

FORUM: DISCOVERING THE ENVIRONMENT

Three Eras of Environmental Concern

Christopher Sellers

The capacious reach of the term “environment” has served the project of environmental history well. But its expansiveness is of limited use when we seek to explain ebbs and flows in public support for environmental causes, agencies, and laws. At any given moment in history, what “the environment” meant for most Americans was not nearly so abstract or pliable as it has proven for environmental historians. The historical arc of modern Americans’ commitments to environmental protection spans three distinctive eras, each with its own reservoirs of popularity as well as its own tactics, challenges, successes, and failures. Only by penetrating beneath the surface continuities between these eras, to plumb just how different the engagements of each were, can we better understand when and how the modern cause of “the environment” was born.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, talk about “the environment” had little of its later coherence or political meaning. Instead, Americans grouped and pursued what we would now identify as environmental concerns quite separately and indeed often found them at odds. Take, for instance, two initiatives that seem classically “environmental”: creating and protecting national parks, and cleaning up the water people drank. John Muir and his Sierra Club members—then a tiny group based almost entirely in California—famously found themselves pitted against San Francisco residents’ own quest for a reservoir of clean water: what that battle over the damming of Yosemite’s Hetch Hetchy Valley in the 1910s was all about. In this era, the places sparring over by preservationists, like Muir, and conservationists, like the first Chief of the U.S. Forest Service Gifford Pinchot, seemed worlds apart from the places that so-called sanitation or public health advocates worried about.¹ Though mostly residing in cities, those concerned with national parks or natural resource depletion set their sights primarily on a distant countryside and its rural, often local consumers, whether of fish and game or timber or minerals. Public health workers, by contrast, sought to shield people from infectious diseases that spread mainly in human settlements, in cities and towns. The clearest forerunners to environmental concerns about industrial contaminants meanwhile ran through the nation’s factories, where workers were falling sick from myriad chemical exposures. Wishful retrospectives of some historians aside, those who pushed for greater attention to this problem, like the occupational health pioneer Alice Hamilton, saw their work as distinct from the public health mainstream,

¹Historical work reflects this siloing: on conservation, Char Miller, *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC, 2001); Robert W. Righter, *The Battle over Hetch Hetchy: America’s Most Controversial Dam and the Birth of Modern Environmentalism* (New York, 2006); Stephen Fox, *The American Conservation Movement: John Muir and His Legacy* (Madison, WI, 1985); John Duffy, *The Sanitarians: A History of American Public Health* (Urbana, IL, 1992); on public health, see Nancy Tomes, *The Gospel of Germs: Men, Women, and the Microbe in American Life* (Cambridge, MA, 1999); James Colgrove, *Epidemic City: The Politics of Public Health in New York* (New York, 2011). Recently, Benjamin Johnson and other historians overcame this division simply by ignoring any historical differences and assuming that conservation was nearly identical to later movements on behalf of “the environment”; Benjamin Heber Johnson, *Escaping the Dark, Gray City: Fear and Hope in Progressive-Era Conservation* (New Haven, CT, 2017).

and utterly removed from the causes of preservationists or conservationists like Muir and Pinchot.²

Which of these separate initiatives was most popular? No one was taking polls, and lay groups were certainly active in all, from hiking clubs to anti-tuberculosis societies to labor unions. But it strikes this historian as a safe bet that it was neither conservationism nor Muir's preservationism. Workers facing dangerous toxins or dust undoubtedly felt more strongly about those, and the immediate, often deadly threat of infections—then still the country's greatest killers—likely inspired the broadest and most motivated constituency. But in all these arenas, especially by the 1910s and 1920s, popular involvement began to look more shallow and localized, as government agencies and professional experts gained greater charge of all three types of environments—factories, cities and towns, and rural public lands.

A second era of environmental concern began after World War II, when the modern idea of “environmental protection” as a public and political commitment first coalesced. As threats to health from DDT and other chemical pollutants came to be closely linked and intertwined with the loss of natural lands, the umbrella term “the environment” was first formulated and politicized. Advocacy of environmental protection then easily found traction. By the mid-1960s, when pollsters first asked about environmental concerns, mass interest was already there. It peaked in 1970, when 82 percent of Americans ranked pollution control as first on their list of priorities for federal spending—an all-time high for any environmental issue.³ That same year, the first Earth Day mushroomed into what was by some measures the nation's biggest mass protest to date, bringing out what organizers estimated to be some twenty million people to events across the country.⁴

Why this explosion of concern? The reasons Rachel Carson gave in 1962 about why Americans *should* be interested—the post-World War II rise of a petrochemical industry and the nuclear threat—deserve an important place in any explanation.⁵ Dissemination of ideas from the science of ecology, key innovations in the health sciences, and a growing understanding of environmental causes of cancer—now the nation's second most deadly disease—also contributed. In certain parts of the country the problems became unmistakable, from thickening smog in cities such as Los Angeles to a burning river in Cleveland to groundwater contamination afflicting places like New York's Long Island.⁶ Government offices and expert agencies—created to tackle various problems from natural resource and recreation management to public health and industrial hygiene—of course betrayed glaring gaps, omissions, and inattention in their priorities. But by the 1960s, Americans had begun to group a host of problems together as “environmental” in part because of how many shared daily experiences with them.

