KERRY IGNORED THE FROG VOTE:

America remains obsessed with post-election analysis. I think Sen. John Kerry lost, in part, because he failed to exploit the frog factor.

I refer to the worldwide plight of amphibians: frogs, salamanders and the like, as documented by the Global Amphibian Assessment (www.globalamphibians.org), released just two weeks before the election. Of the 5,743 known amphibian species, at least 43 percent are declining in population and nearly 32 percent are threatened, principally due to habitat loss, pollution and diseases associated with climate change.

Remember Kermit the Frog? He was the most sensitive Muppet, forever in love with Miss Piggy. His emotional sensitivity mirrored the very real biological sensitivity of frogs in natural habitats. Many amphibians are the "canaries in the coal mine" for terrestrial aquatic systems, being especially sensitive to environmental threats, because of their thin skins and the requirement that they reproduce in fresh water. Before passage of mine safety laws, miners would bring canaries underground because any change in their behavior -- including dropping dead -- was an early warning sign of environmental trouble in the mine. Likewise, the ongoing global extinction of amphibian species signals trouble with respect to Earth's air, water and forest systems. Now is the time -- not the day after tomorrow -- for America to sign onto the Kyoto Protocol to reduce greenhouse emissions; to stop financing slash-and-burn conversion of tropical habitats; and to work with other nations to raise the standard for how pure our air and water should be.

During campaign 2004, Kerry tried hard to shift public attention toward a more global view of the connection between economic and environmental problems. He promised an administration less beholden to the chemical-pharmaceutical-industrial lobby and more open to scientific debate. Yet this globally proactive message never penetrated very deeply into the American psyche, which was still reacting to terrorist attacks. Perhaps if the Democrats had exploited amphibian demise as a sign of things to come, they might have picked up a few more votes in key states. This seems to have been the case in Minnesota, where Kerry received 51 percent of the popular vote, and where a firestorm of political debate about frogs may have helped tip the state blue on election night.

Minnesota is home to some conservative heartland folks, including my father, a former Republican state representative. It's also a place dotted with lakes and streams where, nearly a decade ago, school kids began finding frogs with three legs and other deformities alleged to have been caused by pesticides used on crops.

In September, the endocrinologist Tyrone Hayes was invited as a keynote speaker for an environmental conference sponsored by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. When state officials learned the subject of his speech -- the role of the pesticide Altrazine in frog abnormalities -- he was officially disinvited by the agency's commissioner. Hayes alleged that his removal from the program was an act of censorship by state officials bowing to pressure from the agriculture-pesticide lobby in the land of the Jolly Green Giant. The commissioner denies Hayes' allegation, claiming that he was disinvited because his research results turned out to be old news and therefore not keynote material. E-mail exchanges, however, obtained by the Minneapolis Star Tribune made it clear that political considerations were involved. After much discussion, Hayes was officially reinvited to the conference, but not as a keynote speaker. He declined, not wanting to participate in what he saw as a mockery of science policy.

Public sympathy for the plight of frogs in Minnesota, combined with what the public saw as science censorship by government agencies, helped tip the balance in Minnesota's razor-thin presidential
election margin. At the national level, had the Democrats raised the profile of the global amphibian
decline and combined it with allegations of science censorship by the Bush administration, perhaps
the entire nation might have gone the way of Minnesota.

The frog factor never will be one of the major issues on which elections are won or lost. But what
worries me is that much of America still doesn't realize that many of the world's amphibious canaries
are already dead in the minefield of environmental carnage.