

# From Conservationists to Environmentalists: The American Environmental Movement

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## Abstract

The environmental movement in the United States has undergone substantial changes during the last century. From its approximate beginnings in the conservation movement toward the end of the 19th century, the movement has evolved from a relatively narrow preoccupation with the conservation of local resources and the preservation of scenic areas, parks and forests to the broader concerns of toxic pollution, biodiversity protection and the prevention of global climate change. Early organisations and activists were primarily conservationists and preservationists. While conservation and preservation still exist within the movement, the organisations, activists and ideologies of the movement have expanded to encompass a framework more adequately depicted as 'environmentalist' or even 'ecologist'. This paper provides a broad outline of how the American environmental movement has evolved and how, in doing so, it has responded to the evolving social context in which it exists.

## 1 Introduction

The environmental movement in the United States has undergone substantial changes during the last century. The ideological and organisational roots of the movement are commonly traced to the progressive conservation movement (PCM) at the end of the 19th century. The PCM encompassed two complementary yet often competing perspectives, namely conservationism and preservationism. While contemporary environmentalism still encompasses both of these concerns, the environmental movement has evolved considerably since the late 19th century, reflecting significant changes that have occurred in society and in the scientific understanding of environmental issues. The movement has become 'environmental', a term used to imply a broader, more holistic perspective and a more extensive slate of issues. The movement has evolved from a relatively narrow preoccupation with the conservation of local resources and the preservation of wildlife and scenic areas to the broader concerns of

toxic pollution, biodiversity protection and the prevention of global climate change. This chapter provides a broad outline of how the US environmental movement has evolved ideologically from its preservationist/conservationist beginnings and through the course of the twentieth century. As evidence of anthropogenic global climate change has mounted, the environmental movement has evolved not only to incorporate this issue into the core of its agenda but environmental groups are increasingly drawing connections between climate change and social injustice, leading to the recent emergence of a 'climate justice' movement.

## 2 The Progressive Conservation Movement (PCM)

### 2.1 *Enlightenment versus Romanticism*

Like in other Western societies, there is a longstanding tension in US history between ideas based on the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on scientific progress and rationality, and ideas based on Romanticism, with its emphasis on spirituality and intuition.<sup>1</sup> This tension has played a significant role in the profound ambivalence that Americans<sup>2</sup> have held with regard to nature. On the one hand, Americans value technological progress, scientific innovation and economic growth which privilege benefits to producers and consumers over costs to the environment. The dominant worldview in the US (and the 'Western' world more generally) stresses that nature is to be used in order to perpetuate growth and progress.<sup>3</sup> Much of US history, particularly in the nation's early years, has been characterised by a *laissez faire* approach to the use of natural resources in which people, as the sole authors of their destinies, are viewed as unregulated controllers of their own property and of nature. Enlightenment ideas of progress and scientific rationality, which ultimately fed into the conservationist strain of the PCM, modified these notions only in that natural resources were now to be used in a more carefully considered way; people were still expected to use them rather than to protect them from use.<sup>4</sup>

1 Petulla, Joseph M., *American Environmental History: The Exploitation and Conservation of Natural Resources* (San Francisco: Boyd and Fraser, 1977).

2 While "America" is technically broader than just the United States, I use "Americans" here to refer to people living in the United States.

3 Catton, William R., and Riley E. Dunlap, "A New Ecological Paradigm for Post-Exuberant Sociology," *American Behavioral Scientist* 24.1 (1980): 15-47; Kline, Benjamin, *First Along the River: A Brief History of the U.S. Environmental Movement*, 4th ed (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011).

4 Petulla, *American Environmental History*.

On the other hand, the American public has also recognised that technological and economic progress often tend to devalue issues of spirituality and aesthetic sensibilities, often leading to the decline of traditional values and damage to the natural world. Throughout US history, nature has been seen as a vital component of the national landscape and character, and as a source of inspiration, an object of reverence, and representation of the divine.<sup>5</sup> This view has frequently clashed with both the *laissez faire* and the Enlightenment approaches to nature and natural resources.

The conflict between these two different approaches to nature (Enlightenment rationality versus Romantic spirituality) helped to spawn the PCM; at the same time, the conflict between these ideas became enshrined within the movement through a split between conservationists and preservationists. While conservationists reacted negatively to early American *laissez faire* approaches to the natural world, they eagerly adopted an Enlightenment approach, which allowed continued exploitation of the natural environment through scientific and rational management.<sup>6</sup> Both the *laissez faire* and Enlightenment approaches have ultimately been at odds with a preservationist approach. Despite the Enlightenment influence on early concerns about American treatment of the environment, the earliest voices of concern about the environment tended to be preservationist and Romantic in orientation.

## 2.2 *Preservationist Impulses Prior to the PCM*

Early European settlers in North America treated the natural world and its original inhabitants with considerable disdain. Natural resources were used more quickly and wastefully in a *laissez faire* approach to nature than many had likely anticipated.<sup>7</sup> The earliest voices raised against the reckless use of natural resources were largely isolated and unnoticed. However, expressions of concern grew in intensity and frequency as America became increasingly urbanised, industrialised and settled.<sup>8</sup> The earliest advocates for protecting the environment tended to be intellectuals, who framed their concerns in Romantic and religious terms. The use of religion and spirituality to frame concerns about the environment was increasingly appealing to the general

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5 Huth, Hans, *Nature and the American: Three Centuries of Changing Attitudes*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1957); Nash, Roderick, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

6 Kline, *First Along the River*.

7 Petulla, *American Environmental History*; Kline, *First Along the River*.

8 Petulla, *American Environmental History*; Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*; Kline, *First Along the River*.

American public as they became ever more fearful of the impacts of rapid urbanisation and industrialisation on the structure and morality of society.

