It Takes a Nation to Save a Planet

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The past few months have been a tough stretch for planet Earth. First, negotiators in Copenhagen failed to reach a meaningful global agreement to reduce greenhouse gases. Then the Gulf of Mexico was hit with the largest oil spill in history, due in part to lax oversight by regulatory agencies.

These two events carry an important lesson for the way we approach environmental problems: when it comes to protecting the planet, nations and their governments still call the shots. The race to save the Earth will be won or lost one country at a time, as a result of political decisions made in almost 200 sovereign nations and their capacity to implement reforms. In a world of nations, rather than blame our woes on failed international processes, the US must take action now to demonstrate environmental leadership both at home and abroad.

The idea that the nation-state is the central actor in global environmental politics swims against the current of much environmental thinking. Many commentators point to the transnational nature of problems like climate change as evidence that national governments are increasingly irrelevant for addressing global issues. Add to the mix growing economic interdependence, the power of multinational corporations, and the growth in the size and importance of the nonprofit sector worldwide, and nothing seems as outdated as the idea that crusty old governments hold the key to the planet's future.

Yet international treaties are only effective if they are implemented domestically by countries. The big levers required to shift economic growth onto a sustainable track – transportation infrastructure, energy incentives, agricultural policy, land use planning, and investment in maternal-child healthcare, to name a few – are controlled by national, and to a lesser extent provincial and local governments.

Once we move beyond romantic metaphors like the "global village" and "spaceship Earth," we find significant variation in environmental performance from one country to the next and within individual countries over time. Even in the European Union, with its strong commitment to international coordination, some countries exceed EU policy goals while others miss the mark by a wide margin.

Nowhere is the importance of national action clearer than in the United States. The US was once the global trendsetter in areas like air and water quality standards and policies requiring agencies and developers to assess the environmental impacts of their actions. In the mid-1980s, the US led global efforts to address stratospheric ozone depletion over the bitter objections of our European allies. But over the past two decades we have ceded our leadership role to the European Union, while falling behind in many areas, from consumer product safety to the reduction of toxic waste.

This shift is most visible in our lethargic national response to climate change. In Copenhagen, the US and China – the top emitters of greenhouse gases – reached an agreement: They agreed to do almost nothing about global warming. The common refrain in conservative circles is that the US would be unwise to act in the absence of a binding international treaty. But this portrays the process in reverse. There is no global climate treaty because we have chosen not to adopt appropriate domestic policies to reduce emissions, increase energy efficiency, or expand renewable energy. Where the US was once a leader, we are now a laggard in addressing a growing crisis.

What might a renaissance in US environmental leadership look like?

First we must consolidate past gains, ensuring that accomplishments like our national park system, the US Endangered Species Act, and the Clean Water Act – all created with strong bipartisan support – receive continued support. Next we must watch what other nations are doing and improve on their ideas. (When did it become un-American to learn from other countries?) England and Germany have shown that we can grow our economy while reducing carbon emissions. They also show that it is possible for conservatives and progressives to agree on climate change and energy policies. From Holland we can learn strategies for dramatically reducing the amount of pesticides used in agriculture. From Costa Rica we can learn how to design a system of public lands that not only provides recreation opportunities, but places a priority on species conservation. From Portugal and Denmark we can learn how to rapidly expand renewable energy generation.

The US also has much to offer others, drawing on our unique characteristics as a nation. Because we have the largest national economy in the world, our policies influence the industrial practices of trading partners around the globe. The US is also a highly innovative society. Our investment in research and development is second to none. Ironically, the US government has funded more climate change research than any other nation – only to have the findings ignored by our leaders. We developed the first "cap and trade" programs to reduce pollution at a lower economic cost. Now others deploy these ideas to reduce carbon emissions while Washington dithers.

The United States is also a highly decentralized political system. Our cities and states are laboratories for innovative environmental policies and practices. This is significant because several dozen countries are now experimenting with decentralization – shifting decision-making power from national to local levels – and the US can be a leader in collaborations with subnational governments from Beijing to Bordeaux.

Finally, US environmental leadership can draw on an impressive record of government transparency. American citizens have a degree of access to official information and decision-making processes that is unheard of in Europe and the rest of the world. This is noteworthy because of another major political trend sweeping the globe: the spread of democracy. Newly democratizing societies are eager to put in place tools that empower ordinary citizens. The United States has pioneered the use of tools like the Freedom of Information Act, the right of citizens to sue agencies that fail to implement the law,

protections for whistleblowers, sunshine clauses requiring open government processes, and the provision of public information through programs like the Toxics Release Inventory.

International law has an important role to play in protecting the environment. But we mustn't wait for countries to overcome their differences before taking action at home. Successful treaties draw on successful domestic policies. It takes a nation to save a planet, and the time for US leadership at home and abroad is long overdue.

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