

Liberalism and the Environment

One of American liberalism's focus is environmental protection and regulation of human activities to preserve natural resources and public health. *Silent Spring*, authored by Rachel Carson in 1962, is widely regarded as a catalyst for the modern environmental movement. The book exposed the dangers of pesticide overuse, particularly dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane (DDT), and highlighted how human activities threaten ecosystems, wildlife, and human health. Carson's work galvanized public concern and spurred calls for government action to regulate harmful chemicals, embodying liberal values of scientific evidence informing policy and proactive intervention to protect the environment.

Following this awakening, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was established in 1970 under President Richard Nixon (under pressure from less conservative lawmakers), marking a significant institutional step in advancing environmental regulation in the United States. The EPA was designed to enforce federal environmental laws, set standards for pollution control, and coordinate efforts across various agencies. Similarly, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), formed as part of the Department of Commerce in 1970, extended the federal government's environmental oversight into oceans, waterways, and the earth's atmosphere. NOAA's mission aligns with liberal priorities by monitoring climate change, protecting marine resources, and providing data essential for evidence-based policymaking.

Additionally, legislation such as the Clean Water Act (1972), the Marine Mammal Protection Act

(1972), and the Endangered Species Act (1973) embody liberal principles by establishing legal frameworks to preserve biodiversity, regulate pollution, and protect vulnerable species. These laws exemplify the belief in government action to correct systemic failures (e.g., industrial pollution), and to ensure environmental justice and sustainability for future generations. They also reflect the integration of scientific input into policymaking and an ethic of stewardship for the planet's ecosystems.

The Kyoto Climate Change Conference (1997) represented the international dimension of American liberal environmentalism. While the United States did not ratify the Kyoto Protocol, the U.S. position historically emphasized reducing greenhouse gas emissions as a moral and scientific imperative, advocating for global cooperation to mitigate climate change's impacts.

Finally, the 2016 Dakota Access Pipeline protests exemplify liberal values of environmental justice, Indigenous sovereignty, and government accountability. Activists opposed the pipeline due to concerns about water safety, environmental impacts, and violations of treaty rights, highlighting issues of social inequality and environmental protection.

Collectively, these examples highlight American liberalism's overall environmental ethos: promoting scientific understanding, enacting regulatory protections, establishing institutions, passing laws, and engaging globally—all with the aim of stewarding natural resources for current and future generations.