The Trade-Off Myth

Fact & Fiction
About Jobs
and the
Environment

Eban Goodstein

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Chapter 1

FICTIONS, FACTS, AND POLITICS

In 1992, I was working on the first edition of my college textbook in environmental economics. In the chapter on the costs of environmental protection, I wanted to include a section on the negative employment impacts of regulation. Like many people at the time, I assumed that the issue had been blown out of proportion by the press. Nevertheless, I fully expected that jobs—environment trade-offs would still loom large, at least at the regional level.

They don't.

Many Americans believe three things about jobs and the environment. First, at an economy-wide level, environmental protection has created long-run unemployment. Second, environmental protection has been responsible for large numbers of plant shutdowns and layoffs in manufacturing. And third, environmental protection has led many U.S. firms to flee to developing countries with lax environmental regulations—so called "pollution havens."

When you hear someone say "All economists agree," as a general rule it is best to head for the door. But stay seated for this one. Virtually all economists who have studied the jobs—environment issue agree that the three propositions identified above are false. In reality, at the economywide level, there has simply been no trade-off between jobs and the environment. In fact, regulation-induced plant closings and layoffs are very rare. And, despite what one hears in the media, few firms are fleeing

industrial countries such as the United States to take advantage of loose environmental regulations in poor countries.

These facts run so counter to the conventional wisdom that I suspect most readers, at first encounter, will not believe them. However, the research base that supports these views—and they are the strong consensus views within the economics profession—is substantial. Chapters 2 and 3 show that jobs—environment conflicts are very small in both relative and absolute terms.

Although environmental protection seldom causes large-scale lay-offs, jobs-environment conflicts—particularly in coal mining or timbering towns—do pose serious hardships for some workers. Chapter 4 focuses attention on these issues. How big are the impacts, and what can government policies do to help workers adjust?

In contrast to the conventional wisdom that jobs and the environment are in conflict, a revisionist view has recently arisen that maintains that environmental protection measures can actually reduce U.S. unemployment problems. Chapter 5 evaluates several different claims about a "jobs—environment synergy." Green jobs, it turns out, cannot solve major problems of unemployment; however, under the right conditions, a shift from "dirty" to "clean" production methods can be an important element of a local economic development strategy.

Chapter 6 looks at jobs—environment trade-offs that might emerge as we attack the problem of global warming. In December 1997, the United States and other industrialized countries signed a treaty in Kyoto, Japan, whereby they agreed to reduce carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions by a combined total of 5 percent from 1990 levels, with the goal to be achieved between 2008 and 2012. However, the U.S. Senate has yet to ratify the treaty, and no enabling legislation has been passed. Opposition has been based on predictions of large-scale job loss that industry groups have floated.

In fact, the job impacts of the global warming treaty are likely to be modest, on the order of a few thousand jobs per year nationwide. But the layoffs will be concentrated on distinct groups, such as coal miners, coalshipping railway workers, and employees at oil- and coal-fired electric utilities. Yet, despite these circumstances, the political influence of jobloss arguments is likely to loom large, perhaps large enough to scuttle the agreement itself. Predictions of widespread layoffs, no matter how unfounded, find fertile ground today despite the relatively "healthy economy" of the late 1990s. The twin forces of globalization and the declining power of organized labor unions have left American families facing

an environment of intense economic insecurity. The same forces have also left the political coalition that in the past supported strong environmental regulations increasingly vulnerable. Given this, understanding and addressing the underlying concerns of workers will be key to making further progress in cleaning up the environment.

What follows, in brief, is the story.

THREE TYPES OF UNEMPLOYMENT

Economists divide unemployment into three principal categories: cyclical, structural, and frictional. *Cyclical unemployment* is caused by business cycles. During recessions, the unemployment rate in the United States will typically rise to between 7 and 9 percent of the workforce. This translates into roughly ten to eleven million unemployed workers. During booms, the unemployment rate falls into the 4 percent range, which economists define as *full employment*.

