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Besides death and middle-class tax cuts, one of the few certainties remaining these days is that the dumbing-down of government will continue, no matter who controls the White House or Congress. And a sign of this bipartisan Dark Age is how both political parties treat environmental science: Democrats subvert it, and Republicans ignore it.

For example: Not long after the Clinton administration proclaimed last summer that "Interior Bureaus agree to support good science," another Interior agency—the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—was advertising a middle-management vacancy with the invitation that "mentally challenged are strongly encouraged to apply."

As White House political correctness undermines preservation, Republican freshmen members of Congress, attending an orientation session sponsored by the Heritage Foundation, received instruction from the great scholar Rush Limbaugh. And although these freshly minted incumbents also heard lectures from prominent policy wonks, not one was a practicing natural resource scientist.

These oversights call to mind a free-lance ecologist I know named

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Charles Kay. Federal agencies and environmental groups won't hire this man, while Republicans ignore him. Indeed, although residing in Utah, to make a living he must occasionally commute to Canada, whose Park Service appreciates the value of his work. Yet Mr. Kay is among many scholars who, although usually ignored, are precisely the people who should be working for preservation agencies and lecturing to Washington's appointed

Mr. Kay's offense, you see, is

intellectual honesty. Lacking political savvy, he actually publishes, in profusion, extensively researched conclusions that make the high priests of resource policy look like ignorant bumpkins, which most of them are.

In a nutshell, Mr. Kay finds that many official preservation strategies are not merely mistaken but positively harmful. The stated intent of laws such as the Wilderness Act is to "restore," so-called "pre-settlement conditions" that existed before Columbus landed on the continent by protecting "wilderness" from human interference.

But this notion—that leaving nature alone recreates pre-settlement conditions—notes Mr. Kay, rests on four erroneous assumptions: (1) that early America was dominated by mature vegetation such as "old growth forests," (2) that the continent was "untouched by the hand of man" before Columbus, (3) that it "teamed with wildlife," and (4) that native American cultures were either too prim-

itive and underpopulated or too ecologically wise to overuse their resources.

But these premises, says Mr. Kay, are wrong. In a series of scholarly articles currently in press, he presents a startlingly different portrait of pre-Columbian America: "North America was not a 'wilderness' waiting to be discovered, instead it was home to tens of millions of aboriginal peoples before European-introduced diseases decimated their numbers." These peoples "structured entire plant and animal communities" by limiting wildlife populations with their hunting and "purposefully modifying the vegetation with fire." Game, relentlessly hunted, was usually scarce, and vegetation, rather than mostly consisting of mature forest, was constantly renewed by frequent aboriginal burning. Only animals such as bison, whose migrating herds periodically escaped pursuing Indians, persisted in relatively large numbers.

In short, suggests Mr. Kay, "The

modern concept of wilderness as a wilderness without human influence is a myth, and "the Americas as first seen by Europeans were not as they had been created by God, but as they had been created by native peoples." They "were the ultimate keystone species, and their removal has completely altered ecosystems. . . . Setting aside areas as 'wilderness' . . . will not preserve some remnant of the past but instead create conditions that have not existed for the last 10,000 years."

Reforming preservation policy, Mr. Kay concludes, "rests with studies that focus on historical ecology." But although Parks Canada, for which Mr. Kay has served as a consultant, recognizes the value of this approach, the United States does not.

This says a lot about what is wrong with Washington. In a rational world, if government wants to restore the past, it ought to study these early conditions. But instead, it prefers fantasy to reality. It abandons this task to people like

Mr. Kay, whom it ignores.

Neither political party directly encourages environmental research but relies on others for the data. On the Democratic side, this support comes from publicly funded university programs, environmental groups, private foundations and federal agencies. While spending billions to foster the myth of pristine wilderness, these institutions intentionally keep historical studies out of the loop.

Meanwhile, Republicans rely almost exclusively on science coming from industry, which, being self-serving, is always suspect and may or may not be reliable. The party's moneyed sugar-addicts never, ever, fund pure science. Conservative think-tanks are crammed with economists and political scientists but don't promote pure environmental research.

Thus, truth falls between the cracks. Government clings to myth while scholars like Mr. Kay, too outspoken to make a living in America, pursue studies in other countries.

Alston Chase is a nationally syndicated columnist specializing in environmental issues.