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Environmental Privilege Revisited

Nature appreciation is a “full stomach” phenomenon, that is confined to the rich, urban, and sophisticated. A society must become technological, urban, and crowded before a need for wild nature makes economic and intellectual sense.

—Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 1967¹

Costa Rica firmly and emphatically rejects the point of view that preservation of the natural environment is a preoccupation of privileged nations, and a benefit that poor nations and developing nations cannot enjoy.

—Costa Rican President Daniel Oduber, 1976²

There is a great deal of popular mythology surrounding tropical conservation. One of these myths is that rainforests deserve the lion's share of attention, when in fact tropical dry forests possess some of the highest concentrations of biological diversity found anywhere in the world (Bullock, Mooney and Medina 1995). A second popular myth, and the focus of this chapter, is the idea that developing countries are somehow “too poor to care” about environmental protection. It is worth examining this idea in detail for two reasons. First, it is a notion so commonly encountered in writings on sustainable development, and so completely at odds with contemporary reality in Costa Rica and Bolivia, that the researcher arriving in these countries is immediately faced with an empirical anomaly. The journalist David Wallace, after some months in Costa Rica, struggled to reconcile this received wisdom with the fact of Costa Rican environmentalism: “For a third world country to be more prowilderness and biocentric in conservation policy than a first world nation might seem strange to North Americans and Europeans. . . . Where does the Costa Rican attitude come from, in the absence of two centuries of Costa Rican Audubons, Thoreaus, and Muirs?” (Wallace 1992: 126; see also Broad and Cavanagh 1993: 58–59).

There is a second and more pressing reason to critically examine the evidence underlying this idea. Over the past three decades international environmental policymaking has been predicated on the assumption that developing countries are too poor to embrace environmental concerns absent financial inducements. Accordingly, policy prescriptions have emphasized North to South resource transfers (Keohane and Levy 1996; Wells 1994; Steinberg 1998b). If this assumption is mistaken, we may be overlooking a variety of other roles international institutions can play to promote sustainable development in the tropics.

The received wisdom about environmental ethics in developing countries is reflected in several literatures, which I place together under the rubric “theories of environmental privilege.” These are diverse in origin and some are not theories so much as oft-repeated assumptions. But they share in common the idea that environmentalism is the province of rich people and rich countries. In the following sections, I first describe these theories of environmental privilege, then take a closer look at their logical and empirical underpinnings. There is no reason to believe that environmentalism will inevitably arise in any society.³ But I will argue that there is no reason to assume that developing countries are less likely than their Northern counterparts to have active environmental movements and domestic constituencies clamoring for effective environmental policies.

Theories of Environmental Privilege

The everyday conversations that a researcher has with friends, family, or a stranger at a bus stop can serve as valuable (if unscientific) sources of information about popular notions concerning environmental protection. In the course of such conversations in the United States, it has been my experience that even those who claim to know little about ecology and development do know enough to say, “It seems to me that in poor countries they’re not thinking about conserving rainforests, but about where to find their next meal. Besides, we destroyed our forests while building our country—who are we to tell them what to do?” What this popular perception misses is that Costa Ricans were fighting for biodiversity conservation—establishing a world-class park system with domestic funds—long before tourists in wealthy countries took an interest in tropical rainforests. In fact it was Nicaraguans—Costa Rica’s poorer neighbors—who comprised the largest group of foreign ecotourists visiting Costa Rican parks prior to the

Sandinista uprising (Boza 1993). Likewise, Bolivian environmentalists like Noel Kempff and Percy Baptista were writing letters and lobbying politicians decades before groups like The Nature Conservancy and World Wildlife Fund made a serious commitment to conservation in that part of the world.

The popular perception that some countries are “too poor to be green”⁴ has been nourished by pronouncements from developing country negotiators at high-profile international meetings. As a bargaining strategy to attract overseas aid, these officials claim that protection of the natural environment is a low priority, a luxury their countries cannot afford without financial assistance. “The environment cannot be improved in conditions of poverty,” announced Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi at the Stockholm conference in 1972 (quoted in Dias and Begg 1994: 284). Economic and social development, she argued, are necessary conditions for improvements in environmental quality. Industrialized countries must contribute to the former if they wish to see the latter. Yet in the years to come, Prime Minister Gandhi was an outspoken advocate of environmental policy in India, spearheading efforts at legal reform and institutional strengthening (Dwivedi and Khator 1995). Clearly, she believed that conservation should be a priority even in poor countries, contrary to her assertions in international fora.