But how can we have achieved full employment if around six million people are still looking for jobs? This is what is termed *frictional unemployment*—people who are temporarily between jobs. Even when the economy is operating at full tilt, some firms will lay off workers who in a short time will find new jobs, some workers will quit to find better opportunities, and young people and new entrants into the labor market will spend time searching for a job. When the unemployment rate in a given region approaches 4 percent, most of it is frictional.

Finally, *structural unemployment* occurs when major regional shifts in production patterns leave workers stranded. The devastating and long-lasting impacts of structural unemployment were captured in Michael Moore's classic film *Roger and Me*. After General Motors pulled out of Flint, Michigan, not much was left in parts of the town besides row after row of boarded up houses and shops.

With this bit of terminology in hand, the three myths about jobs and the environment can be recast more precisely.

Myth 1: At the economy-wide level, environmental regulation aggravates cyclical unemployment by deepening recessions and making it hard if not impossible to achieve full employment.

Chapter 2 addresses this charge, revealing it to be completely without foundation. Cyclical unemployment is created by economy-wide downturns; however, environmental regulation has neither caused nor deepened recessions. The real economy-wide effects of regulation are to shift the *types* of jobs, without increasing the overall level of unemployment either in booms or recessions. There are now well over two million people who work directly or indirectly in environmentally related jobs. And, surprisingly, these jobs tend to be concentrated more than proportionately in blue-collar sectors of the economy. Combined, some 31 percent of jobs that are dependent on environmental spending are in construction and manufacturing, compared with 20 percent of jobs in the economy as a whole.

Myth 2: Environmental regulation has led to wide-scale plant shutdowns and layoffs, which have severely aggravated structural unemployment.

Chapter 3 tells the real story. Across the United States, well over two million workers are laid off each year due to factors such as import competition, shifts in demand, or corporate downsizings. In sharp contrast, annual layoffs in manufacturing due to environmental regulation are on the order of one to 3,000 per year. In 1997 (the last year for which data were available), regulation accounted for less than one-tenth of 1 percent of large-scale layoffs in the economy.

Myth 3: Even if it has not led to massive shutdowns, environmental regulation has encouraged new manufacturing investment to flee overseas to countries with lax environmental requirements. This, in turn, has created structural unemployment.

Economists have actually been looking quite hard for exactly this effect for some twenty years. We even have a name for it: the "pollution haven hypothesis." However, as chapter 3 shows, pollution havens, while perfectly plausible in theory, are quite hard to find in practice. Beyond a couple of high profile—and highly publicized—cases, firms have not been fleeing the developed world to escape environmental regulations. The reasons? Regulatory costs, even in heavily regulated industries, are a small percentage of total sales (i.e., only rarely rising above 2 percent); costs are only one factor affecting a location decision; and much of pollution control technology is embedded in plant design. Because an oil refinery built today by a U.S. oil company in Mexico would look a lot like one built in California, the potential savings on pollution control equipment are not significantly reduced.

The point is not that environmental regulations are without cost. Any time we as a society legislate cleaner air or water, we pay for it in the form of higher prices for commodities ranging from gasoline and automobiles to food and drinking water, at least in the short run. Environmental protection often does require a trade-off, but it entails foregone consumption of some goods and services, not fewer overall jobs.

THE MYTHMAKERS

The jobs-environment debate resurfaces in the United States every time a significant piece of environmental legislation comes before Congress. Today the issue is Senate ratification of the 1997 Kyoto treaty to control greenhouse gas emissions. Before this fight, the two major recent battles were the 1990 Clean Air Act (CAA) amendments, and President Bill Clinton's 1993 Forest Plan for the Pacific Northwest. Throughout this book, I rely on examples drawn primarily from the CAA amendments, the Forest Plan, and the greenhouse debate.

