

# U.S. Environmentalism since 1945

A Brief History with Documents

Steven Stoll



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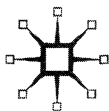
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U.S. ENVIRONMENTALISM SINCE 1945: A BRIEF HISTORY  
WITH DOCUMENTS by Steven Stoll

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## Foreword

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The Bedford Series in History and Culture is designed so that readers can study the past as historians do.

The historian's first task is finding the evidence. Documents, letters, memoirs, interviews, pictures, movies, novels, or poems can provide facts and clues. Then the historian questions and compares the sources. There is more to do than in a courtroom, for hearsay evidence is welcome, and the historian is usually looking for answers beyond act and motive. Different views of an event may be as important as a single verdict. How a story is told may yield as much information as what it says.

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Lynn Hunt  
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Natalie Zemon Davis  
Ernest R. May



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## Preface

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By the end of World War II, Americans' relationship with nature had changed dramatically. New consumption patterns drove an industrial economy that exploited the earth in new ways, while the atomic age heightened Americans' awareness of the earth's fragility. During the postwar period, the environmental movement took shape throughout the country in innumerable local organizations as well as in national campaigns against pollution and economic development. Environmentalists reshaped the physical and ideological landscape of the United States, improved the health of its citizens, compelled the government to enact new legislation, and contributed to the major debates about natural resources, energy, the science of ecology, and the meaning of progress. This collection of primary sources illustrates the development and growth of the environmental movement in the United States since 1945 and illustrates its central voices, positions, and goals.

Part One, the introductory essay, presents a brief history of U.S. environmentalism and ties it to some of the pivotal events in U.S. history since 1945. The introduction begins with a discussion of the philosophical origins of the movement in nineteenth-century romanticism and explains how our modern conception of nature emerged in response to the revolutionary and industrial upheaval of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It traces the influence of romantic thought through the work of its most important American contributors—Thomas Cole, Henry David Thoreau, and John Muir. It also helps readers understand the historic dynamics of postwar America that expanded environmentalism's singular focus on protecting wild spaces into a broad, diverse movement that addressed issues such as growth, consumer habits, pollution, food safety, biological interdependence, climate change, and environmental justice, all of which relate fundamentally to consumption. The introduction emphasizes the impact of the protests of the 1960s on the environmental movement and the role of the federal government in enacting sweeping



environmental legislation during the 1960s and 1970s. It also addresses the objections of anti-environmentalists, whose concerns about the economic impact of environmental policies have spawned powerful lobbies.

The thirty documents in Part Two are organized thematically to illustrate the issues outlined in the introduction. While they cannot possibly include every important strand of environmental thought or activism, they do demonstrate the breadth of the movement and reflect the thoughts and actions of people throughout American society—from the citizens of Santa Barbara coming to terms with an unprecedented oil spill to the citizens of the fictional nation of Ecotopia; from Mexican farmworkers resisting pesticide poisoning to a First Lady of the United States advocating beautification projects; from the neighborhood activists of polluted Love Canal, New York, to the members of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Each document is introduced by a headnote that provides context and key information. To facilitate classroom discussion and inspire further study, this volume also includes five illustrations, a chronology of key events, a list of questions to consider, and a selected bibliography.

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Steven Stoll

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## PART ONE

# **Introduction: The Rise of U.S. Environmentalism**

On July 16, 1945, a six-kilogram sphere of plutonium exploded over the New Mexico desert with a force equal to 20,000 tons of dynamite. It was not only the magnitude of the bomb that made it different from any other, but also its effects. Radioactive fallout traveled on the wind, thinning out over a large region during the following week. Twenty miles from the test site, it exposed a family to nearly lethal levels of radiation, and sensors detected it two hundred miles from the test site after four days. Then, on August 6 and 9, the United States dropped nuclear bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing 105,000 people. In Hiroshima, 45,000 died almost instantly, and 20,000 others died during the following four months. Radioactive plumes shot high into the atmosphere, where they diffused in the high air currents, subjecting every rain forest, arctic tundra, Pacific atoll, arid basin, coastal forest, and alpine range; every city, suburb, and rural county; and every human on earth to low but continuing levels of radiation. Nuclear weapons released levels of radiation that had never existed on earth before, to which no organism or community had ever been exposed. The threat of fallout represented a new and disturbing kind of human unity, one in which the fate of all people became intertwined with the fate of the earth under the new regime of technological warfare.

During the half-century following these events, environmentalism emerged in the United States as both a philosophy and a political movement. Though it had many points of origin, diverse supporters and contributors, and no single goal, environmentalism, in almost all of its forms, expressed the belief that industrial production and its consequent patterns of consumption created ecological instability that brought into question the viability of modern societies. At different times and in a variety of ways, environmentalists demanded redress for the tendency of industrial economies to waste resources, chemically poison people and landscapes, consume space in the countryside, create garbage, and increase population. Environmentalists also sought to redefine human society itself as a subset of the global environment. Environmentalism cannot be understood without its nineteenth-century antecedents, but as a movement it did not appear until after 1945, when earlier concerns over pollution and wilderness merged with a rising global conception of an imperiled human future (page 3). By the 1970s, environmentalism consisted of many simultaneous concerns, which can be summarized as follows:

- A philosophy that identifies wild landscapes with wholeness and aesthetic beauty and asserts that such landscapes, along with their plant and animal species, possess an inherent value beyond any economic value.
- The legal protection of environments and species to prevent them from being absorbed into the industrial economy.
- The conviction that industrial societies, in their present form, are incompatible with natural systems and that human progress lies in the increasing knowledge and understanding of how best to live as members of plant and animal communities.
- A critique of excessive consumption, overpopulation, pollution, and destructive technology, such as nuclear weapons and chemical pesticides.
- The extension of human rights to include the right to clean and healthful homes and neighborhoods.