Similarly, when speaking before international audiences in 1997, Costa Rican Environment Minister René Castro warned that developing countries would not implement their conservation commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity unless they were paid to do so: “All of the efforts that all delegations have been putting in this present Conference of Parties (COP) and the former ones, as well as efforts made at the national level,” he argued, “become a futile and theoretical exercise if our developed country partners in the Convention do not provide the new and additional resources . . .” (Nijar 1998).

This leaves the impression that leaders and publics of developing countries care about short-term economic welfare first and foremost, and that environmental conservation will only be promoted to the extent that it promotes this higher goal. Negotiators from developing countries cemented this impression by successfully inserting a clause in article 20 of the convention stating that “economic and social development and eradication of poverty are the first and overriding priorities of the developing country parties” (UNEP 1992). What Minister Castro’s statement hides is

the fact that, at home, he frequently confronted powerful economic interests and sacrificed short-term income opportunities for the sake of environmental protection.⁵ His pronouncement also belies the fact that 91 percent of Costa Ricans surveyed say they would be willing to pay more for water or electricity if the additional money were devoted to biodiversity conservation (Holl, Daily, and Erlich 1995). Because the international press corps devotes considerably more attention to international summits than to domestic actions in developing countries, Northern publics receive a biased impression from the news media that environmental protection is not a major concern in the developing world.

How can we understand the apparent contradiction between the international proclamations and domestic actions of these officials? The most satisfactory answer comes from negotiation theory, which demonstrates that when negotiators reveal their true interests they risk a loss of bargaining power (Lax and Sebenius 1986). Specifically, if negotiators from developing countries underscore the growing demand for environmental protection on the part of their citizenry, they weaken their position. Why should donors provide financial incentives to countries that already consider environmental protection a priority? This question lies at the heart of the incremental cost approach used by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the world's largest source of overseas aid for biodiversity conservation. The GEF funds only those initiatives that are thought unlikely to attract domestic support in developing countries, giving these countries a powerful incentive to downplay their enthusiasm for conservation (The World Bank 1992a, 1992b). It is no wonder that even officials who are staunch environmental advocates in their home countries argue in international forums that their countries cannot afford to make conservation a priority without foreign aid, technology transfer, debt relief, and improved terms of trade.

Popular accounts of environmental privilege have their counterparts in academia. Inglehart's work on postmaterial values is the best known (and best supported) body of theory suggesting that poor countries might have lower levels of environmental concern. Using data from the Eurobarometer surveys, Inglehart finds that affluent societies have a higher proportion of postmaterialists—people who are more preoccupied with personal freedom, self-expression, and the quality of life than with basic concerns

of physical and economic security. If postmaterial values are more compatible with environmental ethics, and if affluent societies have more postmaterialists in their ranks, we might expect greater support for environmental protection in wealthy countries (Inglehart 1990; Abramson and Inglehart 1995; see also Guha and Martínez-Alier 1998: xi–xv).

Whereas Inglehart's claim is based on a close reading of the empirical evidence, other literatures have adopted environmental privilege as an article of faith. According to Robert Ayres, the idea that developing countries are too poor to care about the environment,

... is taken seriously by economists because it has an interpretation that fits economic theory, viz. that as people get richer, they will value the environment more and protect it better. This is *probably* true, for instance, if one compares the attitudes of Northern Europeans with Southern Europeans, or upper middle-class Americans vis-à-vis lower middle-class Americans. (Ayres 1995: 97, emphasis added)

In fact it is not true, according to the public opinion data reviewed below. Data notwithstanding, environmental privilege has been offered as an explanation for the Environmental Kuznets Curve—the finding that economic development is accompanied by an initial rise and then a decline in the levels of certain pollutants. According to Arrow and colleagues,

One explanation of this finding is that people in poor countries cannot afford to emphasize amenities over material well-being. Consequently, in the earlier stages of economic development, increased pollution is regarded as an acceptable side effect of economic growth. However, when a country has attained a sufficiently high standard of living, people give greater attention to environmental amenities. This leads to environmental legislation, new institutions for the protection of the environment, and so forth. (Arrow et al. 1995: 92)

These authors conclude, however, that the Environmental Kuznets Curve only holds for a few pollutants, does not apply to resource stocks such as soil, forests, and ecosystems, and is on the whole an erroneous oversimplification of the relationship between economic development and environmental protection. Similar conclusions were reached by contributors to special issues on the Environmental Kuznets Curve published by *Ecological Economics* and *Environment and Development Economics* (Rothman and Bruyn 1998; Barbier 1997).

