

The Ecorealist Manifesto Article

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Position Paper for *The Anti-Industrial Revolution* and “The Ecorealist Manifesto”

Gregg Easterbrook’s “The Ecorealist Manifesto” and Ayn Rand’s “The Anti-Industrial Revolution” address environmentalism from sharply different ideological positions. The original essay correctly identified pollution, change, extinction, nature, reason, technology, and human interests as central themes. It also observed that both authors attempt to persuade readers to reject what they regard as misguided environmental thinking. However, Easterbrook’s position is not that pollution is over, and Rand’s argument is not mainly about religion in the conventional sense. Easterbrook proposes a pragmatic environmentalism that accepts scientific evidence, technological progress, economic trade-offs, and the possibility of environmental recovery. Rand attacks the New Left and radical environmentalism as an anti-human ideology that, in her view, treats industrial civilization, technology, and self-interest as moral evils. The readings complement one another in defending reason and human agency, but they oppose one another in tone, evidence, and willingness to recognize ecological limits. (Easterbrook; Rand)

Historical Context of the Readings

Rand’s essays were written around 1970, when environmentalism, student activism, antiwar politics, and criticism of industrial capitalism were expanding in the United States. The first Earth Day occurred that year, and public concern focused on pollution, population, nuclear power, resource scarcity, and corporate responsibility. Rand interpreted parts of this movement as a broader philosophical attack on reason, individual liberty, and industrial progress. Easterbrook’s manifesto appeared later, after major environmental laws had produced visible improvements in air and water quality while debates continued over climate, biodiversity, and regulation. His ecorealism responds both to environmental complacency and to apocalyptic claims that ignore successful policy. The difference in context helps explain why Rand writes as a polemicist confronting a movement she sees as hostile, while Easterbrook writes as a reformer trying to revise environmentalism from within.

Easterbrook’s Meaning of Ecorealism

Ecorealism seeks a middle position between denial of environmental harm and romantic or absolutist environmentalism. Easterbrook argues that ecological problems are real and require action, but environmental policy should be guided by evidence, cost, benefit, technological possibility, and

changing conditions. Nature is dynamic rather than a fixed state of perfect balance. Human beings are part of the environment and inevitably modify it. The ethical question is not whether every modification is unnatural but whether the consequences are acceptable, reversible, fairly distributed, and consistent with long-term ecological health. This approach avoids the claim that progress and environmental protection are inherently opposed.

Pollution and the Possibility of Recovery

The original essay interpreted Easterbrook as saying that pollution is nearly over and later admitting it remains a global problem. His actual position is more nuanced. He emphasizes that environmental regulation and technology have reduced some forms of pollution, showing that improvement is possible. Rivers can recover, urban air can become cleaner, toxic releases can fall, and products can be redesigned. These achievements should prevent fatalism. At the same time, success in one pollutant or region does not mean pollution has ended. New chemicals, greenhouse gases, plastic waste, agricultural runoff, and unequal exposure remain serious. Ecorealism uses previous recovery as evidence for continued action, not as a reason for complacency.

Nature Is Not Static

Easterbrook rejects the idea that nature possesses one ideal, permanent condition that humans must preserve unchanged. Ecosystems change through climate, fire, storms, migration, succession, evolution, and extinction. Human activity adds powerful new forces, but environmental policy cannot simply freeze a landscape at one selected moment. Conservation requires deciding which processes, species, and values matter and how human intervention should respond to change. Recognizing dynamism does not make all environmental damage acceptable. It prevents policy from relying on a false image of nature as stable until people disturb it.

Extinction and Biodiversity

The original article identified extinction as a major danger in Easterbrook's argument. Species extinction is a natural evolutionary process, but current human activity can accelerate it through habitat destruction, exploitation, invasive species, pollution, and climate change. Ecorealism would ask which interventions are effective, how risk is measured, and what trade-offs are involved. Biodiversity has ecological, cultural, scientific, and moral value, even when a species has no immediate commercial use. A pragmatic approach should not require proof of direct profit before protecting life. It should prioritize prevention where loss is irreversible and uncertainty is high.