The Romantic movement of the early 1800s was a fundamental influence on increasing concerns about nature.<sup>9</sup> Romanticism began largely as a literary movement in Europe; however, its critique of the Enlightenment and its belief in the natural world as a source of inspiration, imagination, creativity, freedom and beauty quickly spread to the US and into numerous other fields of thought.<sup>10</sup> Romantics were highly critical of urbanisation and industrialisation, strongly revering rurality and traditional, especially indigenous, lifestyles instead. Romanticism had a powerful influence on Transcendentalism, a movement that developed in the US to protest dominant religious strains in the early to mid-1800s. Transcendentalists, including the famous writers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, urged people to commune with nature, to get away from the squalor of the city; they believed that people achieved union with God through nature.<sup>11</sup> Reform movements in the early 1800s likewise blamed many social evils on the rapid industrialisation and urbanisation occurring at the time; the solution for many of these ills (e.g., delinquency, crime, poverty, alcohol abuse) was to put people back in nature. Nature, therefore, needed to be preserved as a refuge for humanity.

Several prominent figures openly advocated for environmental preservation in the 1800s, including John James Audubon, George Catlin and Frederick Law Olmstead.<sup>12</sup> Environmental preservation also received support from the scientific world via Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, showing that humans were part of nature and not separated from it. Likewise, George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature* in 1864 presented evidence of extensive environmental destruction in Vermont and pleaded for the protection of natural resources. The protection of nature was not only becoming more readily accepted; its implementation, at a national level, was also beginning: in 1872, the first national park, Yellowstone National Park, was established in north-western Wyoming.

In 1890, the US Census declared that the US frontier was closed; there was no longer a clear 'frontier line' distinguishing settled and unsettled portions of the continent. This declaration is credited with promoting a dramatic growth in concern about the fate of the US and of America's remaining natural lands. Hence, just as the Census Bureau was seemingly declaring the triumph of

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9 Kline, *First Along the River*.

10 Petulla, *American Environmental History*.

11 Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*.

12 Ibid.

Enlightenment, with technological and economic progress going hand in hand with the march of 'civilisation' across the continent, a movement based on Romantic concerns to save the remaining natural areas was developing.

The frontier was a potent symbol to the young American nation. The frontier symbolised limitless resources, rugged individualism, and freedom.<sup>13</sup> According to the "Frontier Thesis", espoused by historian Frederick Jackson Turner shortly after the closing of the frontier, the frontier, and the wild nature contained on the frontier, was a uniquely American phenomenon, which laid the foundation for American democracy. The declaration of the 'end' of the frontier was, on the one hand, a symbol of progress, but it was also a forceful symbol of loss. The combination of the closing of the frontier, high rates of industrialisation and urbanisation and rapid depletion of initially vast resources, such as the extinction of the passenger pigeon and the near extinction of the bison, fuelled growing efforts to preserve and protect nature. Ironically, the earlier forces, which compelled settlers to conquer nature as part of a 'manifest destiny', the notion that God mandated people of European descent to spread democratic civilisation by taking possession of and exploiting the continent, had resulted in a new push to protect that same nature.<sup>14</sup> Unease with rapid social changes and the profligate use of resources led to growing pressure for the regulated and efficient (non-wasteful) use of remaining resources and the preservation of tracts of Western land as a means of keeping a perpetual frontier as a lasting source of US democracy and purity. Similar concerns were echoed in the progressive movement at the turn of the 20th Century, which advocated reforming people's living conditions; protecting nature, was again viewed as a central aspect of improving the condition of humanity.<sup>15</sup>

### 2.3 *Conservationists and Preservationists during the PCM*

When discussing the PCM, historians typically divide it into two broad camps: utilitarian conservationists and Romantic preservationists. While conservationists were primarily interested in the wise use and scientific management of natural resources, preservationists were primarily interested in protecting natural areas from the encroachment of industrialisation.<sup>16</sup> Preservationist-oriented organisations and activists focus their efforts on setting aside protected areas (e.g., parks, forests, wilderness areas) and protecting wildlife

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13 Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*.

14 Ibid.

15 Petulla, *American Environmental History*.

16 Hays, Samuel, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959); Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*.

and their habitats from human use. From the preservationist perspective, it is vital to protect wilderness and wildlife because nature is “an important component in supporting both the physical and spiritual life of humans”.<sup>17</sup> Preservationists, particularly contemporary ones, have also focused on the importance of preservation for the sake of nature itself as well as for the ‘ecological services’ that nature provides to human society.

Early preservationist interests were led by naturalist and writer John Muir, who was instrumental in the establishment of the second US national park, Yosemite National Park in California in 1890. Like previous preservationists, Muir (who had long since rejected the Calvinism of his upbringing) often couched his concern for the environment in spiritual terms, referring to stones as altars and to Yosemite as a temple. In 1892, Muir organised the first organisation devoted to preserving wild lands, the Yosemite Defense Association (soon renamed the Sierra Club). A key activity of the group was to sponsor hiking trips to the mountains to enlist people’s support for their protection. Initially limited to the San Francisco area, the Club has since become one of the foremost environmental organisations in the nation, focusing on numerous issues in addition to the preservation of land. Several other prominent preservationist organisations also formed during this time. Preservationist goals became institutionalised in the National Park Service (1916), whose purpose has been to preserve natural beauty and facilitate recreation in the national parks.

Although organised activities on behalf of preservationism began somewhat earlier than organisation on behalf of conservationism,<sup>18</sup> the latter had greater success in having its ideas associated closely with the larger movement (hence, the term progressive ‘conservation’ movement). Conservationism emphasises the stewardship of natural resources and their continued use for ‘the greatest good to the greatest number’ of people.<sup>19</sup> This utilitarian philosophy was meant, through government regulation and scientific management, to overcome the extensive misuse of natural resources embodied in the *laissez faire* approach to natural resources that dominated US history to this point. Conservationist interests, led by Gifford Pinchot, the nation’s first professional forester, had less organised support from the public; however, they were very successful at getting their agenda incorporated into new government agencies—largely due to the close relationship between Pinchot and President

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17 Brulle, Robert J., *Agency, Democracy, and Nature: The US Environmental Movement from a Critical Theory Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 98.

