



## What's Next For Nature: Perspectives on Political Ecology

*Nature and Democracy*

# When the Public Square Falls Silent: The Right to Protest, Environmental Protection, and the Dangers of Democratic Backsliding



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In 1983, Nicolae Ceaușescu, Romania's totalitarian dictator, launched the "Program for the Comprehensive Development and Exploitation of the Danube Delta," a scheme to embank and drain large areas of one of Europe's most important wetlands to use it for agriculture, fish ponds, and other economic uses. This required high dikes, pumps, and canals that cut off natural flooding.

What followed was not agricultural prosperity but ecological crisis. Around three-quarters of the natural habitat across the lower Danube and the delta were drained or dammed. Fish populations plummeted, the ecosystem shrank, and the once-rich floodplains were fragmented and desiccated.

Around the same time, hundreds of miles to the north, Poland's Białowieża Forest—one of the last and largest areas of remaining primeval forests in Central Europe—was being logged by the authoritarian government. Already ravaged by clearcutting during the first half of the 20th century, much of the remaining forest was being "managed" for logging by the State Forests enterprise, a centralized and opaque bureaucracy. This resulted in the loss of the oldest trees, degraded habitats, and a dramatic disruption of the natural forest regeneration cycle.

These parallel stories of environmental devastation under authoritarian regimes illuminate a fundamental truth: when democratic institutions are constrained, and the public square falls silent, ecosystems pay the price alongside citizens and their democratic freedoms.

### **Suppression and Silence**

Under Ceaușescu, big projects such as the Danube–Black Sea Canal and the delta polders were showcased as triumphs of "socialist engineering." Like similar projects in the country, the delta's transformation relied on thousands of state farm workers—men and women posted to the delta as part of Romania's centralized agricultural regime. Many lived in spartan barracks at the edge of the marshes, worked punishing hours, and were expected to handle not only the planting and harvesting but the endless manual labor of maintaining the dikes and preventing the reclaimed land from returning to its natural state.

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Anyone who challenged Ceaușescu's assault on the Danube Delta did so at great personal risk. Fishermen who reported collapsing stocks, villagers who objected to being pushed off newly embanked polders, and scientists who objected were severely sanctioned, silenced, or removed from their posts. The government Department of State Security—universally known as the Securitate—opened surveillance files on “hostile elements,” workplaces were instructed to dismiss those raising objections, and even mild complaints could be reframed as “propaganda against the socialist state” or “social parasitism.”

By the late 1980s, conservation assessments showed a dramatic drop in biological productivity, the loss of many key spawning habitats, and accelerating soil degradation—evidence of a devastation that, had it continued, would have led to the near-total collapse of the delta's natural aquatic and wetland ecosystems.

In Poland, the environmental devastation followed the same authoritarian script. Although the country maintained conservation laws, expert bodies, and park authorities on paper, these institutions operated within a system that prioritized timber output and gave citizens virtually no role in oversight or public accountability. Independent environmental activism existed only in limited and highly constrained forms before 1989.

The resulting ecological catastrophe unfolded largely hidden from public view. A comprehensive censorship machine—enshrined in the notorious “Black Book of Censorship,” smuggled out by a dissident in the late 1970s—imposed strict preventive censorship, vetting newspapers, books, films, and public events before they were released. It included prohibitions on mentioning industrial accidents, mine disasters, serious workplace injuries, epidemics, natural catastrophes, major fires, and environmental hazards. Publishing statistical data that might foment opposition or portray the government in a negative light was strictly prohibited.

For both countries, a landscape defined by surveillance, fear, and the near absence of independent civic life meant that effective environmental protection was nearly impossible.

### **The Public Square Opens Up**

Much changed at the end of the 1980s. After a decade of severe repression under Poland's General Wojciech Jaruzelski, a wave of crippling strikes organized by Solidarity—the union led by Lech Walesa that included workers across industries like shipbuilding, transportation, and mining—forced semi-free elections in June 1989. Walesa and Solidarity won the election handily. The censorship apparatus was blunted and the Assemblies Act of 1990 promised freedom of peaceful assembly.

That same year in Romania, the transformation was more violent but equally decisive. Nicolae Ceaușescu's last speech, delivered in December from a balcony overlooking Bucharest's central square, was interrupted by protests. Within days, he and his wife Elena had fled in a helicopter, only to be captured, tried, convicted and executed by firing squad on Christmas Day 1989.