The CAA amendments, which President George Bush signed into law in 1990, had two main thrusts. First, they required electric utilities to clean up their sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions to reduce acid rain. Second, they imposed controls on the release of so-called "air toxics," or hazardous air pollutants, from chemical companies. President Clinton's Forest Plan, which was initiated in 1993, protected substantial tracts of old-growth timber on federal lands in the Pacific Northwest from logging. The primary motivation behind the plan was to preserve the habitat of the endangered spotted owl. While on the campaign trail in 1992, President Bush adamantly opposed the plan. Habitat protection, he predicted, would mean that "We'll be up to our neck in owls, and every mill worker will be out of a job." Significantly-and unfortunately—debate over both of these measures took place during the recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s. High levels of cyclical unemployment in both the eastern coal fields and western timber country left workers in both regions feeling desperate and under siege.

In the midst of the CAA battle, the *Wall Street Journal* collected an astounding poll result. In a nationwide survey, 33 percent of the respondents told pollsters that they personally felt themselves "likely" or "somewhat likely" to lose their own job as a consequence of environmental regulation. Clearly, the perception of a jobs—environment trade-off, which played out dramatically during the early 1990s on both the east and west coasts, has been deeply imbedded in the national psyche.

For the overwhelming majority of workers, these fears are completely unfounded. So how do these different job trade-off myths arise? I

noted earlier that regulation is not without cost. It does mean higher prices for some of the goods and services we buy. However, in addition to raising prices, environmental regulations also cut into corporate profits. For this reason, companies often oppose regulations. Yet when they try to fight them, they face a serious dilemma. Political arguments that regulations are bad because they raise prices simply fall flat. Americans do not seem to mind generalized price increases for goods if it means a cleaner environment. And, of course, the argument that environmental regulations will reduce profits is a nonstarter. So what message could be fashioned to capture the debate?

Many corporations have responded in a way that is best summed up in one word—*jobs*. Each time a new environmental regulation is considered, the affected industries roll out second-rate studies to prove that the regulations will be "job-killers." Later in the book, we will dissect several of these analyses. The point here is that it has been this relentless, thirty-year-old media campaign—combined with rising economic insecurity and an all-too-common media preference for easy answers—that has led to the entrenchment of these three myths in the public mind.

In fact, the limited jobs impact of environmental regulation is reflected in two high-profile, worst-case scenarios that have taken place in recent years: timber workers versus old-growth forest measures in the Pacific Northwest and coal miners versus clean air efforts in the southern Appalachians. Chapter 4 looks closely at these two circumstances, however, one point is worth making here. Even in these highly publicized scenarios, the number of direct layoffs was less than 10,000 spread out over several years and across several states. Real economic pain was clearly suffered by these workers and their communities. But in terms of the jobs lost, each of these two events would be dwarfed by even a modest-sized corporate downsizing.

You wouldn't know this, however, from reading two stories that ran in the *New York Times* in the space of a week in February 1996. Both stories clearly illustrate the hold that the jobs versus environment myth has on the imagination of readers and reporters. The headlines read:

"EASTERN COAL TOWNS WITHER IN THE NAME OF CLEANER AIR"

"SQUEEZING THE TEXTILE WORKERS: TRADE AND TECHNOLOGY FORCE A NEW WAVE OF JOB CUTS"

The first article, a front-page, lead story, detailed the five-year impact of the 1990 CAA amendments on Appalachian communities as electric

companies switched to low-sulfur western coal to meet tougher air pollution standards. The piece on textile workers appeared in the business section and examined the impact of trade and technology on employment in the textile industry during 1995. Care to guess the number of job losses in each case? In the coal industry, the number of layoffs was hard to pinpoint, in large part due to the fact that the industry was continually downsizing in response to shifting markets and technological advances. Although the reporter, Peter Kilborn, never directly stated as much in his article, if one reads carefully and does some math, it can be calculated that *at most* he was talking about 1,000 job losses per year over a multistate region that could possibly be attributed to regulation. By contrast, in the textile industry, the number was an astounding 100,000 layoffs in a single year.