18 Brulle, *Agency, Democracy, and Nature*.

19 Pinchot, Gifford, *The Fight for Conservation* (Garden City: Harcourt, Brace, 1910).

Theodore Roosevelt.<sup>20</sup> Conservationist ideas were institutionalised in the form of the Forest Service and the Bureau of Reclamation, both of which focus on the 'multiple use' of resources, as opposed to the National Park Service, which preserves land purely for recreational or aesthetic purposes.

Despite obvious intersections between preservation and conservation, they represent distinct ideologies that have led to conflicts throughout the history of environmentalism in the US. Preservationists and conservationists came into direct opposition, for example, in the struggle over damming the Hetch Hetchy river valley inside the Yosemite National Park, a battle that lasted from 1908 to 1913. Conservationists and developers led by Gifford Pinchot urged that the dam be created to provide water to San Francisco, which had been ravaged by an earthquake in 1906, while John Muir and other preservationists decried the despoliation of a beautiful valley inside a national park.<sup>21</sup> President Roosevelt, a great believer in conservation and a friend to both Muir and Pinchot, ultimately sided with Pinchot, and the valley eventually was dammed. While this was a momentous defeat for preservationists, it did not stop them from pressing their cause in the ensuing decades.

#### 2.4 *Conservationists and Preservationists up to the Environmental Movement*

After the heyday of the PCM and the subsequent battle over the Hetch Hetchy dam, conservationist and preservationist issues diminished considerably from the public eye. Despite the advent of two world wars and the Great Depression, however, these issues did not entirely disappear.<sup>22</sup> President Franklin Delano Roosevelt initiated several conservation oriented programs as part of his 'New Deal', including the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Tennessee Valley Authority, which dealt simultaneously with the social devastation of the Great Depression and several contemporaneous environmental disasters, including massive flooding and the devastating loss of topsoil in Oklahoma and adjacent states during the 'Dust Bowl'<sup>23</sup>. Aldo Leopold, a forester, also advanced the cause of preservationism during this time period by initiating the idea of granting wilderness status to undeveloped portions of the National Forests. In 1924,

20 Hays, *Conservation*.

21 Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*.

22 Nash, Roderick, *The American Conservation Movement* (St. Charles: Forum Press, 1974).

23 The 'Dust Bowl' refers to a period of extreme dust storms throughout the prairie lands of the US and Canada during the 1930s. The storms stemmed from problematic farming techniques, resulting in massive losses of topsoil, impaired visibility throughout much of the US and extensive displacement of farmers. See, e.g., Worster, Don, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

500,000 acres in the Gila National Forest in New Mexico were designated as the first Forest Service wilderness area.<sup>24</sup> Later in his career, Leopold became America's first professional wildlife manager, and in the 1930s he developed a philosophy termed 'the land ethic', which is often cited as a basic tenet of modern US environmentalism and is outlined eloquently in *A Sand County Almanac*.<sup>25</sup> The land ethic promoted the idea that humankind was to be seen as a part of nature rather than a master of it.

In 1935, Leopold and another forester, Robert Marshall, organised the Wilderness Society, a national organisation, which continues to be a strong advocate for the preservation of wilderness.<sup>26</sup> Both the Wilderness Society and the Sierra Club went on to successfully fight against two dam projects in the 1950s and 1960s, the Echo Park Dam project on the Colorado-Utah border in the Dinosaur National Monument and a proposed dam in the Grand Canyon of Arizona. The Wilderness Society's success in fighting the Echo Park Dam prompted them to fight for a national wilderness preservation system.<sup>27</sup> Through their efforts and those of other activists, the Wilderness Act of 1964 was passed, immediately protecting nine million acres of federally owned wilderness.<sup>28</sup> These successes garnered greater public attention for preservationist causes at a critical point in American history; greater public attention to the potential utility of such collective action helped to fuel the development of a new episode of activism on behalf of environmental issues. It is at this point in time, the decade of the 1960s, that we can discern a fundamental shift in the movement to protect the environment.

### 3 Rise of the Environmental Movement

Despite important continuities with the PCM, the contemporary environmental movement is typically considered a distinct movement. While no specific date or event marks a clear break, at least three events have typically been used to demarcate the beginning of the modern environmental movement in the US. The first event was the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962. Her book played a key role in the development of a new 'environmental' perspective, since she persuasively articulated to an educated lay audience the burgeoning research concerning the detrimental effects of the array of new

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24 Worster, *Dust Bowl*.

25 Ibid.

26 Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*.

27 Nash, *The American Conservation Movement*.

28 Ibid.



chemicals and pesticides unleashed by post-war industry and agriculture. The second event was the founding of the Environmental Defense Fund (1967) and the Natural Resources Defense Council (1970). Their development reflected substantial shifts in environmental organising. They focused on a qualitatively different set of issues, were founded with corporate and foundation sponsorship (e.g., the Ford Foundation), and specialised in scientific and legal aspects of environmental issues.<sup>29</sup> The final event was the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970, which mobilised massive and highly visible public support on behalf of environmental causes. Millions of people participated across the US in Earth Day activities.

