

The role that nuclear power could or should play in helping to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions is worthy of serious debate, but the latest nuclear-related front-page [story](#) in the San Francisco Chronicle is a head-scratcher. Above the fold, the headline reads “Nuclear plant’s surprise backers,” followed by the following subheading: “Environmentalists push for Diablo Canyon to stay open.” The accompanying article reports on a [letter](#) sent by a new coalition identifying itself as “Save Diablo Canyon,” calling on regulators to relicense the plant. The stated concern is that a closed nuclear plant would make it harder to meet the state’s greenhouse gas reduction goals. Constructed on a cliff along the central California coast, Diablo is the last remaining commercial reactor in the state and it soon must either receive a new license, or cease operation.

The mystery about the article is that it only mentions three of those who signed the letter, and each of those three has been on the public record for years as favoring nuclear power. So, where is the surprise? Where is the news item?

Examination of the letter itself reveals the names of 27 people identified as “Scientists” and 30 who are categorized as “Conservationists and Philanthropists”. No doubt, these are credible, thoughtful people and their support for continued operation should carry weight, but this is packaged for the press as a stunning reversal of direction by “environmentalists”, who are often thought of as opposing anything nuclear. Yet, not a single signatory is identified as having any active involvement with a major environmental organization. No information is provided as to whether any one of them has recently changed his or her mind about the subject.

This coalition is led by Michael Shellenberger who has made a career out of being an “environmentalist” who speaks hard truth to other environmentalists. Most famously, he was the co-author of an article entitled [“The Death of Environmentalism”](#). He has proven to be very adept at gaining public attention in controversial ways.

This latest poof of excitement re-introduces the question of what it means to be an environmentalist. Is it enough to simply award oneself that label? Is there some set of credentials or experience that allows one to enter the club? Whatever it is, it probably means more than having an advanced degree, or a Nobel Prize, or a business card that says “Environmentalist.” It is the ambiguity of the term that makes it hard to give it much potency in a situation such as this.

Here is the thing about Diablo Canyon. If we were to build a nuclear plant in California today, it wouldn’t be at Diablo Canyon. And, if we were going to select the best nuclear plant to continue operating for an additional thirty years, it wouldn’t be this one. Diablo is

perched on a relatively shallow cliff amidst a series of seismic fault lines. It is near a popular small city. It has no doubt led to the destruction of millions of sea creatures due to its massive cold water intake system, and hot water reinjection. It was designed incorrectly at first, then retrofitted with beams and shock absorbers that make it a challenge to walk from one end of the facility to another, then discovered to have been erroneously redesigned so it had to be retrofit again. There have been reported incidents of faulty operation, such as the failure to notice that a pipe feeding a critical backup cooling system had been stuck in the closed position for over a year. In the wake of the earthquake and tsunami-induced Fukushima disaster, important questions were raised about the wisdom of continuing to operate a facility of this type in a coastal, earthquake-prone area. But there it stands, and if the state were to pursue a replacement nuclear plant, it would likely take a decade to get there.

So, there are really two critical questions here: Nuclear — yes or no? This nuclear plant — yes or no? It has got to be the facts that help us decide. The green stripes of those who express opinions don't get us any closer to the answers.