Here, the postwar migration to suburbs proved a critical turning point. Homeownership outside cities brought millions face-to-face with threats both to nearby natural lands and from industrial chemicals, hence, dangers to their own and their families' health. It may seem strange at first to consider the suburbs around the nation's largest and fastest growing cities as birthplaces of modern environmentalism. Environmental activists, after all, often had bitter things to

²For instance, Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington, DC, 2005). I offer another less projective take on what industrial hygiene had to do with later environmental health science in Christopher C. Sellers, *Hazards of the Job: From Industrial Disease to Environmental Health Science* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997).

³Arvin W. Murch, “Public Concern for Environmental Pollution,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1971): 100–6; Hazel Erskine, “The Polls: Pollution and Its Costs,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (Spring 1972): 120–35.

⁴Adam Rome, “The Genius of Earth Day,” *Environmental History* 15, no. 2 (April 2010): 194–205.

⁵Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York, 1962).

⁶Christopher C. Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature and the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012).

say about “suburbia.”⁷ But even as political elites, unions, and scientific experts pushed for more urban and regional planning as well as pollution control, and as youth at universities took up the cause of ecology in the late 1960s, polls nevertheless showed that white, middle-class suburbanites were the heartiest supporters of environmental protection.⁸ For many, suburban migration meant not just a departure from a city but an embrace of more natural surroundings and open space. Beyond the established protections of urban governments or incorporated villages, less elite suburbs especially often bore the largest burdens of unregulated sprawl, as nearby privately owned forests and meadows were razed for gas stations, subdivisions, or factories. If the early postwar pushes for “nature conservancy” emanated mostly from elite suburbanites, the migration of businesses to the suburbs foisted a host of new industry-made chemicals especially upon owners of smaller homes and lots. As the fight to conserve local nature became yoked to that against phosphate detergents, pesticides, and industrial emissions, the unified agenda of “environmental protection,” and a more popular and powerful new movement, were born. With chemical pollution made the new priority, environmental worries percolated through middle- and lower-middle-class white suburbs and even crossed racial lines, with city dwellers joining in.⁹

Support for environmental protections stayed elevated after this moment—often drawing a majority of Americans—but environmental concern has never again reached the sky-high readings it enjoyed in the 1960s and early 1970s. Since then it has fluctuated a great deal and mostly ranked lower in priority than other perennial concerns about wars or the economy. From the mid-1970s, it cracked at best into Americans’ top ten or occasionally their top five worries.¹⁰ Historical developments in the late twentieth century began to limit just how fervid popular support for any environmental concern could turn.

This final sea change came in the wake of the far-reaching triumph of environmental laws in the 1970s and the creation of a myriad of new agencies through which the federal government stepped up its role in environmental governance. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), for instance, became the overseer of regional air or water pollution and pesticides, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) of workplace hazards. A National Environmental Policy Act required environmental assessments of federally funded projects like dams. In parallel, new veins of environmental and “ecological” professionalism and expertise also consolidated. And as environmental advocacy groups, businesses, and other organized interests trained their sights increasingly on those administrative and legal proceedings through which state and federal environmental policy were now made, grassroots foundations for environmental causes corroded. Increasingly, their pursuit came through expert or professional work rather than local or neighborhood campaigns. The array of issues deemed “environmental” did grow steadily; yet more of the newer worries emanated from fieldwork, modeling, and the labs of scientists, rather than from the backyards of everyday citizens. From energy crises to acid rain to global warming, from environmental carcinogenesis to shrinking biodiversity, late twentieth century environmental concerns often had a delocalized geography, not so clearly linked to the grievances of particular neighborhoods or lay-people. Exceptions, as when minority or working-class homeowners complained about nearby hazardous wastes, clenched what

⁷Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge, UK, 2001).

⁸Erskine, “The Polls,” 120.

⁹Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible*; Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945–1980* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1995); David Stradling and Richard Stradling, *Where the River Burned: Carl Stokes and the Struggle to Save Cleveland* (Ithaca, NY, 2015); Robert R. Gioielli, *Environmental Activism and the Urban Crisis: Baltimore, St. Louis, Chicago* (Philadelphia, 2014).