The shift from conservation/preservation to a broader environmental movement marked an important ideological change in US environmental consciousness. Environmentalism encompassed a much broader set of concerns than either conservationism or preservationism.<sup>30</sup> Even so, the concerns of the earlier era did not disappear. If anything, the new ideology of environmentalism was grafted onto the older agenda, augmenting rather than displacing it,<sup>31</sup> and the older organisations gradually evolved to incorporate both the older and newer concerns. The older organisations, especially those that were more preservationist in orientation, actually fared quite well in terms of drawing supporters and resources despite the general ideological transformation in the movement.<sup>32</sup> While numerous environmental organisations sprouted during this time, they also eventually added the more traditional foci to their repertoires. The older organisations were also immensely helpful to the newer environmental organisations, providing an important source of encouragement, strategies, activists and material resources.<sup>33</sup>

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- 29 Mitchell, Robert Cameron, "From Conservation to Environmental Movement: The Development of the Modern Environmental Lobbies," in *Government and Environmental Politics: Essays on Historical Developments Since World War Two*, ed. Michael J. Lacey (Washington, D.C.: The Wilson Center Press, 1989), 81–113.
- 30 Mertig, Angela G., Riley E. Dunlap, and Denton E. Morrison, "The Environmental Movement in the United States," in *Handbook of Environmental Sociology*, ed. Riley E. Dunlap and William Michelson (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 448–481.
- 31 Brulle, *Agency, Democracy, and Nature*; Johnson, Erik, "Changing Issue Representation among Major United States Environmental Movement Organizations," *Rural Sociology* 71.1 (2006): 132–154.
- 32 Carmichael, Jason T., J. Craig Jenkins, and Robert J. Brulle, "Building Environmentalism: The Founding of Environmental Movement Organizations in the United States, 1900–2000," *Sociological Quarterly* 53.3 (2012): 422–453.
- 33 See, e.g., Mitchell, "From Conservation to Environmental Movement;" Mitchell, Robert Cameron, Angela G. Mertig, and Riley E. Dunlap, "Twenty Years of Environmental Mobilization: Trends Among National Environmental Organizations," in *American Environ-*

The modern environmental movement emerged during an era of widespread political activism and reform.<sup>34</sup> Activism among the American youth was spreading across college campuses, public concern was raised over many political issues, and a general reform atmosphere permeated the American government. The various social movements of the 1960s provided some of the impetus for the environmental movement, as activists were spurred on by the apparent efficacy of collective action toward achieving social goals.<sup>35</sup> The movement quickly achieved high levels of support from the public, activists and even elites—all of whom found environmental issues to be relatively appealing and consensual compared to the civil rights and the anti-Viet Nam protests. Indeed, some critical observers viewed the early environmental movement as an elite attempt at diverting social concern from more radical causes;<sup>36</sup> this view declined as the costs of environmental programs to elite interests became more apparent over time.

The growth of scientific evidence on environmental degradation, eloquently documented in Carson's *Silent Spring*, coupled with media-enhanced disasters like the Santa Barbara, California oil spill and the burning of Cleveland, Ohio's Cuyahoga river,<sup>37</sup> both in 1969, generated widespread concern. Increased public concern and increasing threats to the environment influenced the development of numerous new environmental organisations.<sup>38</sup> Post World War II affluence enabled larger numbers of people to spend leisure time in the outdoors, heightening their commitment to preserving areas of natural beauty.<sup>39</sup> In congruence with Inglehart's thesis connecting economic security

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*mentalism: The US Environmental Movement, 1970–1990*, ed. R.E. Dunlap and A.G. Mertig (Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis, 1992), 11–26.

34 Kline, *First Along the River*.

35 Schnaiberg, Allan, "Politics, Participation and Pollution: The Environmental Movement," in *Cities in Change: A Reader in Urban Sociology*, ed. J. Walton and D. Carns (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1973), 605–627.

36 Barkley, Katherine, and Steve Weissman, "The Eco-Establishment," in *Eco-Catastrophe*, published by *Ramparts* (San Francisco, California: Canfield Press, 1970), 15–25.

37 Stradling, David, and Richard Stradling, "Perceptions of the Burning River: Deindustrialization and Cleveland's Cuyahoga River," *Environmental History* 13 (2008): 515–535.

38 Carmichael, Jenkins, and Brulle, "Building Environmentalism;" Johnson, Erik W., and Scott Frickel, "Ecological Threat and the Founding of US National Environmental Movement Organizations, 1962–1998," *Social Problems* 58.3 (2011): 305–329.

39 Gale, Richard P., "From Sit-In to Hike-In: A Comparison of the Civil Rights and Environmental Movements," in *Social Behavior, Natural Resources and the Environment*, ed. William R. Burch, Neil H. Cheek and Lee Taylor (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 280–305.

and “post-material” values,<sup>40</sup> such increases in affluence at this time, combined with increased urbanisation and education, also stimulated changes in social values, lessening concern with materialism and generating interest in the quality of life, including environmental quality.<sup>41</sup> The picture of the *Earthrise*, taken during the first manned mission to orbit the moon in 1968, brought home to an increasingly receptive public, the importance of protecting this singularly beautiful planet.

The contemporary environmental movement was also ushered in with important legislative and governmental policy changes. Prior to 1970, the federal government’s role in environmental issues and policy had been mostly that of public lands manager.<sup>42</sup> This role aided both the conservationist and preservationist causes, as the government set aside some public land for full protection from human uses and other land for multiple use, including government-regulated extractive activities such as logging and mining. In the 1970s, however, the federal government began to take on a greater role by passing a plethora of legislation and developing environmental policy that was in line with the agenda of environmentalism. The National Environmental Policy Act (1969), the Clean Air Act (1970) and the Clean Water Act (1972), the best-publicised initiatives, were aimed directly at mitigating environmental damage, but conservation/preservation issues were also important in the policy and legislative initiatives at this time. Among the best-known examples are the Endangered Species Act (1973) and the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (1980), which promoted the protection of wildlife and set aside a vast portion of Alaska for protection.<sup>43</sup>

At the same time, traditional conservation/preservation organisations, like the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society, were aggressively battling threats to natural areas, and broadening their agendas to incorporate a variety of issues. Organisations began to use direct mail as a means of mobilisation in the 1960s and 1970s, leading to a rapid growth in membership and public

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40 Inglehart, Ronald, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

41 Hays, Samuel, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955–1985* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

42 Kraft, Michael E., and Norman J. Vig, “Environmental Policy from the 1970s to the Twenty-First Century,” in *Environmental Policy: New Directions for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Norman J. Vig and Michael E. Kraft (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 2003), 1–32.

