

It may surprise you to learn this — it certainly surprised me. But Ronald Reagan has been [called](#) “the most environmental governor in California history — protecting wild rivers from dams, preserving a Sierra wilderness by blocking highway builders, creating an air resources board that led to the nation’s first auto smog controls.” This may be an exaggeration, but there were some major environmental achievements. Consider this [LA Times](#) account of Reagan’s effort to save the John Muir trail:

*“A high-speed, trans-Sierra highway between the John Muir and Minarets wilderness areas long had been the dream of Central Valley interests. . .*

*“Reagan galloped out of Red’s Meadow near Devil’s Postpile, 100 packhorses in tow. We overnighted in small tents at a High Sierra lake. The next morning, the governor rode to a meadow beneath the Minaret Summit, dismounted and announced that he had persuaded the Nixon administration not to build the highway’s planned initial leg.*

*“But to bury the road idea forever, Reagan proposed joining the two wilderness areas. Congress later agreed. And today, the John Muir Trail remains unbroken for 250 miles between Yosemite and south of Mt. Whitney.”*

I love the image of Reagan riding in on horseback to save the wilderness. The same story recounts Reagan’s support for legislation to create the Lake Tahoe interstate compact in order to save the lake. And he also blocked dam proposals on the Eel River and on the Middle Fork of the Feather River. In addition, as [Tony Rossman](#) has reminded me, Reagan was instrumental in securing legal protection for California’s wild and scenic rivers.

Perhaps most notably, Reagan signed the California Environmental Quality Act. He also signed the Mulford-Carrell Act, combining the Bureau of Air Sanitation and the Motor Vehicle Pollution Control Board to create the California Air Resources Board (CARB). Reagan appointed the first head of the Board, Arie Jan Haagen-Smit, a Cal Tech chemist who was responsible for linking smog to automobile emissions. By all account, this “stubborn Dutchman” was a dedicated and successful champion of pollution control.

Reagan as President was a much different figure. As we all know, his Administration was no friend to the environment. But even during his Presidency, there were some bright spots, such as his enthusiastic signing of the Montreal Protocol to protect the ozone layer.

In short, Reagan was a more complicated figure than the stereotyped right-winger that both ends of the political spectrum have portrayed. And in his California days, he had a legitimate claim to be considered an environmentalist.