

Polluted by profit Johann Hari on the real Climategate

Global warming - and the worst environmental disasters - will only be tackled when green lobbyists in the US stop taking cash from Big Oil and Big Coal

Friday, 21 May 2010



AP

A boat negotiates its way through the Gulf of Mexico oil slick caused by BP, which has escaped censure for its actions through 'reputation insurance'

Why did America's leading [environmental](#) groups jet to Copenhagen to lobby for policies that will lead to the faster death of the rainforests – and runaway global warming? Why are their staff dismissing the only real solutions to climate change as "unworkable" and "unrealistic"? Why are they clambering into corporate "partnerships" with BP, which is responsible for the worst oil spill in living memory?

At first glance, these questions will seem bizarre. Groups such as Conservation International (CI) and the Nature Conservancy (TNC) are among the most trusted "brands" in the world, pledged to protect and defend nature. Yet as we confront the biggest ecological crisis in human history, many of the green organisations meant to be leading the fight are busy shovelling up hard cash from the world's worst polluters – and simultaneously burying science-based environmentalism. In the middle of a swirl of bogus climate scandals trumped up by deniers, here is the real Climategate, waiting to be exposed.

I have spent the past few years reporting on how global warming is remaking the map of the world. I have stood in half-dead villages on the coast of Bangladesh while families point to a distant place in the rising ocean and say, "Do you see that chimney sticking up? That's where my house was... I had to [abandon it] six months ago." I have stood on the edges of the Arctic and watched glaciers that have existed for millennia crash into the sea. I have stood on the borders of dried-out Darfur and heard refugees explain, "The water dried up, and so we started to kill each other for what was left." While I witnessed these early stages of ecocide, I imagined that American green groups were on these people's side in the corridors of Capitol Hill, trying to stop the Weather of Mass Destruction. But it is now clear that many were on a different path – one that began in the 1980s, with a financial donation.

US environmental groups used to be funded largely by their members and wealthy individual supporters. They had only one goal: to prevent environmental destruction. Their funds were small, but they played a crucial role in saving vast tracts of wilderness and in pushing into law strict rules forbidding air and water [pollution](#). But Jay Hair – the president of the National Wildlife Federation from 1981 to 1995 – was dissatisfied. He identified a huge new source of revenue: the worst polluters.

Hair found that the big oil and gas companies were happy to give money to [conservation](#) groups. Yes, they were destroying many of the world's pristine places. Yes, by the late 1980s, it had become clear that they were dramatically destabilising the climate – the very basis of life itself. But for Hair, that didn't make them the enemy; he said they sincerely wanted to right their wrongs and pay to preserve the environment. He began to suck millions from them, and his organisation and others gave them awards for "environmental stewardship". Companies such as Shell and BP were delighted. They saw it as valuable "reputation insurance": every time they are criticised for their massive emissions of warming gases, or for events such as the massive oil spill that has just turned the Gulf of Mexico into the "Gulf of Texaco", they wheel out their shiny green awards to ward off the prospect of government regulation and to reassure the public that they Really Care.

At first, this behaviour scandalised the environmental community. Hair was vehemently condemned as a sell-out and a charlatan. But slowly, the other groups saw themselves shrink while the corporate-fattened groups swelled – so they, too, started to take the cheques. Christine MacDonald, an idealistic young environmentalist, discovered how deeply this cash had transformed these institutions when she started to work for CI in 2006. She told me: "About a week or two after I started, I went to the big planning meeting of all the organisation's media teams, and they started talking about this supposedly great new project they were running with BP. But I had read in the newspaper the day before that the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] had condemned BP for running the most polluting plant in the whole country... But nobody in that meeting, or anywhere else in the organisation, wanted to talk about it. It was a taboo. You weren't supposed to ask if BP was really green. They were 'helping' us, and that was it."

She soon began to see how this behaviour had pervaded almost all of the mainstream green organisations. They take money, and they offer praise, even when the money comes from the companies causing environmental devastation. To take just one example, when it was revealed that many of Ikea's dining room sets were made from trees ripped from endangered forests, the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) leapt to the company's defence, saying that Ikea "can never guarantee" this won't happen; many environmental groups strongly disagree. Is it a coincidence that the WWF is a "marketing partner" with Ikea, and takes cash from the company?