This book presents a wide range of documents that reflect the perspectives of the various people and organizations that shaped post-war environmentalism in the United States. The diverse documentary record of environmentalism reveals the movement's wide variety of political and social goals. In order to document the history of environmentalism, however, we must first define it, as well as the ideas that





*The Earth from Space*

This photograph, taken on December 7, 1972, by an astronaut on the *Apollo 17* mission to the moon, made the earth seem delicate and vulnerable. No other image became as important an icon for the environmental movement. Courtesy of Earth Sciences and Image Analysis Laboratory, NASA Johnson Space Center <<http://eol.jsc.nasa.gov>>.

were central to its origins and development, such as romanticism, industrialism, and conservation.

The modern form of the word *environment* comes from an older word that we hardly use anymore: *environ*, to surround, to form a ring around, to encircle. Scholars have found the first recorded uses of the word at the very end of the fourteenth century, when a river would have been said to environ a forest or a hedge to environ a garden. Not

until the 1830s did the English poet Thomas Carlyle use *environment* to mean a surrounding area or region. Beginning in the 1920s, *environmentalism* referred to the sum total of moral or social influences shaping a person or community. The meaning central to this book—a concern with the preservation of the environment and the politics or policies associated with that concern—did not appear in print until 1972. But there is something remarkable and significant about that first modern use of *environment* by Thomas Carlyle, when he wrote in his novel *Sartor Resartus* that “the whole habitation and environment looked ever trim and gay.” It marked the first time that *environment* referred to a landscape from the point of view of an observer, someone looking out at it and thinking about it.

What happened in the years leading up to the 1830s to make people, especially in England, pay closer attention to the landscapes that environed them? The answer points us to one of the most important influences on the later development of the environmental movement, a view of nature that reaches back 150 years from 1945 to the beginnings of industrialism.

## INDUSTRIALISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

In building a context for environmentalism, one subject—industrialism—stands out from all others and forms the backdrop to almost every document in this volume. By the middle of the nineteenth century, a manufacturing economy, driven by mechanical advances, had taken shape in the United States. Industrialism is a way of organizing labor, capital, and environments toward the manufacture of goods. It is a particular way of making things, usually by assembling diverse raw materials with machinery in factories. Next to capitalism itself, no other transformation has had such remarkable environmental consequences because industrialism extracted plants, animals, fuels, and minerals in unprecedented quantities. Whereas individuals as part of households had made what they needed with their own hands for tens of thousands of years, they now mass-produced goods for others, *consumers* who began to purchase *products* with money.

Supporters of manufacturing claimed that it promised an unprecedented degree of comfort and security against want, but opponents argued that it promised only squalor, sickness, and hunger for workers. The persistent and passionate claims of opponents over the century from 1820 to 1920 resulted in child labor laws and safer working conditions. But in addition to the dangers it posed for workers, manu-

facturing also caused unheard-of environmental destruction. The consumption it encouraged created new sources of pollution spawning a generation of reformers in nineteenth-century New England who connected clean air and water to their social goals.<sup>1</sup> From that time forward, advocates of environmental regulation saw themselves as resisting or reforming industrialism in order to improve the lives of the people and places subjected to its effects.

By the end of World War II, industrialism had transformed the landscape in neighborhoods and rural districts across the country. Rather than take trains from city to city, people purchased automobiles with internal combustion engines that emitted carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and drove them on federal highways. The car culture changed the countryside, as people expected city services to follow them out along the interstates. Cars also made it possible for people to live farther away from where they worked. *Suburban sprawl* describes the creeping expansion of residential and commercial land uses into regions of low population density. Its identifying feature is the endless replication of the highway strip, consisting of fast-food franchises, gas stations, and shopping malls.

By the 1950s, the combination of ever-increasing air and water pollution with rapid changes in land use began to define new ways of thinking about industrial “progress” for many Americans. These citizens had all sorts of worries—that the motor car would blur the distinction between city and country beyond recognition (see Documents 6 and 25); that rural life would come to replicate all the material conditions of city life (see Document 27); that pollution would make living in cities unbearable, placing greater pressure on suburban and wilderness areas as people fled the smoggy cities; that consumption would absorb an ever-greater portion of the world’s natural resources. Opposition to industrial production explains much of what has given twentieth-century environmentalism its force. Values such as biological diversity, natural beauty, and sustainability—which became central to environmentalism—came to represent an alternative vision of economics and the human good.

## ROMANTICISM

Industrial production provoked an initial response—not in the 1950s, but in the 1850s—from a small group of intellectuals who articulated a counter-movement called romanticism that is crucial to understanding the origins of environmentalism. We can trace our modern conceptions