

In Search Of... Conservative Champions of Conservation

By Ian Urquhart



The title of the *Science* book review was “Why conservatives abandoned conservation.” It didn’t promise a happy tale. The authors detailed a range of President Trump’s initiatives where environmental conservation became road kill. What struck me most wasn’t that Trump, to the applause of many Republicans in Congress, has abandoned conservation. Rather it’s that, in doing so, Trump abandoned conservation measures sponsored and supported by American conservatives in the Republican party.

Republican President Richard Nixon, not some tree-hugging Democrat, created the Environmental Protection Agency. Three of the conservation pillars Trump is desperate to tear down – the *Clean Air Act*, the *Clean Water Act*, and the *Endangered Species Act* – enjoyed unanimous support in the U.S. Senate. Not one Republican voted against them.

The support in the 1970s for conservation from American conservatives leads me to wonder if all of today’s conservatives are as violently opposed to conservation as President Trump is. Is the abandonment universal? Or, can the case still be made that conservatives can, will, and should support conservation?

The case used in this issue of the *Advocate* to support the contention that environmental conservation still can enjoy an important place among political conservatives comes from coastal states in the United States. In early 2018 the Trump administration proposed a dramatic expansion of petroleum exploration and exploitation activities in U.S. offshore waters. Currently, 94 percent of Outer Continental Shelf waters is off limits to the petroleum industry. The Interior Department’s 2018 plan

proposed to turn the offshore waters balance between conservation and exploitation on its head. More than 90 percent of those waters would be opened for exploration if Interior and the President get their way. The rationale for Trump’s ambitions comes straight out of his “Make America Great Again” playbook. Then Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke said it would help the U.S. achieve “American Energy Dominance.”

What struck me about this plan wasn’t Trump’s enthusiasm to drill everywhere. Instead, it was the reaction from Republicans governing coastal states. Republican governors all along the Atlantic seaboard objected loudly to this plan. All of those governors tied their opposition to the threat offshore drilling poses to multi-billion dollar tourism industries. Conservation needed to be privileged, in part, because of this threat to tourism industries relying on healthy coastal environments. New Jersey’s Republican governor Chris Christie’s department of environmental protection “opposed any industrialization of our coast.” Offshore drilling would threaten the state’s vital \$44 billion tourism industry as well as the recreational and commercial fishing industries that “are also critical to our economic health.” But Christie’s objections were based on more than “just” the economic dimension. “These waters are home to plant, fish, mammal and avian species, including federally listed endangered species,” his environmental protection commissioner wrote. “The risk of adverse impacts to our marine waters and the species that depend on them is unacceptable.” Environment, culture, and economy all figured in Christie’s opposi-

tion. Republican governors from Maryland, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida joined in this chorus.

For now, the Trump administration’s plans are on hold. In April 2019, after losing a case in Alaska, the Department of Interior said it was indefinitely putting on hold plans to allow drilling in South Carolina’s offshore waters. Republican Governor Henry McMaster welcomed the decision: “South Carolinians can remain confident that we will continue our efforts to protect our pristine coastline and invaluable tourism industry from the destructive threats of seismic testing and offshore drilling.”

April also saw the Republican-controlled South Carolina Senate pass a measure to make it difficult to build the infrastructure on the mainland needed to support offshore drilling. It too placed greater value on the need to spare the state’s beaches and coastline from the threat of drilling than on the jobs the industry promises to the state if it’s allowed to explore offshore.

On September 13th, as AWA members were getting ready to enjoy the Wild West Saloon, Republican Governor McMaster joined a federal Democrat – House Representative Joe Cunningham – to celebrate House passage of Cunningham’s bill to ban offshore drilling off of the U.S. Atlantic and Pacific coasts.

Does this example of conservatives supporting conservation mean all conservatives will find religion and embrace conservation? Of course not. But what it does illustrate is that it’s foolish to think that, by definition, environmental conservation is contrary to political conservatism. Conservative politicians should be reminded of that. ♣