Chapter Twelve

COLLECTIVE ACTION

GOVERNING COMMONS

In Part II we identified four grand challenges of sustainability: climate change, loss of biodiversity, rapid urbanization, and sustainable development. Each of these challenges exposes the limitations of our abilities to manage and govern commons on a large scale and over long periods. Meeting the grand challenges, so that people can move toward a sustainable economy, will require us to expand the scale of our competence, both deepening our capacities and extending them in space and time. In this chapter, we describe how that scale of competence has been expanded by environmentalists, but also how their efforts have fallen short of solving critical environmental problems.

Human life is already managed in significant ways on large spatial and long temporal scales. Major political and economic institutions already address peace and war, education and public safety, threats to health from epidemic disease, and more. The institutions that manage the economy and government also coordinate an extraordinarily complex web of markets for goods and services. The same institutions propel and can worsen serious environmental problems, such as the loss of biodiversity, but their strength and reach makes them indispensable for addressing the grand challenges.

In Chapters 12 and 13 we examine these political and economic institutions with the aim of understanding both their role in creating the grand challenges and their potential for dealing with them. In this chapter, we focus on the way that organizations play a central role in environmental governance. Some of those organizations are business firms; others are governmental agencies. In addition, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which advance missions rather than seek profits, play a critical role. The study of politics and markets is the focus of the disciplines of political science, sociology, and economics, and we will explain how these bodies of learning provide essential insights into environmental problems and suggest ways they can be tackled.

Managing human uses of commons is an inherently political process. Recall from Chapter 3 Garrett Hardin's summary phrase: overcoming the tragedy of the commons, he said, requires "mutual coercion mutually agreed to." The word "coercion" signals that governing entails getting people to act in a way that does

Learning Objectives

When you have finished studying this chapter, you should be able to

- identify nonprofit, governmental, and profit-making organizations you interact with each day;
- analyze an environmental policy idea, such as a proposed method to respond to global warming, in terms of the social and political implications of the idea: How does the policy identify a community and a commons in need of better governance? Who would have to change their behavior? Who supports change, and how are they organized? What is the political benefit of favoring, opposing, or staying neutral in the debate over the policy?;
- articulate your own career and life plans in terms of the roles you might be able to play in the economy and in civil society;
- identify examples of concentrated and diffuse interests at play in the governance of your community;
- relate the mission of a nonprofit organization (e.g., a university) to the economic requirements for its survival (e.g., tuition, grants, and gifts from wealthy donors). How does the tension between mission and survival affect what the nonprofit can actually achieve?;
- analyze the complaints of those who criticize environmental regulations and those who oppose environmentalists;
- examine, skeptically and critically, the assertions of progressive politicians and environmentalists that they are improving environmental quality or moving society toward sustainable development. How might those claims advance their own *political* interests? Is having a political interest a reason to distrust a leader?

BOX 12.1

STEALING THE COMMONS FROM THE GOOSE

The power of the community is used to protect private property as well as commons. The protection and even the definition of what is privately owned is a critically important institution, because it draws a boundary between those who have property rights of a certain kind and those who do not. Today, few workers pay attention to the fact that their employers own all e-mail messages that employees send from their company accounts. As a result, communications that they may consider to be private are not protected from surveillance by the firm.

In Chapter 3, we described the enclosure of lands that had been used as commons in Britain until the eighteenth century. Enclosure meant that whole communities, which had relied on commons for their livelihood, were ejected; and many rural people were driven into the cities, where they struggled to find their way in the Industrial Revolution. An anonymous protest poem of the times put it this way:

> They hang the man, and flog the woman,
> That steals the goose from off the common;
> But let the greater villain loose,
> That steals the common from the goose.[1]

Who was the "greater villain" here? It was usually an economically and politically powerful actor—often the hereditary landlord—aided in his claim by the government. The exercise of political influence by the landowners to create the laws of enclosure produced a great tragedy—the destruction of a rural way of life that had persisted for centuries.

The exercise of governmental power to "steal the common from the goose" is also under way today. The development of oil fields in Nigeria, Ecuador, and many other nations has come at the expense of people who had the bad luck to live close to oil deposits and who have suffered rather than benefited from their exploitation. In the coal-rich areas of the Appalachian Mountains, mining firms have sometimes destroyed the landscape and the livelihoods that depended on it. In a process known rather clinically as mountaintop removal, the tops of mountain ridges are blown up and dumped into the valleys, so that the coal in the ridge can be removed. In these and other cases, environmental and social havoc is created, with government acting as a willing partner of those who are appro-

priating the commons. These actions employ coercion, although such coercion is not always accepted by those being ejected. Nigeria has had a low-level civil war simmering amid its oil fields for decades, and a battle over mountaintop removal has been fought through the courts in Appalachia.

As we discuss the exercise of governmental power to protect environmentally sensitive commons, it is important to bear in mind that the power of government is guided by politics, and that political outcomes are not always just outcomes.

1. Wikipedia, "Enclosure," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enclosure.

not immediately advance their individual interests. Communities impose sanctions against stealing, for example, even though theft may be in the interest of the thief. Every community protects some of its commons, and questions of power and conflict are joined in doing so.

Institutions of governance are not only abstract rules; governance is brought into being by the actions of people as they carry out the roles discussed in Chapter 3—monitoring behavior, enforcing rules, resolving disputes, and asserting the authority of a community over specific commons. Like other human activities, actual governance is full of imperfections—errors, overreaching, corruption—as well as diligence, courage, and selflessness. These properties, good and bad, are usually deeply woven into the institutions and cannot easily be changed (see Box 12.1: Stealing the Commons from the Goose, page 312).

In this chapter, we examine the governing of commons in stages. First, we consider the model of classical environmentalism as it has operated in the United States. Classical environmentalism has shaped the creation and course of environmental policy. Although environmental policies have made essential contributions, environmental problems persist, and some, such as climate change, have grown larger. This is due, in part, to the political dynamics of environmental problem solving and the difficulty of overcoming the incentives that guide human behavior in commons (that which belongs to all is cared for by none). The limited but real ability of the environmental movement to counter these incentives is rooted in its ability to organize and sustain a durable presence in environmental politics and policy. We conclude this chapter with a discussion of NGOs and the philanthropic foundations that support them. These components of governing have expanded the scale of competence of American government to handle problems of the commons. The struggle to exercise that capability continues, and as we will see, the competence to engage with the grand challenges is still emerging—often barely emerging. Much remains to be done.

LEGITIMATE COERCION

The challenge of governance is to arrange for mutual agreement, so as to protect the environment and move toward sustainable development. This is where the scale of our competence is problematic. It is comparatively easy to arrange for the messy dormitory common room to be cleaned up, even after a big game weekend. It is another thing to arrange for the cleanup of toxic wastes left behind by a company that employs a small army of lawyers, or worse, has gone out of business.

For more than two hundred years, people have come to accept that coercion is legitimate when it is mutual—that is, when the possibility of coercion is asserted by a democratic government (see Box 12.2: Democracy, page 315). By winning a competitive election, a government can make a claim to mutual agreement in the sense that because the government is chosen by voters it can take action in their name. When that claim is accepted by the people, legislatures and administrative agencies can collect taxes and pass and enforce laws, and courts can resolve disputes, decide on punishments for those who violate the law, and even protect the fundamental rights of people who may be very unpopular with a majority of voters. These are all acts that employ or imply coercion, but it is coercion exercised by a government whose legitimacy is improved when its citizens can choose their leaders. As the slow pace of progress on global warming suggests, the international system, not being democratic—nor, indeed, being a single government at all—does not command the legitimacy to coerce. Instead, nations struggle with a tragedy of the commons, the global commons of the atmosphere.

Within a single nation, however, democracy might be a way to counterbalance the accelerating domination of nature. If coercion can be mutually agreed to, then people can overcome the destructive logic of the commons by adopting restraints on their own behavior and entrusting enforcement, monitoring, and dispute resolution to a fair and effective government. This is what happens with speed limits. Nearly everyone is tempted to speed, but no one wants a ticket and no one wants dangerous roads. Most drivers speed some of the time, but speed limits are enforced and they do lower accident rates. When there is a functioning democracy, the political system can manage commons more effectively than authoritarian governments can.

