NOTHING LIBERAL ABOUT CONSERVATION:

Tropical rainforest deforestation in Africa: This will be my ticket to proving I'm a conservative columnist. Let's start the easy part.

For over three years, I've met weekly deadlines and have provoked enough criticism to fill gigabytes on my hard drive. That makes me a columnist.

For 30 years, I've been concerned about being too liberal with planetary systems -- chemically, ecologically, geographically and aesthetically. For example, when I recently read that more than 10,000 miles of logging roads per decade are being punched through the primeval jungles of central Africa, my first reaction was to worry about what the changes will mean for all of us. This is a conservative response.

I'm also strong on defense (though not on offense), having read both military history and evolutionary theory. I'm strong on local control, legislative authority and fiscal restraint, (especially after seven years of George Bush II). The U.S. Constitution works well for me, as amended. Finally, I've been married to the same female for 30 years. By what measure do my environmental, social and political preferences make me a liberal?

The article I referred to above, "Expansion of Industrial Logging in Central Africa," was published in the June 8 edition of the magazine Science. It should be a wake-up call for any conservative who cares about central Africa and global biodiversity.

In Africa, industrial loggers are cutting timber for sale as an export commodity, usually for specialty woods such as mahogany. The process begins by cutting the lower-value trees and bulldozing in a road. At that point, crews work outward, mining nearby stands and skidding the logs to the haul road, creating significant disturbance. Typically less than 10 percent of the forest is cut. Selective logging isn't necessarily bad. The problem is scale and rate at which it is occurring and the effects that will inexorably follow.

According to the article, industrial logging is already the "most extensive form of land use" in part of the Central African Republic, much of Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo and nearly all of Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and the Republic of Congo. Using satellite images, scientists mapped a minimum of 32,259 miles of logging roads created between 1973 and 2003. This doesn't include roads later converted to public use. Nearly a third of the forest is now under logging concession, with more planned. Only 12 percent of it -- much being primeval old growth forest -- is protected.

The accelerating disturbance from logging slices forest into fragments and changes species composition. Illegal logging and wildlife poaching soon follow. The latter seeks bush meat and animal products for trade. Development then arrives as all-too-familiar roadside blight, population impacts and sanitation problems.

What should the governments of these African sovereign nations do? Should they be conservative and conserve the land for ethical reasons, or for reasons of watershed protection, tourist dollars and sustainable forestry? Or should they be liberals, singing carpe diem in unison, and be cavalier about development? I recommend the conservative approach.

A healthy appreciation for the complexity of natural systems and conservative instincts go as well together as beer does with pizza. In fact, academic scientists are among the most conservative
people I know when it comes to earthly matters, preferring to move forward cautiously and with self-restraint. Those with either little idea about how the planet works or who have a profit motive are usually the ones with a liberal bias.

My colleagues in the arts and social sciences are more liberal than I, and also more likely to consider themselves to be environmentalists. Like all other "-isms," environmentalism is political and ideological. Though I share many of their sentiments, I avoid describing myself as an environmentalist because it undermines my scientific credibility.

William F. Buckley Jr., Pat Buchanan, Mona Charen, Linda Chaves, Jeff Jacoby, Charles Krauthammer, Bill O'Reilly and George Will are all considered conservative columnists. I wonder what they think about the breakup of the African rainforest. I'm guessing their responses would be far more liberal than mine.

Perhaps one of them will write me and let me know.