

Environmental Movement

Environmentalism is the most popular social movement in the United States today. Five million American households contribute to national environmental organizations, which together receive over \$350 million in contributions from all sources. On the local level some 6,000 environmental groups are active. Seventy-five percent of Americans in 1989 identified themselves as environmentalists -- all the more remarkable given that twenty-five years before there were no "environmentalists" and ecology was an obscure branch of biological science. In 1965 there were no more than a half-dozen national conservation organizations with citizen members and some degree of influence, and most were on a shaky financial footing. Although conservationists were beginning to win important victories preserving wilderness and protecting air and water from pollution, no one anticipated the explosion of activism that was about to take place.

The roots of the American environmental movement are nourished by New England transcendentalism. When Henry David Thoreau left Concord in 1845 to write and study nature for two years at Waldon Pond, he became the harbinger of twentieth century conservationists who would preserve the natural world for its beauty and potential for spiritual enlightenment, not merely for its practical value. In an era when vast portions of the country remained unsettled, few of Thoreau's fellow citizens embraced his vision. Only well after the Civil War, perhaps not until the figurative closing of the frontier in 1890, would any significant number of Americans share a sense that the bounty of the nation is not limitless, that progress threatens the very survival of native forests and wildlife, and that nature and wilderness contain an antidote to the ills of industrial civilization.

Two Traditions in American Conservation. The traditional conservation movement took form in the 1890s, marked by the founding of the Sierra Club in California in 1892 and the first state Audubon societies in Massachusetts and New York in 1896. In its origins more an elite activity than a mass movement, conservation nevertheless drew support from a broad segment of the public who enjoyed hunting, fishing and camping. Two distinct tendencies emerged among the early conservationists: a pragmatic "utilitarian" wing, typified by Gifford Pinchot (1865-1946), the first director of the U.S. Forest Service; and an idealistic "preservationist" wing, represented by naturalist John Muir (1838-1914).

Gifford Pinchot, a Connecticut Yankee and Yale graduate from a wealthy family, studied forestry in France and Germany and returned to the United States to preach the gospel of scientific management of natural resources. He defined conservation with the utilitarian outlook of "the greatest good of the greatest number in the long run." In the spirit of the Progressive political movement of his time, Pinchot defended natural resources against short-sighted exploitation by irresponsible businessmen, opposing "the interests," not timbering and mining in themselves. He sought to bring forest and mineral resources under rational, long-term management, overseen by professionals employed by government.

The utilitarian resource-management advocates retained a predominant influence on public conservation policy through the 1940s. Professional forestry, soil and water conservation, flood control and watershed development, scientific game management, and the development of state departments of natural resources are among their significant and lasting accomplishments. Organizations in this tradition include the Izaak Walton League (founded in 1922) and the National Wildlife Federation (1935). By the end of the New Deal the innovative impulse of this tradition was exhausted. Its most notable institutional achievements -- the Forest Service, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Bureau of Reclamation -- would become targets of the environmental movement in later decades.

In contrast, the preservationist wing of the conservation movement saw the natural world not as a factor of production but as something to be enjoyed and valued in its own right. John Muir, born to a zealous Christian family in Scotland, was transplanted as a boy to a farm in Wisconsin. Inventor, botanist, geologist, wanderer -- Muir arrived in California at age 30 in 1868 and began several years of roaming the Sierras. Drawn by friends into writing about his experiences, Muir was soon publishing essays in such major eastern magazines of the day as *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, and *Century*. An eloquent spokesman for the redemptive character of nature and value of preserving wilderness, Muir joined the political battles to save the Yosemite, Sequoia, and Kings Canyon areas as national parks. The Sierra Club, which Muir helped organize in 1892, and the National Audubon Society (founded in 1905) are early reflections of this tradition; the National Parks Association (1919), an ancestor of Defenders of Wildlife (1925), and The Wilderness Society (1935) followed.

