Abstract: This Note examines the transformation of the American environmental movement into a social movement. First, it provides a history of the American environmental movement. The environmental movement is traced from its origins as an upper-class movement with a wilderness-centered ideology, to its transformation into a richer more diverse membership and an ideology inclusive of the urban environment. Next, the theoretical underpinnings of the environmental movement in social movement theory are highlighted. Finally, the question of whether grassroots environmental groups should protest or litigate, and how the legal system can be strategically used by grassroots environmental groups, is examined.

Introduction

The American environmental movement encompasses a variety of environmental organizations, ideologies, and approaches. Indeed, the evolution of environmentalism from an ideology into a social movement illuminates the existence of the essential elements of movement formation. These elements include: (1) the growth of preexisting communications networks; (2) co-optable ideas; (3) a series of crises that galvanize individuals into action; and (4) subsequent organizing efforts to weld spontaneous groups together into a movement. As the following history illustrates, these elements appear throughout the course of the four eras of the American environmental movement.

A. The First Era: Conservation and Preservation

Far from being that one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, nature is quite profoundly a human creation—indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history. It is not a pristine sanctuary. . . . Instead, it is a product of that civilization, and could hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made.¹

American environmentalism narratives usually begin with tales of wilderness and the West, whose spectacular landscapes encountered dramatic changes due to urbanization and industrialization. By the 1870s, resource exploitation dominated development patterns in the West. Natural resources were devoured by destructive practices in mining, overgrazing, timber cutting, monocrop planting, and speculation in land and water rights. To protect America’s natural resources, environmental organizations arose in support of conservation and preservation.

The philosophies of conservation and preservation, the roots of American environmentalism, continue to be an influential institutional presence today.

**Conservation** groups emphasized the efficient use and development of physical resources to combat inefficient land management. Conservationists put forth a developmental strategy based on efficiency, scientific management, centralized control, and organized economic development. This strategy was exemplified by management systems, which were created to emphasize the balance between immediate and long-term production necessary to sustain a continuous yield.

Conservationists established a foothold in American politics in 1901, when President Theodore Roosevelt delineated plans for resource management to Congress. Conservation became the dominant resource strategy of the government during President Roosevelt’s tenure, as illustrated by the policies of the new governmental agencies. Moreover, regional and industry-related interest groups emerged as lobbying organizations and agency support groups.

In 1902, for example, the Reclamation Act established the Reclamation Service, whose mission was to accomplish “the reclamation and settlement of the arid lands.” The Reclamation Service promoted scientific methods like irrigation, storage, power generation, and flood control. Its emergence as a key institution in western resource development signified a policy shift towards scientifically-based resource management and away from the resource exploitation associated with land monopolization and private resource development. Similarly, the establishment of the U.S. Forest Service under the Department of Agriculture in 1905 bolstered resource development strategies. Comprised of several different existing agencies, the U.S. Forest Service’s mandate was to “coordinate private development through government regulation and management.”

During the Roosevelt Administration, however, the first divisions between the conservationists and preservationists emerged. These divisions are best personified by the legendary split between Gifford Pinchot, champion of conservation and efficient land management, and John Muir, co-founder of the Sierra Club. Muir’s philosophy embodied natural land management through ‘right use’ of wilderness resources. Preservationists, who believed wilderness preservation to be imperiled by the forces of urbanization and industrialization, viewed traditional conservationist strategies of ‘right use’ and efficient land management as promoting industry needs.

**Preservation** flowed easily from American frontier ideology and notions of the environment as defined in terms of wilderness. According to Muir, it was wrong to view wilderness as simply resources for human consumption; rather, wilderness had an independent value as a “fountain of life.” Moreover, the preservationists’ vision of nature was romanticized by the poems of William Wordsworth and Henry David Thoreau, which analogized wilderness with religious sacredness, and by Frederick Jackson Turner’s classic description of the settling of the frontier and the concomitant rise of a vigorous and independent American democracy.