Likewise, the Sierra Club – the biggest green group in the US – was approached in 2008 by the makers of Clorox bleach, who said that if the club endorsed their new range of "green" household cleaners, they would give it a percentage of the sales. The club's Corporate Accountability Committee said the deal created a blatant conflict of interest – but took it anyway. But Jessica Frohman, the club's Toxics Committee co-chair, said, "We clearly corrected the record. We never approved the product line." Beyond asking a few questions, she has said, the committee had done nothing to confirm that the product line was greener than its competitors', or good for the environment in any way. The club's chairman, Carl Pope, says he made sure the products met the EPA's most stringent standards and spent four months reviewing them.

The green groups defend their behaviour by saying they are improving the behaviour of the corporations. But as these stories show, the pressure flows the other way: the addiction to corporate cash has changed the green groups at their core. As MacDonald says, "Not only do the largest conservation groups take money from companies deeply implicated in environmental crimes, they have become something like satellite PR offices for the corporations that support them."

It has taken two decades for this relationship to become the norm among the big green organisations. Imagine this happening in any other sphere, and it becomes clear how surreal it is. It is as though Amnesty International's human rights reports came sponsored by a coalition of the Burmese junta, Dick Cheney and Robert Mugabe. For environmental groups to take funding from the very people who are destroying the environment is preposterous – yet in the US it is now taken for granted.

This pattern was bad enough when it affected only a lousy household cleaning spray, or a single rare [forest](#). But today, the stakes are unimaginably higher. We are living in a brief window of time in which we can still prevent runaway global warming. So you would expect the American conservation organisations to be joining the great activist upsurge demanding we stick to a safe level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere: 350 parts per million (ppm). And – in public, to their members – they often are supportive. On its website, the Sierra Club says: "If the level stays higher than 350ppm for a prolonged period of time, it will spell disaster for humanity as we know it."

But behind closed doors, they tried to stop this becoming law. In 2009, the EPA moved to regulate greenhouse gases under the Clean Air Act, which requires the agency to ensure that the levels of pollutants in the air are "compatible with human safety" – a change the

Sierra Club supported. But the Center for Biological Diversity – an independent group that doesn't take polluter cash – petitioned the EPA to take this commitment seriously and do what the climate science says really is "compatible with human safety": restore us to 350ppm. Kieran Suckling, the executive director of the centre, explains: "I was amazed to discover the Sierra Club opposed us bitterly. They said it should not be done. In fact, they said that if we filed a lawsuit to make EPA do it, they would probably intervene on EPA's side. They threw climate science out the window."

Why would the Sierra Club oppose a measure designed to prevent environmental collapse? Pope says that "while there are legitimate disagreements between lawyers about the best legal strategies to cut carbon emissions, we have always supported the deepest emission cuts and the need to convert to a new clean-energy economy." But climate scientists are bemused by this claim. Professor James Hansen – the world's most distinguished climate scientist – says: "I find the behaviour of most environmental NGOs to be shocking... I [do] not want to listen to their lame excuses for their abominable behaviour."

It seems the US "green" groups have come to see the world solely through the funnel of the US Senate and what legislation it can be immediately coaxed to pass. They say there is no point advocating a strategy that senators will reject flat out and urge environmentalists to be "politically realistic". This focus on inch-by-inch reform would normally be understandable: every movement for change needs a reformist wing.

But with global warming, this approach doesn't make sense, because of the existence of "tipping points" in the climate. If the artificial temperature rise is pushed beyond two degrees, the earth's natural stores of carbon will break down – and be released into the atmosphere. The huge amounts of [methane](#) stored in the Arctic permafrost are belched into the atmosphere, causing more warming. The moist rainforests begin to dry out and burn down, releasing all the carbon they store into the air, and causing more warming. They mark the Point of No Return. After that, any cuts we introduce will be useless. You can't compromise with the atmosphere.

By definition, if a bill can pass through today's corrupt Senate, then it will not be enough to prevent catastrophic global warming. Why? Because the bulk of the Senate – including many Democrats – is owned by Big Oil and Big Coal. They call the shots with their campaign donations. Senators will not defy their benefactors. So if the green groups call only for measures the Senate could pass tomorrow, you are in effect giving a veto over the position of environmentalists to the fossil fuel industry.

Yet the "conservation" groups in particular believe they are being hard-headed in adhering to the "political reality" that says only cuts far short of the climate science are possible. They don't seem to realise that in a conflict between political reality and physical reality, physical reality will prevail. The laws of physics are more real and permanent than any passing political system. You can't stand at the edge of a rising sea and say, "Sorry, the swing states don't want you to happen today. Come back in 50 years."