Preservationists drew on a widespread "back to nature" spirit, a romantic reaction to the rapid urbanization and industrialization of the early decades of the Twentieth Century. The evils of city life could be countered, it was believed, by city parks, Boy and Girl Scouting, summer camps, nature study in schools and museums, and suburban green belts. With the introduction of the eight-hour working day and the two-day weekend, more city people had time to enjoy hunting, fishing and the out-of-doors. Early achievements of this tradition include the National Park system, wildlife sanctuaries, and the protection of birds threatened with extinction. More recently, preservationists have spearheaded the protection of endangered species, vast areas of wilderness, and wild and scenic rivers. By the 1960s, John Muir had displaced Gifford Pinchot as the popular embodiment of the American conservation movement.

The contemporary environmental movement's strength is rooted in the transformation of American society brought about by the long period of prosperity following World War II. Increased real income and a higher standard of living, accompanied by the spread of paid vacations to a wide range of occupations, meant many more people had both the financial means and the leisure time to enjoy outdoor recreation. Advancing levels of education also helped produce a shift in social values favoring protection of natural areas. With the widespread ownership of automobiles and the development of freeways, the number of visits to the expanding National Park system jumped from 12 million in 1946 to 282

million by 1979. Access to natural environments became an essential aspect of the quality of life to millions of Americans.

The first major wave of national environmental legislation came in the mid-1960s as long-sought victories from the preservationists' agenda: the Wilderness Act of 1964, the Land and Water Conservation Fund of 1964, and the Wild and Scenic Rivers and National Trails System Acts of 1968. Stewart Udall's *Quiet Crisis*, published in 1963, had helped focus attention on the threats to our wilderness heritage. Preservationist victories continued in the midst of new concerns, with such landmarks as the Eastern Wilderness Act of 1974 and the Alaska National Interest Lands Act of 1980. Organizations in the traditional conservation movement share credit for this impressive string of legislative victories.

KEY ENVIRONMENTAL LEGISLATION, 1963-1980

1963: Clean Air Act. Encouraged cooperative programs by state and local government to prevent and control air pollution; established federal grants for air pollution control agencies.

1964: Wilderness Act. Preserved 9 million acres of wilderness in the western states.

1965: Water Quality Act. Required states to establish and enforce water quality standards.

1968: Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, National Scenic Trails Act. WSRA designated 8 rivers for immediate inclusion and 27 others to be evaluated. NSTA designated Pacific Crest and Appalachian trails as first two national scenic trails.

1970: National Environmental Policy Act. Required federal agencies to prepare "environmental impact statements" of projects; established the Council on Environmental Quality.

1970: Resource Conservation and Recovery Act. Authorized EPA to promote the recovery and recycling of solid wastes.

1972: Federal Environmental Pesticide Control Act. Required manufacturers to register pesticides with the EPA and disclose contents and test results; authorized EPA to ban sales and seize products.

1973: Endangered Species Act. Authorized Secretary of the Interior to list endangered or threatened species.

1976: Toxic Substances Control Act. Required manufacturers to test products for risk to human health or the environment before marketing them.

1980: Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (Superfund). Set up fund to clean up abandoned hazardous waste dumps and toxic spills; made dumpers and owners responsible for cleanup costs.

1980: Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. Preserved 104 million acres of wilderness in Alaska.

1990: Clean Air Act. Reauthorized and strengthened regulation of air pollution by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Source: David Bollier & Joan Claybrook, *Freedom from Harm* (1986), pp. 275-292; The Wilderness Society.

Conservationists Revitalized. Federal support for environmental protection, in one form or another, had stretched from the Clean Water legislation of the Eisenhower administration to the Alaska Lands Act of the final Carter years. When Ronald Reagan won the Presidential election of 1980, he swept the Western states on the winds of the "Sagebrush Rebellion," a revolt against Federal regulation of land and its use by ranchers, miners, and other businesses. Reagan appointed as Secretary of the Interior the former legal counsel for the free-market Mountain States Legal Foundation, James Watt. As a political strategy, Watt attempted to divide the "daisy sniffers" from the "hook and bullet boys," the preservationists from the hunting and angling constituency, which he mistakenly imagined did not share substantial portions of the conservation vision. The two traditions of American conservation stood together, united in defense of the legislative victories of the 1960s and 1970s.