Another theory of environmental privilege maintains that Southern support for environmental initiatives, where it occurs, is little more than a coerced response to the carrots and sticks offered by the industrialized

North. In this view, Northern support for environmental protection in the South amounts to "green imperialism," the latest instance of powerful Northern actors flexing their muscles to promote policy reforms at odds with the interests of developing countries. There is ample historical precedent for this assertion. Conservation was imposed coercively by colonial regimes in Africa and Asia (Beinart 1989; Rajan 1998) and colonial-era management philosophies continue to shape conservation policy in some countries (Peluso 1992). But the "imperialist" label has also been applied, in more cavalier fashion, to characterize the central tendency of contemporary international environmental activism and policymaking. This reaction began in the 1960s when environmentalists, the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, and Robert McNamara of the World Bank first sounded the alarm on population growth. Their rhetoric stirred deep-seated fears among leaders and publics in developing countries, who saw in these warnings a conspiracy to limit their numbers and influence. "What do the proposals of Malthus's disciples amount to," wrote Eduardo Galeano, "if not a proposal to kill tomorrow's beggars before they are born?" (Galeano 1989/1971: 7). Accusations of green imperialism are reflected today in academic and popular titles such as "The New Imperialism: World Population and the Cairo Conference," "Ecology and the New Colonialism," "Environmental Protection or Imperialism," and "Environmental Imperialism: GATT and Greenery."⁶ What matters for the present discussion is not the purity of Northern motives, but the idea that environmentalism is an outside idea that has been imposed on developing countries, against their will and contrary to their true interests and desires.

The notion that developing countries are too poor to care about the environment has even found its way into more careful works on comparative public policy and international organization. "Questions of environmental quality are unlikely to receive careful hearing amid the overwhelming problems of poverty," argues Desai (1998: 3). According to Keohane (1996: 3, 10), "It is futile to demand of poor countries that they give sufficient priority to environmental degradation . . . The asymmetrical levels of concern inherent in international aid for the environment mean that relations between funders and recipients are not harmonious: their priorities differ."

Environmental Privilege: A Logical and Empirical Critique

Are the priorities of North and South fundamentally at odds on the environment? Are poor people and poor countries too preoccupied with material security, their governments too concerned about economic development, to make the environment a major concern? The argument is compelling, intuitive and widely believed. In this section I show that it is also mistaken, logically flawed, and at odds with the evidence. The argument proceeds as follows. First, I adopt the assumption that poor individuals care less about the environment than the well-to-do, and show that even with this assumption, we should expect many developing countries to aggressively pursue environmental policies. Next I relax this assumption, reviewing public opinion data on environmental attitudes and willingness to pay for environmental quality. These data consistently show that citizens in poor countries express support for environmental protection equal to that of their counterparts in wealthy countries. I then consider why these results should come as little surprise, given the diverse collection of issues that comprise the environment, the material element of these purportedly postmaterial concerns, and the many nonmaterial concerns of materially deprived peoples.

Individual Concerns, Collective Outcomes, and Problems of Aggregation

Let us assume for the moment that wealthy individuals care more about environmental protection than do poor individuals. To conclude on this basis that developing countries are less likely to embrace environmental protection is to draw an unsupported inference about the relationship between individual and group (in this case, national) characteristics. To evaluate the relationship between wealth and the environment posited by theories of environmental privilege, we must first distinguish between poor individuals and individuals in poor nations. Next we must clarify our assumptions about the relationship between individual concerns and collective changes in public policy and environmental quality.