At Copenhagen, this process reached a startling climax. Some of the US conservation groups demanded a course of action that will lead to environmental disaster faster. It's a complex story, but the stakes are so high that it's worth smacking through the acronyms and loopholes.

It begins with one crucial loophole. When the presidents and prime ministers stand up and say they are going to cut their emissions, it sounds to anyone listening as if they are going to ensure that there are fewer coal stations and many more renewable energy stations at home. So when Barack Obama says there will be a 3 per cent cut by 2020 – a tenth of what the science requires – you assume the United States will emit 3 per cent less warming gases. But that's not how it works. Instead, they are saying they will trawl across the world to find the cheapest place to cut emissions, and pay for it to happen there. Today, the chopping-down of the world's forests is causing 12 per cent of all emissions of greenhouse gases, because trees store [carbon](#) dioxide. So the rich governments say that if they pay to stop some of that, they can claim it as part of their cuts. A programme called Redd – Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation – has been set up to do just that by the United Nations, and it is expected to be at the core of a global deal when – if – one ever arrives.

In theory, it sounds fine. The atmosphere doesn't care where the fall in emissions comes from, as long as it happens in time to stop runaway warming. A ton of carbon in Brazil enters the atmosphere just as surely as a ton in Texas. But if this argument sounds deceptively simple, that's because it is deceptive. In practice, the Redd programme is filled with holes large enough to toss a planet through.

To understand the trouble with Redd, you have to look at the place touted as a model of how the system is supposed to work. Fourteen years ago in Bolivia, a coalition of the Nature Conservancy and three big-time corporate polluters – BP, PacifiCorp and American Electric Power (AEP) – set up a protected forest in Bolivia called the Noel Kempff Climate Action Project. They took 3.9 million acres of tropical forest and said they would clear out the logging companies and ensure that the forest remained standing. They claimed this plan would keep 55 million tons of CO₂ locked out of the air – which would, in time, justify their pumping an extra 55 million tons into the air from their coal and oil operations. AEP's internal documents boasted: "The Bolivian project... could save AEP billions of dollars in pollution controls."

Greenpeace sent an investigative team to see how it had turned out. They found that some of the logging companies had simply picked up their machinery and moved to the next rainforest over. An employee for one of the biggest logging companies in the area bragged to them that nobody had ever asked if they had stopped. This is known as "leakage": one area is protected from logging, but the logging leaks a few miles away and continues just the same. In fact, one major logging organisation took the money it was paid by the project to quit and used it to cut down another part of the forest. The project had to admit it had saved 5.8 million tons or less – a tenth of the amount it had originally claimed. Greenpeace says even this is a huge overestimate. It's a Potemkin forest for the polluters.

When you claim an offset and it doesn't work, the climate is screwed twice over – first because the same amount of forest has been cut down after all, and second because a huge amount of additional warming gases has been pumped into the atmosphere on the assumption that the gases will be locked away by the now-dead trees. So the offset hasn't prevented emissions – it's doubled them. And as global warming increases, even the small patches of rainforest that have technically been preserved are doomed. Why? Rainforests have a very delicate humid ecosystem, and their moisture smothers any fire that breaks out, but with two degrees of warming, they begin to dry out – and burn down. The climatologist Wolfgang Cramer says we "risk losing the entire Amazon" if global warming reaches four degrees.

And the news gets worse. Carbon dioxide pumped out of a coal power station stays in the atmosphere for millennia – so to "offset" it genuinely, you have to guarantee that a forest will stand for the same amount of time. This would be like Julius Caesar in 44BC making commitments about what Barack Obama will do today – and what some unimaginable world leader will do in 6010. In practice, we can't even guarantee that the forests will still be standing in 50 years, given the very serious risk of runaway warming.

If their primary concern was the environment, the major conservation groups would be railing against this absurd system and demanding a serious alternative. But on Capitol Hill and at Copenhagen, these groups have been some of the most passionate defenders of carbon offsetting. They say that, in "political reality", this is the only way to raise the cash for the rainforests, so we will have to work with it. But this is a strange kind of compromise – since it doesn't actually work.