The hope for a responsible self-government, of course, conflicts with the cynic's suspicion that *any* government is a macroparasite, exploiting people for its own purposes. This conflict runs through a good deal of recent political discourse. Citizens share little agreement about which view of government is better, especially in concrete circumstances. The speeder does not like being pulled over, and firms often complain about intrusive and foolish bureaucrats when an environmental regulation is imposed. Nonetheless, environmental problems are usually approached through the political system, and this is what is assumed in classical environmentalism.

BOX 12.2

DEMOCRACY

Recall from Chapter 2 that intense exploitation of nature and environmental concern arose simultaneously in the historical process we call modernization. So did democracy—the search for workable self-government of, by, and for the people. The U.S. Constitution was written in 1787, toward the end of the lives of both Gilbert White, the naturalist, and Richard Arkwright, whose factory launched the Industrial Revolution. The Constitution was the first successful charter for self-government in a large nation, one that would span the North American continent less than a century after its basic rules were adopted. The development of democracy has shaped how we think of environmental governance today.

The premodern role of governments was macroparasitic: the monarch levied taxes, conscripted soldiers for war, and provided public order by punishing criminals and repressing political opposition. Since the Enlightenment, the time in which White and Arkwright lived, democracy has taken hold on a widening scale. The concepts and practices of democracy form a rich tradition of social innovation. Key components include citizens who possess political rights, such as the freedoms of speech, assembly, and access to information; equal treatment of citizens within a fairly administered legal system; and the ability of citizens to choose their representatives through open, fair elections. These are ideals, and reality often falls short.

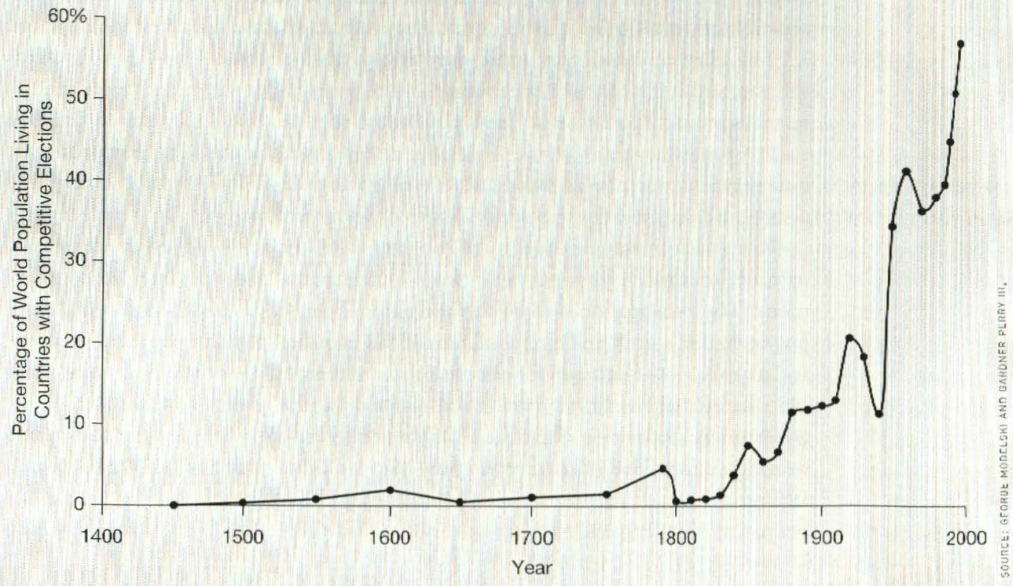
The ideal of democracy itself—that the people can rule—has been a powerful one, and it has led to a broadening of the scope of government to encompass services provided to citizens. The U.S. Constitution was written in part to facilitate trade among the states. It was a document grounded in the idea that economic development was a legitimate purpose of government. Today, roads, sewers, and police forces remain basic responsibilities of government.

From that base, the U.S. government—like those of all other developed nations—expanded its responsibilities to encompass a wide spectrum of commitments. The principal ones form the institutional part of Second Nature: education, public health, social welfare, regulation of the economy, environmental protection, and equality of treatment for women and minorities. All of these commitments arise from the ideas that the citizens should be the direct beneficiaries of the government's activities, and that obtaining the consent of the governed requires treating all members of society in a way that can be regarded as fair. When Gilbert White was born, that notion of government for the people and by the people was as remote from the mainstream of thought and the reality of institutions as Aldo Leopold's land ethic is today.

The idea that democracy might propel historical change has been a bright hope several times: when the United States was founded in the late eighteenth century, in the early years of the twentieth century, in the 1950s and 1960s when colonial empires collapsed, at the end of the cold war in 1989, and during the Arab uprisings of 2011. Each time, we have seen idealism and upheaval, and many new democracies, only some of which proved stable. Like the survivors of a virulent fever, the societies that manage to weather the tumult of democratic change are often resistant to further life-threatening chaos. There are countries struggling to become democratic, such as Tunisia after 2011, and others where democracy seems to have taken hold, such as Taiwan and several nations in eastern Europe.

The American Revolution was fought in the eighteenth century, and western European nations developed parliamentary democracies from the late eighteenth through the twentieth centuries. Japan and India both developed democratic rule in the late 1940s, adding to the surge in the proportion of the human race governed by elected leaders. India is by far the world's largest functioning democracy. The end of colonial rule and the collapse of the Soviet empire in the early 1990s have produced a large array of independent countries, many of which have difficulty satisfying international observers that their elections are free and fair. Still, the trend over time has been an increasing proportion of the human race living under some form of democratic government (see figure). For this purpose, social

Percentage of the world's population living in countries with competitive elections. The existence of competitive elections is an influential indicator of democratic governance.



SOURCE: GEORGE MODELSKI AND GARDNER PERRY III.

scientists use open electoral competition as one key indicator that a government is democratic.

To most Americans, it is individual freedom rather than voting that is foremost among the benefits of democracy, and freedom is, of course, fundamental to the consent of the governed that is the basis of democracy. Liberty *is* crucial to the individual person's experience of democratic participation. Free speech and the ability to organize for political action without government meddling or intimidation are clearly important to vigorous political competition. Yet in practice, virtually all societies debate the limits that should be imposed on those freedoms. As a result, the specifics of freedom vary a good deal across democratic political systems. In all of them, the ability to hold governments accountable for their actions has been a significant factor in sustaining individual liberties over time.

In elections, organization is essential. This is why political parties have appeared, often spontaneously, in all democracies. The advantages of the well organized are important: environmental causes have gained support from educated, economically successful people who have the capacity and desire to organize, and who are numerous enough to matter. This is one reason that Rachel Carson's appeal in *Silent Spring* meant so much: it reached people who could make a difference in politics.

The broad appeal of environmental protection and the conservation of nature has meant that, at least since the 1970s, virtually all American politicians, both Republican and Democratic, have claimed to be environmentalists, although the details and implications of those claims have changed a good deal in recent decades. Those working to curtail regulation describe their positions in terms of opposition to environmental extremists ignorant of economic realities. In this way, the politician can claim not to be anti-environment, but only anti-extremist.

The pro-business, anti-regulation stance of the Republican Party has meant that environmentalism has been caught up in the deepening polarization of American politics in recent years. Yet a wide base of political support for environmental protection exists among voters, whether they identify themselves by political party (Republican or Democrat) or by ideology (liberal or conservative).

Over the last half-century, Americans have consistently told Gallup, the best-known opinion survey firm, that paying some price for environmental protection is appropriate (Fig. 12.1).[1] Support for environmental protection wanes during economic recessions, but has been quite robust for decades. The decrease in the strength of support for environmental protection between 2008 and 2010 reflects economic worries during a time of severe recession, as well as the cumulative effect of decades of politicians' charges and advertising claiming that environmentalists do not care about the economy.

