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A Conservative Conservationist?

Why the Right Needs to Get Invested in the Search for Climate Change Solutions

By Mark Sanford
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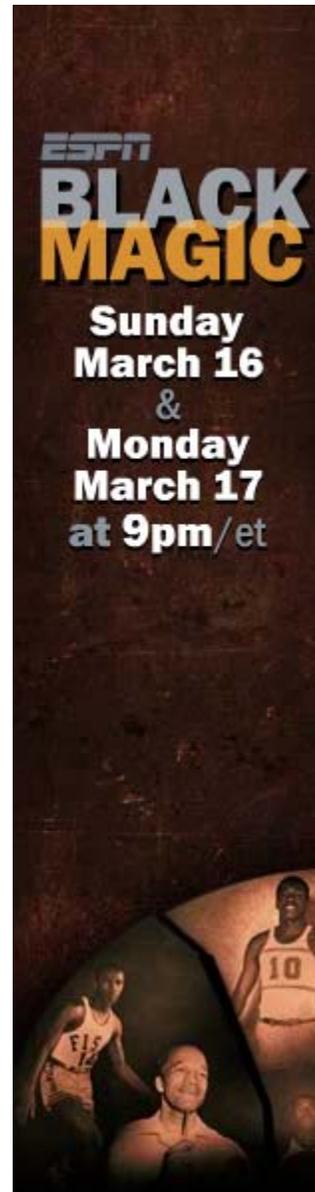
When George W. Bush, The Post and the insurance giant Lloyd's of London agree on something, it's obvious a new wind is blowing. The climate change debate is here to stay, and as America warms to the idea of environmental conservation on a grander scale, it's vital that conservatives change the debate before government regulation expands yet again and personal freedom is pushed closer toward extinction.

The fact is, I'm a conservative and a conservationist -- and that's okay.

For the past 20 years, I have seen the ever-so-gradual effects of rising sea levels at our farm on the South Carolina coast. I've had to watch once-thriving pine trees die in that fragile zone between uplands and salt marshes. I know the climate change debate isn't over, but I believe human activity is having a measurable effect on the environment.

The real "inconvenient truth" about climate change is that some people are losing their rights and freedoms because of the actions of others -- in either the quality of the air they breathe, the geography they hold dear, the insurance costs they bear or the future environment of the children they love.

But like a polar bear searching for solid ice, many people seem ready to dig into the first solution offered to slow or reverse climate change. Cue former vice president Al Gore -- the politician turned screen star who could take home an Academy Award this weekend and a Nobel Peace Prize later this year -- whose call for greater government intervention is resonating with administrations in this country and across the globe: California may soon ban incandescent light bulbs; France wants to force the Kyoto-less United States to pay carbon taxes on exports; and the European Union is pushing automobile emission standards that would cost carmakers such as Volvo roughly \$3,200 more per



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vehicle.

Make no mistake, the issue of environmental conservation sits squarely on the battle line between government and liberty. From light bulbs to automobiles, government will gladly expand its regulatory reach even if the result is a hamstrung economy and curtailed individual freedoms. Yet conservatives have remained largely absent from this debate, and by pulling back from the environmental battle they have conceded the high ground to those on the far left.

I believe conservatives have a window of opportunity, but that window is closing fast.

First, conservatives must reframe the environmental discussion by replacing the political left's scare tactics with conservative principles such as responsibility and stewardship. Stewardship -- the idea that we need to take care of what we've been given -- simply makes sense. It makes dollars as well, for the simple reason that our economy is founded on natural resources, from tourism and manufacturing to real estate and agriculture. Here in South Carolina, conservation easements are springing up across the state as landowners see the dual benefit of preserving the environment and protecting their pocketbooks.

Second, conservatives must reclaim lost ground from far-left interest groups by showing how environmental conservation is as much about expanding economic opportunity as it is about saving whales or replanting rain forests. When corporations such as BP and Shell America pursue alternative energy sources, they not only cut carbon emissions but help cut our petroleum dependency on OPEC nations. When South Carolina restaurants recycle their oyster shells, they not only restore shellfish habitat but take a job off local governments' plates and ensure continuing revenue streams for local fishermen.

Third, conservatives must respond to climate change with innovation, not regulation. This means encouraging private research and implementation of more eco-friendly construction, more energy-efficient workplaces and more sustainable ways of going about life -- all of which cuts costs and protects God's creation. It means looking past the question of whether your car's exhaust melts polar ice caps and instead treating our environment as an investment our future depends on.

South Carolina is creating an advisory group that will study the effects of climate change on commerce and vice versa, with an eye toward crafting a plan that balances the needs of the business and environmental communities.

I am a conservative conservationist who worries that sea levels and government intervention may end up rising together. My earnest hope going forward is that we can find conservative solutions to the climate change problem -- ecologically responsible solutions based on free-market principles that both improve our quality of life and safeguard our freedoms.

For if conservatives cannot reframe, reclaim and respond to climate change with our principles intact, government will undoubtedly provide a solution, no matter how taxing it may be.

The writer, a Republican, is governor of South Carolina.

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