As Reagan and Watt threatened to undo the gains of the 1970s, membership skyrocketed in the Sierra Club and other activist environmental organizations. Scandals were uncovered at the Environmental Protection Agency. The popular consensus on environmental protection was apparent in the united front of all the major conservation groups. Watt resigned rather than become an issue in Reagan's campaign for reelection in 1984. The following year the Group of Ten, leaders of organizations ranging from Friends of the Earth to the National Wildlife Federation, issued a common action agenda for the environment. The defeat of the Sagebrush Rebellion and the rout of James Watt left the counter-environmentalists regrouping as the Wise Use Movement on the populist right. Only the libertarians with their free market environmentalism mounted a serious intellectual challenge to regulatory environmentalism.

By 1988 Democratic and Republican Presidential candidates alike were hailing themselves as champions of the environment. Ocean dumping off Atlantic beaches and pollution in Boston Harbor became issues in the campaign. George H. W. Bush proclaimed his intention to become "the environmental President," in the tradition of Teddy Roosevelt. As the twentieth anniversary of Earth Day was celebrated in April 1990, protection of the environment was one of the most popular political priorities in the United States, as it had been throughout the 1980s. Whether the commitment to global ecological protection is deep or shallow remains to be tested by competition in the world economy among advanced nations and pressure for economic growth from developing nations. This tension was apparent during the 1992 presidential campaign as the Bush administration debated its stance toward the U.N. Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Rio de Janeiro in June, which pushed to limit greenhouse gases and achieve sustainable development. Environmental sociologist Riley Dunlap reports that surveys on public support for environmental protection shows a "clear consensus" in favor, but an "ambiguous commitment" when it comes to voting on environmental referenda, paying the cost, or modifying lifestyles.

For most of Bill Clinton's two terms as President from 1992 to 2000, he was faced with a Republican Congress hostile to environmental protection. Clinton was able to block Republican efforts to weaken wetlands protection, sell off Federal forest lands, weaken the Clean Air Act, and loosen regulation of pesticides. His Interior Secretary, Bruce

Babbitt, was a strong advocate for Federal lands, and encouraged Clinton to use the Antiquities Act to establish the Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument by Presidential declaration. Clinton created or expanded 13 national monuments, protecting 4 million acres of land, as well as adding protection to Hawaiian coral reefs and the Florida Everglades.

George W. Bush, in contrast, has few environmental accomplishments to his credit. He began his Presidency by rejecting the Kyoto Protocol to mandate reductions in carbon dioxide emissions. He supported oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and sought to reverse Clinton's rule protecting roadless areas in national forests. He proposed major changes weakening the Clean Air Act. On the credit side, Bush ordered that diesel fuel be reformulated to reduce pollution, and that new diesel trucks meet stricter emissions standards. By the middle of his second term, domestic and international pressure had forced Bush to begin to face climate change as a genuine threat.

Despite widespread public support, the environmental movement harbors its own fractures and vocal critics. Tension between the "ecoactivists" at the grassroots and the "envirocrats" at the headquarters of the large conservation organizations centers on the priorities given to local action versus Washington lobbying on national legislation. The "ecophilosophers" of deep ecology, bioregionalism, and Green politics bring new debates and divisions to the preservationist camp. Environmental organizations also are being challenged by the Southwest Organizing Project and others to reach past their overwhelmingly white, professional, college educated membership to form alliances with minorities and labor unions, and institute affirmative action programs to diversify their staff.

In late 2004 two young environmentalists, Ted Nordaus and Michael Shellenberger, proclaimed the "death of environmentalism," arguing that the inability of environmental organizations to obtain government action on the threat of global warming means that the current strategy of the environmental movement is a failure. They urged the merging of the environmental movement into a broader progressive movement with labor and other friendly constituencies. Global warming did begin to make its way onto the national political agenda by 2007, but it was partly a result of Hurricane Katrina's impact and the continuing threat of more volatile storms, as well as domestic and international pressure from environmental groups and concerned governments.