To appreciate the importance of distinguishing between poor people and poor nations, we need only consider that there are greater numbers of affluent people in Brazil than in Switzerland—if we may define affluence

as possessing a house, nice clothes, an expensive automobile, and an abundance of food. The reader may protest that the *proportion* of affluent people is higher in Switzerland, and this is certainly the case. If policy change is the result of voter behavior and if wealthy people are more likely to cast a green vote, then we might expect Switzerland to pursue environmental policy with more enthusiasm than Brazil. In most societies, however, policy change results from the efforts of small, highly committed groups of individuals as often as it does from mass voting (see Grindle and Thomas 1991; Sabatier 1991: 148–149). This alternative and equally plausible model of the relation between individual concerns and collective outcomes predicts environmental policy reform in countries which achieve a sizable *absolute* number of affluent people. One thousand committed environmental activists (less than one-hundredth of 1 percent of the wealthiest 10 percent of Brazil's population) can establish offices in all of the country's major cities, achieve a division of labor among researchers, educators, grassroots activists, journalists, and lobbyists, and constitute themselves as a force to be reckoned with. Thus even if we adopt the assumption that personal wealth is a prerequisite for environmental concern, there is good reason to believe that environmental movements and policy change can occur in poor countries. And we must resist the temptation to dismiss movements comprised of a small elite as less authentic than their counterparts in industrialized countries, since this is entirely congruous with the historical origins of environmental concern in the United States, where "conservation was never more an elitist conspiracy than at its birth," according to historian Stephen Fox (1981: 110).

Roderick Nash (1967) concludes his influential book *Wilderness and the American Mind* with a chapter entitled "The International Perspective," in which he argues that wilderness preservation is the intellectual preserve of rich countries. He begins with a quote from Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere, who in 1961 characterized wildlife appreciation as a curious foreign obsession: "I am personally not very interested in animals. I do not want to spend my holidays watching crocodiles. Nevertheless, I am entirely in favor of their survival. I believe that after diamonds and sisal, wild animals will provide Tanganyika with its greatest source of income. Thousands of Americans and Europeans have the strange urge to see these animals" (Nash 1967: 342).

Table 2.1

U.S. population characteristics during the 1870s national parks movement compared to those of developing countries today

	Percent population in urban areas	High school education (% of eligible age group)	National wealth (GNP per capita)	Life expectancy
United States	26 (1870)	2 (graduated, 1870)	\$2565 (1869–78)	47 years (1900)
Developing countries (average)	41 (1999)	63 (enrolled, 1997)	\$1240 (1999)	65 years (1995)

Source. World Bank 1997, 2000; U.S. Department of Commerce 1975. Note. “Developing countries” = low and middle-income countries, as defined by the World Bank. U.S. GNP/capita is the average of 1869 to 1878 decade, expressed in 1991 dollars. Life expectancy data for U.S. as a whole prior to 1900 not available. (For Massachusetts, life expectancy in 1878–1882 was 41.7 for men, 43.5 for women.)

What is noteworthy about Nash’s choice of quotes is that Julius Nyerere was at the time a wealthy man, much richer than the average American visitor to Yosemite National Park. Although Nash characterizes conservation as a “full stomach” concern, he is in fact referring to levels of national industrial development rather than personal wealth. Specifically, he claims that those who value wilderness are those who lack it—because they live in developed, urban societies. The problem with this argument as a basis for theories of environmental privilege is that today most people in Latin America, the Middle East, and North Africa live in urban areas.⁷ In fact, as table 2.1 shows, when the national parks movement got underway in the United States in the 1870s, that country was less urbanized, its people less educated and with a lower life expectancy than citizens of the average developing country today. This should be borne in mind by Northern critics who may be tempted to dismiss national parks movements in developing countries as unlikely, ungentle, or inconsistent with national priorities.

Another logical flaw common to theories of environmental privilege is to impute individual motives from observed collective outcomes.⁸ Supporters of the Environmental Kuznets Curve theory observe some

differences in pollution levels between rich and poor countries and take this as evidence for cross-national differences in individual preferences for environmental amenities.⁹ One of the major contributions of social science research over the past quarter century, however, has been to demonstrate the many reasons why collective outcomes often fail to reflect the preferences of the individuals comprising the collectivity (Olson 1965; Ostrom 1990). Institutional designs, access to information, and free rider problems are among the many factors that place a wedge between individual preferences and collective actions.

Beyond questions of aggregation, the relation between action and preferences at either the individual or group level must be handled with care. Inferring preferences from actions would lead us to conclude that low-income people care less about air pollution and more about water conservation than do the wealthy, because in the United States the poor drive older, more polluting vehicles and use less water per capita in drought-prone areas. What we need are measures of environmental concern that are independent of the outcomes this concern is said to produce. Such measures are the focus of the next section.

