

Environmental Heroes and Villains

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, October 13, 2004

This week, the world lost a super-hero. Christopher Reeve was known worldwide for his flight through the clear skies, rescuing victims in distress. Fans knew about his fight for life after his spinal cord injury. Less known was his fight for clean water and other environmental causes.

We could pay no greater tribute to Reeve than to cut through the rhetoric and sharpen our thinking about attacks on the environment these last four years. The "Clear Skies" Act of 2003 is a blatant misnomer and a gift to coal-burning power plants. By the year 2020, "Clear Skies" will allow 478 tons of mercury into the environment; the Clean Air Act, which it replaced, would have limited those emissions to 204 tons. The new mercury regulations were developed at the White House and without consulting Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) experts. It's hard to say policy is based on science when no scientists are in the room.

It's not just that this administration is loosening the laws that protect the environment. They're deceiving the public as well. We've heard for a long time that mercury contaminates fish. Even moderate levels, if ingested by pregnant women, can impact memory, attention, and language of unborn children. For a year, the Bush administration delayed a report showing that eight percent of women of childbearing age had mercury levels above EPA safety thresholds. The new number is nearly 16 percent. Yet the White House still refuses to classify mercury emissions as a hazardous air pollutant, even though the EPA has determined otherwise.

And then there's the administration's "Healthy Forest" Initiative. Sounds great, doesn't it? Supposedly this plan protects us from forest fires by opening 60 million acres to lumber companies for logging. The real way to minimize fire hazards is to thin forests and underbrush near homes and communities, not in the backcountry. Besides, there's much to argue against more logging: its debris is highly flammable and the roads allow traffic into the forests, leaving them more susceptible to arson or accidental fire. Smokey would not be pleased.

Pretty words and catchy titles don't make you strong on the environment. The administration is intent on covering up the well-established link between man-made emissions of greenhouse gases and global

warming. In 2003, White House officials tried to force the EPA to alter the section on climate change in its Report on the Environment. Any references to human activity as a cause or the change being harmful to human health were gone. In fact, the White House tried to insert a reference to a discredited study of temperature records partly funded by the American Petroleum Institute.

There is broad-based consensus within the scientific community that global warming does exist and is harmful. But the Union of Concerned Scientists says that interviews with current and former EPA staff, and an internal EPA memo, indicate that the administration wanted to insert “uncertainty...where there essentially is none.” Recent studies have shown that global warming is expected to increase the intensity of hurricanes. Sound familiar? Until this past September, we didn’t think this was going to happen anytime soon. Wrong.

Just a few months into his presidency, Bush reversed his father’s “no net loss” policy on wetlands. No longer must every acre of wetlands consumed by development be replaced. After criticism from many groups, the president said he would reinstate his father’s policy. We’re still waiting.

The environment used to be a bipartisan cause. Teddy Roosevelt gave us the Wilderness Act. Dwight Eisenhower gave us the Arctic Refuge. Both were Republicans. This administration, however, seems more concerned with keeping money in the pockets of big corporations. Many executives of the biggest polluters are Bush campaign contributors, and many of the Clean Air Act violations against their companies have been dropped or stalled.

By a margin of 58 to 34 percent, Americans say environmental quality is getting worse rather than better. Kerry supporters note that in his first year as senator he introduced The National Acid Rain Control Act and created a fund for clean air. He fought recent attempts to weaken drinking water standards for arsenic and was largely responsible for defeating a proposed rule to remove 20 million acres of wetlands from protections. And he’s introduced legislation to require the use of clean renewable energy sources such as solar and wind power. It’s no surprise that he and Christopher Reeve were friends. Super friends.