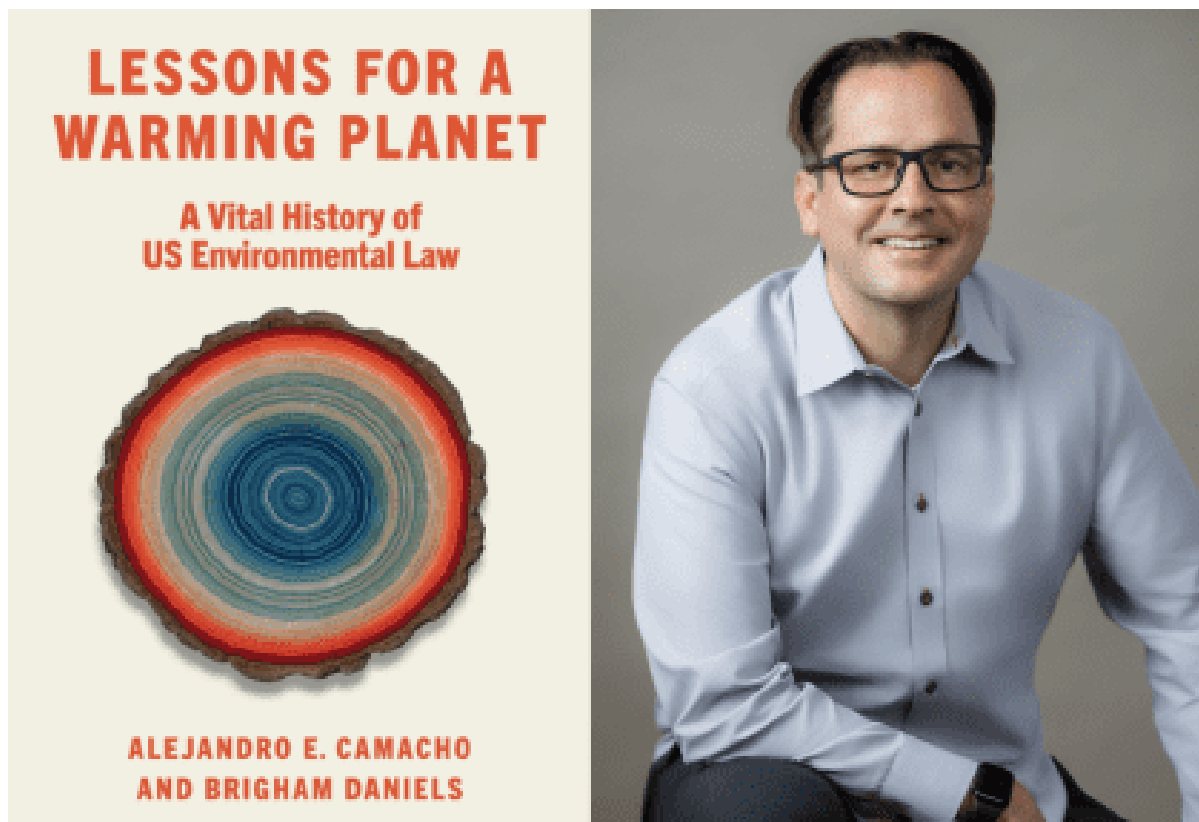




This Earth Day, environmental advocates are looking backward as well as forward. With the U.S. federal government so dramatically overhauling environmental policy, history shows how American social movements of the 19th and 20th centuries overcame seemingly insurmountable odds to preserve public lands and pass laws protecting human health. “I’ve been trying to look through the history of the United States to understand how we’ve gotten where we are,” said Alejandro Camacho, a Professor of Law at UCLA School of Law and co-author of [“Lessons for a Warming Planet: A Vital History of U.S. Environmental Law,”](#) which comes out on Earth Day, April 22, 2026. “Prior generations did meet the moment and at least partially addressed some of the major problems that were in front of them.” Camacho discusses the book in this lightly edited transcript.