A Look at the Evidence

The above arguments hold constant the assumption that wealthier individuals are more likely to care about the environment than poor individuals. Here I relax this assumption, with a review of public opinion data on the subject. Three major public opinion surveys have examined cross-national differences in support for environmental protection. The 1992 Health of the Planet survey, coordinated by the George H. Gallup International Institute, interviewed over 29,000 citizens in twenty-four countries to measure levels of environmental concern (Dunlap, Gallup, and Gallup 1993). Survey questions explored topics such as the perceived seriousness of environmental problems, support for environmental protection measures, willingness to pay higher prices to protect the environment, and trade-offs between environmental quality and economic growth. Before respondents were informed of the survey's environmental focus,¹⁰ they were asked, "What do you think is the most important problem facing our nation today?" The results, plotted against gross national product per capita in figure 2.1, show no relationship between environmental concern

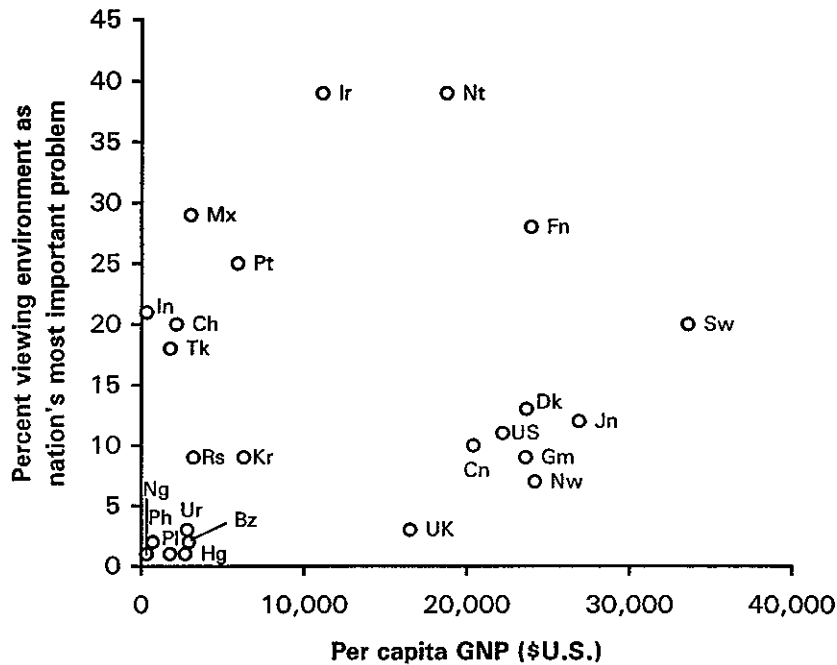


Figure 2.1

Affluence and environmental concern. Source. Dunlap et al. 1993; World Bank 1993. Note. $p < 0.34$, $R\text{-squared} = 0.04$. In response to the question: "What do you think is the most important problem facing our nation today?" Bz = Brazil, Ch = Chile, Cn = Canada, Dn = Denmark, Fn = Finland, Gm = W.Germany, Hg = Hungary, In = India, Ir = Ireland, Jn = Japan, Kr = South Korea, Mx = Mexico, Ng = Nigeria, Nt = Netherlands, Nw = Norway, Ph = Philippines, Pl = Poland, Pt = Portugal, Rs = Russia, Sw = Switzerland, Tk = Turkey, UK = Great Britain, Ur = Uruguay, US = United States.

and the level of economic development ($p < 0.34$, $r = 0.2$). In fact, the survey found that people in poor countries express greater concern about environmental problems than those of industrialized countries in eight of eleven measures.

In table 2.2, we see that respondents in low- to middle-income countries express at least as much concern for national environmental problems as do respondents in affluent countries. This result is robust at different scales of concern (local, national, global) and across a range of environmental issues. Of particular relevance to the present study are the results in table 2.3 on species extinction. People in developing countries express greater

