

Dangerous Environmentalisms Exposed in the Era of Trump

Lindsay Schubiner

Editor's note: In multiple past issues *DifferenTakes* has featured the greening of hate — a political strategy to attract liberal environmentalists to support anti-immigrant agendas by blaming environmental degradation on overpopulation. Lindsay Schubiner takes stock of the recent actions of a network of organizations that for decades promoted the greening of hate in the U.S. Schubiner argues that the current political climate, in which hate discourse and anti-immigrant organizing proliferates, has exposed the greenwashing of anti-immigrant agendas and made greenwashing a lower priority strategy for anti-immigrant groups who are now able to peddle their bigotry overtly. To meet the broader threats of rising anti-immigrant influence, Schubiner underscores that it is increasingly vital to build a strong pro-immigrant, social justice oriented environmentalism.

— *Rajani Bhatia, guest editor*

In April 2017, a spokesperson from the virulently anti-immigrant organization Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) traveled to Oregon to share nativist strategies with an allied group, Oregonians for Immigration Reform (OFIR). The speaker, Jessica Vaughan, was met by a lively protest led not by the

many local immigrant rights groups in the area (though they participated and lent their support), but by a coalition of environmental groups. “Our mission is to protect the planet for all people, regardless of national origin,” Laura Stevens of the Oregon Chapter of the Sierra Club told Street Roots regarding the group’s leadership in the protest.¹

It may seem surprising that environmental groups would sometimes be at the forefront of struggles for immigrant rights. But there are both historical reasons and contemporary political effects in the era of Trump that point to an ever greater need to integrate struggles for immigrant rights and the environment.

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Anti-immigrant groups have long attempted to infiltrate² the mainstream environmental movement and use environmental arguments to win broader support for their bigoted ideas. This strategy to “greenwash” hate originated in the late 1970s when white nationalist and eugenicist John Tanton decided that opposing immigration was the most efficacious way of achieving his goal of a white(er) population in the United States. He wrote, in 1993, “I’ve come to the point of view that for European-American society and culture to persist requires a European-American majority, and a clear one at that.”³ For Tanton, this goal was inextricably bound up in his racist brand of environmentalism, in which he hoped to preserve open spaces primarily for use by white people.

Tanton was involved in the founding of the three most dangerous groups in the contemporary anti-immigrant movement — Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), and NumbersUSA. These groups pursue Tanton’s goals of reducing the population of people of color in the U.S. They have support from certain members of Congress, a platform in mainstream media, and now champions inside⁴ the executive branch. These groups stridently oppose the constitutionally protected right to birthright citizenship. They lobby for harsh border and deportation policies that separate families, risk lives, and lead to thousands of needless deaths⁵ at the border. They work to close the border to the vast majority of authorized immigrants. And they spread racist vitriol targeting immigrants and communities of color as a whole.

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From the start, Tanton hoped his nativist organizations would reduce the number of immigrants living in the U.S. by gaining access to the halls of power and convincing policymakers to take action. He conceived of CIS as “a small think tank” that would “wage the war of ideas.”⁶ One strategy anti-immigrant organizations have used to attract more politically centrist environmentalists to their cause has relied on the notion that the U.S. population is “exploding”⁷ because of immigration and that population growth alone poses a risk to the environment. The notion of a population crisis provided the anti-immigrant movement with an apparently apolitical, and outwardly less extremist explanatory framework that could justify targeting immigrants broadly and even legal immigration. Of course, organizations in the Tanton network willfully ignore the causal impact of political and economic forces on the environmental

harms they describe. Under Trump, however, these groups have observably reduced their reliance on arguments about “overpopulation,” exposing the disingenuous nature of these greenwashing efforts. While environmental arguments with a racist underpinning are still a feature of nativism today, they are used less frequently as the political space for overt extremism grows.

The Greenwashing of Hate Today

John Tanton’s racist conservationism was a driving force in his political activity, and these beliefs were dangerously inseparable from his white nationalism. Yet the anti-immigrant movement he created is now as insincere about its environmentalism as it is overtly nativist. This fact has become ever more apparent over the past couple years, as the rise in national anti-immigrant sentiment precipitated by Trump has reduced the need for nativist groups to greenwash their hate. But this hardly means attempts to greenwash hate are over.