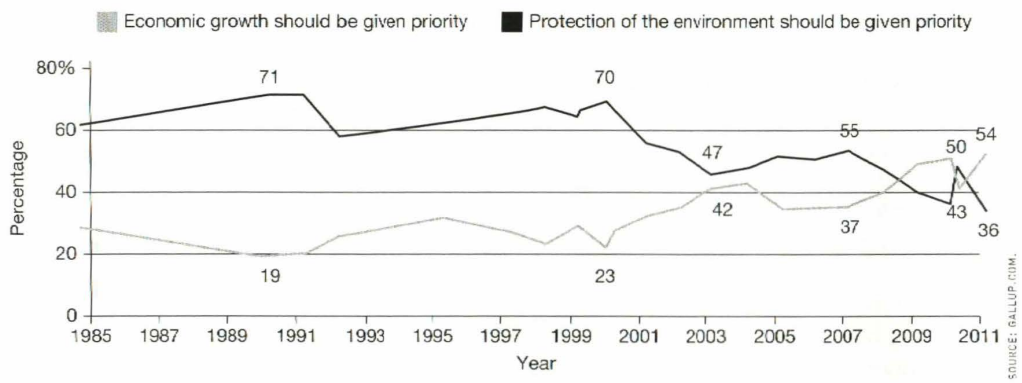


FIGURE 12.1
Trends in public opinion about the priority of environmental protection and economic growth.

It is no surprise that concrete environmental actions may be unpopular. During the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico temporary delays in deep-water drilling met with sharp protest, particularly among those who lived closest to the area where the drilling was being carried out and whose livelihoods depended directly or indirectly on the oil industry. What may be more surprising is that support for environmental protection has been so widespread, and it still is.

An intriguing finding of public opinion studies is that parents recognize that their children are better informed than they are themselves about environmental choices at the personal level—and parents look to their children for guidance on environmentally significant decisions.[2] Recycling, for example, has been adopted by many families after children began scolding their parents about separating waste streams. People in their teens and twenties are both more strongly environmentalist and more confident of their individual capabilities to bring about change than those who are older.[3] We will see in the years to come whether those opinions persist into later adulthood.

The breadth of support for environmental protection indicates that classical environmentalism continues to play a critical role in environmental politics. When scientists warn of environmental threats, voters look to government to undertake mutual coercion to protect the commons. It is from this logic that environmental policy takes shape.

ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

Environmental policy may be said to have a very long history. The Magna Carta ("Great Charter"), reluctantly signed by England's King John in 1215 under pressure from his rebellious barons, is one of the founding documents of the tradition

of constitutional rule—the idea that no person, not even the king, stands above the law. The Magna Carta included language requiring the king and his favored associates to remove their fish traps from the Thames River, so as to reduce the pressure on fish populations. Such rules to govern a commons (see Chapter 3) are a form of environmental policy.

The scope of environmental governance is broad. As we discuss later in this chapter, the laws with the most important environmental consequences do not seem at first glance to be environmental at all—laws that authorize the building of roads or levees, for example, or tax breaks that can make certain forms of energy cheaper or more expensive. When most Americans think of "environmental policy" today, however, they are thinking of a smaller body of statutes having a much shorter history—a raft of laws, beginning with the Wilderness Act of 1964 and continuing through the early 1980s, that reflect the ways in which classical environmentalism modified the existing structure of American politics and law (see the highlights in Table 12.1). These laws covered a broad spectrum—water, air, drinking water, toxics, endangered species, Alaska wilderness, and nuclear waste.

The wide concern triggered by *Silent Spring* signaled to politicians that the environment was an area in which constructive government actions were both

TABLE 12.1 SIGNIFICANT U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL LEGISLATION, 1964–82.

Year ratified	Legislation
1964	Wilderness Act
1969	National Environmental Policy Act
1970	Environmental Protection Agency created; Clean Air Act (significantly amended in 1977 and 1990)
1972	Clean Water Act, Coastal Zone Management Act, Pesticides Control Act (significantly amended in 1996)
1973	Endangered Species Act
1974	Safe Drinking Water Act
1976	Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (management of toxic materials), Toxic Substances Control Act, National Forest Management Act
1980	Superfund established to clean up toxic sites (significantly amended in 1986)
1980	Alaska Lands Conservation Act
1982	Nuclear Waste Policy Act

needed and likely to be rewarded by voters. Some of the champions of environmental causes did appear to reap political gains. The presidential campaign of Senator Edmund Muskie in 1972, for example, was given a significant boost by the key role he played in enacting the Clean Water Act that year. Even politicians with little previous interest in the environment sought to change the ways in which they were seen by the public, depicting themselves as environmental leaders and sometimes bringing about important policy changes. Republican president Richard Nixon, for example, signed the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) on New Year's Day 1970 with a message to citizens about his support for environmental protection. Later that year, he reorganized several federal agencies to create the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

These were actions taken by the most prominent members of the American political establishment for the highest political rewards. Particularly in the first two decades after *Silent Spring*, these choices made a difference. The Clean Water Act was for some time the largest source of discretionary public spending, as federal dollars were channeled to municipalities to upgrade their sewers and sewage treatment plants. The new laws governing toxic wastes put legal liability for cleanup in the hands of property owners, and this led to drastic changes in commercial real estate practices, as potential buyers scrutinized buildings for any environmental hazards that they might contain.

Although the Nixon administration did not intend it, NEPA set off an intense period of litigation aimed at federal agencies. The Act required that, before any agency of the federal government could take actions "significantly affecting the quality of the human environment," the agency needed to study the environmental impact of major projects. These projects ranged as widely as the federal government itself, including everything from building highways to licensing nuclear power plants to the management of public lands. The resulting environmental impact statements were public documents that anyone could read, and they included discussions of ways in which the negative impacts could be mitigated (reduced). The requirement to publish environmental impact statements opened up the decision-making process of government in a new way, spelling out both controversial impacts and things that could be done to reduce them. This disclosure changed the course of many projects, including some that were canceled outright because no plausible case could be made that the benefits outweighed the costs, including environmental costs. This kind of public scrutiny was unwelcome to the projects' proponents, of course, and they resisted. The lawsuits that forced compliance with NEPA formed a central part of environmental law as a new body of jurisprudence.

Most of all, this era created new rules and new administrative bodies to protect citizens and nature from environmental harm. The EPA became a national presence, with ten regional offices working with a growing batch of new, state-level,

BOX 12.3

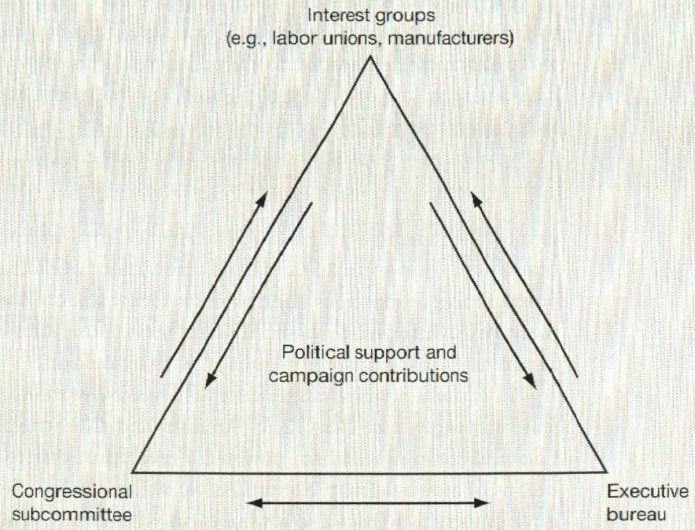
PLURALISM AND THE STRUGGLE OF GROUPS

Conflict is normal in politics. The standard model of American politics is the theory of **pluralism** initially articulated in the 1950s. In this model, the role of government is to be a referee in the competition among private interests, which are organized into **interest groups**.

Pluralist political systems are biased in favor of interests that can be organized effectively. It can be difficult to organize people around the protection of ecosystems or the health of those who endure high levels of pollution. More generally, in a commons, that which belongs to all can be treated as if it belonged to no one, which is a problem for those who would solve environmental problems in a pluralist political system (see Box 12.4: Concentrated and Diffuse Interests, page 326).

