The "People" Versus the "Interests" in Contemporary Environmental Issues

The majesty, power, and vulnerability of the natural world are powerful phenomena that invoke a vast range of diverse and characteristically passionate reactions from human kind. These reactions range from a utilitarian view of nature as a resource at humankind’s disposal to a recreational, therapeutic, and even to a spiritual appreciation of nature in its pristine state. And just as people appreciate nature for a diversity of reasons, they likewise hold a vast array of views on how best to maximize their specific value of nature. Government officials who value nature’s resources above all will inevitably conflict with the poet who appreciates nature as beauty and truth. This diversity of definitions of nature’s greatest worth is the philosophical issue at the heart of many historical and contemporary environmental debates and the interstate I-69 expansion controversy in Southern Indiana is no exception.

The federal government, in accordance with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), has mandated that interstate I-69 eventually connect Mexico and Canada through the United States in order to facilitate trade and economic development. It is, however, left up to each state involved to decide how to proceed in accordance with their specific financial and geographic circumstances (Tokarski; 2002). Inevitably the greatly varied agendas and interests of those involved has resulted in a fierce and ongoing philosophical debate between government officials, poets, and essentially everyone in between. The conflict has grown particularly intense in the state of Indiana.
At the heart of the issue lies in two questions, as mentioned earlier: what is nature’s worth? And how do you maximize this value? Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels, who advocates constructing 142 miles of entirely new interstate between Evansville, IN and Indianapolis, IN (“Major Moves”), would answer that nature’s value lies in its resources and an entirely new interstate is the best way to encourage industry and economic growth within the state while reinforcing Indianapolis’ proud identity as the “Crossroads of America.” On the other side of the dispute are grassroots advocacy groups, like the Hoosier Environmental Council (HEC), Citizens for Appropriate Rural Roads (CARR), and the Environmental Law and Policy Center, who maintain that nature is a gift that should be conserved as much as possible and thus advocate a “Common Sense I-69” alternative which would designate preexisting roads as I-69. This solution would be more cost efficient, saving taxpayers $600 million and adding a mere ten minutes onto the two hour trip, as well as more environmentally conscious by saying thousand of acres of farmland and wilderness (“A Common Sense I-69”; 2008). Construction has already begun on the first 1.8 mile segment of Daniels’ so-called “New Terrain” route, but the issue is far from dead. Tom Tokarski, President of CARR, writes in a July 20, 2008 letter posted on the CARR website that the section has “independent utility” and that there is no legal obligation to complete any other portion of the project (Tokarski; 2008). The philosophical core of the I-69 conflict in Indiana, classically epitomized by scholar Samuel P. Hays as a conflict between the “interests” and the “people” (Hays; 1959), truly lies in the contrasting values of the natural environment held by Daniels’, whose view align with the utilitarian, anthropocentric viewpoint of J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur in Letter from an American Farmer, and the value of nature appreciated by his opposition, the advocacy groups, who represent a relatively biocentric viewpoint
conveyed historically by an unlikely combination of the grass roots methods of John Muir and the conservationist philosophy of his contemporary and foe, Gifford Pinchot.

The real root of the similarity between Governor Daniels and the 18th century writing of Crevecoeur lies in their association of national identity and economic development. Indianapolis, long known as the “Crossroads of America” as a result of the many major roadways that converge on the city, has found itself, like most of the country, in an economic downturn. With the major American car companies floundering, Indiana finds itself seeking new industry and new development to sustain its economy. Governor Daniels views the “New Terrain I-69” as the means to both reinforce Indiana’s identity and aide the economy by better maximizing the worth of the state’s abundant natural resources, as delineated in Daniels’ 2006 State of the State Address. Likewise Crevecoeur identifies this utilitarian view of nature with a proud, nationalistic identity in his 18th century work entitled Letters from an American Farmer: “We are a people of cultivators, scattered over an immense territory, communicating with each other by means of good roads and navigable rivers, united by the silken bands of mild government…We are all animated with the spirit of an industry which is unfettered and unrestrained” (41). According to Crevecoeur, American identity is defined by hard work, ambition, and a certain industrious and untamable desire for economic and personal advancement. Crevecoeur contines: “We are nothing but what we derive from the air we breathe, the climate we inhabit, the government we obey, the system of religion we profess, and the nature of our employment” (45). Daniels has advanced his “New Terrain Route” solution to the I-69 debate into action through fair and legal avenues provided to the governor by the American government system. His “Major Moves” plan uses a portion of the $3.8 billion proceeds from the privatization of the Northern Indiana toll road to fund the I-69 project which should, according to Daniels, result in the creation of 130,000
jobs in some of the most underdeveloped and remote portions of the state (“Major Moves”; 2008).

