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Paper Sets Off a Debate on Environmentalism's Future

By FELICITY BARRINGER

MIDDLEBURY, Vt. - The leaders of the environmental movement were livid last fall when Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, two little-known, earnest environmentalists in their 30's, presented a 12,000-word thesis arguing that environmentalism was dead.

It did not help that the pair first distributed their paper, "The Death of Environmentalism," at the annual meeting of deep-pocketed foundation executives who underwrite the environmental establishment. But few outside the movement's inner councils paid much attention at first.

Then came the November election, into which groups like the Sierra Club and the League of Conservation Voters poured at least \$15 million, much of it to defeat President Bush, whose support for oil drilling and logging, and opposition to regulating greenhouse gases have made him anathema to environmental groups. Instead, Mr. Bush and Congressional champions of his agenda cemented their control in Washington at a time when battles loom over clean air and oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Now a debate about the future of environmentalism is ricocheting around the Internet about the authors' notion of, in Mr. Shellenberger's words, "abolishing the category" of environmentalism and embracing a wider spectrum of liberal issues to "release the power of progressivism." Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club, began things in the fall with a bristling 6,000-word denunciation of Mr. Shellenberger's and Mr. Nordhaus's paper. An online magazine, Grist.org, has started a forum to debate their ideas and their assertions that environmentalism has become "just another special interest."

One writer called the paper "ridiculous and self-serving." Another wrote simply, "I'm not dead."

Others have embraced the paper. "The article articulates exactly my feelings about the environmental movement," one enthusiast wrote.

Mr. Nordhaus, 38, is a pollster, and Mr. Shellenberger, 33, is a strategist and the executive director of the Breakthrough Institute, a new organization that advocates putting progressive values to work to solve problems. They are receiving an increasing number of speaking invitations like the one that brought them here to Middlebury College in central Vermont recently, where they spoke at a conference on rethinking the politics of climate.

The election results may not have been the only reason they have struck a nerve. Other nagging concerns abound, like worries about the effect of repeated defeats on morale and concerns about image; a recent survey conducted for the Nature Conservancy suggested that the group use the term "conservationist" rather than "environmentalist."

"To a large extent, most of us in the environmental movement think most people agree with us," said Bill McKibben, a scholar in residence at Middlebury College and the author of "The End of Nature," a 1989 book on global warming.

But Mr. McKibben, who called Mr. Shellenberger and Mr. Nordhaus "the bad boys of American environmentalism," said their data showed that the kind of political support the movement had in the late 1970's had come and gone. "The political ecosystem is as real as the physical ecosystem so we might as

well deal with it," he said.

Their paper asserts that the movement's senior leadership was blinded by its early successes and has become short-sighted and "just another special interest." Its gloomy warnings and geeky, technocentric policy prescriptions are profoundly out of step with the electorate, Mr. Shellenberger and Mr. Nordhaus say.

"We have become convinced that modern environmentalism, with all of its unexamined assumptions, outdated concepts and exhausted strategies, must die so that something new can live," they wrote. As proof, they cite the debate on global warming and the largely unsuccessful push for federal regulation of industrial and automobile emissions.

They avoided making tactical prescriptions, but they did chide the movement for its limited efforts to find common ground with other groups, like labor and urged their compatriots to tap into the country's optimism.

Mr. Nordhaus, who works at Evans/McDonough, an opinion research company, told the student-dominated conference at Middlebury College that environmentalists "have spent the last 25 or 30 years telling people what they cannot aspire to." Given the can-do spirit of the country, "that isn't going to get you very far," he said.

The authors' arguments are based partly on data from a Canadian polling company, Environics, that show American voters edging away from the environmentalists and some of their allies. For example, the percentage of the 2,500 people in the poll who agree that pollution is necessary to preserve jobs rose from 17 percent in 1992 to 29 percent in 2004.

The paper - based largely on interviews with 25 environmental leaders - has exposed latent fault lines in the often-fractious world of groups who battle for strategies to preserve wetlands, save endangered species and the wilderness, and eliminate toxic pollutants in the air and water.

The observations have rippled through the environmental movement to the anger of some of its leaders and foundation executives and to the applause of a scattering of younger or less visible environmentalists.

John Passacantando, the executive director of Greenpeace USA, was the only national environmental leader who chose to come to Vermont to hear the pair when they appeared at the conference. "These guys laid out some fascinating data," Mr. Passacantando said, "but they put it in this over-the-top language and did it in this in-your-face way."

The movement has always been able to count on overwhelming expressions of support for its goals; polls consistently show approval of 70 percent to 80 percent or more. And memberships have been rising steadily at organizations like the Sierra Club, which reported an increase in membership from about 642,000 in 2000 to 750,000 last year. That helps those who dismiss Mr. Shellenberger and Mr. Nordhaus as upstarts.

"The environmental movement is probably the strongest social movement we have in this country," said Joshua Reichert, director of the environment division of the Pew Charitable Trusts, a major source of financing for environmental causes.

Mr. Reichart added: "It reflects the values and aspirations of a huge majority of the country - but it simply can't compete with war and terrorism, nor should we expect it to."

Mr. Reichert, his counterparts at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and scores of other foundation members who support organized environmental activity were the intended audience of the paper. It was underwritten by Peter Teague, the environment director of the Nathan Cummings Foundation. Perhaps the most scathing response came from Mr. Pope of the Sierra Club, who said the paper mischaracterized both the interviews with him and the state of the environmental movement.

Phil Clapp, the president of the National Environmental Trust, who pushed for new tactics in his own day, said the authors fundamentally misunderstood both history and politics. "There's some great fantasy out there that the nation's great environmental laws were passed in some national wave of unanimity with millions of people assaulting the barricades demanding environmental protection," Mr. Clapp said. "In reality it was the result of 10 years' hard work - grass-roots organizing, careful and skillful lobbying of members of Congress and careful policy analysis."

Deb Callahan, president of the League of Conservation Voters, said that the movement had been changing even before the paper was written. "I think what we are looking at is the rebirth of environmentalism, examining constituencies, messages and focus and going beyond what we've been comfortable with," Ms. Callahan said. But she agreed that success was not at hand as she and her colleagues confront "the most hostile federal government we've seen in the history of the environmental movement," she said.

The decision by Mr. Shellenberger and Mr. Nordhaus to pick global warming as Exhibit A of their argument, Mr. Pope said, was unfair. "Since global warming is our hardest problem, and we brought to bear our weakest tool, expertise, it's hardly surprising that we are getting our worst results," he said.

Mr. Pope also took a dig at his adversaries' motives. "Given that the chosen audience of the paper was the funders," he wrote, "it will be hard for many readers to avoid the suspicion that the not-so-hidden message was, 'Fund us instead.' "

In the trenches of the movement, the reviews were more positive. In San Francisco last year, Adam Werbach, who in his early 20's was the national president of the Sierra Club, joined the chorus with a speech that echoed the tone of the Shellenberger-Nordhaus paper and that began, "I am here to perform an autopsy."

And in an e-mail message to Mr. Pope, Gerald Winegrad, a Sierra Club member and a board member of the Maryland League of Conservation voters, wrote, "We are failing now, I would suggest very badly, in accomplishing our goals."