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The Death of Environmentalism

Don't choke on your Sierra Club card. This may be a good thing.

Greens can be excused for feeling blue these days. They give money to eco-causes. They declare their support for the environment at Earth Day events. But what do they have to show for it? In the last 5 years, Americans have seen a record low number of acres added to national parks and wilderness areas, a repeal of roadless area protections, fewer polluters brought to justice, a stubborn refusal by the government to address global warming, a decrease in money for Superfund cleanups, and an increase in oil and gas drilling on public land. But—truth be told—it's their own damn fault. Despite surveys consistently showing that most Americans support conservation efforts, environmentalism has been marginalized by its failure to adapt to a changing political and cultural landscape.

So says a provocative paper published last fall by two veteran

conservationists. "The Death of Environmentalism" argues that the movement has failed to articulate a message that resonates with Americans' core values; instead, it's become "another special interest."

Got your attention now? You're not alone. The paper earned a fiery rebuttal from Sierra Club executive director Carl Pope, and kudos from former Sierra Club president Adam Werbach. Greens are buzzing: They're defending old strategies, reaching out to new partners, challenging big-budget fundraising, questioning the wisdom of lawsuits—and breathing life into the movement. We think it's more rallying cry than obituary, but see for yourself; read the paper and join the fray at www.backpacker.com/greendebate. You don't have to like this idea—or even believe it—to recognize its power.

Dennis Lewon