¹⁰Riley E. Dunlap and Rik Scarce, “Poll Trends: Environmental Problems and Protection,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 651–72; Matthew C. Nisbet and Teresa Myers, “Trends: Twenty Years of Public Opinion about Global Warming,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (Jan. 2007): 444–70.

was increasingly the rule. Environmental experts and officials now cast this mobilizing as NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard)-ism, ignoring its resemblances to earlier mass mobilizations that had driven the creation of those niches in which they themselves now worked.

This late-century regime of environmental agencies, experts, and advocates soon became a convenient nemesis for what Samuel Hays termed “the environmental opposition.”¹¹ Businessmen and industrialists who felt blind-sided by all the new public demands and constraints on their operations funded think tanks to ramp up the scrutiny and criticism of federal environmental regulators.¹² Neoconservative politicians wielded attacks on the environmental state in the hope of cementing new coalitions between suburban and rural voters, especially in parts of the country where the environmental mobilizations of the 1950s and 1960s had lagged. One strand of coalition-building emerged in the Mountain West, where a so-called Sagebrush rebellion among ranchers, miners, and other larger property owners rode to political power in the 1970s and joined up with suburban politicians like Anne Gorsuch, who railed against regional planners’ disrespect for “property rights.”¹³ Another strand of anti-environmentalism ran through the South. There, traditional Democratic dominance was in flux, and Republicans like Newt Gingrich forged a similar coalition by launching attacks on the EPA and OSHA, to successfully expand their party’s power.¹⁴

This anti-environmental, largely Republican politics pitted its growing might against an increasingly interracial environmental movement between the 1980s and 2000s. As better-off African Americans moved to suburbs of their own, civil rights groups spearheading the movement for “environmental justice” struck tentative if sometimes reluctant alliances with white environmentalists. The latter, maintaining bases in many suburbs but ever more concerned about fossil fuel burning as they embraced the issue of climate change, began to lose traction in newer white suburbs even while gaining black allies. Across the Southeast especially, black politicians elected by black majority districts increasingly became the voice of southern environmental advocacy. In Georgia, for instance, starting with Atlanta’s 5th District won by John Lewis in 1986 and into the first two decades of the twenty-first century, black Congressmen served as the state’s foremost pro-environmental voices in Washington.¹⁵

This last era of environmental concern has been distinguished by at least one other major factor: the narratives that have prevailed over the past few decades about the history of environmentalism itself. Too often, rather than reckoning with those mid-century mobilizations that actually gave us our modern notions of “environmental protection,” its would-be historians keep projecting the birth of environmentalism backward in time. But locating its “birth” in a turn-of-the-century elite-led movement for conservation, as many continue to do, obscures just how much of a social and political break that mid-century movement represented. Turning far more participatory and bottom-up, absorbing concerns about bodily dangers that conservationists had long downplayed, it effectively nourished nature advocacy among millions more Americans. As later generations of environmentalists and climate activists have struggled to revive its popularity, an understanding of this upwelling focused mainly on visionary leaders like Carson or David Brower has also not helped. Flattering the conceits of today’s environmental elites and making for personable stories, this approach disguises just how little such a movement owed to any one writer or leader. To successfully overturn the recent

¹¹Samuel P. Hays, *A History of Environmental Politics since 1945* (Pittsburgh, PA, 2000).

¹²Aaron M. McCright and Riley E. Dunlap, “Defeating Kyoto: The Conservative Movement’s Impact on U.S. Climate Change Policy,” *Social Problems* 50, no. 3 (2003): 348–73; Jason Stahl, *Right Moves: The Conservative Think Tank in American Political Culture since 1945* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2016).

¹³R. McGregor Cawley, *Federal Land, Western Anger: The Sagebrush Rebellion and Environmental Politics* (Lawrence, KS, 1993).

¹⁴Christopher Sellers, “How Republicans Came to Embrace Anti-Environmentalism,” *Vox*, June 7, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2017/4/22/15377964/republicans-environmentalism> (accessed Oct. 30, 2017).

¹⁵*Ibid.*

astonishingly hostile takeover of our country's environmental state, we need to look at the other side to environmentalism's history: those many less-heralded individuals who "sold" environmental protection to their neighbors and across local communities, whose past participation offers a more auspicious prelude to political groundswells to come.

Christopher Sellers is a professor of history and director of the Center for the Study of Inequalities, Social Justice, and Policy at Stony Brook University. His research concentrates on the history of environment and health, of cities and industries, and of inequality and democracy, with a focus on the United States and Mexico. He holds a Ph.D. in American studies from Yale and an M.D. from the University of North Carolina; among his numerous grants, fellowships, and awards are those from the Wilson Center, the National Science Foundation, the National Humanities Center, and the National Library of Medicine. His latest book is *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature and Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012), and he is currently finishing a history of inequality, democracy, and environmental politics in Atlanta, and an in-depth comparative and transnational study of the history of industrial hazards in Mexico and the United States from the twentieth into the twenty-first century.