When conflict is persistent, the political alignments that form around it endure; for example, the division between labor and business has been reflected for more than a century in the electoral competition between Democrats and Republicans. These stable divisions are like the trees in a rain forest: they organize the dynamics of interactions for long periods, so that specific patterns of organization can arise and persist.

The iron triangle.



One important class of long-lasting political habitat is sometimes called the iron triangle (see figure)—a mutually reinforcing set of alliances that often works to secure government funding for projects such as interstate highways or major medical centers, or to promote industries such as agriculture, often with the assistance of officials within government agencies who are not acting so much as referees as they are advocates of a particular, well-organized interest. Such "captured" agencies and their congressional allies have powerfully reinforced private economic actors in transforming the natural world, often to the detriment of the environment and of people who lacked the power to stand in the way of "progress." The arrows inside the triangle in the figure indicate flows of political resources—money for election campaigns, statements of support such as letters, news articles, demonstrations, and workers for campaigns at election time. The arrows on the outside of the triangle indicate flows of legitimacy and governmental resources—laws, policies, administrative actions to implement them, tax breaks for favored businesses, and budgets to carry out activities.

The pluralist model describes many issues reasonably well. Corn farmers in Iowa, for example, have a strong interest in obtaining federal support for the growing of corn. Senators and congressional representatives from the Midwest are more likely than those from Connecticut to serve on committees that control funding for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which has been responsible for administering large subsidies to corn growers among others. These subsidized crops, in turn, are grown with fertilizers that pollute the Gulf of Mexico (see Box 6.1: Agricultural Ecosystems in Chapter 6, page 132). The struggle among groups is a struggle to shape public policy, which is the set of rules that govern the commons of American society. In the pluralist theory, the voters elect representatives seeking to advance a variety of interests. The trade-offs and compromises made by voters and politicians then produce a shared interest. This theory assumes that all interests have an equal opportunity to organize and be heard, an assumption discussed in Box 12.4 on page 326.

environmental-quality agencies. The Army Corps of Engineers, long known as a construction-oriented agency, hired a new cadre of biologists to gather data on the environmental impacts of their projects. Other scientists were hired by the Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service to evaluate whether certain species of animals or plants were threatened with extinction.

All of these policy changes were achieved by working within the existing political framework (see Box 12.3: Pluralism and the Struggle of Groups, page 321). Classical environmentalism powered a revolution carried out by the conventional means of interest-group politics. As we will see below, though, the very success of environmental politics also set limits on what could be achieved.

HAS ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY WORKED?

The laws created through classical environmentalism have made a difference. Air quality has improved, despite continuing growth in American industrial production and the continuing rapid expansion in automobile use. Today's cars emit huge amounts of carbon dioxide, but there have been major reductions in the pollutants singled out in the 1970 Clean Air Act. The comparison with the developing world is dramatic, as one sees in Mexico City's heavily polluted urban air. In 1970, the air was roughly as polluted in Los Angeles, but it is now far cleaner.[4] However, there are still several days each year when health alerts are issued in Southern California, as is the case in many American cities.

Water pollution control has managed to stabilize water quality in the United States overall, with substantial improvements in many places, such as Boston Harbor. The Clean Water Act provided funding for cities and towns to treat their sewage, in some cases for the first time, before releasing it into streams and bays.

The Endangered Species Act has provided protections that have led to the recovery of some species, such as the bald eagle, the grizzly bear, and the Channel Island foxes you met in Chapter 1. Regional habitat conservation plans have been adopted in high-biodiversity areas of Southern California, as well as other parts of the United States. These provide a regional approach that is meant to allow some land conversion for economic purposes while protecting habitat for species under pressure. But intense conflict still persists over the restrictions on use of private property, and opponents have succeeded in requiring agencies to carry out far more elaborate procedures before taking action to defend new species under the Act. Congressional appropriations for carrying out those procedures have undergone many cuts over the years, so that the list of species being considered for listing has grown ever longer.

Cleanup rules for toxic waste sites have drastically altered commercial real estate practices and markets. Roughly a thousand sites that were sufficiently hazardous to be listed on the Superfund National Priority List have been cleaned up, but there are tens of thousands more. In 1995, in an often-repeated pattern of failing to provide consistent financial support, Congress allowed the major funding source for these cleanups, a tax on the oil and chemical industries, to lapse. Funding was 25 percent lower for the years 2001–4 than it had been from 1992 to 2000, and the number of cleanups completed each year dropped by more than half.

Across the American economy, environmental policies have led to greater complexity. Facilities such as housing subdivisions, shopping centers, offices, and factories must be planned more carefully, with numerous environmental considerations being weighed. These include questions about the need for additional parking spaces when a building changes use from offices to shops, whether asbestos needs to be removed when walls are rebuilt, and how to treat the pollutants produced

in a manufacturing plant. All of these and numerous other environmental considerations arise from a commons that was once ungoverned or poorly governed. Urban planning has been transformed, and state and federal laws have required explicit consideration of many implications that had been ignored.

One result has been the growth of a cumbersome maze of permits, planning meetings, and public hearings facing anyone wanting to undertake a significant project in an urban or suburban setting. Is the system imperfect? Certainly. Are all the complications reasonable and rational? Certainly not. Yet many environmental problems are recognized, avoided, or solved through the scrutiny now required. We have extended the capacity of government to use mutual coercion, even though the means of doing so are often awkward and need improvement.

In what may be the most important legacy of classical environmentalism, an environmental movement now exists, unlike in 1962. It is a force to be reckoned with in elections, in corporate decision making, and in public life. This is an immense achievement, largely unanticipated when *Silent Spring* appeared. To an important extent, classical environmentalism has been effective.

ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS

The major achievements of classical environmentalism, on the other hand, have not yet created a governmental and cultural structure that can move toward sustainable development, or that is yet up to the task of challenging global warming and the fossil fuel consumption that drives climate change. As we will see in the chapters ahead, the struggle to engage with the grand challenges requires economic and technological innovations, as well as shifts in the material strivings of large numbers of people.

Nearly all of the struggles for sustainable development have a political dimension. In some states, the price of a soft drink includes a deposit—a fee that is refunded when the empty container is returned to a retail store. Deposits encourage reuse or recycling of containers. But if no law requires a deposit and one bottling firm charges deposits while its competitors do not, that firm's soda will cost more. This is the pattern of the tragedy of the commons: those who do something that benefits the community—reducing the number of drink containers that are thrown away—are punished for their good deeds. What is needed for better governance of this commons is a rule that requires all bottlers to charge a deposit. Such fees have been adopted in eleven states. They have been successful at reducing litter and raising the proportion of containers that are reused or recycled, at a cost of a little more than a penny per container.[5] But bottling firms, grocers, and others who would have to accept and redeem the containers oppose these regulations

and have defeated citizen campaigns for decades by arguing that this form of mutual coercion is too costly. Governing the commons is a political task.

The environmentalist approach to politics is classical environmentalism. The rise of environmental policy demonstrates the power of this approach. By contributing to sophisticated national organizations such as the Wilderness Society and the Sierra Club, citizens from across the country could have a voice in the interest-group politics of Washington, D.C., and many state capitols. The pluralist politics described in Box 12.3: Pluralism and the Struggle of Groups, page 321, turned out to be an arena in which environmentalists could win significant victories, including the major legislation listed in Table 12.1.

In doing so, the environmental movement also has gained powerful enemies who have fought back. These opponents were and are formidable. First, they are deeply entrenched. Most benefited from earlier enclosures of commons that converted public resources to the advantage of specific industries. The coal and electric power companies did not pay for the environmental damage done by the fly ash, mercury, and carbon dioxide they put into the air, or for restoring the ruined landscapes and waterways left behind by mining. Logging companies and farmers using irrigation water paid little of the cost of roads, dams, or canals built by taxpayers, to say nothing of the damage that logging or irrigation do to downstream fish populations.

