

Success of private industry is key to protecting planet

Edwin Feulner

Climb aboard a plane and fly over Africa's Sahel desert and you'll come upon a strange sight indeed: A 400-square mile dark-green patch, rich with vegetation, nestled comfortably within a horrid wasteland stretching thousands of square miles.

How do we explain it? The desert region is commonly held tribal land, abused by overgrazing; the inner region is the only privately held land in the area, and its owner carefully restricts grazing. It serves as a graphic lesson of the role of private property rights in preserving the environment.

Unfortunately, this lesson was ignored by many of the politicians and environmental activists at the recent "Earth Summit" in Rio de Janeiro. Instead, officials at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) did their darndest to ignore property rights and impose a new array of global regulations on businesses and industry — all in the name of environmental protection.

Now let me set the record straight on conservatives and conservation: We conservatives like to breathe clean air and enjoy the rest of the Earth's natural resources as much as any other creature on the planet.

But the best way to protect resources is not to cripple businesses with burdensome regulations, but to make it profitable for people to act responsibly. All the talk about "sustainable development" is so much alfalfa if it fails to truly balance environmental concerns with economic growth.

Remember, the pollution still devastating much of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union was not caused by the industrialized machines of a capitalist economy, but by state-controlled industries that lacked accountability. Private property either did not exist or could not be protected in the former communist states — leaving government-owned enterprises free to pollute the environment.

The answer is not to roll back economic growth. Poverty and underde-

velopment are major culprits in the global crimes against the environment. In the poorest countries, people cut down trees for fuel and cooking, using the inefficiency of wood-burning to create the hazard of deforestation. "Poverty itself is a toxic force," says World Bank President Barber Conable.

Ah, yes, you say, industrialized economies make better use of resources — but at the price of air-polluted cities.

True, studies show that urban air pollution gets worse as national income rises to about \$5,000 per year. But pollution subsides as income rises beyond that, dropping at least one-third in countries with per capita incomes of \$15,000.

Even the most rabid tree-hugger

knows why: Only in wealthier countries do people have the luxury of worrying about the environment: only developed countries have the political will and the money to fight pollution. By contrast, political tyranny, heavy handed government regulation, and self-induced poverty continue to wreak the worst havoc on the environment.

As the various treaties signed at Rio are examined and implemented, President Bush and other Western leaders would do well to remember that free, industrialized economies are the best champions of a clean and safe environment.

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