

The Worst

- King County Eco-Consumer
- Dow Constantine chooses politics over the environment
- The gap between “green jobs” rhetoric and reality
- Maury Island hypocrisy
- Governor Gregoire’s Climate Change Executive Order

The Best

- Seattle turns down the bag tax
- Getting the facts right
- British Columbia Conservatives win re-election with environmental platform
- Cap-and-trade dies in the legislature
- Elinor Ostrom wins the Nobel Prize in Economics

The Worst, and Best, Environmental Moments of 2009

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The past year was not a good one for promoting environmental sustainability in Washington state. The overriding theme of 2009 was the way politics displaced environmental honesty. Environmental policy offers benefits in two ways: benefits to the environment and political benefits to politicians associated with environmental policy. Sometimes, however, these two are at odds, especially when what is popular does not actually help the environment or what is good for the environment is difficult, costly or decidedly un-sexy. Last year, popular trumped positive.

Despite the strong move toward trendy environmentalism, and away from policies that are likely to be environmentally sustainable in the long run, there were a few glimmers of hope for thoughtful and honest approaches to environmental issues.

Along those lines, we have compiled the top five worst, and five best, environmental moments of 2009.

The Worst

First, we have to give honorable mention to *Seattle P-I* cartoonist David Horsey. This does not really count as a “moment,” but deserves attention because it is emblematic of the thinking that underlies so much bad environmental policy. On May 22, Horsey penned a cartoon showing the Earth goddess Gaia talking about a “dangerous infestation” that is destroying her.¹ In the final frame she (and Horsey) renders judgment, saying “These humans have got to go.” Overpopulation is a popular theme with environmentalists and they have claimed repeatedly that we have crossed the threshold time after time. Ironically, the problem they identify is always other people. I am not sure how to describe this notion as anything other than “inhumane.”

5. King County Eco-Consumer. Writing a twice-monthly column for *The Seattle Times*, the King County Eco-Consumer offers advice for those who want to buy and live environmentally. Frequently, however, his advice conforms not to the science or economics of sustainability but to well-worn political slogans. For instance, the eco-consumer told us that “the lower the food mileage we rack up, the better.”² This, however, is simply untrue. Food shipped many miles by train often has a lower carbon footprint than food shipped by truck. Shipping milk from Yakima is more efficient than shipping hay from Yakima to cows in King

¹ “GAIA Speaks...,” by David Horsey, *Seattle PI*, <http://www.seattlepi.com/horsey/viewbydate.asp?id=1950>, May 22, 2009.

² *King County EcoConsumer column*, *Seattle Times*, April 19, 2009.

County, despite the fact that the actual milk travels a shorter distance. Following his advice would actually be counterproductive to the environment in many cases. For more about why the Eco-Consumer earned a spot on the list, read our *Environmental Watch* “King County EcoConsumer Advice: Bad for Consumers and the Environment.”³

4. Dow Constantine chooses politics over the environment. When a political spokesman, in Nixonian tones, tells the media “We are being absolutely truthful,” you can be sure the opposite is true. In his recent campaign for King County Executive, Constantine ran an ad attacking Washington Policy Center’s position on climate change, calling us climate “deniers.” Ironically, he continued to make the claim even after his source, *The Seattle Weekly*, retracted it.⁴ *The Weekly*, *The Seattle P-I* and *The Seattle Times*⁶ all criticized Constantine for the claim. Dow knew the claim was false because the campaign highlighted policies in the WPC’s *Policy Guide for Washington State*, but ignored our policy recommendation calling for creating a carbon price and tax cuts to encourage energy efficiency. His decision, however, was that the political benefit of lying was more important than the environmental benefit of honestly addressing our policy. Such a position commits Constantine to bad environmental policy because changing his position would mean acknowledging he was dishonest in the campaign. It is the best example of a bad trend where environmental politics trumps environmental sustainability.

3. The gap between “green jobs” rhetoric and reality. With the economy taking center stage politically, the promise of “green jobs” became a centerpiece of the rhetoric justifying new environmental taxes and regulations. The Governor has repeatedly claimed that Washington created more than 47,000 green jobs. As we noted earlier this year, however, those green jobs are not new in any real sense and have more to do with definitions than economic growth.⁷ It is obvious, as well, that many who promise green jobs do not even believe their own rhetoric. One version of the state’s proposed cap-and-trade legislation required an economic analysis examining “How to address trade competition from countries and states that are not participating in an emissions reduction program.”⁸ The legislation acknowledges that the regulation will put us at an economic disadvantage compared to other states and nations. As we noted recently, the Governor’s current Chief of Staff does not see that as a bad thing. The harm done to Washington’s economy by the Governor’s climate change Executive Order creates opportunities. Jay Manning wrote in his memo on the order that “An almost certain increase in the regulated community’s interest in getting a national program will be an important side benefit” of the Executive Order.⁹ Those businesses covered by the regulation will be hit so hard that they will look to the federal government for relief. Policymakers know they are playing games with the economy and jobs, but they hope that they can fool the public long enough to get what they want and that, somehow, jobs will materialize. It demonstrates that, despite their rhetoric, policymakers know their climate policies are likely to kill more jobs than they create.