Many environmental organizations that are considered “mainstream” today were formed during the late 1800s, by conservationists and preservationists who desired to protect the natural environment and conserve wildlife. In addition to the Sierra Club, which was founded in 1892 by John Muir and Robert Underwood Johnson, the National Audubon Society opened chapters in New York and Massachusetts in 1896. The Boone and Crockett Club, founded in 1886 at a
dinner party given by Theodore Roosevelt, drew its elite members from political, military, and professional circles and required them to be “American hunting riflemen.” According to Muir, these groups put forth a complementary vision of preservation and ‘right use’ of wilderness resources by combating waste and spoilage associated with unregulated private development and by suggesting that science and technology would enhance the values of preservation and the “necessity” of wilderness.

When considering the American environmental movement’s origins of conservation and preservation, however, it is essential to note the utter lack of diversity among these early organizations. Both types of organizations were comprised of members harboring anti-urban and class biases. Members of these groups were generally wealthy, white, Anglo-Saxon males who enjoyed outdoor activities, such as hunting, fishing, and camping. Indeed, their debates were primarily “disputes among elites—between those who wished to leave the natural environment in a pristine state and those who viewed it as a place for recreation and pleasure.”

Consequently, early environmentalism was not a social movement but rather an attempt by privileged classes to preserve a place for outdoor recreation. Working class individuals and ethnic minorities were generally excluded from conservation and preservation organizations. Moreover, urban, industrialized areas, viewed by early preservationists and conservationists as areas of pollution, degradation, and squalor, found no home in early environmentalism. Consequently, environmentalism did not evolve into a social movement until the 1960s—when diversity entered the fight to protect the environment.

**B. The Second Era: The Rise of Modern Environmentalism in the 1960s**

The most alarming of all man’s assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials. . . . For the first time in the history of the world, every human being is now subjected to contact with dangerous chemicals, from the moment of conception until death.²

Modern environmentalism differs from the conservation and preservation era in two salient respects. First, whereas the first era emphasized the protection or efficient management of the natural environment, the primary policy of modern environmentalism is based on the cleanup and control of pollution. Second, modern environmentalism displayed “social roots” decidedly absent from the first era. Charted by numerous citizen groups and studies of public attitudes, this change parallels the infusion of particular social values into the public arena and the widespread expression of those values in the environmental arena. Moreover, the approach of modern environmentalism transformed from top-down control by technical and managerial leaders into bottom-up grassroots demands from citizens and citizen groups.

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The publication of Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring in 1962 marked the beginning of modern environmentalism. Carson, known as the “godmother of modern environmentalism,” impacted the American public’s consciousness with her detailed exposition on the dangers of environmental pollution to human health. By examining the ecological impacts of hazardous substances that pollute both the natural and human environments, like pesticides, Carson fundamentally altered the way Americans perceived the environment and the dangers of toxins to themselves. Emphasizing the problems associated with industrial society, Carson argued that science and technology had been effectively removed from any larger policy framework and insulated from public input and opinion. Carson’s controversial thesis not only made Silent Spring an epoch event in the history of environmentalism, but also helped to launch a new decade of rebellion and protest in which the concept of “nature” was broadly construed to include quality-of-life issues.

The Environmental Movement differs markedly from other American social movements because it was saddled, from its inception, with conservative traditions. Indeed, some activists were initially cautious about the association of environmentalism with population control and anti-urban elitism. Nevertheless, the Environmental Movement flourished in the 1960s amid an era of social activism which fostered the rise of the Civil Rights, Peace, and Women’s movements.

Most activists linked environmentalism with novel values that could restructure society and form alternative institutions and lifestyles. Increasing ecological awareness in the areas of organic gardening and urban and rural communal living grew in popularity and were popularized by the underground press. Moreover, “several New Left ecology collectives were organized in the late 1960s to focus on the waste issue and were pivotal in the formation of community-based recycling centers.”

Furthermore, the Environmental Movement was precipitated by two major social changes in American culture. First, citizens began searching for improved standards of living and amenities, beyond necessities and conveniences, due to increased personal and social “real income.” Rising standards of living allowed Americans to view nature as an essential provider of recreational activities. Second, increasing levels of education spawned values associated with personal creativity and self-development, including involvement with the natural environment. Both of these societal changes allowed individuals to think broadly about the natural habitat in which they lived, worked, and played.