Again, this is not to downplay the devastating impact that layoffs can have both in textile towns and coal communities. But it does beg an interesting question: Why did the *Times* feel compelled to report truly small layoff events on the front page, while burying in the business section the news about job losses that were one hundred times larger?

There are two answers. The first is the corporate world's ability to spin the media. Reporters uniformly report—often without comment—the absurdly high job-loss predictions that industry think tanks regularly churn out. More profoundly, journalists are looking for someone to blame for rising income inequality, corporate downsizing, and increasing middle-class insecurity. While the declining power of labor unions, increasing levels of import competition, and rapid pace of automation are genuine suspects, environmental regulations are apparently a more comfortable villain.

A JOBS-ENVIRONMENT SYNERGY?

Environmental protection is simply not the "job killer" it has been made out to be. What about the opposite view? Some environmentalists and policy makers claim that environmental regulation can be a "green jobs machine" that will help solve U.S. unemployment problems. Vice President Al Gore, for example, has argued that investment in new environmental technologies could provide a dramatic spark to our economic system to a degree comparable to that experienced as a result of the Marshall Plan, which followed World War II. Others have argued that reducing greenhouse gas emissions (e.g., by cutting oil imports) will create a significant number of new jobs in the United States.

If the argument is that green jobs will solve the problem of cyclical unemployment, then it is without substance. Just as regulation does not cause recessions, neither does it prevent their occurrence. (However, reg-

ulation may mitigate the depth of recessions somewhat by mandating a "stimulus" in the form of clean-up investment.)

What about structural unemployment? Under the right circumstances, a shift from a dirty to a clean technology can lead to modest gains in local jobs. This is evident from a couple of ongoing experiments in "sustainable development" close to my home in Oregon. In different arenas, environmental groups are working with businesses to promote new jobs in waste-based manufacturing and value-added natural resource products. But these kinds of employment benefits are contingent on location, time, and technology. A shift to green production is, therefore, no panacea for depressed regions. Nevertheless, it should be considered as one important tool for promoting local economic development.

JOBS AND GLOBAL WARMING

The central thesis of this book is that the employment gains or losses from environmental protection are small, gradual, and tend to balance each other out. Nevertheless, for political reasons, "jobs" will continue to loom large when new regulations are proposed. President George Bush set the tone for the current global warming debate at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 when he defended the U.S. opposition to a strong greenhouse agreement as "protecting American jobs from environmental extremists." Since then, several major consulting firms, working on behalf of the fossil fuel and auto industries, have churned out studies that predict near-term job losses of over two and a half million.

What are the likely employment impacts if the U.S. Senate ratifies the Kyoto global warming treaty? At the economy-wide level, the likely answer is a few thousand per year, nationwide. However, specific sectors will be hard hit. In particular, attempts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions will further shrink the U.S. coal industry. Coal miners have borne the brunt of environmental regulation before. Under the CAA amendments of 1990, adjustment assistance programs were set up that have since served several thousand eastern coal miners over the last few years.

However, the keystone of the adjustment program for coal miners—which is an extension of the job training program that is available to workers who are dislocated by trade and defense downsizing—has been, to put it politely, largely useless. Study after study has demonstrated that the underfunded, short-term approach to training that is available under the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) simply has no impact on raising

the earnings potential of their graduates. Longer-term retraining has real value, however, without income support, many dislocated workers can't afford to take advantage of the longer-term options that the JTPA offers. Even good training has its limits. For coal miners, many of whom live in regions with persistent, high rates of structural unemployment, the question has become: "training for what jobs"? Also, nothing in coal counties pays like coal mining; many laid-off miners have taken income cuts of 50 percent or more.