In an attempt to provide evidence for an imagined population crisis, CIS published a map in March 2016 detailing what percentage of each state's population is comprised of immigrants and their minor children. Alongside the map, CIS analysts write, "What number of immigrants can be assimilated?"⁸

Six months later, FAIR published a report about the environmental impacts of immigration. A typical example of greenwashing, the report blames immigrants for urban sprawl, posits that limiting immigration will have positive impacts on climate change, and argues that "stabilizing" the U.S. population will lead to environmental sustainability.⁹ Yet researchers assert that population is only one factor among the many complex causes of urban sprawl, including urban planning and zoning, transportation infrastructure, income growth, household structure, and lifestyle preferences.¹⁰ Federal policies have played a particularly important role historically. After World War II, for instance, the Highway Trust Fund and the Federal Aid Road Acts, along with mortgage guarantees of the Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans Administration, directly encouraged suburbanization and urban sprawl.¹¹ It is that infrastructure that now supports development in suburban and exurban areas.

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In its report, FAIR claims that limiting immigration will reduce climate change because immigrants produce fewer greenhouse gases in their home countries, where they have a lower standard of living. Even though the wealthiest individuals on the planet are responsible for far more than their share of greenhouse gas production,¹² FAIR implies that maintaining global inequality is key to addressing climate change. FAIR's recommendations address neither wealth inequality nor corporate pollution, and instead focus solely on strategies to reduce the number of immigrants who live in the U.S. The nativist group's sole focus on population control to achieve environmental sustainability gives an undeserved pass to actors like corporations and governments.

The anti-immigrant group Californians for Population Stabilization (CAPS) is another source of racist environmentalism, disingenuously using real environmental issues such as pollution or drought to promote a deeply anti-immigrant agenda based on discredited population control arguments. CAPS advocates for dismantling birthright citizenship, enacting major cuts to legal immigration, and promoting the deportation of every single undocumented immigrant in the United States. The organization has regularly accepted funding from foundations connected to eugenics, including from the Pioneer Fund, a white supremacist foundation devoted to racial purity. CAPS has also worked with an array of racist extremists over the years; it has, for example, maintained a five-year relationship with neo-Nazi Parker Anthony Wilson.¹³

CAPS lacks a grassroots base of support, but does have funding to produce and run nativist television and radio campaigns in California and other states. For Earth Day in 2016, CAPS aired an anti-immigrant radio commercial across Los Angeles. The ad preposterously blamed immigrants and their children for traffic and California's drought at once. It featured a child asking, "If Californians are having fewer children, why are there so many cars? If Californians are having fewer children, why isn't there enough water? If Californians are having fewer children, where are all the people coming from?" A narrator then declares, "Virtually all of California's population growth is from immigration and births to immigrants."¹⁴

CAPS's most recent ad vilifies immigrants in order to spread fear and generate opposition to so-called sanctuary cities, which refuse to enlist local police in the federal mass deportation machine. Over the summer of 2017, CAPS spent at least six figures to air the ad on broadcast television.¹⁵

Another example of environmentalist nativism cloaked in sheep's clothing occurs every year at Texas Earth Day. The Texas event is in part funded by Dallas real estate mogul Trammell Crow.¹⁶ Crow's personal support for nativism is well documented. He invested hundreds of thousands of dollars to support the legal defense of a discriminatory housing ordinance in Farmers Branch, Texas that sought to prevent landlords from renting to undocumented immigrants.

So it may be no surprise that Texas Earth Day plays host annually to anti-immigrant groups seeking to cloak their hate with the moral shine of environmentalism. In 2016, anti-immigrant groups FAIR, NumbersUSA, and the deceptively named front group Progressives for Immigration Reform (PFIR) attended. That year, the Austin chapter of the Sierra Club pulled out of Earth Day Texas because of the participation of these anti-immigrant groups. Their statement may have had an impact. Perhaps to avoid additional criticism, only NumbersUSA and PFIR participated in 2017, absent FAIR. Of these three groups, FAIR is most closely linked to John Tanton and most widely viewed as extremist.

Even anti-immigrant front group PFIR, created to make anti-immigrant issues appear as though they have support from across the political spectrum, has inched away from environmental issues recently. Aside from an appearance at Earth Day Texas, the group has been largely silent on the environment. Instead, PFIR appears to have shifted strategies aimed at superficially appearing progressive. The group is now primarily focused on labor issues within the H-1B visa program, feigning concern for workers in order to reduce options for legal immigration.

FAIR has loudly supported Trump's environmentally catastrophic border wall proposal. The group released a paper in January 2017 that argued in favor of the border wall, marshalling a misleading array of cost estimates intended to make it seem like a good financial decision. The paper's authors went to significant lengths to paint the wall as fiscally justifiable, arguing that "the overall construction and annual maintenance costs pale when compared" to the "costs" to the state of undocumented immigrants.¹⁷ Of course, the faulty analysis excludes the well-documented positive impacts of immigration on the economy. More importantly, it utterly dehumanizes immigrants, portraying human beings as only costs.

