



The United States: A Foreword

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The historian Samuel Hayes has written that the “environmental drive in modern society stems from new human values about what people want in their lives.”¹ In America, this drive has been discernible since the late 19th century, when technological advances and the industrial economy led to markedly improved living standards, giving birth to a leisure class. As recreational activities like hunting, fishing, and hiking became popular, especially with affluent urbanites in rapidly expanding cities who sought to reconnect with the country’s rural heritage, this new leisure class soon became concerned about overexploitation of the country’s forests and wildlife, and began advancing a philosophy of “conservation,” the sustainable use of natural resources. The federal government, prompted by the growing trend toward outdoor leisure pursuits, started establishing national parks and wildlife refuges in the early decades of the twentieth century. Meanwhile, the conservation ethic was vigorously incorporated into public policies after being strongly embraced by President Theodore Roosevelt (an avid outdoorsman) and other government officials.

By the middle of the twentieth century, as the country grew more prosperous, the environmental drive expanded to include wilderness preservation, a nature-centric movement that advocated setting aside forests and mountains for their aesthetic beauty and ecological properties. This cause, championed by many national environmental groups whose memberships consisted largely of affluent whites, led to the 1964 Wilderness Act, a federal statute that defined wildernesses as areas where “man is a visitor who does not remain” and set aside millions of acres as nature sanctuaries.

The late 1960s saw the creation of another strand of environmentalism, as increasing evidence of pollution caught America’s attention and people started linking public health to environmental quality. Decades of steady modernization and unbridled economic growth had brought higher-paying jobs and material comforts to a growing middle class; many now expected clean air and water and a healthy environment for their children. But cities, beaches, and parks had become intolerably foul as a result of industrial waste and car exhaust. In addition, wildlife began

dying off because of indiscriminate spraying of pesticides across the land. Several infamous incidents from this era crystallized the view of generalized environmental decay: a river in Cleveland burst into flames after chemicals dumped into its water ignited, for example, and the coast of Santa Barbara, California, was blackened by an oil spill.

New environmental groups that emerged to address these alarming problems mobilized average citizens, who had already become increasingly politicized by societal changes and the controversial Vietnam War. On April 22, 1970, 20 million Americans took to the streets around the nation to demonstrate their concerns about the environment and their health. Many participated in volunteer trash cleanups, planted trees, and protested in front of the offices of major oil companies. This event, now referred to as Earth Day 1, marked the arrival of the contemporary environmental movement, which merged ecological concerns with those of human health—a connection later popularly described as the “web of life.”

Politicians quickly got the message. In a burst of activity the U.S. Congress enacted a raft of landmark environmental laws that President Richard Nixon said would “help repair the damage we have done to our air, to our water, and to our land.” New federal agencies were created to enforce the new laws and carry out further environmental protections.

Since then, nature appreciation, ecological awareness, and pollution prevention have formed the core tenets of mainstream environmentalism in America. It is a movement whose values have been expressed on both the personal and political levels, influencing individual habits (as in recycling) and public policy (in measures ranging from the safeguarding of endangered species to the regulation of industrial pollution). In recent years, the environmental movement has widened its purview to include everyday quality-of-life issues. Middle-class Americans, for example, have become distressed by the increasing “sprawl” in their communities—poorly planned housing and commercial developments that have congested their highways with traffic and eaten up treasured open space. The disenchantment is so widespread that many have been moving to less crowded states where open space is still abundant and where they can enjoy greater exposure to nature, a deeply embedded “environmental drive.”

Still, for all its broad appeal, environmentalism has failed to develop a platform that can unify conservationists and social justice advocates. Instead the movement has become balkanized into competing groups with competing messages: some groups continue to focus their efforts largely on preserving nature, while others emphasize the dangers of environmental contaminants to human communities. To a large degree, this schism reflects the competing groups’ constituencies and their differing agendas. The nature groups are mostly national in scope, and their members are still mainly affluent whites who care about issues like biodiversity and sustainable development. The groups most concerned with pollution are localized, and often based in

low-income, minority neighborhoods, where the residents live in close proximity to factories or dumps (and sometimes both).

If it is true, as Hayes asserts, that the country's "environmental drive" reflects what Americans "want in their lives," then it would appear that America today has two distinctly separate sets of environmental values—one that is expressed in ecological terms, the other in human health terms. The U.S. environmental movement splits along this divide not because of disagreement over these two environmental values but because they have been treated unequally on the political and policy levels.