There are better ideas out there: President Clinton's Northwest Forest Plan provided an increase in federal infrastructure and business development dollars for hard-hit timber communities. The plan also funded an innovative conversion effort. Dubbed "Jobs in the Woods," the program was originally designed to promote living-wage jobs in the forest-restoration industry. These initiatives are explored and evaluated in chapter 4. Policies such as these, combined with a serious commitment to rigorous retraining programs, as well as buyouts for older workers, could form the basis for a fair adjustment package for miners and others who do lose their jobs as a consequence of climate-change policy.

THE WORKERS' ENVIRONMENT

During the 1993 Forest Summit that was held in Portland, Oregon, 50,000 environmentalists who were bent on protecting the remaining old-growth forest, and its now-famous resident the spotted owl, attended a rally and rock concert in a riverside park. The next day, 20,000 workers from the logging industry rallied in the same park. They called on President Clinton to end logging restrictions in the old-growth forest. Buzz Eades, a sixth-generation logger, put his predicament this way: "I represent thousands of timber workers[,]... modern Paul Bunyans who are hiding in the car while their wife buys groceries with food stamps."²

Eades tells a critically important story, but one that is only tangentially about spotted owls. All across the country, the last two decades have seen the gradual disappearance of decent, family-wage jobs for high school and, increasingly, college graduates. The fiction that environmental protection creates large-scale unemployment needs to be understood in this American context of ever-increasing job insecurity and growing income inequality. Manufacturing plants are fleeing overseas, attracted not by loose environmental regulations but by low wages. Service industries, even in good times, are continually downsizing and restructuring, which has lead to layoffs that by historical standards are indeed massive. Economy-wide, inflation-adjusted hourly wages for male workers are in

a twenty-year slide from which there is no evidence of recovery. And many workers who are laid off from established industries do not quickly—if ever—recover their former salaries.³ Given these circumstance, it is no wonder that people are concerned about highly visible government policies that seem to them likely to further destabilize their communities.

Much of the concern about job loss in the case of miners and timber workers was related to the disappearance of high-paying union jobs that were available to hard-working high school graduates and that made up the backbone of the blue-collar middle class in the 1960s and 1970s. A powerful indication of this trend is that the percentage of the U.S. workforce in unions fell from 24 percent in 1979 to 14 percent in 1997. And the loss of these jobs is certainly to be mourned. America's middle class has found itself working harder and harder to maintain a constant family income. In 1996, the typical married-couple family worked over six weeks longer than in 1989 and brought home a slightly smaller paycheck. Stresses at home have mounted while quality of life has declined.

Meanwhile, incomes for the top 20 percent of earners have escalated rapidly. Emblematic of this trend is that the average pay for a CEO more than doubled between 1989 and 1997 and is now more than 116 times that of the typical worker. Even the booming stock market over this same period couldn't help middle-class families, who saw their wealth actually decline by over 3 percent as stagnant incomes lead to more debt. Stock market gains did benefit one group—the richest 10 percent of U.S. households reaped over 85 percent of the run up in stock value. This tremendous growth in economic inequality has led to a troubling new label for America in the 1990s: "the 80-20 society."

However, environmental regulation is not the cause of deindustrialization or of the growth of income inequality in the United States. If we, as a society, are generally concerned about rising income inequality, than one solution is to make union organizing in this country feasible again. Since the early 1980s, many American businesses have aggressively exploited loopholes in the nation's labor laws to render union organizing virtually impossible. The number of employers using five or more antiunion tactics during organizing drives (e.g., holding compulsory antiunion meetings, publicly threatening plant closure, firing organizers) has more than doubled since 1986. And the risks for workers supporting a union drive have skyrocketed. The AFL-CIO estimates that in 1995, over 11,000 workers were illegally fired during organizing campaigns. In 1980, one in twenty workers who voted for a union was illegally fired; in 1995 that number had risen to one in eight.⁶

Not surprisingly, the number of union elections dropped by over 50 percent over the same period of 1980 to 1995. Two points can be made here. One is that if Americans are concerned about the loss of jobs with decent pay for the middle class, than the solution to the problem is unlikely to lie in rolling back environmental regulations, but rather, at least partially, in labor law reform. The second point is perhaps less obvious, but equally relevant. Organized labor, by helping to elect progressive Democrats, has played a pivotal role in the political coalition that is responsible for America's environmental protection laws. Without a revived political presence on the part of unions, the future for new, major environmental legislation in the United States is likely to be dim.