³ *Environmental Watch*, *Examining Environmental Claims and Their Costs*, Washington Policy Center, May-June 2009, www.washingtonpolicy.org.

⁴ “Washington Policy Center Denies Global Warming Denial,” by Caleb Hannan, *Seattle Weekly*, October 21, 2009, www.seattleweekly.com.

⁵ “There’s no denying global warming, center says,” by Chris Grygiel, *SeattlePI.com*, October 13, 2009.

⁶ “Dow and the Deniers,” by Bruce Ramsey, *The Seattle Times*, October 30, 2009, www.seattletimes.com

⁷ “State Uses Shifting Definitions to Boost Green Job Count,” by Brandon Houskeeper, *Environmental Watch*, Washington Policy Center, August 2009, www.washingtonpolicy.org.

⁸ Washington State Legislature, E2SB 5735, 2009 session, <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/documents/bill-docs/2009-10/Pdf/Bills/Senate%20Bills/5735-S2.E.pdf>

⁹ “Governor’s Chief of Staff: State’s Climate Policy Worse than Federal Cap-and-Trade,” Washington Policy Center Press Release, December 8, 2009.

2. Maury Island hypocrisy. As we noted last year, a dock on Maury Island has become a cause célèbre for local environmentalists.¹⁰ Freshman Lands Commissioner Peter Goldmark quickly moved to stop the construction of the dock, designed to ship gravel off the island. He moved quickly to pull the dock's permit when a judge ruled that the US Army Corps of Engineers had not followed the proper procedure when analyzing the dock. It was hailed as an environmental victory, despite the fact that the judge did not rule on the environmental impact, just the process. It is important to remember that the project had been given permits by the state Department of Ecology and King County as well. The reason this decision is on the list, however, is the contrast between the attention given to a small project with all its environmental permits and the most serious water quality problem on the island in Quartermaster Harbor, which lies in an aquatic reserve managed by Goldmark and the Department of Natural Resources. As the *Maury/Vashon Island Beachcomber* noted in September, the cleanup of that part of the island is far behind schedule. They wrote that the County cannot get any of the homeowners to cooperate in assessing the impact that failing septic tanks are having on the Harbor. The *Beachcomber* wrote that "Despite several meetings, no homeowner has stepped forward to allow the county to take a look at his or her system, and none has agreed to work publicly with county officials to find a solution to a system that may be failing or inadequate." The gap between the actions of King County and Goldmark regarding the dock and the problems in Quartermaster Harbor is a dramatic example of how the value of environmental policy is more about political benefit than environmental benefit.

1. Governor Gregoire's Climate Executive Order. After pushing for a bill authorizing a range of environmental regulations and supporting Washington's participation in a regional cap-and-trade system, the Governor instead simply signed an executive order implementing those policies after the legislature turned them down. The Executive Order raised a number of red flags. First, there are questions about its legality since it attempts to usurp legislative authority.¹¹ Second, it attempts to pick and choose future technologies that will best reduce carbon emissions. This is a strategy popular with politicians looking to receive credit for "leadership" on climate change, but it rarely delivers results (see biofuels and hydrogen cars for recent examples). Finally, it spends money to continue Washington's role in the Western Climate Initiative's (WCI) effort to create a regional cap-and-trade system. The Department of Ecology claimed it could simply shift the money from other projects to cover the costs. Strange that it is so easy to find available money at a time when we face a significant budget deficit. Worse, the WCI is likely to collapse because none of the key decisions about the structure of the WCI have been made and political changes in the participating states make it unlikely that the system will ever be launched. That sets aside the reality that cap-and-trade systems have failed to meet their targets due to the many political payouts that are invariably included in these systems. An Executive Order that has legal questions, embraces failed strategies and wastes money on a system that does not work, earns the Governor's Executive Order on climate change the top spot in this year's list of worst environmental moments of 2009.

The Best

5. Seattle turns down the bag tax. Sometimes preventing a step backward is as good as taking a step forward. The issue is not that plastic bags do not have an environmental impact. The problem is that they are seized upon because they are politically easy targets. *The Seattle Times* published a graphic showing the environmental impact of the bags. Those impacts are extremely small, especially

¹⁰ "Which Way for Environmentalism: Science or NIMBYs," by Todd Myers, Washington Policy Center, March 2009

¹¹ "Does the Governor's climate change EO have power of law?" by Brandon Houskeeper, Washington Policy Center, May 22, 2009, www.washingtonpolicyblog.org

when compared to the cost of the ban.¹² We calculated that you could receive the same benefits from reductions in CO₂ emissions and water use for less than four percent of the cost of the ban.¹³ It is important to remember that a waste of money is a waste of resources, and spending \$20 to get \$1 of benefit wastes numerous opportunities to make positive environmental improvements. The vote shows that even in Seattle politicians cannot simply be frivolous with money when it comes to the environment.