The two case studies in this chapter bear this view out. One covers a small town in the Louisiana bayou where over a million barrels of oil field waste were dumped in pits, sickening the residents. The other involves the Arizona desert, where the world's largest "sustainable" housing project was built with energy-saving and water-conserving features.

The common thread between the two cases is energy. One is about the idealistic mission of saving it; the other is about its toxic byproducts and the people who have to live with them. The Tucson study exposes the perverse ironies within one dominant school of environmentalism, in that it shows how some popular environmental values and projects are divorced from the problems they purport to address. Similarly, the Louisiana study exposes serious gaps within the social-justice-oriented environmentalism that has arisen in recent decades, and the fact that these health-related environmental values have not included recognition of a certain class of people and the environmental problems they have faced.

Concerns over oil scarcity and global warming are triggering a new wave of angst over energy-related issues in the United States today. The Arizona and Louisiana case studies presented in the chapter that follows are instructive lessons for the larger debate over energy—that is, how to both conserve it and produce it. The first step is to revisit key policies from 1980 that, coincidentally, set the stage for the unfolding events in both case studies. This was the year the U.S. Congress passed a law protecting a hundred million remote acres in Alaska from development, including 19.6 million acres officially designated as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The law, a reflection of continuing support for wilderness and biological preserves, a hallmark of the American environmental movement, closed the refuge, which contains oil reserves under its coastal plain, to oil and gas exploration. In ensuing years, the refuge would become an iconic symbol for environmentalists, who have periodically battled attempts by oil companies and their supporters to open it to exploration.

In 1980, Congress also approved an amendment exempting oil field waste from being regulated as a hazardous substance under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA), passed in 1976. That act had required that the transportation and disposal of industrial hazardous wastes be tracked and monitored. In addi-

tion to petroleum, oil drilling produces a watery soup of toxic chemicals, such as arsenic, lead, mercury, hydrogen sulfide, and benzene, but the petroleum industry argued that the health effects of such waste were unclear and that federal regulations would be too costly to their operations and even slow down the domestic production of oil. Their lobbying won the day, and in some states, like oil- and gas-rich Louisiana, where officials have historically exercised lax oversight of industry, indiscriminate dumping of oil field waste in one community would go on unchecked for years.

Also in 1980 this same Congress created a historic environmental program, known as Superfund, to clean up abandoned toxic waste sites around the country. Sites with oil field wastes, notably, were not included. Nonetheless, the Superfund law gave impetus to a grassroots movement already underway that was known as the “anti-toxics” campaign—community groups fighting the disposal of toxic waste in their neighborhoods. The issue of toxic waste as a health concern had exploded into public view a few years earlier, when a group of outraged mothers in the Love Canal section of Buffalo, learned that their community had been built atop a 20,000-ton chemical waste dump, leading to a spate of strange, unexplained illnesses among residents. One resident in particular, Lois Gibbs, won national fame for leading her fellow residents in the search for accountability; she would go on to establish an effective network of community groups engaged in similar battles around the country, a precursor to the grassroots environmental justice movement that emerged in the 1990s, which has sought to remedy the disproportionate placement of landfills, toxic waste sites, and factories in minority communities.

Meanwhile, in the Arizona desert, 1980 was the year that a group of university researchers, solar power advocates, and eco-friendly developers sketched out their vision for the Tucson Solar Village, an environmentally sustainable community that was to supply all its energy needs through solar power. During the sixteen years that passed before the idea took root, the solar component was deemphasized, and the building design was remodeled in New Urbanist fashion, as a pedestrian-friendly townscape that encouraged social interaction and neighborhood ties, civic virtues that, many Americans were beginning to feel, had been lost with the onset of sprawl. The ecologically conscious residents who would move here came because of their desire to live more harmoniously with nature and be part of a healthy, vibrant community.

In 1980, as all these events started to play out, the two faces of American environmentalism were becoming increasingly distinct from each other: upwardly mobile, white Americans were searching for a higher quality of life that included a deeper connection with nature, while less economically advantaged Americans in blue-collar towns, inner cities, and backwater bayous were coming to grips with the fact that society’s waste products were now contaminating their community.

The paired studies in this chapter illustrate those two faces of American environmentalism—how they were expressed on an individual and public policy level, as well as how their differing environmental values shaped the outcomes of the two cases.

Note

1. Samuel P. Hayes, *A History of Environmental Politics Since 1945* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 22.