] In fact, even before COVID, rates had declined to levels not seen since the early '90s.[xiii]

ECONOMIC PROTESTS IN VENEZUELA

While the U.S. saw the biggest overall reductions in carbon emissions, it still lags behind many (mainly European) nations when it comes to the percentage by which it cut its carbon output. Larger emissions reductions, however, can be a mixed blessing. The country with the biggest downward swing from 2009-2019 was Venezuela, which reduced CO2 emissions by 4.8% – because its economy collapsed. Partially as a result of the ensuing poverty, the country is now in the grips of an environmental disaster.

None of which means there isn't still lots of work to be done. But here's the thing: We should be confident that that work ***will get done***. Because the consistent trend is that the citizens of wealthy, democratic societies push their elected officials to protect the environment…

… which is why many of the world's big environmental problems come from unfree societies. Not because the citizens of those countries don't also want a clean planet, but because their politicians don't have to listen to them.

Which might be part of the reason that a country like China, despite its growing wealth, leads the world in things like marine waste, animal trafficking, and greenhouse gas emissions. In fact, they've been so reckless that they even restarted the use of the substances that caused the hole in the ozone layer, threatening to reverse the progress made by the rest of the world.[xiv]

The world only learned of China's malfeasance when a team of researchers noticed that progress on closing the hole in the ozone layer was unexpectedly slowing despite the fact that CFCs – the chemicals that cause the problem – had been outlawed. Subsequent investigations revealed that the majority of the emissions responsible for the problem were coming from eastern China, where CFCs were being used in insulation.

I mean, c'mon guys, read the room.

Bottom line: We've made progress that citizens of a country like China can only dream about. And while there's still plenty of work to be done, **we've got lots to be proud of.**

We've cleaned up our air. We've saved some of our most beloved species.

And, once again, for the record … we have not blinded any sheep.

[END SCRIPT]

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