Unions, Democrats, and the Environment

In the fall of 1997, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbit was on a speaking tour drumming up public support for the Kyoto global warming treaty. Like many economists who study environmental issues, I had become persuaded that the benefits of early action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions were large and that the initial steps to address the problem could be taken at a relatively low cost. I had a chance to speak briefly with Secretary Babbit, and I urged him to tell President Clinton to negotiate a strong agreement. My political reasoning was simple: in twenty-five years the U.S. Senate has never voted down a major piece of environmental legislation once it was introduced. If Republican Presidents Nixon, Reagan, and Bush all saw major pieces of environmental legislation make it through Congress on their watch, what should Clinton have to fear? Also, the American people overwhelmingly support action on global warming. Poll results from 1997 showed that 90 percent of Americans felt that the government should limit the greenhouse gasses that businesses generate, and 72 percent said that they would pay higher utility bills to reduce greenhouse pollution from electricity plants.8

President Clinton did come home from Japan with a solid, first-step agreement. The Kyoto process included only the industrial nations, which was consistent with an agreement reached in Berlin in 1996. The rationale was twofold: rich countries had emitted the vast bulk of greenhouse gasses over the last century, and poor countries could not afford significant, immediate reductions. This two-step process followed the model of the successful 1987 ozone protection treaty, the Montreal Protocol. In Montreal, the developing nations were given a ten-year grace period before they were expected to reduce production of ozone destroying chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs).

But before the Kyoto Summit took place, by an astounding vote of ninety-five to zero, the U.S. Senate declared that a treaty that failed to require that developing countries adhere to the same timetable for greenhouse gas reduction as industrial countries was not acceptable. Everyone knew such a treaty would not emerge from Kyoto, and the best President Clinton could say in response was that he would obtain "significant participation" from developing countries before bringing the treaty to the Senate. Of course, the standard for significant participation was left vague. Nor is it clear whether whatever minor treaty modifications Clinton can wrangle will satisfy the Senate.

The Senate floor debate was as astounding as the vote. Not one Democrat stood up for the treaty process as it had been negotiated by President Clinton's team and agreed upon in Berlin. Democrats and Republicans alike repeated Myths 1, 2, and 3: big, economy-wide job losses would be inevitable, widespread shutdowns of manufacturing plants would be likely, and developing countries with relaxed environmental standards would steal U.S. jobs. President Clinton's economic advisor Janet Yellen had given the Senate Democrats ammunition to take down this view, arguing in the previous months that the employment impacts of Kyoto would be small. But no one was there to take up the charge. Why not?

In part, the Republican party has lost many of its environmental moderates. There is hard-core and well-organized ideological opposition to the treaty on the part of the new conservatives in the party. The debate led off with Senator Charles Hagel of Nebraska entering into the record an article from the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page declaring that "global warming is mostly a phantom phenomenon." This was one constant theme from the Republican side. The other theme, of course, was jobs. Reducing carbon emissions would "cripple our economy..." and result in the lose of 1.25 to 1.5 million jobs (Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky); "lead to a loss of two million jobs, most of which will actually move overseas" (Senator Trent Lott of Mississippi); and require "[i]ndividual Americans [to] pay for this treaty either in their electric bills, at the gas pump, or by losing their jobs" (Senator Hagel).

It is no news that the Republican party has moved to the right. But much more significant from an environmental perspective is a similar drift among Democrats. There are today many fewer genuine ecological voices in the Democratic party than in the 1970s, when the first wave of environmental legislation passed, or even than in the late 1980s, when the CAA amendments were enacted. Massachusetts senator John Kerry,