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Mr. President: 5 Ways to Salvage Your Environmental Legacy (and Our Future)



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Few things distract our nation like the selection of its leader. But while we were obsessing over polls, swing states and Paul Ryan's workout photos, the calculus that determines the future of life on Earth only got grimmer.

The climate crisis is deepening, rare plants and animals are vanishing at an accelerating clip, and politicians -- well supported by the polluter class -- are freshly emboldened to chip away at laws that protect our water, air, environment and wildlife.

To be blunt, when it came to tackling the most important environmental issues of our age, President Obama's first term was a disappointment. He has a chance to salvage his legacy (and ours) in his second term. Here are the five places to start:

1. Address climate change and ocean acidification.

There's no crisis bigger than the one that's rapidly transforming the world's climate and oceans. We need to fix this, and fast. 2012 is on track to become the warmest year on record; some 40,000 temperature records have been shattered in the United States this year, while Arctic sea ice has melted to a record low.

The urgency of this crisis is manifested in the devastation of Hurricane Sandy, record droughts, massive wildfires, disappearing coral reefs, floods and a terrible, continuous stream of bleak headlines. Left unchecked, climate change threatens millions of people around the globe and countless species already on the brink of extinction. It's time to stop waiting for someone else, including Congress, to lead. The best way to start: Fully harness existing laws like the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act to reduce carbon pollution.

2. Stem the extinction crisis. Plants and animals around the globe are going extinct at an astonishing rate, up to 10,000 times faster than normal in some cases. Unfortunately federal agencies in charge of saving endangered species have yet to respond on a scale that meets the speed and magnitude of this massive loss. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service need to work aggressively to protect the backlog of species that federal scientists say need protection denied to them so far.

Federal agencies must also do more to protect large swaths of habitat to ensure that wildlife have ample room to find suitable homes as climate change transforms the landscape. Acute crises must also be promptly addressed, including white-nose syndrome, which has wiped out nearly 7 million bats in North America; pesticides that sicken and kill our wildlife; and pollution and habitat loss that are threatening freshwater fish, turtles, salamanders and mussels in the Southeast.

3. Keep politics out of the Endangered Species Act and other vital environmental laws. If you're glad that grizzly bears, wolves, bald eagles and peregrine falcons are still around, you can thank the Endangered Species Act. If you like breathing air and drinking water that won't make you sick, you can thank the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act. These laws have built an enviable record of success over the past four decades -- but there's a growing movement in Congress to cripple them. Rather than focusing on science and public health, these politicians are focusing on profits and right-wing zealotry.

We saw it when Congress made an end run around scientists to strip Rocky Mountain wolves of their Endangered Species Act protections; when a series of hearings were held criticizing the Act for failure de-

spite clear evidence that it's put hundreds of species on the road to recovery; when the pesticide industry pushed a provision to allow unregulated dumping of pesticides into U.S. waters; when the NRA sought to ban environmental agencies from protecting wildlife from lead poisoning.

America's bedrock environmental laws work well, but not when we let special-interest politics get in the way.

4. Safeguard our public lands, wild places and the Arctic. There are nearly 650 million acres of federal land in the United States -- places like national parks, wildlife refuges and national forests. In the face of urban sprawl, habitat loss, population growth and a consumption-driven economy, these publicly owned lands are crucial refugia for wild animals and plants and are a life-sustaining resource for clean water, air and biodiversity. They're also a target for profit-driven companies that want to mine, graze, log, bulldoze and drill them into oblivion.

These lands are owned in public trust and in trust for future generations of Americans. We owe it to them, and to the countless species these lands protect, to safeguard our unique places. That means saying no to offshore oil drilling in the Arctic; fracking in California and elsewhere in the country; off-road vehicles that ruin streams; logging that clear-cuts wildlife habitat; and devastating mountaintop mining projects that leave a legacy of illness and destruction.

5. Embrace a newer, cleaner energy. Fossil fuels are a huge part of what's gotten us into this mess in the first place, whether it's pollution from coal that's altering our planet's climate or spilled oil that badly damaged the Gulf of Mexico. It's time to end our addiction to an antiquated system saddling us with staggering problems and heartaches for years to come. We need to end the billions of dollars of federal subsidies to these polluting industries, call off dangerous schemes like the Keystone XL pipeline, admit that natural gas is not a safe or renewable resource and say out loud, again and again, that clean coal is an oxymoron.

It's time to reinvent our energy future by focusing on renewable sources of energy, including solar, geothermal and wind. Yes, these come with complications, and we've got to be smart about how we make the shift, but it can and must be done. There's a smarter, saner way to move ahead, and that path is open to us. All we need now is the courage and political will to step onto it.