

Serendipity: Trashing of the Environment Nears End of the Line

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While Bush is cleaning a clearer path for polluters, he's also cleaning up his image in his waning days.

In a holiday season where industrial workers were furloughed by the thousands and retail owners presided over relatively empty stores and profits that slipped from red to bloodbath, the outgoing administration was unusually active.

In the past couple of months, [President Bush](#) has slid through “a bundle of controversial last-minute changes in federal rules — many of them involving the environment, national parks and public lands in the West,” according to Jim Tankersley of the Los Angeles Times. Bush has presided over new rules and regulations to:



- » speed oil shale development across 2 million Western acres,
- » auction drilling rights along three national parks,
- » finalize major changes to end species protection,
- » allow more mining waste to flow into rivers and streams,
- » and exempt factory farms from air pollution reporting.

Supporters defend the changes as tit for tat, noting a tradition dating at least from [President Reagan](#) of turbo-charged action in anticipation of an opposed administration.

But something is amiss about this characterization. [President Clinton](#)'s last-minute legislation benefited Americans in short-term health and recreation and in the long-term carryover of “natural capital” treasures for future generations. He “strengthened a host of environmental rules,” Tankersley wrote, “locking up federal lands with wilderness and other protective designations.” Clinton signed off higher energy efficiency standards for appliances and stricter limits on arsenic levels in drinking water.

By contrast, one of Bush's new rules makes it easier for coal-mining companies to dump waste into nearby rivers and creeks. Another exempts from air pollution laws "factory farms," in which animals live in confined quarters (remember we Californians passed [Proposition 2, Standards for Confining Farm Animals](#)). Others excuse new projects from assessing possible effects of greenhouse gas emissions and eliminate an [Endangered Species Act](#) provision requiring "independent scientific reviews" before construction or drilling in that species' habitat.

Let's try to make sense of these last-minute gasps from the outgoing administration. Supporters say the rules cut bureaucracy, but there are some mighty big babies in the bureaucratic bathwater. What is in it for Bush to trash the environment? He can't hate Mother Earth. In fact, a couple of the last-minute changes are pro-environment. He sets more stringent emissions standards for medical waste incinerators, which can leak lead, mercury and other toxins into the air. He abandoned a rule that would have allowed an increase in lifetime emissions from many power plants, according to blogger Kent Garber.

Maybe he made promises to polluters and other private stakeholders. Why? He can't really need the money or the influence. At this point in his life and career, it would seem the thing he lacks and seeks is a better legacy.

Indeed, it is clear that while Bush is cleaning a clear path for polluters, he is also trying to clean up his image in his waning days. He seems to be speaking more candidly and admitting mistakes. I believe that he understands on some level his personal contributions to the [Superfund](#)-full of problems the [Barack Obama](#) administration will inherit. However, he can't quite get his actions to match his conciliatory words.

This environmental trashing is not sustainable. Fortunately, it will not be sustained. Jan. 20 is fast approaching.

Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: the Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.canyonvoices.com.