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The Politics of Denial

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This book is dedicated to my parents,
Thomas Milburn and JoAnne Milburn
—M.A.M.
and to the memory of
David R. Mariani
—S.D.C.

ergy and the Environment, referred to restrictions on CFC production as a product of “liberal arrogance” and the misuse of science. Representative Thomas DeLay (R-Texas)—as reported by CBS News on November 23, 1995—referred to ozone depletion as “just a theory.” The unscientific basis for the effort to stall environmental protection efforts is remarkable for its level of denial.

The Backlash against Environmental Protection Several books attacking the environmental movement have been published in the last few years. Although they are ostensibly based on scientific information, their authors’ motivations appear to be conservative political ideology, not scientific argument. These books include: *Trashing the Planet* (1990) and *Environmental Overkill* (1993), both by Dixie Lee Ray, head of the Atomic Energy Commission under Ronald Reagan, and Lou Guzzo; *Apocalypse Not* by Ben Bolch and Harold Lyons, professors of business and chemistry, respectively, at Rhodes College in Memphis; and *Eco-Scam* by Ronald Bailey. Bolch and Lyons’s book was published by the conservative Cato Institute, which also supported Bailey while he was writing his book.

The essence of their attack on the environmental movement is the argument that, because the jobs of professional environmentalists depend on the public belief that environmental crises are imminent and ongoing, they use scare tactics. Professors and scientists are willing partners in this deception because, as Bolch and Lyons write, “Scientists, especially academic scientists, are easily flattered with cocktail parties and press conferences, and can be counted on for a steady stream of new ideas” (p. 23). Along with conservative talk show hosts like Rush Limbaugh, these authors paint the picture of a broad conspiracy of liberal politicians, scientists, and environmentalists who, in cooperation with the mass media, are deceiving the public into believing that the environment faces threats from technology. These books are loaded with undocumented statements, misinterpretations of research, and factual errors—all reflecting the effects of denial on thinking processes we discussed in earlier chapters.

Rush Limbaugh, who has called proponents of the ozone-hole theory “dunderhead alarmists,” stated that he obtained his information from Ray and Guzzo’s *Trashing the Planet*, which he calls the most thoroughly documented book he has ever read. Gary Taubes, in the June 1993 issue

of *Science*, carefully details many of the errors and misrepresentations that fill this and other books on the subject. Taubes notes that most of Ray and Guzzo’s information about ozone depletion comes from Fred Singer and Rogelio Maduro (who holds a bachelor of science degree in geology). Maduro edits a magazine called *21st Century Science & Technology*, which is published by supporters of libertarian politician Lyndon LaRouche—currently in jail for tax evasion. In her book, Ray cites extensively from Maduro and Schauerhammer’s *The Holes in the Ozone Scare* (1992). According to Taubes, atmospheric scientists who have read all or parts of the Maduro and Schauerhammer book found it to be based on a selection of out-of-date studies and bad research.

One of the influential arguments Maduro makes against the theory of ozone depletion is repeated by Ray and Guzzo, Bailey, and Rush Limbaugh. It states that numerous natural sources of ozone-depleting chemicals (such as chlorine from volcanic eruptions) emit far greater quantities of these substances than CFCs do, and that the ozone layer has nonetheless survived intact for billions of years. It turns out, however, that such natural sources of chlorine are water soluble; so, because they are washed out of the lower atmosphere by rain, they never reach the stratosphere, where they would damage the ozone layer (Taubes 1993). CFCs, by contrast, are not water soluble and are thus able to reach the upper atmosphere and release the chlorine molecules that initiate the chemical reactions thought to deplete the ozone layer.

Fred Singer (1989), whom Ray and Guzzo cite in support of their rejection of the ozone problem, disputes Maduro’s argument about natural sources of chlorine. Although he once believed that such natural sources have a greater impact on the ozone layer than do manufactured chemicals, Singer has since concluded, on the basis of published evidence, that CFCs are the primary source of danger (Begley 1993).

Ozone Depletion and Skin Cancer We explained earlier in our discussion that denial can take the form of either outright disbelief in some unpleasant reality or of minimization—in which a reality is acknowledged but claimed to be unimportant. The books by Ray and Guzzo and Bailey, which both downplay the importance of increases in skin cancer from ozone-layer depletion, are revealing examples of environmental denial and minimization.