Save the Truffula Trees

Analyzing Resolution #2: Economic Growth over Environmental Protection

By Chris Ostertag

One of my favorite childhood books was The Lorax, by Dr Seuss. Who doesn't like whimsical illustrations of purple trees and fluffy barbaloots? The Lorax had to give up on his cause, lifting himself up by the seat of his pants in a gesture of poetic resignation to human intransigence. That’s because it can be hard to see, in the short term, why environmental protection should trump things like economic freedom. Hence, in the interest of keeping your neatly-pressed suit pants neatly-pressed, let’s get some perspective on the resolution.

# Intrinsic Conflict

The idea that we should assess the resolution vis-a-vis conflict likely won’t be new to those of you who’ve been part of competitive forensics for a couple of seasons. It’s a perennially popular concept, which - for those of you who aren't familiar with this - says something along these lines:

*"It would be pointless to evaluate the resolution merely by adding up the relative merit of two ideas and figuring out whose merits are greater by means of some arbitrary weighing mechanism. Furthermore, that kind of analysis isn't especially useful anyway, because in the real world, we can usually value both, and attain the full benefits of both. The only case where we can truly value one over the other, and the only case under which the resolution actually has meaning, is one in which the two conflict. Hence, I propose the resolutionality standard of conflict."*

It's a relatively versatile argument; usable in a plethora of different strategic situations, it allows the user to parametricize the resolution into a shape where the opposing applications have no link, and lets the user make the most of smaller-scope advocacy.

However, under this resolution, not only are there hundreds of great examples where economic freedom and environmental protection conflict, but the two ideas are actually opposites on a philosophical level.

Here's how: *economic freedom is an intrinsically selfish concept, while environmental protection is intrinsically selfless.*

The thing to remember about economic freedom is that its selfish underpinnings are actually what allow it to work: a system of mutual profit incentives drives businesses to compete and produce higher-quality goods for lower prices. Walmart can't charge $30 for a bag of Doritos, because if they did, everyone would get their game-day snacks from Target. There are dozens of well-documented cases where policies of economic freedom led to greater prosperity, and that's a compelling reason to support it.

You guys are pros at arguing for freedom. Environmental protection, however, is a little trickier. It's intrinsically selfless, because it means seeking not one's own betterment, but the security of another entity (in this case the environment) that doesn't do an especially good job of defending itself.

In other words, the terms in the resolution - by definition - are in conflict. Valuing economic freedom higher means the environment can be harmed during economic actors' haste to self-aggrandize. Valuing environmental protection higher means some freedom is lost, because there's now a list of things you can't do; you aren't free to put radioactive sludge in the Pacific Ocean, or cover Philadelphia with choking industrial smog.

It's important to note that freedom is the default state of humanity, but freedom leads to a damaged environment. Let's look at that question next: why is the environment not protected in the state of nature?

# Tragedy of the Commons

The Tragedy of the Commons is the idea that when something is owned and shared by a large group of people, no one person has much incentive to keep it nice.

It's best illustrated with an example: imagine that five college students all decide to share a house. Their normal college habits quickly wreak havoc on the place; there's half-empty bowls of Captain Crunch under the beds, with the fallout ground into the carpet, dust entrenched on every cupboard, and a sink filled with dishes no one wants to clean. That situation shouldn't surprise us. Who actually wants to do the dishes? No one. If one guy owned the house, he'd likely clean it even though it's unpleasant, because he has an incentive to keep his property in good condition. But when no one student actually owns the house, and none of them considers it his property, no one has an incentive to clean, so no one does.

The environment is a great example of something owned in common. No one owns the air we breathe, the water we use, the untapped natural resources buried deep in the earth. It's impossible to own them; but because they aren't owned, but instead commonly shared, people have little immediate incentive to preserve them. We'll throw an empty Coke can into a river, because it won't really do that much harm in the long run, right? Virtually everyone feels it's acceptable to commit small violations of environmental integrity, setting a precedent that is continued by companies motivated by economic freedom: the self-aggrandizing tendency of humans leads to the prioritization of profit over environmental protection.

Freedom means you get to make choices. And those choices are driven by incentive. However, the tragedy of the commons means that freedom will never incentivize environmental protection. Because freedom won't sufficiently preserve the environment, negating the resolution requires two things: one, justifications for limiting freedom in favor of the environment, and two, a viable concept of what that actually means in the real world.

# Save the Truffula Trees

When the Lorax made his famous petition for the Onceler to cease his destruction of the environment, he did so on two grounds: one, moral obligation, and two, pragmatic necessity. Incidentally, those are the same basic reasons most negatives will likely use this year, so I want to equip you to run both.

The moral obligation route basically says it isn't acceptable to use your freedom to damage something that is commonly-owned. We all breathe the same air. So while it would be acceptable to pollute the air only you will breathe, when you pollute the air everyone breathes, you've posed a serious threat to their wellbeing… clearly not acceptable. Pollution is a real, immediate threat. In cities like Beijing and Shanghai, China's health experts have estimated that air pollution is at fault for around 350,000 to 500,000 premature deaths every year. That's an egregious, large-scale violation of human rights caused by irresponsible use of economic freedom. People and business are morally obligated to avoid killing innocent people.\_

The pragmatic justification route is less obvious, but somewhat more fun. Protection of the environment doesn't just mean that we should avoid shooting every last polar bear, or not spill toxins into city water supplies. It also means that we need to be cautious in our use of natural resources. It's evident that earth possesses a finite supply of those; oil and gas are only viable power sources for around 53 more years, according to BP estimates. Water and air, even more valuable resources, are more polluted than ever, fomenting international outrage and posing serious questions about how sustainable our current policies really are. Protecting the environment is the only way to ensure that, 53 years from now, the lights stay on. Losing our power sources is a terrifying concept, but it's a very real threat. If you capitalize on that, you can make a strong argument in favor of restricting companies’ freedom to use resources however they want.\_

# In Conclusion

Those two approaches can be easily expanded into cases. If you're running moral obligation, try values like Justice, Human rights, and General Welfare, arguing that economic freedom's environmental devastation is unjust, violates rights, or makes society worse-off. For an example of the pragmatic approach, take a look at my sample case, Je Suis le Lorax.

The tragedy of the commons is also a useful, streamlined explanation of why economic freedom permits environmental harm. It fits well into most negative cases this year, and you should feel free to use the college-student analogy to make it real for the judges.

Maximize your strategic viability with these arguments, speak persuasively, and you too can save the Truffula trees.