Human Interests and Environmental Responsibility

Easterbrook's human-centered language can be interpreted as assigning people superiority over other creatures. A defensible anthropocentric approach begins from human moral agency: people create policy and bear responsibility for foreseeable harm. Human needs for food, housing, energy, health, and development are legitimate. Yet those needs do not justify treating nonhuman life as valueless. Human well-being depends on ecosystems, and future generations inherit the consequences of present decisions. Ecorealism is strongest when it connects environmental protection to human flourishing without reducing every organism and landscape to a short-term resource.

Rationalism and Evidence

Both Easterbrook and Rand emphasize reason, but they use it differently. Easterbrook treats reason as empirical evaluation: compare claims with data, recognize improvement, revise predictions, and choose effective policies. Rand treats reason as a philosophical commitment to individual judgment, objective reality, self-interest, and technological civilization. She accuses radical environmentalists of replacing evidence with guilt and treating nature as sacred. Her criticism can expose rhetoric that romanticizes preindustrial life or ignores the benefits of energy, medicine, sanitation, and production. However, a defense of reason must also take ecological science seriously when it reveals harms created by industry.

Rand's Critique of the New Left

In *The New Left: The Anti-Industrial Revolution*, Rand argues that parts of the New Left reject industrial society not because of specific correctable harms but because they oppose reason, technology, individual achievement, and capitalism. She portrays radical environmentalism as a secular religion in the sense that it replaces rational judgment with unquestioned moral commands and treats untouched nature as sacred. The original essay described this simply as an "evil religion," but Rand's target is an ideological structure rather than a conventional faith. She believes it demands sacrifice of human life and progress to an abstract idea of nature.

Technology and Human Survival

Rand emphasizes that industrial technology supports food production, transport, housing, communication, medicine, and longevity. Calls to abandon industry can ignore the number of people whose lives depend on complex systems. This is one of her strongest arguments. A return to a romanticized preindustrial society would involve hardship, high mortality, and limited opportunity. Environmental reform should therefore distinguish between reducing harmful forms of production and

rejecting technological civilization itself. Renewable energy, efficient buildings, pollution control, and scientific agriculture are forms of technology, not departures from it.

Rand's Defense of Self-Interest

Rand argues that rational self-interest and individual freedom create progress, while demands for self-sacrifice enable coercion. In environmental policy, this raises the question of whether people can pursue private benefit while imposing costs on others through pollution or resource depletion. A factory may profit while nearby residents bear health risks. Climate emissions may benefit current consumers while creating future costs. Market prices do not automatically include these externalities. Rand's framework is less convincing when it assumes that property and voluntary exchange fully protect people who lack bargaining power or information. Rational self-interest requires institutions that prevent one actor from shifting harm onto another.

Environmentalism as Religion

Rand's religious analogy is rhetorically powerful but overly broad. Some environmental arguments use apocalyptic language, appeals to purity, or moral condemnation without evidence. Yet environmental science is not a faith simply because it leads to duties or limits. Measurement of atmospheric carbon, toxic exposure, species decline, and temperature is empirical. Ethical conclusions then require debate about risk, rights, and responsibility. Labeling environmental concern a religion can become a way to avoid evidence just as romanticizing nature can. The quality of an argument depends on its claims and support, not the political identity attached to it.

How the Readings Complement Each Other

Both readings reject fatalism and the belief that human beings are only destroyers. They defend reason, innovation, and the capacity to solve problems. Both criticize environmental rhetoric that ignores complexity or treats industrial society as wholly corrupt. They also insist that policy has consequences for human welfare. Easterbrook's optimism about pollution control complements Rand's defense of technology: environmental gains often depend on engineering, regulation, investment, and productive capacity. Neither author supports passivity.

How the Readings Oppose Each Other

The major difference concerns the legitimacy of environmental regulation and collective responsibility. Easterbrook accepts that pollution and ecological degradation require policy, standards, and coordinated intervention. He evaluates environmentalism as a project that can succeed and improve. Rand is more suspicious of state action and interprets many environmental

demands as threats to liberty and production. Easterbrook seeks reform of environmental thought; Rand seeks rejection of an ideology she believes is fundamentally anti-industrial. Easterbrook's position is therefore more compatible with regulation, public investment, and negotiated trade-offs.