As these examples show, small but important groups have powerful economic reasons to oppose environmental reforms. These are interests that benefited directly from the enclosure of commons and the channeling of public resources to benefit private parties, such as the fishermen who used the government to stake a claim on a fishing ground. The iron triangle form of political alliance described in Box 12.3 reflects this pattern.

In the iron triangle, government is the organizer and sponsor of the enclosure of the natural world; in this role, government may or may not be the organizer of mutual coercion as well. Governments are widely seen as having responsibilities both to foster economic development and to protect commons. Environmentalists seek to change the balance between these broad missions, as well as to reduce the number of cases in which the commons can be damaged without actually contributing to economic well-being. Rather than lobbying to have Congress increase funding for environmental and resource agencies, such as the EPA or the U.S. Forest Service, environmental groups are far more likely to spend their resources suing the same agencies (Fig. 12.2 on page 327). This approach leads to persistent conflicts.

Here the opponents of environmentalism have two basic advantages. First, the iron triangle already provides an organized network to pursue economic development. These actors have **concentrated interests**, as explained in Box 12.4: Concentrated and Diffuse Interests, page 326. Second, the voices of development have economic resources as well as powerful reasons to defend their interests.

BOX 12.4

CONCENTRATED AND DIFFUSE INTERESTS

Most of the economic actors in the existing economy are already organized to work with government. They belong to a category that political scientists call concentrated interests. Members of these groups already have organizations that enable them to communicate with one another (and reach agreements on their interests) with relative ease, in part because they tend to derive a direct financial benefit from successful lobbying. Firms in polluting industries, the commercial fishing industry, and land developers are all concentrated interests.

Environmental interests, by contrast, have often been **diffuse**—the reverse of concentrated. Access to clean air and clean water is an interest shared by every person on Earth. Yet very few of the people who benefit from that clean air would be able to invest the same amount of money in lobbying for clean air and clean water as the owners of coal-burning power plants who seek to receive exemptions from environmental regulations.

As a rule, governments pay more attention to concentrated interests than to diffuse ones. Representatives of concentrated interests, for example, tend to be much more effective in securing government funding—projects such as interstate highways or new bridges and dams tend to receive far more support than do projects to repair trails or maintain campgrounds in the national parks, or programs that hire forest or park rangers to watch out for people who are hunting or fishing without a license. In addition, diffuse interests such as environmental protection tend to be far more fragmented—split across multiple agencies and jurisdictions.

In the tragedy of the commons, that which belongs to all is protected by none. In a pluralist political systems, interests that are diffuse are harder to organize and to advance than those that are concentrated.

If we inquire into the major sources of environmental harms, many are authorized and subsidized by laws that few people ever think of as environmental—laws that benefit concentrated interests. Major environmental impacts, for example, have been created because of laws for building roads, subsidizing the growing of some crops and not others, and providing far more funding for new housing that sprawls into former farmland than for rebuilding the inner-city housing that is already served by mass transit, to name only a few examples. The problems brought on by these enclosures tend to be diffuse. The role of government in creating these enclosures is often not seen at all because they have been in place for a long time and their effects are hidden in the invisible present.

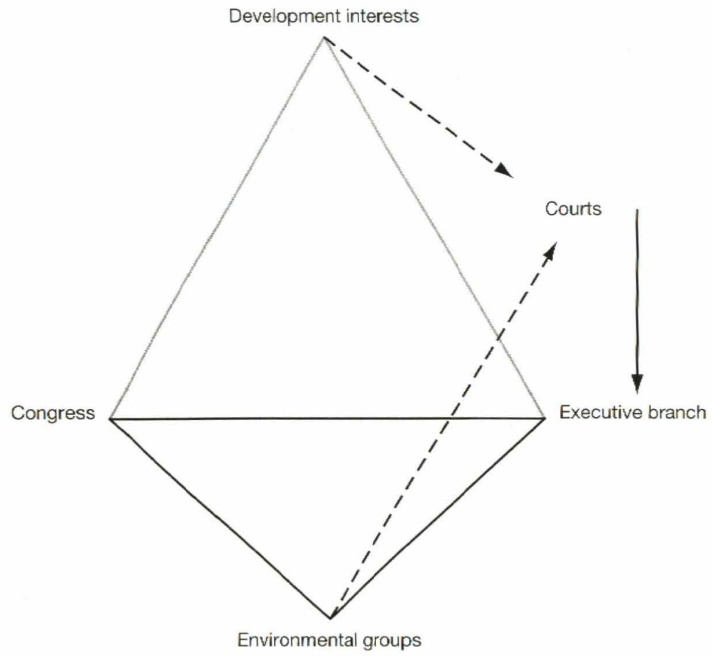


FIGURE 12.2
Modifications of iron triangle due to environmental policy.

Environmentalists have talent and passion, and often logic and the facts on their side, too. But the forces of resistance have money to pay for lobbying, advertising, and sophisticated analysis and litigation. Most of all, they have staying power. Environmental groups might be able to seize on a crisis and press for the enactment of a reform. But the implementation of reforms requires complicated regulations, administrative resources for enforcement, and the time and energy to resolve lawsuits stemming from changes in the way things are done. Those who benefited from enclosures of the commons have had both the motive and the means to slow or reverse environmental progress.

ECONOMIC BENEFITS AND ENVIRONMENTAL ELITISTS

Counterattacks from concentrated interests take two forms: emphasizing the social benefits of exploiting the environment, and attacking environmentalists as elitists who care more for nature than people. There is enough plausibility in each of these criticisms of classical environmentalism that these arguments have gained

traction in the American political dialogue. Some of the leading voices and much of the funding for these counterattacks come from people and firms who have long benefited from public policies that give them significant economic advantages. They know how things work politically, and they can be potent adversaries of those advocating classical environmentalism.

One of the key themes in the counterattack is to claim that exploiting natural resources leads to broader economic benefits that outweigh the associated degradation of the environment. These are enclosures of common resources that benefit some more than others, but this is not what the critics of environmental protection policies emphasize. Instead, they argue that allowing environmental harms brings jobs and economic returns for society as a whole. Opponents of better gas mileage requirements for automobiles have argued that the requirements would make cars less affordable for American consumers (rather than complaining that they would make things tougher for automobile manufacturers), and that if higher automobile prices lead to fewer sales, it might endanger the jobs of American workers.

Those who oppose environmental policy have a second major tactic: changing the subject by attacking environmentalists. As novelist Thomas Pynchon observed, "if they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about the answers."[6] Instead of trying to defend either the pollution or the benefits they themselves gain from enclosing the commons, the critics portray environmentalists as privileged job-hating snobs who do not care if the economy crashes.

Often, communities fear the pollution, traffic, or social changes implied by a new industrial facility or a big-box retail shopping center, and they cite environmental laws and regulations to delay projects and force concessions. But critics charge that all environmentalists oppose jobs and economic growth, even in cases in which environmentally responsible policy options have clear economic benefits, as with many energy conservation proposals. (Caught up in the polarization, most environmentalists have been slow to recognize that many businesses have actually reacted to environmental policy constructively. These firms are stepping up to their responsibilities by complying with or going beyond regulatory requirements, and developing methods and technologies that lower the cost of environmentally sound approaches to production, marketing, and distribution. We will discuss some of these innovations in Chapter 14.)

The charge of elitism has turned the strength of classical environmentalism against itself. Remember the appeal of *Silent Spring*: Rachel Carson warned well-educated, readily mobilized suburbanites about hazards that could be managed and eliminated by a benign government. In this argument, there is no weighing of the benefits, no estimate of the degree to which the costs and risks may exceed the benefits, and no need to make difficult choices to choose a path toward a more sustainable economy. All this made classical environmentalism vulnerable to the charge that its advocates did not care about the social consequences of their advocacy. That

environmentalism is a main element of progressive politics suggests that this alleged lack of concern has only a weak basis, but it has proved difficult to put the charge to rest, particularly as many citizens became suspicious of the motives of government and skeptical of the capabilities of public servants.

