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HEADLINE: Striking a legislative balance; Lawmaker: State Sen. Martin G. Madden won praise for his environmental record and support of business, but politicians who can hold that course have become scarce.

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BODY:

TOO OFTEN, politicians justify anti- environmental voting as seeking "balance" -- a curious term for what always results in less green space, dirtier water and fouler air.

So it was welcome counterpoint for the Maryland League of Conservation Voters, announcing score cards on 1997 and 1998 General Assembly voting, to showcase state Sen. Martin G. Madden at a recent news conference.

Madden, a Republican who represents part of Howard and Prince George's counties, has scored 100 percent on league report cards for all of his eight years in the House and Senate.

The day before appearing with the league, he was endorsed by the Maryland Chamber of Commerce for his 84 percent voting record on business issues.

He also was chosen one of 10 legislators of the year by the National Republican Legislators Association.

But Madden is atypical of Maryland legislators, and especially of Republicans. Consider these tabulations by the league, a bipartisan, volunteer group of state environmental leaders who rate and endorse politicians.

During 1997-1998, the House of Delegates voted "right" on selected environmental issues 47 percent of the time. The Senate's overall score was 63 percent.

House Republicans scored 23 percent, as opposed to 57 percent for House Democrats. In the Senate, it was Republicans 35 percent, Democrats 76 percent.

"It is the thing that bothers me the most -- that Maryland's bipartisan tradition has been lost," says Nancy Davis, chairwoman of the league.

When one looks in the league's report at scores that go back to 1991, Republicans were consistently and markedly worse on the environment.

What a change from past decades, when Republicans such as former Sen. Porter Hopkins were mainstays of the environmental community; also the late Arthur Sherwood, who started the Chesapeake Bay Foundation.

And Republicans such as U.S. Sen. Charles McC. Mathias, Environmental Protection Agency directors Russell Train and William D. Ruckelshaus, and Pennsylvania Gov. Richard L. Thornburgh were key to Chesapeake Bay restoration efforts.

I asked Madden: Why can't more legislators find the kind of "balance" that is both pro-business and pro-environment?

"I'll let my colleagues speak for themselves," he said. "But to me it's a very comfortable position and a very consistent one."

The league's report card is designed to avoid "cream puff" votes, such as bills weakened from the original version to one most pols could support.

It rates how legislators voted in committee, where a bill's fate is often set before it gets to the floor; it also scores preliminary votes taken within county delegations; and examines how legislators voted on amendments to strengthen or weaken bills before votes on passage.

The votes on which this year's scores were compiled revolved mainly around three areas:

Air quality -- a program to toughen auto exhaust inspections. Only a veto by Gov. Parris N. Glendening overcame the legislature's refusal to bite the bullet on clean air.

Smart Growth -- a bill to stem sprawl development across the Maryland countryside. A weakened version of the governor's original legislation passed.

Pfiesteria -- measures to control the runoff of nutrients from farm fertilizers and animal wastes. A weakened version of a bill endorsed by environmentalists passed.

Looming larger than party line disparities in the legislature's voting were differences by region.

The Eastern Shore delegation scored 11 percent in the House and 10 percent in the Senate. The Prince George's delegation was 92 percent (House) and 76 percent (Senate).

You can understand to a degree how urban legislators might be more concerned than rural ones with development and dirty air. But given the Shore's wealth of natural resources, and the obvious pressures on many of them in a fast-growing state, their representatives' scores are unconscionable.

"You look at all the support Wayne Gilchrest [environmentally strong congressman representing the Shore] has, and you look at the state legislators' awful record, and you wonder who really represents the Shore's wishes," Davis said.

That brings up an unsettling question indirectly posed by the league's score card: Does a legislator's environmental voting record matter?

John C. Astle, a Democratic senator from Annapolis who succeeded popular environmental leader Sen. Gerald W. Winegrad when he retired from elective office in 1995, scores 37 percent to Winegrad's 100.

Del. Robert L. Flanagan, a Republican representing Howard and Montgomery counties, notes for most of the decade he scored much better on environment than his colleague and fellow Republican Del. Robert H. Kittleman, "and our vote totals are always about the same."

(Flanagan, who plummeted to 10 percent this year, says he didn't change, the league did -- "toward fringe issues.")

Winegrad says, "The environment will make a difference where the election is close, but if you've got a strong incumbent, it often doesn't make a difference."

He thinks environmental issues today are tougher to define and connect with a need for action.

Consider the "villains" the league links with its main issues this time: your auto and mine with the exhaust inspections; farmers with Pfiesteria; your suburban dream home and mine with sprawl and Smart Growth issues.

It makes an environmentalist long for the days when one could rally everyone around suing a steel plant or shutting down a pipe with dead fish around it.

But connecting our everyday actions to their consequences is exactly what the league's score card and endorsements are all about, says Winegrad, an adviser on this year's voting report.

There is this connection, too, as Madden said: "A duty to my children and grandchildren."

(For league scores and endorsements, check <http://www.mdldcv.org>; or write P.O. Box 1644, Annapolis 21404).

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO 1, John C. Astle: The Annapolis senator scored 37 percent on environmental issues.; PHOTO 2, BARBARA HADDOCK TAYLOR : SUN STAFF, Martin G. Madden: He scored well with business and environmental groups.; PHOTO 3, BARBARA HADDOCK TAYLOR : SUN STAFF, Robert L. Flanagan: He said his rating fell when the league embraced fringe issues.; PHOTO 4, BARBARA HADDOCK TAYLOR : SUN STAFF, Gerald W. Winegrad: The former senator was a strong supporter of the environment.

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