

Many people today know Jimmy Carter as an ex-President who has strongly advocated for human rights. His Presidency is probably best remembered for the Iranian Hostage crisis. His post-presidential career was at least as notable as his time in the White House. Historians find his presidency flawed by micro-management and lack of rapport with the Democrats controlling Congress. Nevertheless, we owe Carter a considerable debt for his environmentally related achievements.

Carter signed some important environmental legislation. Early in the Administration, there was the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977, which started to put some controls on the devastation wrought by strip mining. Near the end, there were two major legislation accomplishments. The first was the Superfund law, known to lawyers as CERCLA (an acronym for the unwieldy official name). CERCLA required clean-up of the hundreds of major hazardous waste sites that had been left dotting the American landscape. The second was the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). ANILCA, which dramatically expanded the national network of national parks and wildlife refuges.

Carter also laid the foundations for today's renewable energy and energy efficiency policies. His motivation had more to do with diversifying the country's energy sources than with the environment, and climate change was not yet recognized as a major concern. The 1978 National Energy Act began the process. One portion, the Public Utility Regulatory Policies Act (PURPA), started the on-going revamping of the U.S. electricity system. It required public utilities to purchase power from small independent generators, including renewable sources, breaking what had been the utility's monopoly on power generation. The law also largely eliminated electricity rates designed to encourage buyers to maximize their use of electricity rather than conserving. Carter also created the Department of Energy, in part to support research on alternative sources such as renewables.

Carter also made use of executive power to promote the environment. He used his power under the Antiquities Act to create 17 national monuments covering 56 million acres of public land in Alaska. He also oversaw issuance of regulations by the White House Council on Environmental Quality governing how federal agencies implement legal requirements relating to environmental impact statements. These regulations remain largely unchanged today. Carter also did his best to kill some environmentally harmful, pork-barrel water projects, though he seemed to succeed primarily in alienating Western members of Congress.

Carter came at the very end of the Golden Era of environmental law – the period from 1969-1981 when all of today’s major environmental statutes were passed. He was to be followed by Ronald Reagan, who began many decades of conservative attacks on environmental regulation. While Carter was not among our greatest Presidents, his contributions to environmental protection deserve to be remembered today.