It is of course true that all consumers enjoy benefits from the pressures we collectively impose on the environment. This is why sustainable development is a grand challenge. It will not be simple or easy to chart the paths to a sustainable economy. Rather, the paths will require substantial changes in production and consumption, touching on virtually all the economic actors in the world without edges. The fact that much environmental impact is caused by a small fraction of the firms involved (see Chapter 4) means that those firms may be highly motivated to resist the adjustments that may be needed to reach a less polluting, more sustainable future.

Some of those resisting environmental policy are crying wolf: they may indeed suffer, but the impact on the broader society may be matched by larger environmental benefits and progress toward sustainability. It can be difficult to look beyond the rhetoric to see whether the claims of widespread economic dislocation are valid. A major challenge of politics in a large, complex society is doing just that: having a debate about complicated facts and judgments. The pluralist politics of the American government (Box 12.3, page 321) has demonstrated some competence in meeting this challenge—but, as the climate debate has shown, that competence remains limited.

The actual economic impact of environmental policies has been modest. The cost of complying with environmental regulations is roughly 2 percent of GDP.[7] This is a lot of money, but the GDP has grown slightly less than 3 percent each year over many decades. This means that the burden of environmental regulation is about the same amount that the economy grows in approximately one year. The economic *benefits* of environmental protection, ranging from preserving valuable fish species for future generations to improving the health of humans who live downwind from a polluter, are on average far higher. Air pollution regulations return very high benefits because they reduce lung disease and other human health effects, which are easily measured. The EPA estimated in 1999 that the Clean Air Act had cost businesses and automobile owners more than $500 billion to implement over the twenty years since the Act was passed. But the benefits were at least $6 trillion—12 times as much—and could have been as high as $50 trillion. Such impressive ratios have been estimated again more recently.[8] Broader assessments of the economic effects of environmental regulations have shown their impact to be modest or positive. In most cases, even the economic harm inflicted on communities and occupational specialties such as ranching was fleeting.

But public perception has often failed to track these analyses. The story of the timber industry of the Pacific Northwest illustrates a larger pattern. During the

so-called golden age of logging—a time that began with the building boom after World War II and ended as environmental regulations were imposed in the wake of the Wilderness Act in 1964—the actual rate of job loss among loggers in the Pacific Northwest was 3 times higher than it was *after* the new environmental regulations took effect. Yet the restrictions on logging imposed in the 1980s to protect the endangered northern spotted owl are still blamed for the travails of the timber industry.

POLITICAL POWER AND LIMITED COMPETENCE

Environmental groups managed to work within the established system of American politics (Box 12.3, page 321), bringing about changes in the relationship between the economy and the public, and affecting nearly every business and every level of government. Although there were limits to their influence, environmentalists did gain power.

Over the past half-century, classical environmentalism has revealed both its strengths and its weaknesses. Its main strength was that classical environmentalism provided a model for action that shaped the laws written during the period of enthusiasm in the 1970s. The creation of environmental NGOs, many of which have flourished for decades, has created a body of expertise that can participate in vigorous debates in Congress, courts, and agencies such as the EPA. Environmentalists have become a presence that cannot be ignored, and environmentalism can rightly claim to have redirected American society and the economy in ways that have measurably increased the environmental responsibility of our interactions with the natural world.

Classical environmentalism also showed three important weaknesses: a heavy reliance on government regulation to impose mutual coercion; a vulnerability to the counterattacks mounted by concentrated interests benefiting from exploitation of commons; and an inability to escape the limitations of a politics based on interests, as the country has tried to tackle the complicated, subtle problems of humans in landscapes.

Classical environmentalism usually led to a complicated regulatory structure that was difficult to sustain over time. Anti-environmentalist counterattacks came to focus on reducing agency budgets, which were easy to describe as representing "wasteful, bloated bureaucracies." This was usually a caricature, but the cumbersome procedures of government often obscured the benefits of environmental policy while highlighting its costs. Although Garrett Hardin focused on coercion that was mutually agreed to, such attacks showed that mutual coercion can be hard to implement. Even if a clear majority of citizens favor strong environmental laws,

skilled lobbyists and activists backed by a concentrated interest group may still be able to undermine individual regulations, neutralizing the majority's will.

Second, although environmentalists showed great skill in raising public awareness and concern over environmental issues, they were far less successful in maintaining that interest in the public at large. Instead, concentrated interests have succeeded in reframing environmental regulation as a threat to consumption, economic growth, and the American way of life.

The net effect has been stalemate: although the majority of American citizens have continued to report to pollsters that they care about the environment (see Fig. 12.1), **regulated industries** have dug in, effectively shifting the political balance. Public support for environmental protection often translated into actual environmental protection measures during the 1970s. But since then, as the electorate turned slightly more conservative and elections became much more expensive, environmental politics has been a seesaw struggle.

The industries determined to ward off environmental regulation increased their lobbying expenditures and their campaign contributions to political allies, gaining considerable influence in Congress. Environmental law soon had practitioners representing developers and regulated industries. They sued the EPA and other administrative agencies at every level of government, challenging regulations on legal grounds and attacking the science or engineering underlying regulatory decisions. Starting in 1981, Republican administrations became outspoken supporters for regulatory rollbacks, giving regulated industries some notable successes, such as a decades-long deferral of the cleanup of coal-burning power plants.

Leading environmental advocacy groups, such as the Environmental Defense Fund, the League of Conservation Voters, and the Sierra Club, have been outspent in Washington, D.C., but these groups have proved to be effective in advancing some policies, such as wilderness protection, and in defending many more, including air pollution regulation and the protection of endangered species. For the most part, however, since the early 1980s, environmentalists in the United States have focused on trying to defend earlier policy gains, rather than making new ones.

This history reveals a third limitation of classical environmentalism—its reliance on finding stark dangers, such as the pesticides that killed songbirds and caused cancer. As some of the most dramatic threats of environmental harm have been brought under the umbrella of public policy, it has been harder to rouse public anger, even though the solutions devised have sometimes fallen far short of protecting public health or ecosystems. Although climate change is under way, some of the public and many politicians persist in thinking that a winter of unusual snowstorms and colder than average temperatures means that global warming is a hoax.

The deeper problem here is in a politics based on the reconciliation of interests. Environmental problems are virtually all complicated: for example, pollution is

emitted at one place but its damage can be felt far away, as is the case with fertilizer that washes off farm fields only to lead to choking growth of algae in coastal wetlands downstream; or an ecosystem is disrupted by clearing forest or overfishing, but humans only notice a decline in valuable species years later. Usually, the people who feel the impacts are not the same ones who cause those impacts. Often, those who cause the impacts do not realize they are doing so, and they already have made large investments or other hard-to-change commitments when the complaints come.

Governing commons that are overexploited in such ways requires more than an articulation of interests, as is done by the pluralist form of democracy (Box 12.3, page 321). It requires means of deliberation and problem solving that can accommodate both social and technical complexity. No society, democratic or not, has achieved a satisfactory way to do this. A centralized, authoritarian government such as in the former Soviet Union had so little effective communication of complexities that it resulted in large-scale disasters such as the death of the Aral Sea (Box 6.3: A Warning? The Aral Sea in Chapter 6, page 150).

In the United States, a lot of information swirls about in environmental controversies, but decision-making processes often cannot sort out reliable information from disinformation or rumor. Lobbyists on all sides are tempted to spread half-truths and worse, making it that much harder for leaders to respond intelligently. Moreover, the combination of antigovernment suspicion and partisan polarization means that deliberations within official processes, such as the setting of environmental regulations, is often subjected to corrosive legal and political challenges. This is not to say, of course, that the complicated discourse of bureaucrats, businesses, and environmental activists leads to results that citizens should always respect. It is to say, rather, that it is difficult to figure out which of those outcomes will actually move behavior toward sustainable development, even when there is ample transparency and opportunity for citizens to vote.

There is a darker side of environmental politics, too. The benefits of environmental protection have not been evenly distributed (see Box 11.1: Environmental Justice in Chapter 11, page 304). When the British landlords took over the shared common grazing lands during the Enclosure Movement, they were taking land not from other rich or powerful people, but from those who were poorer and less able to defend themselves politically. In more recent years, the worst environmental insults tend to be found in poor neighborhoods, not rich ones. Classical environmentalism has had only modest effects in countering this form of social injustice.