43 Vig, Norman J., and Michael E. Kraft, ed., *Environmental Policy: New Directions for the Twenty-First Century* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2003).

awareness.<sup>44</sup> Legal changes enabled organisations to fight battles on several fronts, from congressional offices to courtrooms, where legal standing was becoming easier to achieve. Furthermore, new organisations, like the Environmental Defense Fund and the Natural Resources Defense Council, began to emerge, typically aided by foundation funding.<sup>45</sup>

The environmental movement has been considered one of the most successful movements of the twentieth century. While it has certainly not achieved many of its stated goals,<sup>46</sup> it has succeeded in building and maintaining a substantial organisational and public support base. It has likewise had a significant effect on the legal, political, educational and cultural milieu of the US.<sup>47</sup> The success of the movement, however, has also led to significant opposition—both from those who oppose environmental protection efforts<sup>48</sup> and from those who prefer a stronger or different focus of those efforts. The latter groups, those who have argued that the environmental movement has not gone far enough in promoting environmental protection or that the movement has neglected other aspects of environmental problems, namely social justice aspects, have come to represent a growing ideological current within the contemporary movement. This current can be labelled ‘ecologism’ to denote an even broader, more encompassing approach to environmental issues.

#### 4 The Rise of Ecologism

The environmental movement, like any social movement, is far from monolithic. Indeed, much of the success garnered by the environmental movement through its relatively large, national organisations has engendered criticism that the movement has compromised too much when addressing environmental protection and that many of the large environmental organisations have become ossified, overly bureaucratic, and co-opted by the political and business interests of the status quo. Such criticism has fuelled the development of a ‘radical fringe’, a group of organisations and activists that advocate direct action (e.g., spiking trees, destroying bulldozers) and espouse

44 Mitchell, Mertig, and Dunlap, “Twenty Years of Environmental Mobilization.”

45 Ibid.

46 Brulle, *Agency, Democracy, and Nature*.

47 Mertig, Dunlap, and Morrison, “The Environmental Movement;” Bosso, Christopher J., *Environment, Inc.: From Grassroots to Beltway* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005); Kline, *First Along the River*.

48 See, e.g., Brick, Phil, “Determined Opposition: The Wise Use Movement Challenges Environmentalism,” *Environment* 37.8 (1995): 17–20.

deep ecology, a philosophy grounded in self-identification with nature.<sup>49</sup> Deep ecology was first articulated by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, who argued that traditional environmental groups were too “shallow” and anthropocentric in their approach to environmental issues and that a “deeper” understanding of the inherent worth of nature needed to be developed.<sup>50</sup> Following a “deep ecological” approach, groups such as Earth First!, Earth Liberation Front and the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society have engaged in and condoned property damage in order to protect the environment for its own sake rather than for the sake of humans.<sup>51</sup> They argue that the environmental movement has not gone far enough in protecting the environment.

Another burgeoning area of activism within the movement claims that the environmental movement has not gone far enough in protecting people. While radical groups argue that the mainstream movement has lost sight of nature, these groups believe that the mainstream has lost sight of people. Grassroots groups fighting locally unwanted land uses (LULUS), such as toxic waste dumps or hazardous waste incinerators, have argued that the large organisations ignore their concerns in favour of more fashionable national and global issues (e.g., rainforest destruction or loss of biodiversity). Environmental justice activists have argued that the mainstream organisations have ignored issues of social justice.<sup>52</sup> Mainstream organisations are not only dominated by middle- and upper-class whites, but such organisations, it is argued, have ignored environmental issues faced by members of the working class and people of colour.

These relatively new wings of the movement, the radical and the grassroots groups, while having some antecedents, reflect a qualitatively different

49 Devall, Bill, “Deep Ecology and Radical Environmentalism,” in *American Environmentalism: The US Environmental Movement, 1970–1990*, ed. R.E. Dunlap and A.G. Mertig (Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis, 1992), 51–62.

50 Naess, Arne, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement,” *Inquiry* 16 (1973): 95–100.

51 See, e.g., Foreman, Dave, and Bill Haywood, ed., *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkey-wrenching* (Tucson: Ned Ludd, 1987); Manes, Christopher, *Green Rage: Radical Environmentalism and the Unmaking of Civilization* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990); Scarce, Rik, *Eco-Warriors: Understanding the Radical Environmental Movement* (Chicago: Noble Press, 1990).

52 Freudenberg, Nicholas, and Carol Steinsapir, “Not in Our Backyards: The Grassroots Environmental Movement,” in *American Environmentalism: The US Environmental Movement, 1970–1990*, ed. R.E. Dunlap and A.G. Mertig (Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis, 1992), 27–37; Bullard, Robert D., ed., *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots* (Boston: South End Press, 1993); Gottlieb, Robert, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993).

approach to environmental issues. In the latter part of the twentieth century, the environmental movement grew even more diverse in terms of the activists and organisations within its fold and in terms of ideological breadth. Looking at the historical sweep of ideological themes within the movement, we can discern, then, at least three broad themes: the conservationism/preservationism of the PCM, environmentalism, and ecologism. These three stages can really be seen as parts of one broad and continuously evolving movement aimed at protecting environmental quality.

