ESTY'S GREEN STRATEGY HAS PROFIT MOTIVE: OP-ED

Daniel C. Esty, commissioner of Connecticut's Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, is the right man for the job. He's the perfect fit for the modern era of environmental management in which the dog of politics wags the tail of nature.

His message is basically this: We've had only limited success with "command and control" environmental regulation. Thus, let's instead use business-friendly market incentives to clean up the extinction machine, open latrine and stormy hothouse our planet has become.

Esty is no dreamy idealist seeking to restore Eden. Instead, he's a technocrat, political advisor and environmental lawyer with impeccable academic credentials: Harvard, Oxford and Yale. When I heard him speak at the University of Connecticut last week, he was also a glib speaker, conveyed the confidence of a prizefighter and was patrician in tone, even to an academic crowd. Standing tall in his tailored gray suit, he could double for a Hollywood James Bond (007).

I wondered if Edwin Way Teale, namesake for the lecture series, was rolling over in his grave. Teale, president of the Thoreau Society in 1958 and winner of the 1966 Pulitzer Prize, was a writer-naturalist of the old school. His joy was experiencing everyday wildness in the midst of civilization and sharing it with others, especially at his old farm in Hampton. His nature talks typically included photographic slides with reverent images of nature.

In contrast, Daniel Esty of the new school used only his silver tongue.

But when not giving talks and attending meetings, he writes. His prize-winning book (co-authored with Andrew Winston) is titled: "Green to Gold: How Smart Companies Use Environmental Strategy to Innovate, Create Value and Build Competitive Advantage." My wife bought it for one of my business-oriented sons, which he appreciated, and I hope will use. Being from the old school, however, I skimmed it and put it down, having much more interest in the power of nature to stir the human heart than in corporate profitability and energy policy.

In Esty's context, green isn't a color but a code word for a pro-environment marketing campaign borrowed from a radical political party originally focused on ecological thinking and applied to anything and everything. There are, for example, green congregations, green baby foods, green prisons, schools, toys: green everything, even students. "Gold," of course, signifies the color of money in its most stable form.

To my mind, however, linking the third most common natural hue to environmental correctness is color chauvinism at its worst, akin to saying that brown people are more closely linked to humanity than white ones. Of course, a green polar bear would be a dead polar bear, a green Grand Canyon would eventually look like Virginia and a green Greenland would drown our shoreline economy.

Commissioner Esty earned his stripes as an attorney working with the Environmental Protection Agency in Washington. Created in 1970, this was government's "big stick" regulatory response to corporate and municipal wrongdoing, an anti-pollution policing agency that works about as well as our anti-drug policy. Unfortunately, corporations had an incentive to treat the EPA the way many drivers treat state troopers, scheming to get away with whatever they could. However, the new trend away from authoritarian punishment toward market incentives is gratifying to me as a student of evolution.
In Esty's new school, economics (the flow of money) is the top priority with collateral benefits to the environment. Under his leadership, the task will be to create government policies that enhance ecological integrity as a collateral benefit of making money. Though I see no alternative in the present economic doldrums, I remain suspicious, if only because nature is sacred, an attribute that has no price.