This issue is far from simple. The environmental and social justice movements interact in important ways, often reinforcing each other. In particular, the benefits of clean air and clean water accrue to all segments of the U.S. population, saving tens of thousands of lives each year and yielding major improvements in public health, especially in dense urban areas with substantial low-income communities.

Still, since Rachel Carson's appeal to the readers of the *New Yorker*, the most successful environmental activists have been like the most successful activists on other issues; they have been well educated, well off, and well-organized. Those who are well off create far more garbage than the less well off, but the well off are far more effective at preventing garbage transfer stations and power plants from being built close to their own homes, and only a tiny fraction of those who are well off are active members of environmental organizations. The indirect result can be environmental injustice, as the less well organized and less powerful poor have their neighborhoods invaded by facilities that provide most of their benefits to richer neighborhoods. Here, too, the world without edges can prove to be as close as the nearest sewage treatment plant, which is more likely to be located in a poor neighborhood than an affluent one.

ORGANIZING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

How do environmentalists make a difference? They bring about social change through organizations. We will spend the rest of this chapter explaining this abstract statement. It is an important statement to understand, because making a difference this way is an essential component of the search for sustainable development.

Each of the grand challenges of sustainability presents a challenge of social change, of altering both formal rules, such as environmental laws, and informal practices, such as consumption habits. Social change is almost always resisted: established ways of doing things almost always benefit at least some people, and they seek to keep on doing things the old way. Pressure for social change often emerges in the form of political opposition. Social change can be started by a small group and it can be led by an individual, but for change to become effective, it must be organized, and usually sooner rather than later. If environmental policy is to make a difference, it has to result in social change, and its implementation propels additional change in turn.

In 1970, no electric utility company provided assistance to its residential customers so they could use energy more efficiently and lower the amount of pollution produced by generating plants. Now all utilities do, and many encourage installation of solar panels that can send surplus power back to the grid. This shift is a result of changes in regulatory law that made it profitable to encourage energy efficiency. This was a change that took place on many fronts: in the utility companies, among their customers, in regulatory agencies and Congress, and in the media, which described the political debates and helped to educate consumers about how they could reduce their electric bills by improving the insulation of their homes and water heaters. Environmental organizations such as the Natural

Resources Defense Council pressed for change on all these fronts. As this example demonstrates, environmentalists do more than politics: they work to create a different way of doing things.

Particularly in the United States, where individualism is prized, the tendency can be to overlook the fact that, in large societies, people act through organizations—government agencies, business firms, religious institutions, and political parties, among others. We pay attention to the stars of a movie but usually walk out of the theater as the hundreds of people involved in putting together a motion picture have their names scroll across the screen. The language of politics is individual, but the reality is organizational. Nelson Mandela symbolized and led the struggle for a democratic South Africa, but it is the African National Congress that governs. Individuals can make a difference—and yet, for the most part, they do so through organizations.

Organizations established for the purpose of social change are usually nongovernmental, for the simple reason that they are formed to alter things that are supported and defended by the existing government. Some profitable businesses can bring about changes by persuading people to buy their products or services, the way the cell phone has become widely adopted, bringing considerable social change in its wake. But many of the NGOs that tackle environmental challenges are trying to do so in a way that does not produce earnings, so they are also often called **nonprofit organizations**. The terms "nonprofit" and "nongovernmental" define this genus of social organism negatively, by what it is not. A positive definition would emphasize organizing people around value commitments; these commitments are usually described in the mission of the organization. The mission may include profit-making activities, but these are not primary as they are in a business enterprise.

The need for interests to be organized alters the picture presented by classical environmentalism in an important way. A citizenry may be aroused by events, but in an information-intensive world, this kind of arousal rarely lasts very long. Activist organizations stay focused, because this is what they do—they specialize. Moreover, NGOs seize upon anger in their constituencies, whether those constituents are environmentalists or mining firms, to secure resources. In the terminology used in Box 12.4: Concentrated and Diffuse Interests, page 326 NGOs can be seen as attempts to develop concentrated interests around some of the most diffuse of all human concerns, including planetary-scale environmental systems. Even during times of heightened public concern, however, only a tiny minority of the people who care about environmental preservation—and an even tinier minority of those who benefit from such preservation—can be expected to join in letter-writing campaigns, call their congressional representatives, or even send in annual membership contributions. The great majority are **free riders**: people who may benefit from the work of NGOs but do not contribute resources to it. This problem is

found in almost any kind of organization that is designed to bring its benefits to a larger group beyond its own members. You will recognize a logical parallel to that of the commons: missions that benefit all are sometimes supported by none.

As small and as outnumbered as such organizations may be, however, their fund-raising, organizing for electoral campaigns, letter writing, and other forms of activism provide an important institutional mechanism for translating intense but temporary concern into lasting institutional change. In that sense, NGOs *are* the environmental movement, the durable face of environmentalism in the public arena and in government. Of course, when we complain about industry lobbyists—many of whom also technically work for NGOs, even though those NGOs do their work on behalf of profit-oriented firms—we are portraying the durable presence brought by organization in a less favorable light.

The central role of organizations provides an insight into the scale of our competence. Organizations increase the scale of human action. No single person can build a jet aircraft or elect a political leader or manage a national park. These are inherently organizational tasks. Some are done well, some not. Many of these organizational capabilities generate environmentally destructive consequences. Yet organizations are also human creations, and the record of the past half-century is that many organizations have learned to reduce the environmental damage of the economy.

"Find work," author Wendell Berry wrote, "that does no damage."[9] It has turned out to be possible to work toward steering organizations toward less damage. Organizational work is often difficult and unrewarding (as are other forms of labor). But a lot of worthwhile work remains to be done as humanity faces its grand challenges. Finding effective and creative ways to change organizations is a central task.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Nonprofits and NGOs have been around for a long time. The first European university, at Bologna in what is now Italy, was founded in the eleventh century, and the institutional Christian church traces its origins to Jesus and his apostles. There are even older surviving nonprofits beyond the West. Over the past generation, other nonprofits have risen in visibility and importance, from international organizations such as Amnesty International, to universities whose faculties contribute public policy ideas, to hundreds of community land trusts, to special-purpose temporary organizations such as a city's Olympic organizing committee. Some nonprofits also organize across national boundaries, such as the China Sustainable Energy Project, which links the Chinese government's ambitious efforts to

increase energy efficiency with expertise from developed economies. In many cases, in short, NGOs can have very large goals.

Nonprofits form the organizational backbone of **civil society**—the parts of the social order that are not part of the government or the for-profit part of the economy. It is out of civil society that environmental activism emerges. In the political arena, civil society movements have played a key role in launching democracy in Poland, South Africa, and Tunisia. Civil society is the contemporary expansion of the concept of communities, as social interactions—not just market transactions or formal governmental interactions—have reached into the world without edges, transcending places. Civil society includes spatial communities, such as land trusts, whose mission is to protect valuable landscapes; and it also encompasses large groups in many places, such as the Republican Party, or nonspatial groups, such as the Jon Stewart Intelligence Agency, a web-based fan club.

In a settled place where everyone knows everyone else, people know where they are in a social sense—whom to trust, whom not to trust, what to be careful about saying, and so forth. This is a component of the sense of place discussed in Chapter 2. We now inhabit a world in which we deal with many strangers, and the rules are often uncertain. Much spam e-mail tries to lure people into providing information that can be used to defraud or harm them, disguising its intent by claiming to be from a proper institution such as a bank. This misuse of the rules of social interaction breeds mistrust. As in other commons, bad behavior is not only harmful to victims but it undermines the community as a whole. This erosion of trust is an example of what social scientists call the loss of social capital. Instead of assuming that a message comes from someone who has a legitimate question or offer, we have now learned not to open e-mail attachments from strangers.