Rather than divorcing itself from its predecessors, each stage in this broad trajectory incorporates the concerns and tactics it inherited from earlier stages into its own, expanded agenda. For instance, ecologism does not ignore issues of resource management, the hallmark of conservationism, nor does it reject tactics such as political lobbying. In fact, the evolution of the movement overall has been marked by a gradual broadening of issues and growth in the diversity of groups dealing with such issues.<sup>53</sup> While diversity exists in most mature social movements, and has been present in conservationism/environmentalism since the early split between Gifford Pinchot's utilitarian conservationists and John Muir's preservationists, the modern movement encompasses an extraordinary diversity of organisations, goals, ideologies and tactics. The scheme used here attempts to display the predominant characteristics of each stage, but it should be emphasised that substantial diversity exists at each stage, especially the third.

Table 1 juxtaposes the major characteristics of each stage of environmental activism, starting with the approximate beginnings of each one. Conservationism (which includes both conservationism and preservationism) dates to the late 19th century when the PCM emerged; environmentalism includes the bulk of the modern environmental movement that arose in the 1960s; and ecologism, it is argued, has emerged within the last few decades—partly in response to perceived weaknesses within mainstream environmentalism.

Social movement scholars distinguish movements (here, stages of one long-term movement) by their interrelated set of goals, ideologies and worldviews. Movement goals are the primary focus of action for activists; ideology is a broad statement of what the movement considers to be an 'ideal' state of affairs; and worldview is the lens through which activists perceive the world, in this case the natural world that they are attempting to protect. In fact, the major difference between ecologism and its forerunners is not so much in the types of issues it looks at, but rather in how it looks at them. Of special

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53 Brulle, *Agency, Democracy, and Nature*.

relevance is the distinction between an anthropocentric worldview, where humans are the centre of concern, and an ecocentric (or biocentric) worldview, where ecosystems, other species, and all life on earth are deemed important.

TABLE 2.1 *Three stages of environmental activism*

	Conservationism	Environmentalism	Ecologism
Approximate beginnings	Late 19th c.	Middle 20th c.	Late 20th c.
Primary Goals	Conservation of Natural Resources	Protection of Environmental Quality	Maintenance of Ecological Sustainability
Dominant Ideology	Natural resources should be used efficiently for the good of all society	Environmental quality should be protected for a high quality of life	Ecosystems should be protected for the benefit of all species
Worldview	Anthropocentric	Anthropocentric	Ecocentric
Nature of Issues	Geographically bounded (typically rural), specific, unambiguous	Geographically dispersed (often urban); delayed, subtle and indirect effects; potentially harmful to human health	Extremely diverse; systemic and synergistic effects; potentially irreversible and harmful to all life on Earth
Example	Over-logging of a specific forest area	Urban air and water pollution	Global environmental change
Cost of Solution	Relatively small, localized	Often substantial	Potentially infinite
Tactics	Lobbying	Lobbying, litigation, citizen participation	Lobbying, litigation, electoral action, direct action, lifestyle change
Opposition/Culprits	Natural resource industries; local economic interests (loggers, hunters)	Corporations, economic growth, modern lifestyles	Status Quo; excess human production, consumption, and population

Despite the efforts of preservationists such as John Muir, conservationism was predominantly anthropocentric because it emphasised the wise use of resources for human benefit. Similarly, environmentalism has also been largely anthropocentric in its emphasis on environmental quality as crucial for a high quality of human life. Concerns for human health, outdoor recreational opportunities and an aesthetically pleasing natural world were all motivated by an underlying concern with the welfare of humans—even though the natural environment often derived benefit from these concerns.

The recent emergence of ecologism, however, broadens earlier concerns by incorporating an ecocentric worldview largely stemming from the advent of deep ecology and radical environmentalism.<sup>54</sup> Adherents of ecologism believe that nature has a right to exist in and of itself, apart from human desires. Although this position existed in the PCM via John Muir and his followers, and was given new impetus by Aldo Leopold's 'land ethic' in the mid-1900s, only recently has it become a potent voice in the evolving movement. Advocates of ecologism hold as their primary goal the maintenance of ecological sustainability, for the entire earth and all of its inhabitants.<sup>55</sup> Even grassroots groups, who have often been derogatorily labelled as 'NIMBY' (Not-In-My-Backyard) groups, have become concerned with the sustainability of current production systems, as witnessed by the growing 'NIABY' (Not-In-Anyone's-Backyard) attitude.<sup>56</sup>

Social movements are further distinguished by the types of problems or issues that they address (their 'grievances'). The issues addressed by environmental activists have expanded over time, as environmental problems and society's awareness of them have grown. Not only has each stage seen new issues incorporated into a growing environmental agenda, but the issues themselves have been perceived quite differently over time. As modern technology and lifestyles have become more complex, the environmental problems they create have likewise increased in scale and complexity. Costs of solving environmental problems have also grown, reflecting a rapid change in the magnitude of the problems and our perceptions of them.

Conservationism typically dealt with specific and ostensibly unambiguous issues, such as the protection of particular forestlands from logging. Compare this to air and water pollution, a typical concern of environmentalism. Pollution can diffuse over a broad area, its sources are often ambiguous, and its

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54 Devall, Bill, "Deep Ecology."

55 Thiele, Leslie Paul, *Environmentalism for a New Millennium: The Challenge of Coevolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

56 Freudenberg, and Steinsapir, "Not in Our Backyards."



effects may be delayed and difficult to identify. In short, pollution is subtler than logging, and controlling or stopping it is typically more difficult and costly.

