

A number of people seem drawn to the Libertarian Party during this election cycle. As it turns out, the Party believes not only in minimal government but a minimal platform.

Compared to the platforms of the major parties, the Libertarian platform is blessedly brief. (It also seems notably more purist than the Party's presidential ticket.) Here's all of what it says about the environment:

"Competitive free markets and property rights stimulate the technological innovations and behavioral changes required to protect our environment and ecosystems. Private landowners and conservation groups have a vested interest in maintaining natural resources. Governments are unaccountable for damage done to our environment and have a terrible track record when it comes to environmental protection. Protecting the environment requires a clear definition and enforcement of individual rights and responsibilities regarding resources like land, water, air, and wildlife. Where damages can be proven and quantified in a court of law, restitution to the injured parties must be required."

The last two sentences are the only operational parts. Unfortunately, the downside of the platform's brevity is that it leaves many open sentences.

"Protecting the environment requires a clear definition and enforcement of individual rights and responsibilities regarding resources like land, water, air, and wildlife." The idea of property rights in land seems clear, but that's where the clarity ends. What does the platform mean by definition and enforcement of individual *responsibilities* for land, water, air and wildlife. Who is responsible and for what? And what kinds of rights in water, air, and wildlife are contemplated? Take wildlife, for example. Is a landowner entitled to kill as many ducks as possible if they're flying over his property? If a river runs through the middle of my land, am I entitled to use all the water, to the detriment of downstream landowners. Or are wildlife and water held in common as property? And by the same token, is the air a commonly owned resource? Do carbon emissions violate the rights of others?

Where damages can be proven and quantified in a court of law, restitution to the injured parties must be required. Are damages supposed to be the only remedy for violations of environmental rights? If so, then as a practical matter most of forms of pollution will be completely unrestrained; efforts to bring damage suits for toxic torts are notoriously difficult. And what about injunctions, as opposed to damages?

The problem posed by environmental problems is that they don't fit into libertarian's atomistic view of society, in which independent individuals interact only in discrete acts of

cooperation or aggression. But not everything fits the cooperation/aggression dichotomy. Environmental problems are a paradigm example of the more subtle, complex connections of the modern world. As such, they do not have an obvious place in libertarian thought, leaving individual libertarians free to take a variety of positions, ranging from nearly complete rejection of environmental protection to a grudging acceptance of environmental regulation as a necessary evil.