This discussion leads to the next strong correlation between Daniels and Crevecoeur: their desire to advance society into wilderness areas. Many of the areas affected by the “New Terrain” route are essentially contemporary wilderness. Comparable to the 18th-century wilderness discussed by Crevecoeur, contemporary definitions likewise encompass relatively isolated areas whose sparse inhabitants are considered unrefined, outdated, and immoral. The addition of an international interstate highway through these portions of the state would undoubtedly serve to eliminate this contemporary wilderness: a victory for some and a deep loss to those who value the pristine nature of these areas and their inhabitants.

Daniels’ opposition, the environmental advocacy groups who do favor the intrinsic value of pristine nature, incorporate characteristics of both John Muir and his philosophical nemesis, Gifford Pinchot into their stance on the I-69 conflict. The early 20th century saw the unfolding of an environmental debate, pitting Muir against Pinchot, based on the same underlying issues in play in the I-69 controversy: the value and resulting management of nature. The Hetch Hetchy debate centered on the eventual damming of the Tuolumne River in the Hetch Hetchy valley in order to provide needed water to nearby San Francisco. Muir viewed this as a great natural loss while Pinchot, a government official who favored the dam, viewed it as a necessary step in the area’s development. In a piece entitled The Hetch Hetchy Valley, written by Muir before the damming, he discusses his spiritual value of natural phenomena, like the Hetch Hetchy valley and the pristine Indiana wilderness: “They are the greatest of our natural resources, God’s best gifts, but none, however high and holy, is beyond reach of the spoiler” (Muir; 1908). In this sense of
regard for the intrinsic value of pristine nature, the “Common Sense I-69” advocates align themselves with Muir.

The “Common Sense” solution again overlaps with Muir in regard to the grass roots advocacy methods used to advance their ideas. Muir is credited with starting the Sierra Club: essentially the first environmental advocacy group. Without the precedent of the Sierra Club, the existence, focus, and tactics of groups like CARR, the HEC, and the Environmental Policy and Law Center would be greatly called into question. Acting on the charge of “Protecting the Midwest’s Environmental and Natural Heritage”, the Environmental Policy and Law Center has committed itself, alongside CARR and the HEC, to the cause of the “Common Sense I-69” alternative by virtue of posing legal challenges to Daniels’ plan, advancing voter awareness, and employing lobbyists in order to ignite change within the tedious confines of the legal process (“About Us”). The effectiveness of these tactics in this specific situation is yet to be seen, however, the methodology undeniably takes root in Muir’s work with the Sierra Club.

In application, however, the advocates also integrate the idea of conservation advanced by Muir’s “spoiler” (Muir; 1908), Pinchot. “Common Sense I-69” is above all a compromise. It does not dismiss the construction of I-69 entirely, as Muir would; it simply advocates a conservationist alternative. Pinchot, the leader of the conservation movement, defines conservation in his essay, “What It All Means”: “Conservation means the wise use of the earth and its resources for the lasting good of men” (255). The idea of “wise use” is extremely objective, however, these advocacy groups oppose the “New Terrain” route because they view it as excessive, unnecessary, and unwise to the development of the effected areas. With the same ideal of “wise use” at work, Pinchot advocated the damming of the Hetch Hetchy valley based on the water demands of San Francisco. In both cases conservationist ideals are applied to each
debate; they simply manifest themselves differently when applied to the specifics of the two respective issues.

Samuel P. Hays concludes his article entitled *The Gospel of Efficiency* with the following: “The historian, therefore, cannot understand conservation leaders simply as defenders of the ‘people.’ Instead, he must examine the experiences and goals peculiar to them; he must describe their role within a specific sociological context” (203). The classic conflict between the “interests”, traditionally rooted in politics, and the “people”, represented by conservationist principle rooted in applied science, is an oversimplification when applied to the I-69 debate as Daniels and his grassroots opposition claim both political and scientific allies in defense of their respective agendas. The true philosophical debate lies in the value of nature emphasized by each side with Daniels claiming a utilitarian value, similar to that of Crevecoeur, and his opposition adopting a Muir-like intrinsic value of pristine nature advanced by the methodology of grassroots advocacy, as pioneered by Muir’s *Sierra Club*, while also integrating a conservationist approach, characteristic of Muir’s nemesis, Pinchot.
Works Cited


This is the official website for the group advocating the “Common Sense I-69” alternative and therefore is an informed source on this viewpoint.


This the actual work of Crevecoeur done in the 18th century.


This is a transcript of the actual “State of the State Address”, as found on the Governor’s website.


This document reflects the views of Samuel Hays, a former professor of history at the State University of Iowa.


This is a webpage found on the Governor’s website outlining the his actual policy and plan.


This is an article written by Muir in 1908 in an effort to prevent the damming of the Hetch Hetchy Valley.


This is an article written by Pinchot concerning his stance on Conservationism.


This is a report made by CARR, an organization that has become a key opponent of the “New Terrain” route for I-69.


This is a letter found on the CARR website that describes the current CARR outlook and course of action in the future.