Table 2.2
Perceived importance of environmental problems

View environmental issues as "very serious" national problem		Willing to slow economic growth for environmental protection	
W. Germany	67	Denmark	77
S. Korea	67	W. Germany	73
Poland	66	Finland	72
Mexico	66	Norway	72
Switzerland	63	Mexico	71
Russia	62	Brazil	71
Turkey	61	Canada	67
Chile	56	Ireland	65
Canada	53	Uruguay	64
Hungary	52	Chile	64
United States	51	S. Korea	63
Portugal	51	Switzerland	62
India	51	Philippines	59
Brazil	50	United States	58
Nigeria	45	Netherlands	58
Uruguay	44	Poland	58
Japan	42	Japan	57
Norway	40	Great Britain	56
Philippines	37	Russia	56
Great Britain	36	Portugal	53
Ireland	32	Hungary	53
Netherlands	27	India	43
Denmark	26	Turkey	43
Finland	21	Nigeria	30

Source. Dunlap, et al. 1993. Note. The left column shows responses to the following question: "I'm going to read a list of issues and problems currently facing many countries. For each one, please tell me how serious a problem you consider it to be in our nation—very serious, somewhat serious, not very serious, or not at all serious?" The percentage of respondents indicating "very serious" is shown. The right column is based on the question: "With which of these statements about the environment and the economy do you most agree? Protecting the environment should be given priority, even at the risk of slowing down economic growth, or economic growth should be given priority, even if the environment suffers to some extent?" The percentage of respondents choosing environmental protection over growth is shown.

Table 2.3
Perceived seriousness of air pollution and species loss in the world

Percent who say "very serious"			
Air pollution		Species loss	
Uruguay	78	Mexico	81
Portugal	78	Poland	76
Mexico	77	Uruguay	76
Poland	77	Brazil	74
Chile	73	Chile	72
Turkey	72	W. Germany	69
Russia	71	Portugal	68
Brazil	70	Denmark	62
Norway	69	Switzerland	61
India	65	Russia	61
Ireland	63	Turkey	61
Switzerland	62	Norway	61
W. Germany	61	Great Britain	60
Denmark	61	Canada	57
Canada	61	Ireland	55
United States	60	United States	50
Finland	58	India	48
S. Korea	55	Finland	48
Hungary	54	Hungary	47
Great Britain	52	Philippines	45
Philippines	49	Netherlands	45
Nigeria	43	Japan	37
Japan	43	Nigeria	34
Netherlands	30	S. Korea	33

Source. Dunlap, et al. 1993. Note. The exact question was: "Now let's talk about the world as a whole. Here is a list of environmental issues that may be affecting the world as a whole. As I read each one, please tell me how serious a problem you personally believe it to be in the world—very serious, somewhat serious, not very serious, or not serious at all—or you don't know enough about it to judge?" Results listed in the table are the percentage of respondents who identified "air pollution and smog" or "loss of animal and plant species" as "very serious."

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concern, on average, than do people in industrialized countries about the worldwide loss of plant and animal species. The only instance in the Health of the Planet survey where citizens of rich countries express greater environmental concern is in their willingness to pay higher prices and to trade off economic growth for environmental protection. In nine out of twelve poorer countries, however, a majority of respondents said they would be willing to slow down economic growth for the sake of environmental protection (table 2.2). The median percentage of citizens in developing countries willing to make this tradeoff (58.5 percent) is similar to that of the United States, Japan, and Great Britain. Looking at the results as a whole, survey project director Riley Dunlap and Angela Mertig conclude, "the preponderance of evidence contradicts the widespread view that citizens of poor nations are less environmentally concerned than are their counterparts in wealthy nations" (Dunlap and Mertig 1995: 134).

A second cross-national survey, conducted by Louis Harris and Associates in 1988 and 1989 for the United Nations Environment Programme, takes a closer look at the relationship between national wealth and willingness to pay for environmental protection. The results are shown in table 2.4. Brechin and Kempton (1994) report no statistically significant correlation between national wealth and citizens' willingness to pay higher taxes for environmental protection ($r = 0.21$, $p < 0.44$). Furthermore, respondents in poorer countries are more willing to pay with time—to volunteer two hours per week to improve environmental protection—than are people in rich countries ($r = -0.78$, $p < 0.0009$).

A third cross-national comparison is provided by the World Values Survey, conducted in seventeen low- to middle-income countries and eighteen industrialized countries. This survey finds wealth to be *negatively* correlated with environmental concern in four of seven measures. On willingness to pay for environmental protection, Kidd and Lee (1997: 8) report that the results "clearly show that more people in the poorer countries consistently indicate they would be more willing to give part of their income to prevent environmental pollution or to pay higher taxes to prevent environmental pollution than would people in the wealthier countries." In the poorer countries, 78.5 percent of respondents say they would be willing to devote part of their income to prevent pollution compared with 70.8 percent in affluent countries.