Different Uses of Optimism

Easterbrook's optimism is empirical: environmental conditions have improved in some cases, so intelligent policy can produce further gains. Rand's optimism is philosophical: free and rational individuals using technology can overcome scarcity and natural limits. Both forms can motivate action, but each has a danger. Easterbrook may understate irreversible harm when past recovery creates confidence that every problem can be fixed. Rand may overstate technological substitution and ignore systems that cannot be restored after collapse. Responsible optimism recognizes capability without assuming unlimited repair.

Economic Development and Environmental Protection

The original essay asked whether environmental protection benefits or harms economic development. This framing is incomplete because environmental degradation itself carries economic cost through illness, lost productivity, damaged agriculture, disaster, water treatment, displacement, and resource decline. Regulation can impose short-term cost while preventing larger harm or stimulating innovation. Some projects produce both development and ecological benefit, while others require genuine trade-offs. Analysis should identify who receives benefits, who bears costs, whether alternatives exist, and whether damage is reversible. National benefit cannot justify sacrificing one community without fair process and protection.

Pollution Control as Evidence

Environmental history provides examples of regulation and technology working together. Removal of lead from gasoline reduced exposure, controls on sulfur dioxide reduced acid rain in some regions, and wastewater treatment improved waterways. These achievements support Easterbrook's claim that action works. They also contradict the idea that environmental protection necessarily destroys industry. Firms adapted through innovation and standards. However, success usually followed public pressure and enforceable policy rather than spontaneous market correction. This weakens Rand's broader suspicion of collective intervention.

Climate Change and the Two Frameworks

Climate change provides a contemporary test. Rand's defense of energy and industrial civilization reminds policymakers that billions of people need affordable power and development. Abruptly eliminating energy systems without alternatives would produce harm. Easterbrook's pragmatism supports a transition using clean technology, efficiency, carbon reduction, adaptation, and evidence-based sequencing. A purely anti-industrial response is unrealistic, while denial of climate risk is equally irrational. The most defensible approach transforms industry rather than abolishes it.

Environmental Justice

Neither reading fully centers environmental justice, which asks how pollution and climate harm are distributed by race, class, colonial history, and political power. A policy may improve national averages while leaving one community near a refinery or waste site. Human-centered environmentalism should pay attention to those people, not only aggregate welfare. Individual freedom is also incomplete when some individuals lack the power to avoid contaminated air or water. Environmental justice therefore adds a necessary dimension to both ecorealism and industrial liberty.

Questions Raised by the Readings

The original essay proposed questions about the nature of the "religion" Rand opposes and whether pollution-control approaches are effective. These remain useful. Additional questions include: When does environmental rhetoric become anti-human, and when is that accusation used to protect harmful activity? Which ecological limits can technology overcome, and which losses are irreversible? How should uncertainty be treated when delay may cause severe harm? Who decides the acceptable trade-off between development and protection? What evidence would lead either author to revise a position? These questions move the comparison from ideology toward practical judgment.

My Position

Easterbrook offers the more persuasive framework because he accepts environmental science, recognizes successful regulation, and resists both denial and romantic absolutism. His approach can incorporate technology and economic development without treating them as morally pure. Rand provides an important warning against environmentalism that ignores human survival, freedom, and the achievements of industry. Her criticism is strongest when directed at demands for sacrifice without evidence or feasible alternatives. It is weakest when it treats regulation and collective responsibility as inherently irrational. Pollution and ecological risk often involve harms that individual transactions cannot resolve.

Conclusion

“The Ecorealist Manifesto” and “The Anti-Industrial Revolution” share commitments to reason, human agency, and technological possibility, but they differ in their understanding of environmentalism. Easterbrook argues for practical environmental protection based on evidence, improvement, changing ecosystems, and realistic trade-offs. Rand portrays radical environmentalism as an anti-industrial ideology that subordinates human life to nature. Her defense of technology corrects romantic ideas about preindustrial life, yet her framework underestimates external costs and the need for public rules. The strongest position combines Easterbrook’s empirical pragmatism with Rand’s insistence that environmental policy preserve human freedom and material well-being. Industry should neither be worshiped nor abolished; it should be transformed and governed so that progress does not depend on exporting ecological harm to other people or the future.

Works Cited

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