Moreover, by the late 1960s, activists began to link the destruction of the natural environment to the complex interplay of new technology, industry, political power, and economic power. Grassroots community groups arose to support family and community autonomy against the powerful institutional forces of corporate industry and government bureaucracy. In addition, concerns regarding human health led to demands for increased activism to make natural environments more available for use and to ward off threats from industrial production.
The emergence of these shifts created novel political opportunities through a heightened degree of consumer action not previously known to American politics. New forms of consumption provided focal points of organized activity in common leisure and recreational interest groups. “By emphasizing community organization to protect community environmental values against threats from external developmental pressures, consumer impulses went through a degree of mobilization and activity which they had not previously enjoyed.”

Finally, a series of dramatic environmental catastrophes in the 1960s galvanized environmentalists into action. These events included the 1965 power blackout and garbage strikes of New York City, the 1969 burning of the Ohio River along the industrial sections of Cleveland, and the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill. Symbolic protests on college campuses across the nation, which included letter writing campaigns and “guerrilla theater-like” events, brought students into the Environmental Movement. At Columbia University, for example, sit-ins were organized initially to protest the conversion of parkland in a neighboring black community into a university gymnasium. Similarly, the 1969 People’s Park protests at Berkeley, designed to prevent the bulldozing of a spontaneous community garden into a university parking lot, further heightened environmental awareness. In all, both these catastrophes and protests served to heighten awareness of environmental issues in America.

Environmentalists responded to these events by demanding government protection from environmental degradation and pollution. Environmental activists helped to draft legislation, including the Wilderness Act (1965); the Clean Air Act (1967); National Trails Act (1968); and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (1968). Their efforts and the increasing momentum of the environmental movement culminated in the Earth Day celebration on April 22, 1970.

C. The Third Era: Mainstream Environmentalism

Our country is stealing from poorer nations and from generations yet unborn . . . . We’re tired of being told we are to blame for corporate depredations . . . . institutions have no conscience. If we want them to do what is right, we must make them do what is right.3

Earth Day 1970, widely hailed as the beginning of the third era of American environmentalism, directly resulted from the infusion of social values of the 1960s into environmentalism. Designed to challenge the environmental status quo through peaceful mass mobilization, Earth Day 1970 brought twenty-million Americans together in celebration of quality-of-life issues and concern for the environment. Unfortunately, in the celebrations since 1970, the ad-hoc, participatory nature of Earth Day has been supplanted by an increasingly corporate influence.

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Although Earth Day 1970 enjoyed broad public support and was attended by the spectrum of grassroots interests, it did not escape criticism. It alarmed both radical activists and established conservationist and preservationist organizations. Radical activists believed the organizers of Earth Day had pandered to the press, government, and corporate elite. The Sierra Club, the National Wildlife Federation, the Audubon Society, and other traditional conservative clubs feared that Earth Day would distort the notion of wilderness protection in favor of urban and social justice issues. Their fears were realized, and Earth Day 1970 ushered in a new political atmosphere, one reacting against the adverse effects of industrial growth.

The 1970s also marked the emergence of new issues regarding toxic chemicals, energy, and the possibilities of social, economic, and political decentralization. A seemingly endless series of toxic chemical episodes brought greater publicity, energy, and momentum to the movement. The American citizenry heard about polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in the Hudson River, abandoned chemical dumps at Love Canal and near Louisville, Kentucky, and disasters at Kepone in Virginia.

Moreover, the energy crisis during the winter of 1973 to 1974 alarmed the American public. Shortages of oil etched into the American experience the natural limits of human consumption. Environmental concerns were largely ignored by government entities, however, which favored corporate and technical advocates in an effort to develop new energy sources.

During this period, a shift from legislative to administrative environmental regulation also occurred. President Nixon’s plan creating the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which was submitted to Congress on July 2, 1970 and went into effect sixty days later, received no opposition from Congress. Nixon’s plan called for the reorganization and consolidation of many administrative agencies into the EPA.

With the establishment of the EPA and the passage of a variety of environmental laws and policies in the 1970s, environmental issues themselves became “mainstream.” Primarily comprised of attorneys, engineers, and economists, the EPA developed a complex regulatory structure that categorizes and addresses environmental issues by pollutant and medium.

