

Tom Friedman had an interesting [column](#) yesterday about conservatism and the environment. As he points out, the current wave of anti-environmentalism is out of line with Republican traditions: “Teddy Roosevelt bequeathed us national parks, Richard Nixon the Clean Air Act and the Environmental Protection Agency, Ronald Reagan the Montreal Protocol to protect the ozone layer and George H. W. Bush cap-and-trade that reduced acid rain.” He might also have noted that George W. Bush at the end of his presidency established [preserves](#) that “protected more of the ocean than anyone else in the world.”

In reality, environmental protection resonates with many conservative values. Conservatives have often criticized liberals for focusing on rights while ignoring responsibilities. Environmental law calls on businesses to act responsibly toward their communities by curtailing pollution. Placing profits above all other values is not a traditional conservative position.

Furthermore, conservatives believe in preserving the past rather than heedlessly changing tampering with long-established traditions and institutions. It’s no accident that “conservative” and “conservationist” come from the same root. These values especially overlap in the American context: given the role of wilderness in our history, wild places are part of our heritage. Yellowstone, like Washington monument, is a symbol of America.

Of course, today’s “conservative” movement also includes a strong libertarian strain. But pollution regulation also makes sense from a libertarian perspective: companies that pollute are invading the property rights and physical autonomy of others. Unlike anarchists, libertarians believe that government does have a legitimate role, though a limited one — defined in terms of protecting individuals against invasion of their rights by others. Laws against pollution are as justified on that basis as laws against trespass, theft, and negligent driving.

The recent embrace of anti-environmentalism by conservatives may be an overreaction to perceived liberal excesses, or it may be due to a political marriage of convenience between conservatives and big business. Hopefully, thoughtful conservatives will think better of some of the extreme anti-regulatory positions that are now popular in some quarters.