The laundry list of environmental problems facing the planet -- ozone layer depletion, global warming, destruction of tropical rainforests, extinction of species, toxic and radioactive wastes -- can appear overwhelming and insurmountable. Yet reviewing the successes of the last forty years -- millions of acres of wilderness saved; air, water and pesticide pollution reduced; nuclear power development halted; public consciousness raised and powerful organizations built -- should give all environmentalists a second wind.

The New Environmentalists. On Earth Day in April 1970 our contemporary environmental consciousness seemed to burst on the scene full-grown, in the midst of a

turbulent era of civil rights, women's rights and anti-war agitation. Standing back for perspective, we can see environmentalism as the confluence of the older conservation tradition and more recent efforts to apply ecological perspectives to quality of life and public health concerns -- water and air pollution, toxic wastes, pesticides, and nuclear radiation.

Rachel Carson's surprise best-seller *Silent Spring* in 1962 popularized the idea that nature has a delicate balance and we humans are disrupting it to our own eventual grief. By the late 1960s a second wave of environmental legislation responded to the growing public concern with the impact of industrial society on the quality of life: the Water Pollution Acts of 1967, 1970, and 1972; the Clean Air Acts of 1965, 1970, and 1972; and the Pesticides Act of 1972 which finally banned the DDT denounced by Carson a decade before. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 consolidated responsibility for many regulative and enforcement jobs in the new Environmental Protection Agency. In 1963 Harry Caudill published *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, which described the devastation of eastern Kentucky by the coal industry as a human and an environmental catastrophe; the book helped spark not only a concern for regional poverty but also the long struggle leading to the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977.

Increased attention to personal development, physical fitness, and wellness contributed to a growing concern for the environment as a public health issue. As air and water pollution, pesticides, and toxic wastes came to public attention and debate, the protection of human beings became an important focus of the new environmental issues, much as animals and the natural world had been the center of the earlier conservation movement. The Santa Barbara oil spill of 1969; the energy crisis in the winter of 1973-74, precipitated by the oil cartel price hike; the Three Mile Island nuclear plant accident of 1979; the discovery of the Greenhouse Effect (first discussed by the Council on Environmental Quality in 1979 but only fastened in the public mind by the summer 1988 drought); the Exxon Valdez Alaska Oil Spill of 1989; the oil spills and well-head fires of the Persian Gulf War in 1990 -- all focused attention on the ways industrial society damages the global environment to the detriment of human beings as well as wildlife.

Earth Day 1970 highlighted the emergence of a new environmental activism, which drew upon the youthful energy and demographic clout of the baby boom generation and gave rise to such organizations as Friends of the Earth (founded in 1969), Environmental Action (1970), Greenpeace (1970) and Clean Water Action (1971). Over the following decade they were joined by such groups as Earth First! (1980), Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste (1981), now the Center for Health, Environment and Justice, and Earth Island Institute (1982).

Legal Eagles and PACs. A "third wave" of organizations developed sophisticated legal, technical and lobbying strategies, including Environmental Defense Fund (1967), Natural Resources Defense Council (1970), and Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund (1971), now Earthjustice. The Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, Environmental Action, and Clean Water Action developed affiliated PACs to communicate with and solicit contributions from their members. The League of Conservation Voters (1970) was set up as a single

major independent environmental PAC, free to solicit from the general public. In reaction to the success of environmentalists, conservatives formed their own groups to pursue legal strategies and develop market-oriented energy, environmental and land-use approaches; examples include Pacific Legal Foundation (1973) and Mountain States Legal Foundation (1977).

Land and Wildlife. While the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and others redefined environmental activism during the 1960s and 70s, non-controversial programs of land and wildlife conservation also found support growing rapidly. The warning "once it's gone, it's gone forever" began to sink in -- across the political spectrum. Conservatives naturally prefer private ownership over public control, and liberals are willing to support effective means -- public or private -- to save wildlife habitat. Ducks Unlimited (founded in 1937) has long drawn support from waterfowl hunters for wetlands protection. The Nature Conservancy (1951), the World Wildlife Fund (1961), and various national and local land trusts have attracted thousands of new members and donors eager to save critical areas from development. In the 1980s international causes from African wildlife to tropical rainforests began to attract special attention from the land and wildlife protection groups.

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