

Wednesday, April 21, 2004

## EDITORIAL

# Earth Day gives chance to clean up White House

Since activists first established Earth Day on April 22, 1970 — an event American Heritage Magazine 23 years later called "one of the most remarkable happenings in the history of democracy" — a new environmental ethos has permeated politics.

The summer of that year, President Nixon addressed a letter to Congress citing unorganized, "piecemeal" government-related activities and the need to create a unified Environmental Protection Agency. The agency opened its doors that December.

Politicians facing election aren't staying silent about environmental policies.

Democratic nominee-elect Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., blasted President Bush's environmental record Tuesday.

According to Kerry's critique, delivered at a Tampa, Fla. campaign event, the president's proposals will contribute to upward of 100,000 premature deaths and millions of asthma attacks. He also said Bush's policy of allowing dirtier plants to not upgrade to cleaner technology, is doing serious environmental and human damage.

Regardless of how accurate these claims are, politicians are talking about the environment in big ways. In the modern American political scene — which is one of heightened environmental consciousness — if politicians aren't doing more to establish a balance of human interests and environmental quality, it's much harder to ignore green issues.

The Bush administration has established some environmentally friendly policies. The Landowner Incentive Program, for example, offers grants to landowners who voluntarily protect the habitats of threatened and at-risk species that live on private property. In addition, the president's fiscal year 2003 budget included the largest National Parks operations budget ever submitted — \$665 million.

Still, Bush's White House record, it seems, is far from unsoiled.

The administration's environmental philosophy is results-oriented, according to the White House Web site (<http://www.whitehouse.gov>) — "making our air, water, and land clear."

But a recent budget proposal slashes funding for the recovery of endangered species by almost \$10 million.

For the third consecutive year Bush also has asked Congress to relax environmental laws for the military, and the Pentagon is seeking immunity from laws that regulate hazardous waste and air quality.

For all these efforts, the Bush administration seems to have a problem with scientific integrity.

The White House Web site insists "(t)he President believes that we need to employ the best science and data to inform our decision-making." But Monday, the Union of Concerned Scientists released a rebuttal to a White House statement issued earlier this month.

The Bush administration statement was itself a response to an earlier UCS report, "Scientific Integrity in Policymaking," which criticized the government for undermining scientific integrity. The report, signed by many prominent scientists, including 20 Nobel laureates, alleged the White House has manipulated in areas including air pollution, forest management and endangered species.

This Earth Day, the Emerald Editorial Board urges the Bush administration to re-evaluate its environmental policies (and intellectual integrity) for the good of America's next generation.

## EDITORIAL POLICY

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses can be sent to letters@dailyemerald.com. Letters to the editor and guest commentaries are encouraged. Letters are limited to 250 words and guest commentaries to 550 words. Authors are limited to one submission per calendar month. Submission must include phone number and address for verification. The Emerald reserves the right to edit for space, grammar and style.



Steve Baggs Illustration

## PROJECT: INNOCENCE



**Chuck Slothower**  
 Taking issue

It's quite interesting to read what happens in Salem as the Oregon State Penitentiary counts down to an execution.

With four days remaining until an inmate's execution date, the prison sends him only photocopies of his mail to ensure that he doesn't receive drugs. The inmate is restricted to exercising in his cell.

With 48 hours to go, the superintendent must ensure that a death certificate has been readied and the mortician has signed a form authorizing the release of the body. Arrangements are finalized.

In the inmate's final hours, the emergency phones in the execution room are checked obsessively in case the governor issues a last-minute stay of execution. The syringes are readied.

Soon after midnight on the scheduled date, the inmate is pumped full of sodium pentothal, pancuronium bromide and potassium chloride. He is paralyzed, then his heart stops.

Twenty-eight men await execution in Oregon. The Beaver State is one of 38 states that executes its criminals, and like every one of those states but Nebraska uses lethal injection.

For a long time, the consensus has been that lethal injection is the most humane way to execute an inmate. Think again.

According to an Oct. 8 article in The New York Times, the three-chemical combination used in lethal injections could "lead to paralysis that masks intense distress, leaving a wide-awake inmate unable to speak or cry out as he slowly suffocates."

Some ask why we should be so concerned about the feelings of murderers. I would answer because they're human beings, and simple compassion dictates a modicum of sympathy. I would also say that we are blessed with the wisdom of the Eighth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which prohibits cruel and unusual punishment.

I have no problem, in theory, with executing people for particularly heinous crimes if it can be done right. But it can't.

Our years of experience with capital punishment have revealed too much imbalance, especially on the basis of race and income, to allow it to continue. Recent cases in which DNA evidence freed death row prisoners revealed the frequent mistakes made at the trial level, mistakes that were luckily caught before they became irreversible.

How many weren't?

A small group of University law students, journalism students and faculty are working at a local level to oppose the more egregious mistakes of our criminal justice system. A handful of them gathered in Room 282 of Knight Law Center on April 14 to discuss righting the wrongs of Oregon's criminal justice system.

The activists are interested in starting a group to challenge wrongful convictions in Oregon, and it is modeled after similar groups across the country. One of the most successful groups, Northwestern University's Medill Innocence Project, came about after journalism Professor David Protess and his students freed eight wrongfully convicted men in Illinois, four of whom were on death row.

The problems uncovered by Protess and his students led former Illinois Gov. George Ryan, a pro-death penalty Republican, to declare Illinois' capital punishment system a "catastrophic failure." Ryan then commuted the sentences of all 167 death row inmates to life in prison and pardoned another four. He was later nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for the gutsy move.

No one pretends that Oregon's criminal justice system has problems as severe as those found in Illinois. But excessive sentences run rampant and the possibility of executing innocent prisoners can't be discounted.

These students and faculty are making an effort that citizens of all political inclinations can get behind. It's in no one's interest to have innocent people sit in jail, and it's in no one's interest to have minor offenders taking up jail space while murders occur just because police have no room to house domestic abusers, as recently happened in Springfield.

"There's a lot of people in jail who shouldn't be doing the time they're doing," said Cheri Brooks, a law student active in the nascent innocence project. "They got screwed, but they're not innocent necessarily."

Brooks is actively seeking institutional support from both the University's law school and the School of Journalism and Communication. She said the deans of both schools have "expressed strong interest" in the group.

Journalism graduate student Rita Radostitz worked on capital punishment issues in Texas for eight years and is helping to get the group off the ground.

Brooks said the group has already been approached by prisoners' families who say they need legal help.

The innocence project, which has yet to settle on an official name, could potentially do a great deal of good in Oregon. Working to correct injustices and giving law and journalism students experience in long-term investigations and working with legal documents is something we all should value.

Brooks hopes to have an e-mail account for the group ready at [innocent@law.uoregon.edu](mailto:innocent@law.uoregon.edu).

Contact the columnist at [chuckslothower@dailyemerald.com](mailto:chuckslothower@dailyemerald.com). His opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.