Ecologism incorporates an even wider range of issues, as well as a significantly different perception of these issues. Especially notable is a greater emphasis on both micro and macro concerns. At the micro level, grassroots groups around the country are mobilising protests against garbage incinerators and hazardous waste sites. Minorities in particular are mobilising against 'environmental racism', the practice of locating environmentally noxious facilities in their communities. At the macro level, ecologism is concerned with issues of international import, such as global climate change, ozone depletion and the destruction of rainforests. In addition, the growing radical wing of the movement, mentioned earlier, promotes an ecocentric worldview and an emphasis on global ecological sustainability. In fact, radical groups like Earth First!, as well as many of the grassroots groups, developed explicitly in reaction to what they refer to as the 'reform' environmentalism and 'shallow' ecology embodied by the mainstream national environmental organisations.

Ecologism thus focuses on a bigger picture than either environmentalism or conservationism. Ecologism broadens environmental concern in various ways, fighting on a greater number of fronts—from local to global—and viewing other species and ecosystems as having rights to exist independent of human interests. Concern for equity between species parallels a growth in concern for equity within the human race and across generations, as advocates of sustainable development attempt to rectify social injustice and poverty as well as environmental devastation throughout the world.

Ecologism entails an expanded critique of the status quo, based on a systemic and large-scale view of human impact on the natural environment. The pivotal concerns of ecologism are typically those that involve long-term, irreversible, synergistic and often unpredictable consequences of human actions. Global climate change and loss of biodiversity, for instance, are not only long-term and irreversible results of human actions, but they stem from an incredibly complex interplay of factors. While environmentalism has often addressed these issues, it has looked at them in a piecemeal fashion. Ecologism, on the other hand, views them in the context of the larger ecological-evolutionary global system. Advocates of ecologism talk about the end of nature, mass extinction and the halt of evolution—unless human practices are altered, and soon. The purported causes and consequences, as well as the costs needed to remedy them, are therefore truly colossal.

Key aspects of social movements are the types of tactics they utilise. Just as the issues have broadened, so have the tactics employed by environmen-

tal activists. Tactically, conservationists relied heavily and successfully on lobbying government officials (epitomised by Pinchot's influence with Theodore Roosevelt). The solution to resource problems, they felt, came with governmental and scientific management of resources. In addition to traditional lobbying, environmentalists added litigation, research and citizen participation to its repertoire, through the development of research- and legal-oriented groups as well as via letter writing campaigns and mass protests.<sup>57</sup>

Ecologism builds upon this tactical legacy—grassroots activists march and petition government officials, organisations engage in litigation and lobbying—but it increasingly employs more aggressive tactics such as consumer boycotts and various forms of 'direct action'. The growing radical wing of the movement is especially likely to engage in sit-ins, 'monkey-wrenching' of equipment and other forms of 'ecotage' (from pouring quick rice in the radiator of a bulldozer to ramming a drift-net ship on the high seas) that are disavowed by mainstream environmentalists intent on 'working within the system' in order to reform it.

Recent years have also seen a rapid growth in other forms of activism like electoral action. More and more organisations are becoming active in political campaigns, not only publicising candidates' records but publicly supporting selected candidates. In addition, advocates of ecologism, like their predecessors, promote lifestyle change, ranging from recycling and purchasing 'green' products, to reduced consumption and dietary changes. The tactics have clearly broadened and will likely continue to do so.

Finally, social movements can be distinguished by their opposition and the source of their grievances. Usually these are related, for those who benefit from environmentally harmful practices are most likely to oppose attempts to halt those practices. As our understanding of ecological problems has progressed, so has recognition of their embeddedness in the status quo. No longer are just a few 'robber barons' to blame for our problems; rather, we are essentially all responsible for contributing to environmental problems.

Conservationism laid the blame for resource depletion at the feet of a relatively small group of people, and thereby stimulated limited opposition. Environmentalism, in contrast, blamed entire industries, modern lifestyles and 'growthmania' in general, and in the process engendered broader opposition. Ecologism issues a critique that leaves few unscathed, for our entire species and the status quo (at least within industrialised nations) are to blame, albeit some aspects moreso than others. Simply reforming current practices via legislation is therefore unlikely to suffice. As a simple example, rather than

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57 Mitchell, Mertig, and Dunlap, "Twenty Years of Environmental Mobilization."

favouring installation of scrubbers on factory smokestacks to reduce pollutants, advocates of ecologism argue for alternative production techniques or giving up the product completely. Because the economic and social costs of halting human-induced environmental change could prove enormous, and leave little of modern life untouched, ecologism has the potential of stimulating enormous opposition.

## 5 Ecologism and Global Climate Change

Global climate change represents one of the most, if not the most, encompassing environmental problems faced by humanity. As noted above, it fits squarely within the emerging perspective of ‘ecologism.’ The environmental movement has been criticised heavily, especially from within its own ranks, for not doing enough to address global climate change.<sup>58</sup> The political partisanship that has invaded environmental issues in the US since the 1980s has been especially pronounced in debates over global climate change, with Republicans nearly unilaterally opposing efforts at mitigation. Coupled with the adversarial nature of the political system in the US, this partisanship has essentially stymied strong, comprehensive environmental movement activity in this arena.<sup>59</sup> Environmental organisations, according to Bryner,<sup>60</sup> have been well-suited for addressing fairly specific environmental problems and blocking bad policies but they have been largely incapable of pushing a larger agenda or in tackling the major social transformation that would be required to address “energy production and use, the major driver of modern life”.

However, the environmental movement has played a substantial role in keeping the issue in front of policy makers and the public. The movement was first engaging issues of global climate change in the 1970s, as scientists were increasingly positing that humans could have a substantial impact on Earth’s

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58 Shellenberger, Michael, and Ted Nordhaus, “The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World,” published 2004, accessed March 1, 2013. [www.thebreakthrough.org/images/Death\\_of\\_Environmentalism.pdf](http://www.thebreakthrough.org/images/Death_of_Environmentalism.pdf); see also Brick, Philip, and R. McGreggor Cawley, “Producing Political Climate Change: The Hidden Life of US Environmentalism,” *Environmental Politics* 17.2 (2008): 200–218; Bryner, Gary, “Failure and Opportunity: Environmental Groups in US Climate Change Policy,” *Environmental Politics* 17.2 (2008): 319–336.