What followed was a revolution in the ability of scientists, citizen groups and ordinary people to rally in defense of the environment. In Poland, what scholars have called an “NGO explosion” unfolded: more than 90% of Polish NGOs were created after the fall of the regime, and by the mid-2000s the country's citizens had created hundreds of civic organizations active in everything from

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social services to environmental protection. Meanwhile, the new government overhauled its forestry framework, including biodiversity and ecological values into management practices.

From the early 1990s, professional green NGOs—notably Pracownia Narzecz Wszystkich Istot (Workshop for All Beings)—emerged alongside scientists as key advocates of wilderness conservation in Białowieża. Within six years of the liberation of Poland, their ‘Save the Forest’ campaign helped secure a moratorium on felling old-growth stands and a doubling of the area of Białowieża National Park.

Meanwhile in Romania, once the democratic space reopened, civil society, scientific expertise, and local initiative combined to restore part of the damaged Danube delta. The 1991 Constitution, in particular its guarantee of freedom of association, supplied the legal foundation upon which hundreds of environmental NGOs emerged by the end of the 1990s.

This array of groups faced a daunting task. Several large areas of the delta were diked and drained between the 1960s and 1980s, with one, Pardina, covering about 28,000 hectares, approximately five times the surface area of Manhattan. But with the support of international recognition—the Danube Delta was designated a biosphere reserve in 1990 and listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and Ramsar wetland in 1991—environmental NGOs and allies in government began to plan the ecological reconstruction of the wasted delta, breaching the dikes opening channels to restore the alluvial floodplain.

In 2000, the village of Mahmudia was part of a desiccated tract of farmland. No tourists visited, and local fishers had to travel around 25 km to reach the first lakes in the Delta. Between 2011 and 2015, the community broke down the dams surrounding their communal property, allowing the delta waters to reclaim the area. Slowly but steadily, the delta waters restored the old channels, lakes and islands.

The results were transformative. More than 30 species of aquatic birds have been monitored in the restored area, and 18 types of habitat have been reconstructed. This ecological reconstruction, coordinated with WWF-Romania, not only revitalized the ecosystem but also created a flourishing ecotourism destination. A 2023 survey found that 97% of locals want to keep the area as a wetland, even in the face of a court ruling that favored the interests of agricultural companies that sought to drain it for farmland.

In both countries, and around the world, there are setbacks, obstacles, and neither environmental conservation or democratic rights are forever secured. An ecosystem must be defended against encroachment again and again; free speech and human rights are not guarantors of a protected environment. But an engaged civil society can slow or in many cases halt the worst of the backsliding.

In 2015, when Poland’s conservative Law and Justice Party gained the majority, Environment Minister Jan Szyszko authorized a sharp increase in logging. In response, seven NGOs—including Pracownia, Greenpeace, WWF and ClientEarth—filed a complaint to the European Commission. The Commission, with no inspectors of its own in the forest, effectively relied on activists as its “eyes on the ground”, using their monitoring data to build the case that led to interim measures from the EU Court of Justice in July 2017, followed by a threat of fines of €100,000 per day in November 2017 if logging continued. In April 2018, the Court’s final judgment confirmed that

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Poland had breached EU nature laws, and large-scale logging in Białowieża ceased.

Another Polish conflict, this time over the Rospuda Valley in northeastern Poland, shows even more clearly how an activated civil society can modify or halt destructive projects. In the mid-2000s the government planned an expressway that would cut through the Rospuda peat bogs, a large, highly biodiverse wetland ecosystem that is home to rare species of plants, wolves, lynx, and eagles. Local communities, scientists and environmental NGOs organized winter protest camps, legal challenges and a broad public campaign that framed the defense of the valley as a test of Poland's commitment to both EU law and civil liberties. In 2007 the European Court of Justice ordered construction to halt, and after several years of political struggle the road was finally rerouted around the valley.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the power of an unshackled civil society was the defeat in Romania of the Roșia Montană open-pit gold mine. Conceived in 1995 by a Romanian-born businessman, Frank Timis, the plan involved opening a multi-billion-dollar, cyanide-based open-pit mine. Protests from around the world, including inside Romania, persuaded the World Bank to drop a proposed loan, and by the early 2000s, local villagers who refused to sell their property formed an association called Alburnus Maior, which became the core of organized resistance to the mine.