4. Getting the facts right. Often, it's not what you don't know but what you know that ain't so. In 2009, fortunately, there were a couple of instances where environmental misinformation was corrected. As we mentioned previously, *The Seattle Weekly* had attacked us as climate "deniers." While it is true that we do not support the most extreme claims of impact from climate change, we believe there is risk from CO₂ emissions. When we pointed this out to *The Weekly* they, in a very gracious post, corrected the record. Additionally, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction removed a video from its web page (posted a couple years ago) that made claims about green buildings which were inaccurate. Truth be told, they did not do so quickly or willingly. They removed the video only after KING TV aired a story on our research, highlighting the false claims in the video and after the facilities director at the Spokane School District asked them to remove it. Those requests were made on March 25. Instead of removing the video they simply added a disclaimer saying that it "may not represent current conditions and knowledge of high-performance schools."¹⁴ When we asked for the video in a disclosure request we were denied. We repeated our request, noting that they could not deny it to us. We received the video and one week later it was removed from the page. These things did not happen on their own, of course. We had to press. But I can cite many other cases where bad information was not removed despite evidence to the contrary, so we celebrate small victories.

3. British Columbia conservatives win re-election with environmental platform. Earlier this year, the conservative party (ironically named the "Liberal" party) in British Columbia won a rare third term in power and their environmental agenda played a role. Public opinion research shows that while large majorities say they are concerned about the environment, majorities believe environmentalists are too extreme. This offers conservatives with an intelligent and effective approach to the environment an opportunity. In BC the conservatives took advantage of that opportunity with their policy of a carbon price and tax rebates to citizens. *The Toronto Globe and Mail* even wrote about the leftist New Democrat Party (NDP) failure to recognize this point:

The first week of the election campaign was a complete disaster for the NDP, dominated by news stories about environmental heavyweights like David Suzuki denouncing the NDP for selling its soul in a populist bid to exploit some short-term voter anger. The message from many of the province's most influential environmental groups couldn't have been clearer: If you care about the earth, vote Liberal.

As conservatives head into the elections of 2010 in the US, there is an opportunity to show that the right choice for the economy, jobs *and* the environment are policies that make use of the creativity and incentives of the free market.

¹² "How bad are disposable grocery bags?" *Seattle Times*, <http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/AB-Pub/2009/08/12/2009651807.pdf>.

¹³ "The Environmental Cost of the Seattle Bag Tax," by Todd Myers, Washington Policy Center, August 13, 2009, www.washingtonpolicyblog.org.

¹⁴ "It's Not an Error... We've Simply Updated Our Knowledge," by Todd Myers, Washington Policy Center, August 11, 2009, www.washingtonpolicyblog.org.

2. Cap-and-trade dies in the legislature. This was a short-lived victory, but a good moment, nonetheless. Despite appeals in the media and in person from the Governor, the legislature turned down the costly and ineffective climate policies she offered. This was quickly undermined by the Governor's Executive Order on climate change, but it demonstrated that the legislature recognized that it could not ignore economic realities and the many problems of cap-and-trade. A step in the right direction, even if it was followed by a step in the opposite direction.

1. Elinor Ostrom wins the Nobel Prize in Economics. She is not the first economist to address environmental issues to win the prize. Ronald Coase won the prize in 1991, in part for his application of the theory of transaction costs to economic externalities. But the first woman to win the prize in economics examined the wide range of solutions available to solve "the tragedy of the commons," where there appear to be no incentives to work for long-term environmental sustainability. In selecting her, the committee wrote:

Rules that are imposed from the outside or unilaterally dictated by powerful insiders have less legitimacy and are more likely to be violated. Likewise, monitoring and enforcement work better when conducted by insiders than by outsiders. These principles are in stark contrast to the common view that monitoring and sanctioning are the responsibility of the state and should be conducted by public employees.

It is a reality that we see frequently here in Washington state, where politicians pick and choose and impose political solutions on environmental problems (Jay Manning's comment in the climate change memo that the Governor's executive order would cause businesses to look for relief from the federal government is a case in point). Dr. Ostrom's work shows that alternatives that come from voluntary and market approaches can solve problems better than the standard, command-and-control approach favored by too many environmental activists and politicians. Her good work, and the recognition of it, earns the top spot in our list for the hope it creates for future environmental policy.

Best wishes to all of our readers and supporters for the New Year and here's to hoping that 2010's list of good environmental moments becomes longer and more robust than the worst moments.

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