In fact, some of the big groups lobbied to make the protections weaker, in a way that will cause the rainforests to die faster. To understand why, you have to grasp a distinction that may sound technical at first but is crucial. When you are paying to stop deforestation, there are different ways of measuring whether you are succeeding. You can take one small "subnational" area – such as the Noel Kempff Climate Action Project – and save that. Or you can look at an entire country, and try to save a reasonable proportion of its forests. National targets are much better, because the leakage is much lower. With national targets, it's much harder for a logging company simply to move a few miles up the road and carry on: the move from Brazil to Congo or Indonesia is much heftier, and fewer loggers will make it. Simon Lewis, a forestry expert at Leeds University, says: "There is no question that national targets are much more effective at preventing leakage and saving forest."

Yet several groups – such as TNC and CI – have lobbied for the weaker, lamer, worthless subnational targets to be at the core of Redd and the US climate bills. Thanks in part to their efforts, this has become official US government policy. The groups issued a joint statement with some of the worst polluters – AEP, Duke Energy, the El Paso Corporation – calling for them.

An insider who is employed by a leading green group and has seen firsthand how this works told me: "They will generate a lot of revenue this way. If there are national targets,

the money runs through national governments. If there are subnational targets, the money runs through the people who control those forests – and that means TNC, Conservation International and the rest. Suddenly, these forests they run become assets, and they are worth billions in a carbon market as offsets. So they have a vested financial interest in offsetting and in subnational targets – even though they are much more environmentally damaging than the alternatives. It's shocking."

Becky Chacko, the director of climate policy at CI, tells me these subnational targets are only a first step, and they will support national targets in time. "Our only interest is to keep forests standing. We don't [take this position] because it generates revenue for us. We don't think it's an evil position to say money has to flow in order to keep forests standing, and these market mechanisms can contribute the money for that." Yet when I ask her to explain how Conservation International justifies the conceptual holes in the entire system of offsetting, her answers become halting. She says the "issues of leakage and permanence" have been "resolved". But she does not say how. How can you guarantee a forest will stand for millennia, to offset carbon emissions that warm the planet for millennia? "We factor that risk into our calculations," she says mysteriously. She will concede that national accounting is "more rigorous" and says Conservation International supports achieving it "eventually".

There is a broad rumble of anger across the grass-roots environmental movement at this position. "At Copenhagen, I couldn't believe what I was seeing," says Kevin Koenig of Amazon Watch, an organisation that sides with indigenous peoples in the Amazon basin to preserve their land. "These groups are positioning themselves to be the middlemen in a carbon market. They are helping to set up, in effect, a global system of carbon laundering... that will give the impression of action, but no substance. You have to ask – are these conservation groups at all? They look much more like industry front groups to me."

So it has come to this. After decades of slowly creeping corporate entanglement, some of the biggest environmental groups have remade themselves in the image of their corporate backers: they are putting profit before planet. They are supporting a system that will lead to ecocide, yet where more revenue will run through their accounts, for a while, as the collapse occurs. At Copenhagen, their behaviour was so shocking that Lumumba Di-Aping, the lead negotiator for the G77 bloc of the world's rainforest-rich but cash-poor countries, compared them to the CIA at the height of the Cold War, sabotaging whole nations.

How do we retrieve a real environmental movement, in the very short time we have left before the damage is irreparable? Charles Komanoff, who worked as a consultant for the Natural Resources Defense Council for 30 years, says: "We're close to a civil war in the environmental movement. For too long, all the oxygen in the room has been sucked out by this beast of these insider groups, who achieve almost nothing... We need to create new organisations that represent the fundamentals of environmentalism and have real goals."

Some of the failing green groups can be reformed from within. The Sierra Club is a democratic organisation, with the leadership appointed by its members: they can put it right. But other organisations – such as CI and TNC – seem incapable of internal reform and simply need to be shunned. They are not part of the environmental movement. They are polluter-funded leeches sucking on the flesh of environmentalism, leaving it weaker and depleted. Already, shining alternatives are starting to rise up across America. In just a year, the brilliant 350.org has formed a huge network of enthusiastic activists who are demanding our politicians heed the real scientific advice – not the parody of it offered by the corporate greens. They have to displace the contaminated conservationists as the voice of American environmentalism, fast.

This will be a difficult and ugly fight, when greens need all our energy to take on the forces of ecocide. But these conservation groups increasingly resemble the forces of ecocide draped in a green cloak. If they don't build a real, unwavering environmental movement soon, we had better get used to a new sound – of trees crashing down and an ocean rising, accompanied by the muffled ringing till of America's "conservationists".

A version of this article appeared originally in The Nation, America's best-selling political magazine.