The meaning of the abstract idea of **social capital** is brought out by something that happened a while back at a liberal arts college in a small town, a place that comes about as close to Wendell Berry's model of a face-to-face community as is likely to be found in the contemporary United States. A new assistant professor, fresh from her doctoral work at a large urban university, drove to campus on a foggy morning. The day turned bright en route, and she neglected to turn off the headlights she had switched on to navigate through the murk. Upstairs in her office, she was beginning class preparations when the campus police called. They told her the lights on her car were on. They also apologized for being slow to call: she had arrived so recently that they had yet not had time to transfer her license plate number from the form she had filled out into their computer database. Amused at the intimacy of the "bureaucracy," the young professor started down to the parking lot. On the stairs she encountered the department chairperson. "Oh, that was your car!" he said. "I saw the lights on and tried to turn them off, but you had locked the door."

There were formal, big-city ways—a computer database, a police force on the alert—providing one layer of social capital to protect absent-minded professors. A parallel second layer was the informal social capital of the unlocked door and the colleague looking out for people in the community, even if he doesn't know precisely who they are. Both kinds of relationships are valuable forms of social capital. Too often, as with spam e-mail, we lack either kind of social capital as we struggle to find our way in the world without edges, both as individuals and as communities caught up in the turbulent changes of globalization.

Even in a modern, urbanized world, civil society organizations can do more than conserve social capital—they can actively create it. They create social capital by building networks of associations in which people can learn to trust one another by interacting repeatedly. In nonprofit civil society organizations, people participate because they want to, not because it's their job. This provides a basis for building trust that is different from the formal relationships that arise in the workplace or in the governmental arena.

This does not mean that life in civil society is happier. Conflict and duplicity can be found in all kinds of human relationships. A society with a vigorous civil society is more resilient, however, than one in which the civil society is weak—as it was in Iraq under Saddam Hussein's secret police, for example. Civil society provides an alternative way to articulate problems and to address them. Moreover, nonprofits are often deliberately inclusive in their missions, reaching out to "groups too poor to purchase from the market and too politically weak to matter to the state."[10] One of the problems of the Internet is that its civil society is frail and is still being built. (The attempt by the editors of Wikipedia.org to make it a reliable source of information offers an example of an attempt to build trust.)

CREATING CIVIL SOCIETY

Nonprofits can both complement and provide substitutes for market and government. Like government, nonprofits seek to advance the public good and address problems, such as pollution, that arise from the operation of markets. Unlike government, nonprofits lack powers of coercion or regulation and must rely on persuasion (including advocacy aimed at changing policies of the state). Unlike the market—and unlike most pro-industry lobbying organizations—nonprofits lack financial profit making as an incentive driving the organization of activity. The purposes that motivate donors and volunteers and staff of nonprofits differ from those found in government or business: charity, voluntarism, and sometimes religious fulfillment, all focused on a mission that contributors to the nonprofit can define as "making a difference." The sense of commitment and challenge that

emerges from this situation is different, though not completely different, from what one sees in business or government.

Nonprofit organizations are the institutional manifestation of civil society, and they commonly have several of these characteristics:

- Their missions are nongovernmental but community oriented (sometimes by *creating* a community, as a fan club does).
- They organize mutual aid among members, as in an organic-food cooperative.
- They do charitable works through social service and social welfare missions, as one sees in the Rotary Club, an association of businesspeople.
- Their work often overlaps with religious institutions, as in the case of the Catholic Relief Services, an international humanitarian organization.
- They provide a base for articulating critiques of existing institutional arrangements of political and economic power. The Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan research group in Washington, both studies and criticizes the effects of campaign contributions and lobbying expenditures, making the information widely available through its website, www.opensecrets.org.
- They supply a base for mobilizing people, particularly those who may not have access through formal institutional channels. Labor unions have done this on a large scale.

Nonprofits have grown rapidly. In the United States, the most important population of nonprofits is that set of organizations recognized as public charities under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. These nonprofits can receive donations that are tax deductible, so that donors can claim their gifts on their tax returns and not pay tax on them. There were more than 800,000 such public charities in 2000, a population that was 77 percent larger than in 1989, when an earlier survey was done.[11] The federal government estimated that nonprofits contributed 4.2 percent of the gross domestic product.[12] For comparison, this is considerably more than is spent to comply with environmental regulations.

In other countries, too, the growth of nonprofit organizations has been rapid. A study found that "a veritable 'global associational revolution' seems to be under way throughout the world, a significant upsurge of organized private voluntary activity in virtually every corner of the globe."[13]

In the United States, more than eight thousand nonprofits identify their missions as environmental, and in 2000, they spent $8.2 billion to advance those missions. About half of that funding came from donations from individuals and other organizations. These environmental nonprofits constitute the environmental movement in an organizational and political sense. This is the case despite the **free rider problem**: the total membership of environmental groups is a small

fraction of the populace who tell opinion pollsters that they are environmentalists; self-described environmentalists number roughly half of the U.S. voting population (see Fig. 12.1). The nonprofits are the public face of environmental advocacy, and they

- educate the public and raise awareness, through science, policy analysis, school curricula, and publicity;
- try to increase coverage of issues in influential media, so as to compel reactions from government leaders and high-profile commentators—a function called **agenda setting** by political scientists;
- advocate for legislation, press for administrative actions, and litigate—all steps aimed at altering institutional rules and practices;
- produce leaders, some of whom go into government or other leading institutions, such as Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangaari Maathai, who was deputy environment minister in the Kenyan government when she was awarded the prize in 2004 for work she did in an environmental NGO she had founded earlier in her career;
- generate resources to keep advocacy going, by building membership, fundraising, obtaining grants, and forming corporate ties; and
- monitoring the implementation of some policies and evaluating their impacts and success.

NGOs provide a way to sustain the determination and persistence that are essential to meeting environmental challenges. Scholars have begun to study NGOs and to identify factors necessary to marshaling social will and bringing about social change. Because NGOs are not profit-making enterprises, you might wonder how people are motivated to join, to stay, and to contribute to them. Motivation, like its companion trust, is a central determinant of what competences can be fielded in political struggles at large scales. We do not expect neurosurgeons or airline pilots to serve without pay, but conservation biologists of comparable expertise and devotion do their work with very little financial compensation (see Box 12.5: Agents, Incentives, and Making a Difference, page 340).

PHILANTHROPY, CHARITY, AND INVESTMENT

Nonprofits receive an important part of their resources from **philanthropic foundations**. Under American law, private individuals can create and endow independent foundations, a class of NGO that operates in accord with special

BOX 12.5

AGENTS, INCENTIVES, AND MAKING A DIFFERENCE

NGOs are agents of their constituencies. The National Rifle Association claims to speak for gun owners, but what about the policemen who are both hunters and advocates of gun control? Universities act on behalf of their students, but students are rarely consulted before tuition is increased. People who act on behalf of organizations are called **agents**; they may or may not act in the interests of the organization's members, who are called **principals**. Often, it may be unclear what the principals' interests are. Even if a board of directors cannot agree on a course of action, the president still needs to meet a payroll and keep things going. Members of Congress often vote on issues that their constituents back home know little about. This is a recurrent dilemma: agents need to act, even when their principals are divided, indifferent, or ignorant. The situation with principals and agents is somewhat reminiscent of the commons: the problem lies in aligning the agents' interests and incentives with those of the principals.

What draws people into organizations? There is a simple but helpful classification of the reasons why people participate in organizational life:

- *Coercion or duty.* One or both of these motivate prisoners or nuns, as well as students who see no acceptable alternative to going to college. Either of these motivations can lead to half-hearted participation, as we see among students on every campus who are not sure why they are there but enroll nonetheless.
- *Material compensation.* These are the motivating factors we are all familiar with—pay, benefits, stock options, and other forms of compensation that can generally be valued easily in financial terms.
- *Making a difference.* Some organizations, including most nonprofits, offer individuals the opportunity to achieve, or to join in achieving, a goal that they could not achieve on their own. This is what draws some to become activists, even though no one makes them do it and they are unpaid. This is what impels members to join, volunteer, or donate to environmental groups. Public service in the government or military often motivates people in this fashion as well.