Since I finished writing Our Limits Transgressed, the debates in the environmental literature have proceeded unabated. Much here is familiar and comes as little surprise to anyone who has followed the debates of the previous decade or two, but there is at least one development that is worth noting: there is a new tone in some of the criticisms of environmentalism. There has never been, nor is there now, a shortage of books and articles critical of environmentalism and environmentalists, and it has been and remains common for critics to dismiss environmentalists as marginal, hysterical, even subversive and disloyal, or, perhaps, as white middle-class elitists preoccupied with their own quality of life and indifferent to the plight of their less advantaged nonwhite neighbors. Since 1992, however, books have appeared that are deeply critical of environmentalism but do not fit neatly within the recognized genres of "anti-environmentalist" literature. In fact, these critical books are written by individuals who have been involved with or supportive of the environmental movement but who are having significant doubts about the current direction of the movement. This critical literature marks something of a turning point for environmental political thought in America.

Consider Christopher Stone’s The Gnat Is Older Than Man. Stone, a major figure in environmental ethics debates (discussed in detail in Chapter 3) exhibits a noticeable impatience with environmental theorists' preoccupation with identifying political and ideological causes for our environmental problems. “I don’t know how to explain why so many canisters of wastes and weapons lie corroding on the ocean floors. Fear? Distrust? Aggressiveness? Surplus capital? One only wishes we would recognize the threat and take care of it.”

sider the book *No Turning Back* by Wallace Kaufman. A longtime environmental activist, Kaufman is clearly fed up with what he takes to be the inflated rhetoric and grandiose ideology of contemporary environmentalism, and he fears that these habits of thought will cripple the movement’s ability to contend with particular environmental problems in a calm, reasonable, measured way: “After thirty years in the environmental movement, I am worried that as it gains power, it cares less and less about reason and science. . . . In short, I believe the environmental movement has lost touch with reality. Through its recent political success, it has started to exercise power in ways that may do more harm to nature than good.” Or consider Charles Rubin’s *The Green Crusade*. Equating environmentalism with the antislavery and temperance movements as “part of the ongoing saga of evangelical reform that has characterized American history,” Rubin warns us about the utopianism of much environmentalism and suggests that we need to focus more clearly on specific problems and avoid misleading rhetoric about any unified “environmentalism”:

All the talk about problems of unprecedented scope, all the fearful celebrations of our power, all the hand wringing about the death of nature are distractions from the day-to-day situations and problems of people all over the world. If we do not allow ourselves to be misled by the totality of the environment, and if we do not give in to utopian hopes for a perfect world, we see that what faces us are the same fundamental questions and aspirations of human life that have always faced us. . . . We do not need to explore new ethics for mere survival, nor revive or imagine old wisdom for saving the earth. We need to take care to live decently with an eye to the full range of relationships and responsibilities, human and otherwise, that necessarily characterize a good life.4

These authors, and others like them, are uncomfortable with the degree to which environmentalism has become or aims to become a

"world view," an ideological system that provides a single explanation for the totality of environmental (and virtually all other) problems and offers an equally totalistic program for their solution.

"Environmentalism" is a large and varied movement, and the portrait painted of environmental thought by these authors inevitably suffers from oversimplification. But it is true enough that much environmentalism has become highly ideological, and it would be wrong for environmentalists to dismiss these critics as just another gang of anti-environmentalists. These authors do not doubt the existence of real environmental problems or the need to devise reasonable strategies for solving them. Their claim is, not that environmental problems are a hoax or a charade, but that contemporary environmentalism contains certain theoretical and political excesses which make it politically irresponsible and hamper its ability to clean up and protect the natural world. This is a claim, I believe, that all who care about the human relationship with the natural world must take seriously.

There is a sense in which these critics of contemporary environmentalism are part of a larger and important democratic discourse about American politics and society. Jean Bethke Elshtain reminds us that any uncompromising ideological politics is an enemy of democracy: "Ideologues who enjoin a world 'beyond compromise' scorn democracy as anemic. They . . . want the world to conform to their totalitarian dreams." She also warns us that any claim that we are "starting anew," that we "will not be bound by the past, with its petty and benighted ways," is unambiguously antidemocratic. Christopher Lasch, in his final book, also criticized all "ideological rigidity" as having the "effect of obscuring the views Americans have in common, of replacing substantive issues with purely symbolic issues, and of creating a false impression of polarization." Elshtain and Lasch are not thinking specifically about environmentalism, but there is enough ideological and utopian thinking in contemporary environmentalism to give all democrats pause. And this is the strongest point Stone,

6. Ibid., p. 135.
8. For example, see Carolyn Merchant's Radical Ecology (New York:
Kaufman, and Rubin are making with regard to environmentalism: beware the degree to which environmental ideology undermines our commitments to democratic life and our ability to pursue a defensible and sensible democratic public policy.9

This message is a welcome one and in keeping with my own claim in this book that we need to keep a close eye on both our environmental and our democratic values. There is danger in these arguments as well, however. For all its utopian and ideological excesses, environmentalism, especially of the most radical sort, has often reminded Americans of something that we frequently either forget or choose to ignore: that the earth was not created merely for our human pleasure, that our power to manipulate the environment to suit our own purposes is limited, and that this situation is probably as it should be. As Lasch says, "In an age that fancies itself as disillusioned, this is the one illusion—the illusion of mastery—that remains as tenacious as ever."10 At a time when our religious communities have lost much of their traditional power to humble us before creation, our environmentalist discourse is one of the only places we can find the message of human limits brought to our public attention, however imperfectly. When Stone pragmatically asks us to stop worrying about how we got into this mess and instead concentrate on the specifics of cleaning it up, we may hear just the slightest echo of scientific and technological complacency. If we would only think about the problems in the right way, he seems to be suggesting, we will find the tools to deal with them. Kaufman's views are much more explicit: "Science seems to be marching forward and the environmental movement backward."

9. Routledge, 1992). Even while admitting that "radical ecology lacks coherence as a theory and as a movement" (p. 237), Merchant remains undeterred: "Radical ecology and its movements will continue to challenge mainstream environmentalism and will remain on the cutting edge of social transformation, contributing thought and action to the search for a livable world" (p. 240).

9. A chilling example is found in Laura Westra’s recent book, An Environmental Proposal for Ethics (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994). Westra boasts of her willingness to take the "risk of impugning the ‘sacred cow’ of democracy" (p. 193) and offers her absolutistic environmental ethics as a "revolutionary" alternative to democratic majoritarianism (pp. 188–89).

10. Lasch, Revolt of the Elites, p. 246.

reason to fear the future. "A world of 60 billion people would almost surely be unpleasant by today's standards, but not unsustainable in the next century. Methods of housing, feeding, and transporting people will undergo a revolution as unforeseen as fiber optics." Any hint of nervousness about the future we may detect in this comment is thoroughly overridden by Kaufman's conviction that "dominion is ours" and that "as we test nature, we will also test ourselves and the very limits of human wisdom." Kaufman correctly distrusts the utopianism of some environmentalists, but his faith in the human mastery of the natural world is itself startling, frightful, ideological, and utopian. Stone and Kaufman and Rubin are probably right when they say we need to pragmatically focus on the particulars of specific environmental problems. But this focus must not distract us from also worrying about the "arrogance of humanism," and it certainly must not allow us to be seduced by the liberal fantasy of scientific dominion over nature.

The problem which I ended this book with three years ago remains: how do we combine a respect for democratic discourse and politics with an appropriate humility before creation? Although the recent environmentalist literature helps us to formulate the question once again, we are still a long way from a satisfactory answer.

12. Ibid., p. 176.
13. Ibid., p. 181.
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