

All Hands On Deck: Robert Hicks Tells How Economic Solutions Can Fix Environmental Problems

By Lizzie Henry

As an undergraduate, Robert Hicks spent his breaks out West in the wilderness. He was passionate about outdoor climbing and backpacking. Off his breaks, he was earning a B.S. in economics at North Carolina State University, completely unrelated to his recreational hobbies. Then, he took a class on environmental economics.

“Immediately, it just clicked for me,” Hicks said.

Now, Hicks is a professor of economics at the College of William and Mary. He has been teaching at the university since 2000. His major research and teaching interests are econometrics, environmental economics, and environmental policy.

“When people say economics and the environment they think that’s the whole problem,” Hicks said. “People try to make money and it’s bad for the environment.”

However, the relationship between economics and the environment is much more complex.

“Take fisheries management,” said professor Hicks. To prevent overfishing, management will put limits on things like boats, fishing time, or gear. In the Chesapeake Bay, fishermen must use sails instead of engines five days a week.

While these restrictions would hypothetically limit the efficiency of the fishermen, they actually tend to have little to no effect.

“Fishermen will find a way around the limits,” professor Hicks said. “If you make them use sails, they will become better sailors. On engine days, they become even more

efficient.” This, according to professor Hicks, is because these limitations don’t actually address the underlying incentive problems for the fishermen. “No fisher has an incentive to conserve the stock of fish,” professor Hicks said.

Policies that take into account these incentives tend to have better results. These policies include dividing the bay into separate areas and giving the rights to those areas to individuals, or taxing boat landings. This way, the regulators get money that can be used on other things like research or schools. These policies are often safer for fishermen as well, not causing them to push themselves as hard.

“Environmental economics is harnessing human behavior so people can make good choices,” professor Hicks said. It’s about “recognizing that people have value for environmental amenities. Environmental economists try to quantify that so it can be brought to policy discussions.”

The creation of environmental policy, even with the added benefits of an economic viewpoint, isn’t always smooth sailing. Conflicts often arise when talking about policy and other factors like employment, shareholders who want to maintain their wealth, or even the red tape that is involved with changing policy.

“Every state no matter how red or blue is gonna say, ‘yeah, I care about a clean environment,’” said professor Hicks. “They are aware of smarter [policies] but [because of] the political issues with changing policy they tend to stay with the status quo.”

Some conflicts arising with implementing environmental policy, professor Hicks said, are “less about Congress” and more about the courts and the executive branch.

Even before the recent dismantling of many government agencies under the Trump administration, the Supreme Court dealt a blow to environmental agencies when

they repealed the Chevron doctrine in June of 2024. In the past, the Chevron doctrine required that courts deferred to these agencies when making policy on scientific or environmental issues. “Courts couldn’t overturn policies if agencies acted in good faith,” professor Hicks said. “Now, courts can do so.”

Most often, presidential administrations use executive orders to make changes to national environmental policy. These can easily be overturned by another administration. The more lasting damage comes from the workers who have been fired or voluntarily quit during this administration.

“I’m worried we’re losing a lot of human capital and a lot of institutional memory,” said professor Hicks. “We’re losing the people who care about their mission and have the expertise.”

In a best case scenario, these people can still be hired again when the political climate is better and more accepting of their expertise. In the meantime, it becomes important for people to begin caring on an individual scale. Even for those who are not experienced with economics or environmental policy, there are still things they can do to help. “Don’t always assume you can’t add to things in a different way,” professor Hicks said. “Engage with the things you are passionate about.”

It was passion for the environment that brought professor Hicks’ attention to environmental economics in the first place, and what drove him down the path of teaching it to his own students now. “I saw these bad things happening, and I saw economics as a way to solve these problems,” he said. “By looking at the economic side, we can design policies that are smarter and better.”