Q: The cover of your new book is striking — the illustration shows tree rings but instead of just shades of brown, the rings are vibrant shades of red and blue. Can you say more about the cover design?

I really enjoyed my collaboration with my co-author Brigham Daniels in coming up with the cover art. Those are the striking red and blue ‘Climate Stripes,’ created by

University of Reading Professor Ed Hawkins to depict global average temperature change over the past two centuries. The idea was to integrate multiple foci of the book in a single visualization by embedding scientific data in one of nature's oldest storytellers: trees. My hope is that the book similarly relies on evidence and narrative to understand, interpret, and explain the lessons of US environmental law for current and future generations. But as always, the story continues to be written, one ring at a time.

Q: What is something that surprised you that you learned while researching this book?

One of the things I found positive to learn in my research was how despite the insurmountable challenges that prior generations had, and some of their real concerns about whether they'll be able to meet the challenges — whether we're talking about before the Progressive Era movements to engage in public land preservations and health and safety laws and labor laws or before the 1970s where we passed a slew of environmental statutes that are really the modern environmental law — how so many people were despairing and really concerned that they weren't going to be able to meet the moment. Yet they had real successes, through a combination of really dogged, hard work, the use of science, the sort of expertise to help marshal evidence, and by leaning on legal imagination and creativity. That part in particular was something that I really was excited to learn. A lot of the ideas that are being cultivated early — generations earlier — end up playing a role and sort of turning the tide to address problems. So, with problems like those we face today — things like global climate change, AI, biotechnologies — the question is, how can these different technologies and different problems be addressed through the use of legal imagination combined with grit and determination.

Q: We are watching the second Trump administration roll back environmental protections even more than the first Trump administration, how would you qualify your sense of optimism?

One of the sub themes of the book is that we see throughout each of the different eras of environmental law in the United States there has been this sort of tension between pragmatists and idealists. Idealists who see that there's massive problems and that they require fundamental change to address them and the pragmatists, who are more incrementalists, who are looking to address problems on a more case-by-case and to not let the best be the enemy of the good. What I found, in

doing some soul searching in myself and in general looking at history, is that for a lot of history the pragmatists-idealist binary is really something that each of us has. Each of us individually at any given moment sees that there's hope, particularly when we look at future generations and the innovation that they are and the hard work that they are willing to do. And at the same time, on some days we wake up and we see the challenges ahead and think "Are we ever going to make a difference?" I tend to lean as hard as I can on trying to learn from the past and look at the future and say, "There are things that each of us can do and change only happens if each of us are willing to make that happen." I think the book is not overly Pollyannaish, I think it recognizes there's a lot of ways the future might be grim. I think the point of the book, in many ways, is to call on those readers and future leaders to learn from the past and recognize that if something is going to happen the law is going to be fundamental to it and we're going to have to come up with innovative ideas to address the problems. Sometimes that will mean drawing on past laws that we have, but sometimes it will require coming up with whole new ideas that are completely meeting the moment of current problems.

Q: Can you give some examples of the idealists and the pragmatists that you describe in the book?

One of the big famous conflicts is between John Muir and Gifford Pinchot during the Progressive Era over the damming of the Hetch Hetchy Valley in a corner of Yosemite. Muir of course was the archetypal preservationist who sought to protect wilderness in its "natural" state and founded the Sierra Club. Pinchot was a utilitarian conservationist who advocated for managed resource extraction, or "wise use," on public lands. Other idealists include Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Rachel Carson, and someone like Greta Thunberg today. Pragmatists include Harold Ickes, FDR's Secretary of the Interior, who advanced conservation goals through the existing administrative and political structure; Stewart Udall, who balanced resource users and extractive industries while advancing conservation during the Environmental Era; and more recently former President Joe Biden, whose administration restored ESA protections and made unprecedented green infrastructure investments but drew criticism from idealists for not going far enough.

"Lessons for a Warming Planet" is available now for [pre-order here](#).