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Conservation leader decries environmental misinformation



For some people, "Chicken Littles" is a favorite way of describing environmentalists. Although these name callers are rarely without specific political agendas, there is a glimmer of truth in that nickname.

For example, several environmental groups and leaders have forcefully stated that there has been an increase in the incidence of cataracts in Antarctic wildlife as a direct result of increased ultraviolet radiation from the ozone hole. Yet there has been no scientifically sound study of the situation; only anecdotal evidence exists. A comprehensive study is now under way, but the results are still unknown.

What follows is an enlightening letter about environmental exaggerations from one of the nation's top environmental leaders — John Sawhill, national president and chief executive officer of The Nature Conservancy. This letter appeared in the Nature Conservancy's national magazine.

"Hardly a day passes, it seems, without the publication of some new report warning of an impending environmental calamity. My problem is figuring out which ones to worry about.

"Think of the environmental issues that dominate the headlines — global warming and climate change, the ozone layer and toxic waste, to name but a few. How can we possibly set priorities for action when confronted with so many challenges?

"In my view, the environmental movement has unwittingly contributed to this confusion through its fondness for hyperbole. The conservation lexicon is littered with superlatives: the most, the best, the rarest. Problems are invariably 'critical' and the situation always 'grave.'

"In many cases, of course, the environment does face grave threats. Similarly, many plants and animals

are indeed perched on the brink of extinction. But in other cases, environmentalists have used incomplete or flawed scientific evidence to dramatize the deteriorating health of our environment. At best, this sends mixed messages, which are then reflected in the media.

"Add the deliberate distortions of anti-environmental activists, and you're left with a hodgepodge of conflicting data about the environment.

"I believe that the responsibility for sorting facts from fiction falls on those of us in the conservation community. We must provide the public with clear and accurate information about environmental issues. We must be open and honest. And above all, we must avoid crying wolf.

"All environmental organizations have at some time or another cried wolf without adequate justification. Perhaps they have overly dramatized the plight of a particular species or inflated the severity of a problem. But as the conservation movement enters the mainstream of politics and society, I am convinced that this will hinder, rather than help, our efforts to protect the environment.

"For one, such embellishments are unnecessary because we face plenty of legitimate threats. There is no

need, for example, to overstate the plight of Hawaii's native birds and plants.

"What's more, crying wolf can destroy the credibility and trust upon which" not-for-profit "organizations such as The Nature Conservancy depend. The Conservancy has spent 42 years earning a reputation as an efficient, no-nonsense operation. We cannot tarnish that reputation by allowing our rhetoric to outstrip reality.

"Perhaps most important, however, is that the more dire predictions go unfulfilled now, the less people will pay attention to such warnings in the future. As you will recall, this is the real lesson behind the story about the boy who cried wolf. When the wolf finally did appear to begin to eat the sheep, no one believed the boy's pleas for help. After all, why should they have, after so many false alarms?

"The environmental community cannot afford to run this risk. The stakes are simply too high."

If you have a suggestion for a column, a gripe, a success story or whatever, write it down and send it to me, care of the Columbia Daily Tribune.