59 Bryner, “Failure and Opportunity.”

60 *Ibid.*, 330.

climate.<sup>61</sup> Environmental organisations were instrumental in taking scientific information and disseminating it to the public, gradually increasing public awareness of this issue. There is evidence that environmental organisations (as well as other advocates such as Al Gore) have played an important role in fashioning public opinion with regard to global climate change<sup>62</sup> and ‘framing’ the debate to make the issue more accessible to the lay public.<sup>63</sup> Framing activities, combined with traditional movement activity, are absolutely essential for providing “a more diverse foundation for developing future strategies.”<sup>64</sup>

In addition to the important but often ‘hidden’ framing activities of the movement,<sup>65</sup> groups within the movement have been extensively involved in efforts to change policy and behaviours, often at the sub-national level.<sup>66</sup> Several organisations have incorporated global climate change as a central issue, have been involved in international climate change negotiations, and have engaged in alliances with states, communities, businesses and labour unions to address climate change issues. As Moser<sup>67</sup> notes, “momentum is quietly building in the shadow of federal inaction”. While the movement has not been successful at prompting federal action on global climate change, it has been successful in building up ‘grassroots’ activity at other levels. Indeed, scholars have discerned the emergence of a new ‘climate justice’ movement.<sup>68</sup> This movement attempts to incorporate the mainstream discourse of environmentalism with a focus on social justice issues—a combination that fits even more squarely into the ‘ecologism’ frame noted above. Jamison<sup>69</sup> even notes that this new movement is marked by a greater willingness to engage in civil disobedience and direct action. In fact, the Sierra Club, one of the oldest environmental organisations in the US, recently decided to take part in its first act of civil disobedience—an act meant to target global climate change by engaging

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61 Moser, Susanne C., “In the Long Shadows of Inaction: The Quiet Building of a Climate Protection Movement in the United States,” *Global Environmental Politics* 7.2 (2007): 124–144; Jamison, Andrew, “Climate Change Knowledge and Social Movement Theory,” *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews-Climate Change* 1.6 (2010): 811–823.

62 Brulle, Robert J., Jason Carmichael, and J. Craig Jenkins, “Shifting Public Opinion on Climate Change: An Empirical Assessment of Factors Influencing Concern over Climate Change in the U.S., 2002–2010,” *Climatic Change* 114.2 (2012): 169–188.

63 Brick, and Cawley, “Producing Political Climate Change.”

64 *Ibid.*, 216.

65 *Ibid.*,

66 Moser, “In the Long Shadows of Inaction.”

67 *Ibid.*, 140.

68 *Ibid.*; Jamison, “Climate Change Knowledge.”

69 Jamison, “Climate Change Knowledge.”

in deliberately unlawful trespass to protest the construction of the Keystone XL oil pipeline.<sup>70</sup>

## 6 Conclusions

In 1892, the fledgling Sierra Club held as its motto “to explore, enjoy, and render accessible the mountain regions of the Pacific Coast [...] to enlist the support and cooperation of the people and the government in preserving the forests and other natural features of the Sierra Nevada Mountains”.<sup>71</sup> Currently, the Sierra Club’s motto is to “Explore, Enjoy and Protect the *Planet*” (emphasis added).<sup>72</sup> This transformation amply demonstrates the extent to which the American Environmental Movement has broadened its slate of concerns and become active in global issues. Although local, regional and national issues are still addressed by organisations and activists within the movement, the movement has become integrally connected to and involved in issues of planetary significance. Global climate change, as well as issues such as biodiversity loss, has been an especially powerful impetus in this regard. The Sierra Club, for instance, has developed an “International Climate Program”. The Sierra Club is, of course, not alone in exhibiting this transformation. Numerous environmental organizations in the US have developed international programs while many of the newer ones developed explicitly with international agendas (e.g., Conservation International). Even newer organizations (like, for example, 350.org) have developed explicitly as internationally focused organizations addressing global climate change. Perhaps the time has come when we can reference the movement as the Global Environmental Movement rather than referring to—aside from historical accounts—an American or any other national level environmental movement. Of course, the American environmental movement, as with any national level phenomenon, has always influenced and been influenced by international factors (for example, the influence of European romantics in the 1800s, the development of international treaties in the 1970s), despite

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70 Merritt, Judith Lewis, “Sierra Club Fights Keystone XL with Civil Disobedience,” *High Country News*, February 18, 2013, accessed February 22, 2013. <http://www.hcn.org/issues/45.3/sierra-club-fights-keystone-xl-with-civil-disobedience>.

71 Sierra Club, “About the Sierra Club,” accessed April 5, 2014. <http://www.sierraclub.org/aboutus/>.

72 Ibid.

our prior attempts to compartmentalise.<sup>73</sup> We are, however, now at a juncture when the global nature of environmentalism is much more palpable.

In sum, the environmental movement has come a long way both organisationally and ideologically. What was early on a movement of conservationists and preservationists has expanded into a movement of environmentalists, ecologists and global climate change activists. As environmental problems have become apparently more complex, it has had to evolve to tackle ever more nebulous and potentially devastating issues. While observers may feel that the movement has not had great success lately, we need to keep in mind that successful movements wax and wane. Successful movements, while outwardly declining, are often working 'behind the scenes', building alliances and framing issues. Ultimately, these activities help to pave the way for future, more large-scale successes—and that is what is needed if we are going to successfully challenge global climate change.

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73 Tyrell, Ian, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," *The American Historical Review* 96.4 (1991): 1031–1055.