Despite opposition from almost all the branches of civil society, including Romanian churches, the Romanian academy (the country's highest scholarly institution), artists, and international NGOs, the Romanian government attempted to create a special law for the mine to fast-track its development. In September 2013, massive protests swept Romania, and tens of thousands of people filled the streets in Bucharest, Cluj, and other cities. This protest finally helped persuade the Romanian Parliament to kill the special law. In 2021, UNESCO declared the landscape around the proposed mine as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The commonality between these two histories is striking: authoritarian governments systematically undermine and/or dismantle the institutional and civic infrastructure necessary for environmental protection. When democratic norms are introduced, the public square becomes fertile ground for citizens, students, NGOs, and multilateral institutions to fill the space left barren by the former regime and repopulate it with facts and figures, free speech and nonviolent protest. And the environment, more often than not, wins.

### **The Global Democratic Recession**

Today, we are dealing with global democratic backsliding. The 2025 World Justice Project Rule of Law Index paints an alarming picture. Overall, the rule of law, which the project defines as "a durable system of laws, institutions, norms, and community commitment that delivers accountability, just laws, open government, and accessible and impartial justice," declined in 68% of countries studied. According to the study, "civic space deteriorated in over 70% of countries, curtailing freedoms of expression and participation."

According to "The Future of Free Speech," an independent, non-partisan think tank at Vanderbilt University, from 2015 to 2022, 22 open democracies experienced an alarming increase in restrictions, with a majority reporting changes that restricted free speech. The most common justifications for limiting expression were national security, national cohesion, and public safety.

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This erosion of democratic norms is particularly insidious because it takes place slowly and in stages—nominal freedoms can remain. There are no tanks in the streets, stores are open, some kind of public life goes on. But in the background, the ballot box is captured, news outlets are either neutered or weaponized, dissidents are jailed and protests crushed. As a result, when a robust defense is needed for a suddenly persecuted group, or a threatened ecosystem, no response is available.

### **The American Crisis**

Nowhere is this pattern more consequential than in the contemporary United States under the Trump administration. Since gaining office, the administration and its allies in the Republican Party have systematically dismantled environmental protections by gutting funding, issuing executive orders, and appointing people who oppose environmental safeguards to head the agencies charged with administering them.

The trend is disturbing. In May 2025, Republican legislators attempted to add language to their omnibus bill that would allow “terrorist-supporting” organizations to be stripped of their nonprofit status. In July 2025, Senator Ted Cruz introduced the “Stop Financial Underwriting of Nefarious Demonstrations and Extremist Riots (Stop FUNDERS) Act,” explicitly targeting “Domestic NGOs and foreign adversaries” for allegedly funding “riots.” Cruz’s bill relies on the federal definition of riot, which is broad and vague enough that a range of protests could meet the bar, even if nonviolent but “perceived” to have the threat of violence.

In late September 2025, the Trump administration directed senior Justice Department officials and U.S. attorneys to draft criminal cases against George Soros’s Open Society Foundations, citing possible charges like racketeering, fraud, and material support for terrorism. No public evidence has been produced, and no indictments have been announced as this goes to press. The move is part of a broader campaign to scrutinize a cluster of nonprofits working on diverse issues related to democracy, rights, and peace—including well-known groups such as ActBlue, Indivisible, the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights, IfNotNow, and Jewish Voice for Peace—under the banner of combating “political violence.”

The terms deployed to justify these actions are ludicrous; the institutions being targeted are unmistakably nonviolent, in no way support “riots”, and in most cases have been part of the US civic landscape for many decades. Their crime is to hold views that are different from those of Republican Party leadership.

Meanwhile, in states across the country and around the world, the right to protest without fear of selective prosecutions and draconian jail sentences is being rolled back at a breathtaking pace. Since 2016, at least 18 states in the US have passed laws that sharply increase criminal and civil penalties for actions near “critical infrastructure,” including pipelines and easements, electric power plants and water treatment facilities, dams and levees, ports and maritime facilities, telecommunications centers—in short, any facility that a state or federal authority chooses to designate.

Five states in particular—Florida, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Tennessee, and South Dakota—have criminalized a wide range of common, formerly protected, behavior. Florida pairs a sweeping “anti-riot” law—with broad felony charges and incentives for aggressive policing—with new

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felonies for merely entering “critical infrastructure” property and rules that let authorities bill organizers for protest-related costs.

