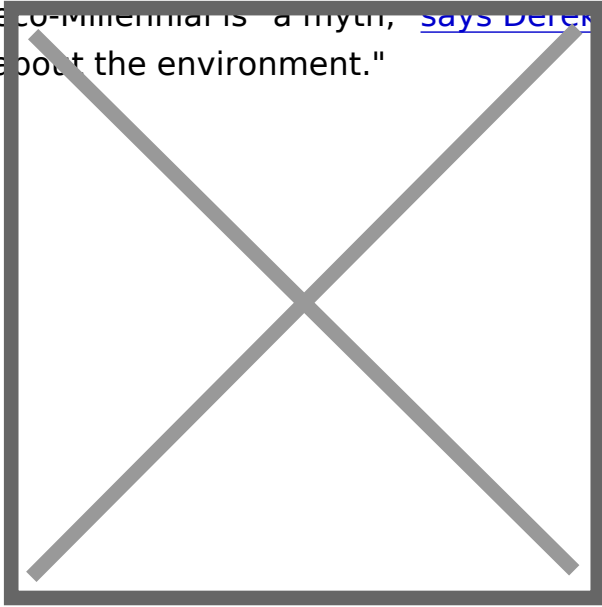


Putting the "-ist" in "environmentalist"

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Keith Kloor thinks environmental organizations are [struggling to stay relevant](#). Christopher Ingraham says "[the green movement has a Millennial problem](#)." The eco-Millennial is a myth, [says Derek Thompson](#): "Millennials don't give a hoot about the environment."



They're all talking about [this big Pew study on](#)

[Millennials that came out last week](#). Among other things, it found that Millennials are the most likely age cohort to self-identify as "a supporter of gay rights" but the least likely to self-identify as "a patriotic person," "a religious person," or "an environmentalist" (see chart).

Ingraham allows that Millennials do care about some environmental issues, but "they don't identify strongly with environmentalism as a whole"—unlike gay rights.

Samantha Larson explains that [her generation's greenness is more pragmatic than doctrinaire](#). Eli Rabett points out that strong Millennial support for environmental issues (which Pew [reported in 2011](#)) combined with weak support for the word "environmentalist" sure beats the opposite.

All fair points, but I'm more interested in how Pew's language functions here. A "supporter of gay rights" is a person who does something (supports gay rights, and not necessarily all of them). The other three all speak more directly to identity: I *am* a patriotic person, a religious person, an environmentalist.

Ingraham downplays the issue of identity labels as something that younger generations have long been opposed to—while they're young. But this discomfort with group affiliation is also part of a general trend away from institutional membership and toward what Robert Wuthnow calls "[loose connections](#)." We church professionals know this well, what with all the SBNRs and Nones who aren't necessarily hostile to our churches and might even like and appreciate them at times; they just don't want to *commit* to them for all the other times, too. (My colleague Amy Frykholm's 2011 [cover story on church membership](#), which borrowed its title from Wuthnow, is worth revisiting.)

Some Millennials I know prefer to call themselves "followers of Jesus" instead of "Christians." I've never quite gotten what's at stake here, but then, I'm not quite a Millennial. So I'm very curious what might change if Pew asked whether a Millennial is "a supporter of environmental causes" instead of "an environmentalist." I'd be relieved but not surprised if the number ticked up a bit.