Table 2.4
Willingness to pay higher taxes and volunteer time for environmental protection

Pay taxes		Volunteer time	
Kenya	94	Kenya	98
United States	81	Nigeria	95
Nigeria	80	Mexico	91
Mexico	80	India	89
India	78	Brazil	87
China	78	Zimbabwe	85
Norway	78	Senegal	85
Senegal	72	Jamaica	85
Zimbabwe	70	Hungary	84
Saudi Arabia	63	China	83
W. Germany	62	Argentina	77
Hungary	60	Norway	76
Japan	60	Saudi Arabia	70
Brazil	59	W. Germany	62
Jamaica	56	Japan	44
Argentina	48	United States	not avail.

Source. Louis Harris and Associates, as reported in Table 6 of Brechin and Kempton 1994. Note. In many developing countries, the sample only included urban residents. Volunteer time = two hours per week.

With public opinion polls consistently refuting the posited relationship between wealth and environmental concern, what then becomes of Inglehart's postmaterial thesis? *Social Science Quarterly* devoted a special issue to this question.¹¹ The consensus that emerged from this debate is that people holding postmaterialist values do express greater than average concern for environmental protection, but postmaterialism only explains a small portion of the total variation in individual and national support for the environment. Postmaterialists comprise a small proportion of the citizenry in industrialized (39 percent) and developing countries (22 percent) alike, leading Brechin and Kempton (1997: 19, 20) to ask: "If only 22 percent of low- to middle-income country citizens are postmaterialist, why do 62 percent of their citizens score high on the environmental index? The larger question . . . is, How does one explain that citizens of poor countries—materialists and postmaterialists alike—are environmentally

concerned? . . . [O]ther phenomena besides postmaterialism must be driving global environmentalism.”

Paul Abramson, who coauthored a recent book on postmaterialism with Inglehart, concedes the point that many (as yet unspecified) factors other than postmaterialism apparently influence levels of environmental support (Abramson 1997).

The survey results reviewed thus far tested correlations between aggregate national wealth (as opposed to personal wealth) and public opinion. In a review of the nonmarket valuation literature, McConnell (1997) concludes that the evidence for a positive relation between personal income and demand for environmental quality is mixed at best. Two such studies are available for Costa Rica. Holl and colleagues (1995) report a *negative* correlation between wealth and concern over national and global environmental problems among residents in San José. Echeverría and colleagues (1995) conducted a contingent valuation survey at Costa Rica's Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve and found that Costa Ricans express a greater willingness-to-pay for protection of the preserve than do foreign tourists (mostly from the United States), both in absolute terms and as a proportion of personal income.¹²

Additional data on the relationship between personal income and environmental concern are available from the United States. In a review of the environmental sociology literature, Buttel concludes:

The results from surveys of the general public thus provide little support for the widespread view that environmental concern is an 'elitist' issue that may be inconsistent with the interests of the less affluent segments of society . . . The elitism charge . . . is often based on evidence of the above-average socioeconomic status of environmental *activists*—such as members of the Sierra Club—rather than on evidence of the correlates of environmental concern among the general public. . . . Mohai (1985) has demonstrated that the link between socioeconomic status and environmental activism is primarily due to the link between socioeconomic status and general political activism. (Buttel 1987: 474, emphasis in original. See also Hirsch and Warren 1998: 4.)

A final piece of evidence suggesting that theories of environmental privilege underestimate the potential for ecological concerns in developing countries is found in the environmental movements that have arisen throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America in recent years (see Broad and Cavanagh 1993; Lee and So 1999; Hirsch and Warren 1998; Keck 1995; Dankelman and Davidson 1988; Peritore 1999; Fisher 1993; Darlington

1998; Collinson 1996). In an insightful collection of essays, Guha and Martínez-Alier (1998) have attempted to characterize some of the ideologies and practices of these diverse movements. The sheer number of environmental groups in developing countries today provides a startling rebuke to theories of environmental privilege. In 1990 the African NGOs Environment Network counted 530 member organizations in 45 countries. The Indonesian Environmental Forum had over 500 member organizations in 1992, while Bangladesh has more than 10,000 NGOs working on environment-related topics (Tolba et al. 1992; Riker 1992; WRI 1993, all cited in Princen and Finger 1994). Pesticide Action Network International has approximately 600 affiliates advocating alternatives to biocides in over 40 developing countries (Moore 1998). By my count, Costa Rica has roughly 245 citizens' environmental groups—a higher per capita number than exists in the self-consciously environmentalist state of California.¹³