Moreover, the primary emphasis of the legislation during this era was the harmful impact of pollution on ecological systems. “During its first sixty days, EPA brought five times as many enforcement actions as the agencies it inherited had brought during any similar period.” In addition to water quality legislation, air pollution laws were passed in 1965, 1970, and 1972. Growing concern over pesticides led to the revision of the existing pesticide law, resulting in the Pesticides Act of 1972. Likewise, the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972 was passed in direct response to concerns during the previous decade regarding dredging and filling, industrial siting, and offshore oil development. It was only later that the environmental movement advocated for legislation emphasizing the harmful effects on human health. Still, environmental laws do not prohibit pollution. As developed, environmental laws control pollution according to health-based standards.
By the 1980s, however, “mainstream environmentalism” emerged in the wake of the Reagan Administration’s anti-environmental deregulation policies. Based primarily on a system of market-based incentives to entice companies to stop polluting, this approach frustrated progressive environmental protection advocates. “From the beginning of that administration, the new governmental leaders made clear their conviction that the ‘environmental movement’ had spent itself, was no longer viable, and could be readily dismissed and ignored.” Consequently, while grassroots environmental groups were ignored by the Administration, mainstream environmentalism evolved into a cluster of public interest groups specializing in lobbying, legal expertise, scientific expertise, and the art of compromise.

These mainstream organizations formed the “Group of Ten” (G-10), which included the CEOs of the ten largest environmental organizations. During the Reagan years, the membership in the G-10 organizations increased from four to seven million. These professionalized organizations utilized scientific and legal expertise, and primarily initiated lobbying and legislative strategies. Most importantly, however, these traditionally conservative, national organizations took a primary place in the American public’s perception of the environmental movement during this decade.

Unfortunately, the G-10 alienated many environmental groups by considering environmentalism to be a Beltway affair, played within the confines of Washington, D.C. and focused on the federal government through legislative strategies. Groups such as Greenpeace and Environmental Action, which defined action more broadly and distrusted federal government, were excluded. Moreover, apolitical groups like World Wildlife Fund and the Nature Conservancy were eliminated. The G-10 “clearly sought to exclude groups conducting, supporting, or advocating direct action against polluters, whalers, the military, and, even more troubling, against corporations.”

However, other citizen environmental groups did respond to the Reagan Administration’s challenge to prove their depth and persistence. These groups mobilized and joined together in opposition to Administration policies. A 1981 Harris poll illustrates this point, finding that some eighty-percent of Americans favored either maintaining the Clean Air Act or making it stricter. Moreover, by the late 1980s, grassroots organizations emerged that were critical of mainstream environmental groups’ issue-by-issue strategy.
D. The Fourth Era: Grassroots Environmentalism

The environmental movement has not been practicing one of the laws of nature: strength in diversity.⁴

Reaction to Reagan Administration anti-environmental policies produced a backlash of grassroots environmentalism. Grassroots environmentalism embraces the principles of ecological democracy, and is distinguished from mainstream environmentalism by its belief in citizen participation in environmental decision making. Perceiving mainstream environmental organizations as too accommodating to both industry and government, grassroots groups utilize “community right-to-know laws, citizen-enforcement provisions in federal and state legislation, and local input in waste clean-up methodology and siting decisions.” Consequently, although mainstream organizations do perform necessary functions such as educating the middle class to environmental concerns, litigating, and fighting the industrial lobby, grassroots groups create the real movement on issues and force environmentalism onto the public agenda.

These new citizen-based groups reflect the evolution of environmentalism from a narrow, wilderness-centered philosophy to a richer, more inclusive ideology encompassing both rural and urban environments. Philosophically, the fourth era encompasses a spectrum of ideologies, including: deep ecology, social ecology, bio-regionalism, feminist ecology, spiritual ecology, native ecology, and Not in My Backyard (NIMBY) groups. Moreover, grassroots environmentalism cuts across ethnic, racial, and class barriers to introduce a diversity previously absent from the environmental movement.

Grassroots groups can be conceptually separated into four areas: (1) splinter groups; (2) the new conservation movement; (3) environmental justice groups; and (4) NIMBY groups.¹³⁰ The variety of environmental issues addressed by these groups include: toxic abatement; ecological economics; civil rights; human rights; secular and religious issues; and wilderness preservation.

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⁴ John Cook, Environmental Careers Organization