Furthermore, FAIR's paper does not include a single mention of the negative environmental impacts scientists expect as a result of the wall, which are significant and devastating. When asked by NPR to address the environmental consequences of the wall, FAIR representative Ira Mehlman downplayed the expected harms and attempted to shift the blame to immigrants for environmental degradation at the border. He said that while a wall could have some environmental impact, "so [do] tens, hundreds of thousands trampling across the flora, leaving tons of garbage and debris along the way. So having that traffic is also damaging to the local ecology."¹⁸

Advancing a pro-immigrant, social justice oriented environmentalism

Environmentalists and immigrant rights advocates ought to be natural allies. Immigrants and communities of color in the U.S. are important stakeholders in the fight for both environmental and immigrant justice. A 2015 poll found that 85-90% of Latinx voters ranked environmental issues such as clean air and water as "very important" or "extremely important," percentages even higher than the 80% of poll respondents who prioritized passing comprehensive immigration reform.¹⁹ In another example, a 2012 research study found that Asian American voters in California care deeply about protecting air, land, and water.²⁰ (Neither of these studies included information about whether respondents were immigrants or were born in the U.S. Both were conducted in more than one language.) Environmentalists need as strong and wide a coalition as possible to take on threats from the Trump administration, so embracing issues important to

immigrants, communities of color, and all those who want to live in a country with just migration laws, should make absolute sense.

Immigrant communities suffer some of the worst consequences of environmental harms, both in the U.S., through siting of hazardous industries in immigrant neighborhoods, for instance, and in their countries of origin. Many immigrants and refugees are forced to leave their homes because of climate change or environmental degradation that threatens their livelihoods.

Environmental and immigrant rights movements also have a broad set of shared enemies. In addition to worsening the human rights violations created by U.S. border policies, scientists agree²¹ that Trump's proposed border wall would be devastating for wildlife populations near the border, possibly leading to the extinction of numerous species. Regarding the border wall, wildlife biologist Jeff Corwin told NBC News, "It would be catastrophic for the environment, because for the first time in the geological history of this natural corridor, which affects North to South America, there would be a barrier like that."²²

Anti-immigrant policies also frequently rely on militarization of the border and of interior immigration enforcement. Meanwhile, U.S. militarism is one of the largest — and most frequently unacknowledged — contributors to climate change and environmental degradation. The U.S. military uses as many as one million barrels of oil per day, and the vast majority of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund sites were polluted by military testing or manufacturing.²³

Environmental and immigrant rights organizations should use this opportunity to join together in support of their mutual interests — and to reject organized nativism, once and for all.

Behind many of these harmful policies are some of the same political culprits. Trump's attorney general and former senator Jeff Sessions is not only one of the most anti-immigrant politicians. He also opposes greenhouse gas regulations,²⁴ has voted several times against clean water protections, and has supported the privatization of federal wilderness areas.²⁵ And he is far from alone.

Despite the disproportionate impact of environmental harms on immigrant communities and communities of color and shared enemies between environmental and immigrant justice, most mainstream, white-led environmental organizations fail to prioritize fostering leadership of people of color, addressing

environmental racism, or building power with communities of color.²⁶ Doing so is essential to fighting successfully for both racial justice and a greener, healthier world.

The convergences between environmentalism and immigrant rights are one of many reasons why environmental groups in Oregon played a leadership role in protesting Jessica Vaughan this April and should serve as a model for their peers. The group Vaughan came to meet with, OFIR, is a statewide anti-immigrant group responsible for a 2014 ballot measure denying undocumented immigrants access to driver's licenses. Other efforts targeting immigrants in Oregon, such as "English only" legislation and anti-sanctuary measures, have also been spearheaded by the organization. OFIR superficially embraces the environmentalism of many Oregonians, using fear mongering about population growth to justify their animus toward immigrants. In a local opinion piece, OFIR co-founder Elizabeth Van Staaveren argued that immigrants and their children would be responsible for urbanization and loss of forest land. Using dehumanizing language, she implied that the "life-giving natural environment" might not "survive this

onslaught of people."²⁷ OFIR even incorporated a tree into its logo to distract from the group's extremist positions.

The anti-immigrant movement was founded to promote both racial and ecological purity. Current anti-immigrant organizations have been so buoyed by Trump's efforts to support the first half of that equation that they are letting their utter lack of concern for the environment show. Environmental and immigrant rights organizations should use this opportunity to join together in support of their mutual interests — and to reject organized nativism, once and for all.

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