Oklahoma has imposed harsh penalties for blocking streets, civil liability for organizations that “conspire” with protesters near pipelines, and RICO-style tools that treat loosely defined “unlawful assembly” as racketeering. Louisiana has expanded its racketeering law so that repeated participation in protests that obstruct traffic, or even “aiding and abetting” such actions, can carry decades in prison and huge fines, on top of felony “critical infrastructure” trespass and limits on suing drivers who hit protesters.

Tennessee has turned camping at the Capitol and making legislative proceedings “inconvenient” into offenses that can lead to felony records and loss of voting rights, while broadening “aggravated riot” and creating new crimes for approaching officers or hanging protest banners. South Dakota, meanwhile, pioneered “riot boosting” civil liability for those who “encourage” protests, added new felonies and civil suits for “incitement to riot,” and imposed liability and restitution obligations on individuals and organizations connected to infrastructure-related protests.

The impact on civil society is chilling. Some organizations have begun to self-censor, alter their programs and brace for massive budget cuts. Groups that would normally organize protests that might result in an arrest and a misdemeanor charge are canceling plans to avoid putting volunteers in harm’s way. And all this just at the time when the windows to address the climate crisis and biodiversity loss are closing.

The United States is now classified by the Economist Intelligence Unit as a Flawed Democracy, a factor that weighs heavily on global trends. According to Freedom House, which tracks the state of democracy worldwide, “Both democratic and autocratic countries look to the United States to justify their own actions, so the course charted by President Trump over the next four years will have global reverberations.”

### **Conclusion: The Indivisibility of Freedom**

The resurrection of the Danube Delta and the preservation of Białowieża Forest were victories made possible by the restoration of fundamental democratic freedoms: the right to organize, to protest, to investigate, to speak, and to dissent. While these rights, and the power that emerges from them, must be constantly protected—since 1990, Romania and Poland have both endured governments that moved to extinguish or curtail civic engagement—the relationship between democracy and a protected environment is unmistakable. The challenge now is to ensure that the United States remains a leader in valuing and upholding democracy and civil rights both here and around the world.

Civic engagement and nonviolent protest have proven time and again to be the most effective means to protect ecosystems and secure rights under threat. Nonviolent civic engagement is especially effective because its tactics attract mass participation and can enroll workers, the press, economic elites, government employees, and even the military—institutions that authoritarian rulers rely on to stay in power. If these groups can shift their loyalties without fear of selective prosecution or bloody retribution, the system will change.

Democratic institutions and civil rights do not automatically prevent pollution, over-exploitation or environmental injustice. As the recent history of rivers, forests and mining conflicts in Central and Eastern Europe shows, they are constantly contested and sometimes captured. But they do ensure that there is a space, a public square, in which citizens, journalists, scientists and courts can push back—again and again—against destructive projects. In that sense, a healthy democracy is a precondition for a healthy environment.

## About the Authors



**Andre Carothers** is an activist, writer and organizer. Andre has been involved in campaigns and protests on issues of climate change, human rights, environmental protection, and nuclear disarmament for over four decades. He worked for Greenpeace US for thirteen years, including serving on the board of directors. He is the cofounder of the Rockwood Leadership Institute, a training organization for activists, and works as an organizational development consultant and coach for leaders in the social change sector. He has served as an adviser and Board member of numerous organizations, including International Rivers, the Center for Environmental Health, the Center for Investigative Reporting, the Furthur Foundation, Rainforest Action Network, and the Story of Stuff Project.

**Annie Leonard** is a lifelong environmental activist. She spent 17 years with Greenpeace US serving as Executive Director from 2014-2023; created The Story of Stuff film, book and organization; co-launched the Jane Fonda Climate PAC; and campaigned against the international trade in hazardous waste and technologies around the world for over a decade. Annie speaks and writes frequently about environmental and democracy issues, focusing on pollution, waste, consumerism, climate, democracy and activism. She has appeared on numerous media, has testified before Congress and has received a number of awards for her work, including an honorary degree from Vermont Law School and was named Time Magazine's Hero of the Environment. She is currently working on a book, with coauthor Andre Carothers to be published in April 2026, which is a tribute to peaceful protest and a call to protect this essential democratic right.

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