

# **The historically significant environmental events of '96**

Alston Chase

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When the Nazis invaded Poland on Sept. 1, 1939, thereby launching World War II, *Life* magazine's cover story that week was on movie star Rosalind Russell.

So it's been throughout history. Events that change the world seem insignificant as they happen. When in 1517 Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Germany, no one realized he had launched the Reformation. When Vladimir Lenin arrived at St. Petersburg's Finland Station in April 1917, few anticipated this would lead to a communist revolution.

Likewise with environmental events. When Congress overwhelmingly approved the Endangered Species Act in 1973, few foresaw this law would become among the most controversial since Prohibition. When Ralph Nader took aim at General Motors in 1965, no one realized this was the first step toward the creation of a gigantic federal regulatory empire, mandating everything from zero-emission vehicles to air bags.

So what occurrences of 1996 will turn out to have been the most historically significant? You be the judge:

- Maybe Bambi should wear dark glasses. In January, authorities released 11 wolves in to Yellowstone National Park in the second stage of the park's wolf "reintroduction" program. In April, a pack of timber wolves killed an Ontario, Canada, woman who, according to one expert, made the mistake of "making eye contact" with the animals.
- Man's best friend cries wolf. In August, recently released wolves attacked and almost killed a Great Pyrenees dog that had been guarding sheep belonging to Idaho rancher Frank Shirt. The dog was saved by a sheep herder. In September, several border collies returned the favor, rescuing another sheep herder who was attacked by three wolves.
- War in the West continues. Beginning March 25, armed militiamen near Jordan, Mont., held off an FBI siege for 81 days. In February, green arsonists torched a historic barn in Washington state belonging to a motorcycle club. On April 3, the FBI arrested Theodore Kaczynski at his cabin near Lincoln, Mont., asserting that the former math professor was the Unabomber, who killed people to protect "wild nature." In October, two Forest Service ranger stations in Oregon suffered arson attacks, apparently at the hands of a group calling itself the Earth Liberation Front.
- National media still clueless. Press and television covered the militia standoff closely but dropped Kaczynski like a hot stone as soon as the Unabomber's environmental agenda became known.
- Jumping to conclusions. In May, the United Nations International Panel on Climate Change issued a report claiming that human activities are triggering global warming. In June, one of the country's most prestigious scientists exposed this

document as having been massaged “to deceive policy makers and the public.” In August, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration admitted it had inadvertently caused the death of many small children by requiring cars to be equipped with air bags.

- Does Kermit know calculus? In May, Long Island University’s Southampton College, famous for environmental science, awarded Kermit the Frog an honorary Doctorate of Amphibious Letters. In November, the Third International Mathematics and Science Study found that among school children from 41 industrial countries, American eighth graders ranked 28<sup>th</sup> in math and 17<sup>th</sup> in science.
- *Avoirdupois* Department. In May, scientists reported a hybrid sea lion weighing 10 times more than its mates was crushing females to death while trying to breed. In November, a nationwide study found 75 percent of Americans are overweight and nearly a quarter are really roly-poly.
- Where is gun control when you need it? In June, a Yellowstone National Park ranger shot and killed a tame fox with an AR15 assault rifle, putting four slugs into the little animal because it was teasing a dog. Does the Endangered Species Act apply to them?

In August, NASA scientists claimed to have found evidence of life on Mars. In September, researchers reported that a giant poisonous marine toad, *Bufo marinus*, was killing dogs in Florida.

- Maybe he should ask Jane first. According to the Associated Press, in July a woman recovering from hemorrhoid surgery infuriated with her husband for leaving her alone while he went fishing and shot him to death when he got home.” And in August, Ted Turner announced that he’s burned out and “just wants to go out to a trout stream and get away from it.”
- There’s a message in here somewhere. In September, Bob Dole went to see the movie Independence Day and loved it. Around the same time, Bill Clinton created Escalante National Monument in Utah, and Republicans in Congress, with Clinton’s help, passed the pork-rich Omnibus Parks Bill. In November, Clinton and congressional Republicans won and Dole lost.

There’s the year in a nutshell. Which was the defining event? Decide for yourself. Personally, I think it was Kermit’s honorary degree.

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