

SPECIAL YEAR-END ISSUE



ADBUSTERS

THE BIG IDEAS OF 2006



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CURVEBALL OF THE YEAR



Environmentalism needs to die. So say the two most talked about eco-provocateurs of last year, Michael Shellenberger

and Ted Nordhaus. Their hotly debated "Death of environmentalism" essay declared that environmentalists rely on outdated, ineffectual concepts, and are too busy engaged in "complaint-based activism" to come up with new ideas. Indeed, they issued a broad indictment of the left, with its compartmentalized, single-issue organizations pushing special interests.

Not surprisingly, rebuttals to their thesis were fast and furious. Sierra Club director Carl Pope called it divisive and self-serving. But many agreed with Shellenberger and Nordhaus that progressives needed to create a more purposeful and cohesive movement that resonated better with average citizens.

Michael Shellenberger took some time out from working on their forthcoming book *The Death of Environmentalism* – coming in the Fall of 2006 – to talk to *Adbusters* senior editor Nicholas Klassen.

NK: Were you surprised by the reaction to your essay?

MS: We thought it would spark a dialogue among environmental elites but had no idea that it would be so interesting to ordinary environmentalists and progressive liberals more generally. And it was also surprising how the response broke down along generational lines. We saw ourselves as standing on the shoulders of environmentalist of the past, but saying that it's time to move on. But people like Carl Pope were really strenuously attacking us in sort of a generational way. Many in the over-50 crowd saw us as destroyers who weren't offering any alternatives. But those under 40 got it. They'd read the essay and say "no duh" and wonder what all the fuss was about.

NK: Do you think people really absorbed the argument?

MS: No. It became a projection screen, both for people who liked the essay and those who didn't. Conservative environmentalists would say: this

is why environmentalism needs to be more about market forces. And liberals would say: this is why we need a big progressive movement. But the one thing that everybody got wrong is that we never said environmentalism was dead. We said that environmentalism and its useless conceptual underpinnings need to die. I don't think that's a semantic difference. We have this idea that death is bad and that deconstruction is bad, and everyone just wants to get right into building the new politics. But we're saying that you can't really get into the new politics until you know what hasn't been working about the old politics. For example, why do we conceptualize global warming strategy narrowly around regulation of green house gas emissions but we don't think of it as a sort of industrial policy or as foreign policy?

NK: Okay, so where to do we go from here?

MS: In addition to political solutions, we need to create a set of pre-political institutions that mirror the grassroots networking that evangelical churches provide for the conservative movement. The mega churches in US appeal to the things that really matter to the people living in the suburbs; health care, job referrals, drug and alcohol treatment, counseling, a whole set of things. So what about someone like me who isn't religious, but wants to be part of a community like that? I think that there are plenty of liberals who would love to have the opportunity to go to some sort of a service every Sunday that allowed them to connect with people who shared their core values and a sense of awe in the mystery of the universe. But that sort of institution doesn't really exist. Moveon.org tried something like that with it's movie-screening potlucks. Apparently people will go to the first couple and then they stop going. Because how many times can you watch a video about the war in Iraq or about how fucked up the world is or about Fox news?

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