



Thomas Midgley, Jr. — Greatest Environmental Scourge of All Time

My friend and colleague [Steve Bainbridge picks up on a list going around Red Blogistan](#), concerning the supposed “20 Worst Americans of All Time.” Steve’s a conservative Republican, and has no love for progressive politics, but even he says, “I find the collated list pretty much of a joke. It reflects the partisan passions of the moment, not anything resembling a serious verdict of history.” Steve’s list is much better, with one or two exceptions.

But that got me to the dangerous habit of thinking. If you were to put together a rogue’s gallery for the environment, who would be on it? Could you do it in such a way as to not reflect ideological biases?

To my mind, there is a clear candidate for Number One: [Thomas Midgley, Jr.](#) Midgley was an American research chemist, who invented two things: chlorofluorocarbons and tetraethyl lead for use in gasoline. The first destroyed large chunks of the ozone layer, the second was a devastating pollutant that poisoned millions. As one historian aptly remarked, Midgley “had more impact on the atmosphere than any other single organism in Earth’s history.”

Now, the problem here obviously is that Midgley didn’t *intend* to do these things. He did spend many years of his (lead-shortened) life defending lead’s safety, but the data didn’t come out definitively under years afterwards. On pure destructiveness grounds, he wins going away, but if you’re a stickler for [mens rea](#), he probably doesn’t qualify.

Any other nominations?