

Tree mugger: Bush has quietly undercut environmental policy

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White House senior political adviser Karl Rove says that Theodore Roosevelt would be “standing up and applauding” President George Bush’s environmental policies. Let’s check the record on that. Roosevelt created 150 national parks, founded the National Forest Service and set aside some 230 million acres of public land as parks and refuges. Bush has lifted limits on logging in the Tongass National Forest in Alaska. He cleared the way for BNP Petroleum Corporation to set up a 156-foot derrick at Padre Island National Seashore in Texas and begin drilling for natural gas. Overriding the recommendations of the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Park Service, Bush lifted a ban on snowmobile traffic in Yellowstone National Park designed to cut down on pollution and noise. He has also laid the groundwork for dismantling protections for some 20 percent of the country’s wetlands.

There is this much truth to Rove’s comparison: both Roosevelt and Bush exhibit an uncommon interest in national parkland. But whereas Roosevelt sought to create and preserve it, Bush works to secure its use for the interests of those involved with logging, energy production and off-road vehicles.

Knight Ridder Newspapers asked 36 experts in both the environmental and business communities to assess the administration’s environmental record at mid-term. They report that Bush has quietly but significantly undercut environmental policy. Even Russell Train, who headed the EPA under Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, and who was cochairman of Conservationists for Bush in 1988, remarked that the current administration “has been negative toward the environment.”

In addition to clearing the way for increased, and increasingly unregulated, exploitation of public lands by the logging, mining, and oil and natural gas industries, Bush has pushed to weaken existing air and water pollution laws; has opposed all but the most modest increases in fuel efficiency standards for passenger

vehicles; and, not least, has refused to participate in international efforts to curb global warming.

Bush's cavalier rejection of the Kyoto Protocol on climate change may be his grandest snub of environmental concerns, but his response to an EPA report issued last spring may be more telling. In the report the EPA agreed for the first time with the consensus position of scientific research: that greenhouse gases produced by humans are causing a process of global warming that very likely will dramatically alter environmental conditions in the U.S. and around the world over the next century. Bush quickly dismissed the report as "put out by the bureaucracy." The EPA got the message. Its last annual report on air pollution omitted any reference to carbon dioxide emissions or global warming.

Observers have pointed out that the current polarized state of the environmental debate—between corporate America and environmentalists—benefits neither the environment nor responsible economic development. Effective environmental policies involve the adjudication of sharply competing interests. Bush's one-sided assault on environmental protections guarantees continued political polarization and hastens environmental degradation.