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The environment's new bling

ENVIRONMENTALISM, long a movement accused of Chicken Little scare tactics and doomsday prophesying, recently reached new depths of gloominess when it announced the death of itself.

At a meeting of the Environmental Grantmakers Association, two movement insiders, Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, presented an obituary-cum-call-to-arms titled, bluntly, "The Death of Environmentalism." Like most public deaths, this one was sensational, at least within environmental circles, which have been buzzing ever since with ripostes and postmortems.

There's no question that the folks in the undertaker camp have a point. In the face of an unprecedented assault on the environment by the Bush administration, mainstream environmental groups are proving almost entirely impotent. They have lost crucial ground on hugely important battles (drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, mercury emissions from power plants), and entire wars (the importance of multilateralism, the role of federal regulatory agencies, the input of impartial scientists).

Worse still, they have been unable to mount a resistance to the administration's reckless disregard for global climate change, the most important environmental issue and one of the most important human rights issues of our time.

The leaders of the organizations are working hard for a good cause; this planet and its people need their collective expertise, dedication, and clout. But we also need them to step back and take a look at what they're doing and what they aren't.

Instead of a broad, values-based vision, they're offering up narrow policy fixes. Instead of reaching out to young people of all backgrounds, they're preaching to a middle-aged, upper-middle-class choir. Instead of looking at the plight of inner cities and rural areas, they're focusing on urban sprawl and wild lands.

Instead of connecting environmental concerns to unemployment, outsourcing, rising health care costs, rising gas prices, and rising disease rates – in short, to the issues that matter most to tens of millions of people – they're talking a language almost no one speaks: CAFE standards, NSR



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rules, POPs treaties.

What ought to be the biggest of big tents has become, well, a yurt. But if we turn away from the D.C.-centric public face of the environmental movement, a very different picture emerges. In cities nationwide, young professionals are giving environmentalism a new cultural cachet. They're enjoying the benefits of compact, well-designed neighborhoods where it's easy to walk and take public transportation. They're buying shares in Community Supported Agriculture. They're trading in their SUVs for minis. They're finding that many of the hippest products clothes, accessories, home furnishings, appliances are

made with environmental concerns in mind.

Sustainability is the new bling. In rural America, residents are recognizing the potential of wind power, solar energy, biodiesel, and

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other green industries to revitalize their communities. Farmers are discovering the advantages of precision agriculture. Communities are fighting the stench, pollution, and economic ravages of factory farms.

Sustainability is the new self-reliance. In churches, mosques, and temples, religious leaders are taking seriously their responsibility as stewards of God's creation. They are retrofitting their places of worship for energy efficiency,

spreading the word to their congregations, banding together to pressure politicians, and asking, "What would Jesus drive?"

Sustainability is the new grace. In minority and low-income communities all over the country, civil rights activists are linking disparate struggles – poverty, criminal justice, transportation, climate change, health – to continue the path-breaking work of the environmental-justice movement. Sustainability is the new dream.

In the marketplace, green technologies and industries are among the fastest growing and most innovative developments. The Toyota Prius has defied every prediction to become the must-have car. The organic food business doubles every time you blink. Green architecture is taking off. Renewable energy, emissions trading, environmentally conscious investing: Many of the most exciting advances in environmental thinking are happening in the private sector.

Sustainability is the new bottom line. Business people, religious leaders, farmers, activists, urban hipsters – you can't kill a hydra with that many heads. Environmentalism as a narrowly focused D.C. lobby might be struggling, but a common-sense conviction that sustainability is integral to our quality of life and our economic competitiveness is on the rise. That's as it should be.

This warming, crowded, industrialized planet of ours faces real and substantive problems, and if we want to protect its inhabitants we need creativity and commitment as broad and deep as the problems we face. That's not the work of a movement; it's the work of a nation.

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