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Green movement gaining steam across country

Rebecca Boyle, Greeley Tribune

This is not your mother's environmental movement.

It is not the days of spotted owls and Soylent Green and the famous "Crying Indian" commercial.

Instead, we have compact fluorescent light bulbs, corn-based ethanol, wind power and a positive attitude.

Conservationism and sustainability are gaining steam, and environmental activists and policy makers are hoping to maintain that momentum to avoid letting the new green movement fade into memory like last week's American Idol loser.

Karen Barton, a resource management professor at the University of Northern Colorado's geography program who studies the politics of conservation, said the trend has a future.

"It seems like people today are beginning to care about the issue because it affects them," she said.

In the 1960s and 70s, environmentalism became important because people realized chemicals were getting into the food chain, and natural habitats were being harmed by pesticides and industrial chemicals. It was visible, so people paid attention.

Now, people can see the effects of climate change, and they're paying attention again, Barton said.

"When it affects you is when you begin to care, and not when it's this amorphous issue," she said.

Barton believes today's environmental movement is largely consumer-driven. Shoppers want green products, so businesses are responding.

For example, retail giants Home Depot and Wal-Mart recently announced plans to promote "green" products like organic milk, compact fluorescent bulbs, or CFLs, and all-natural insect repellents.

On April 17, Wal-Mart released research that said 57 percent of Americans are "extremely concerned about the environment," and 43 percent believe they will adopt an "extremely green lifestyle" in the next five years.

"I think when it's a consumer movement, it has a lot of sustainability," Barton said.

Other experts believe businesses are driving the trend.

Richard Jurin, environmental studies program coordinator at UNC, called it "the sustainability revolution."

"Something is happening at the business level, and it's driven partly by business, partly by a new way of looking at the bottom line," he said. "It still comes down to the bottom line of, if we don't want it, they won't make it. So I think we are seeing business and consumers working hand in hand in a very unique way that I don't think we've ever seen before."

Charles Davis, a political science professor at Colorado State University who studies environmental politics, cautions that while the movement is popular, not everyone is embracing it with unfettered enthusiasm.

In the rural West, there's still suspicion of environmentalists, he said.

"If you talk to ranching communities and you mention the term 'environmentalist,' they go apoplectic," he said.

Environmentalists know this, so they have begun to identify as conservationists.

"That has a link to Republican conservationists, like Theodore Roosevelt," Davis said. "It doesn't have as much of the literary baggage as the term environmentalist. That does imply, to Westerners, an intrusive, Big-Brother-knows-best, granola chomper."

So instead, today's trend toward sustainability and conservation defines the new green movement.

Products like CFL bulbs and energy-efficient appliances, which in the past may have been considered "crunchy," are now being demanded by environmentally-aware consumers.

That is helped by leadership in states like Colorado, which have taken on sustainability by themselves. Gov. Bill Ritter has championed renewable energy since his days on the campaign trail, and Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper is leading a charge to make Denver a more "green" city.

The free market is playing a role, too. With energy prices on the rise, consumers are conserving to protect their wallets in addition to the Earth, said Brent Wilsey, president of a San Diego money managing firm called Wilsey Asset Management.

"I don't think it's a fad, because people are actually saving money by doing it," he said. "We're becoming more aware that if we go more green, it's a win all the way around."

That's one more reason the movement is likely to stay, says [Howard Geller](#), who co-authored a new study at the Center for the American West's Southwest Energy Efficiency Project.

The study, called [*What Every Westerner Should Know About Energy Efficiency and Conservation*](#), extolls westerners to embrace a new way of thinking: conservation borne of necessity.

The issues that are bringing energy to the forefront today are not going away, he said -- dependence on foreign oil, high energy prices, and the most controversial: Global climate change.

"The evidence is mounting that this is going to present very serious negative consequences for generations to come," he said. "We're not on the path of solving that problem."

Patty Limerick, who wrote the study with Geller, said conservation is the topic that allows environmentalists to change the tone. Protecting the environment shouldn't be couched in negative, scary terms, she said.

"We can say, yes, here's some very serious problems, and here's the immediate positive action you can take. There's no reason to drift around in glumness," she said. "This is not that stupid phrase that 'we're going to freeze in the dark' ... (conservation) is remarkable for its positive properties, and that's going to energize people."