The Many Faces of Environmentalism

Theories of environmental privilege rely on errors of aggregation, tautological inferences that take outcomes as proxies for preferences, and questionable models of the relation between public opinion and policy change. They are at odds with public opinion data and are contradicted by the fact of environmental movements in developing countries. But if environmental concern in poor countries is counterintuitive, it is only because the intuition itself is paper thin. On closer examination, these results should come as little surprise. The most obvious reason why societies with a high percentage of materialists (per Inglehart's definition) might see widespread environmental concern is that environmental protection is often a matter of personal security and material well-being. The World Health Organization estimates that 25 million people—3 percent of all agricultural workers—in developing countries suffer acute pesticide poisoning every year (Jeyaratnam 1990). Similarly the prevention of soil erosion is not a luxury ticket, but a matter of physical survival. The same is true of water quality—as the journalist Alfonso Gumucio-Dagrón (1992: 7) put it, “¿Hay algo más cercano a la conservación del medio ambiente que el agua?” (“What could be more central to environmental conservation than water?”) Environmentalism is not strictly a postmaterial concern.

But even the nonmaterial shades of environmental concern—the aesthetic, spiritual element of protecting “Mother Earth,” or “Pacha Mama” as it is known by the Aymara people in the Bolivian highlands—should not be assumed a preoccupation of the wealthy. I find most peculiar the idea that the poor are too preoccupied with material concerns to value aesthetic and spiritual qualities, given the breadth and depth of religious conviction in low-income communities around the world. North Africans are not too poor to care about Islam, nor Latin Americans about Catholicism, Tibetans about Buddhism. People believe in spirits, gods, demons, and deities not merely because they hope fidelity will bring material prosperity, but because this gives meaning and a deeper significance to their lives. If the poor devote so much time and energy to religious worship, why should they be considered too preoccupied with survival to appreciate moral and spiritual arguments for protecting nature? To do so requires the absurd proposition that the world can be divided into a hierarchy of conceptual abilities corresponding to wealth, a sort of environmental noblesse oblige. Nor is there any reason to believe that materially deprived people are too poor to value the beauty of a stunning landscape or a blue morpho butterfly. Why would we expect societies whose people so enthusiastically embrace art, beauty, and abstraction—Peruvian textile designers, Jamaican songwriters, Nigerian mask carvers, and those who pay to enjoy their craft—to be somehow too poor to appreciate the beauty of nature?

Environmental activists around the world draw on an enormous stock of cultural symbols, curiosities, pleasures, and familiarities when making the case for conservation. They are able to do this because in every society the natural world has long been a source of metaphors representing both good and bad—beauty and terror, bounty and depravation, life and death. In traditional Mayan lore, forests are associated with beauty and tranquility as well as danger and chaos (Simonian 1995); the seventeenth century paintings of South American artist Melchor Pérez Holguín are adorned with brilliant wildflowers as well as fearsome serpents. Contemporary activists attempting to spread environmental awareness are not inventing nature appreciation from scratch. They are, rather, accentuating the positive—the familiar beauty of colorful feathers and flowers, the neotenous appeal of a lion club—and reshaping the intuitive, like the idea that one should not squander resources at the expense of one’s grandchildren. Although the precise content of environmentalism will vary from one

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place to the next, self-identified environmental advocates generally share a concern for protecting their person and their natural surroundings and recognizing the link between the two. In this context the many faces of environmentalism present a distinct political advantage, as environmental movements can appeal to numerous potential constituencies while providing a coherent ideological basis for coalition-building and sustained collective action, both domestically and across borders.

I must reemphasize the point I raised at the beginning of this chapter, that in no society is social support for environmental policy inevitable. The thrust of the arguments presented here is simply that politically significant levels of environmental concern are as likely in poor countries as they are in rich countries. To argue that environmental movements and associated policy changes *can* occur in poor countries, as I have here, is an entirely different project from explaining why and how they *do* occur. That will be the task of chapters 5 and 6. But first let us put some flesh on the story, by reviewing the fascinating history of social activism and policy reform in Costa Rica and Bolivia, the subject of the following two chapters.