

The Origins of the Modern Environmental Movement in the US by Dr Elsa Devienne

Transcript of the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPB516nFuFM>

These are photographs that were taken in the month of April 1970 on the occasion of the first Earth Day, a national event held in thousands of communities across the US to raise awareness of environmental issues.

Earth Day was enormously successful—in fact, it was the second largest protest in US history after the Black Lives Matters demonstrations of 2020—and it popularized the phrase “the environmental movement.” But what was Earth Day about? And was it truly a turning point in the emergence of the environmental movement?

My name is Elsa Devienne, I am an assistant professor in US history at Northumbria University and in this lecture, I will give a brief overview of the origins of the modern environmental movement in the US and tell you a bit about Earth Day and its legacies.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE “MODERN ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT”?

Historians use that expression to talk about the emergence, in the postwar period, of a national, grassroots movement concerned with nature protection and the fight against pollution.

Of course, this movement did not come out of the blue. From at least the early 19th century, Americans worried about the consequences of rapid urbanization, the pollution and waste caused by industrial manufacturing, and the relentless exploitation of natural resources.

But historians, such as Adam Rome who wrote a book on the history of Earth Day, argue that these pre-World War 2 initiatives were usually local and revolved around one particular issue. Moreover, the early “conservation” or “preservation” organizations such as the Audubon Society or the Sierra Club were composed of a few thousand people at most, and mostly middle and upper-class white men.

THE ORIGINS OF THE MODERN ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

The story of how we went from this weak, fragmented conservation movement to the mass movement of the postwar period, is often told along these lines: it all started in 1962 with a book called *Silent Spring* published by a quiet little lady called Rachel Carson. In her book, Carson revealed to unsuspecting suburban housewives who sprayed toxic pesticides in their homes that they were poisoning everything around them, including their own bodies. The book became a best-seller and, according to this narrative, it sparked environmental awareness which eventually culminated with the first Earth Day, the true beginning of the environmental movement.

According to historians like Chad Montrie, this narrative is problematic for two reasons. One, it obscures the many factors and actors that played a role in the rise of the movement; as historians we know that it’s never down to one individual; just like Rosa Parks did not spark

the CRM, nor was Carson the unique trigger. Two, this narrative centers the white middle-class who lived in leafy suburbs and their awakening to environmental threats around them.

What I want to do here is complexify somewhat this narrative. From the 1940s onwards, many Americans questioned the environmental costs of postwar affluence and “progress” and it wasn’t just middle-class people worrying about their health and the environment. For instance, in the 1940s and 1950s, workers and rural residents in Ohio and Pennsylvania fought to obtain regulation on strip mining, which brought deforestation and thus landslides, acid runoff and other detrimental effects to communities. Another example: in the early 60s, migrant Mexican and Mex Am farmworkers fought for workplace rights, including protection from pesticides. And a final example maybe: in 1967, African-American students took to the streets of Houston to oppose garbage-filled pond in their community where an 11-year-old had drowned.

EARTH DAY

By the late 1960s, environmental concerns were becoming louder. At the same time, several environmental disasters shook the nation, most notably the Santa Barbara oil spill when, following an explosion on an oil platform off the coast of California in January 1969, 3 million gallons of crude oil were released into the ocean. The vision of this beach city turned into a hell site shocked Americans. PICS of oil spill ¹

According to an often-recounted anecdote, Wisconsin senator Gaylor Nelson was flying home from California after having toured the oil-tarred beaches when he came up with the idea of a nationwide environmental teach-in. Teach-ins had become popular on campuses as part of the anti-Vietnam war movement. They involved informal lectures and discussions. His idea for an “Earth Day” struck a chord. It was a success. In fact, Earth Day is somewhat misleading it was more like Earth Month with over 12,000 different events taking place across the nation.

A big focus of the event was air pollution. In many protests, participants wore gas masks to convey their anxiety over an apocalyptic future.

Another big focus, more surprisingly maybe, was overpopulation. Following the publication of books such as Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb*, the zero-population movement argued that too many people on a planet with limited resources was the fundamental root cause of the crisis.

EARTH DAY’S LEGACIES

Scholars don’t agree on whether Earth Day was the beginning of a new environmental movement or the culmination of decades of environmental protests. In any case, it pressured Congress and the White House to act. In 1970, President Richard Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and, in the following five years, a series of landmark legislation was passed in Congress to protect the environment.

But what about Earth Day’s less obvious symbolic legacies? Historian Finnis Dunaway argues that, visually speaking, reporting on ED often focused on students riding bikes, school

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/28/688219307/how-californias-worst-oil-spill-turned-beaches-black-and-the-nation-green>

children picking up litter, that is on events that emphasized individual action over social change (images of earth day²); the message was *everyone* was to blame for pollution. There were events that were more radical and pointed at corporate responsibility: At Tulane University in New Orleans, for example, students gave Louisiana's oil industry the “polluter of the month” award. But this wasn’t reflected in the mainstream media.

More broadly, media coverage of Earth Day was largely focused on white, middle-class participants. It portrayed environmentalism as a movement of white people concerned about the threat of pollution on an undifferentiated “humanity”. There were, in fact, Earth Day events in non-white communities. In St Louis, an organization called Black Survival performed skits denouncing the distinct environmental problems of the inner-city including air pollution, unreliable bin pick-ups, and the ubiquitous presence of rats. But this was not covered outside of local news outlet.

These choices reflected debates within the movement. In fact, In the 1970s, mainstream environmental organizations too often failed to connect their goals to broader social and racial justice struggles. This disconnect led to the emergence of the environmental justice movement in the 1980s which exposed the fact that working-class people and people of color were disproportionately affected by environmental risks and nuisances. To this day, the environmental movement grapples with these issues: how can environmentalists connect ecology to power relations, racism and poverty? How can they change the popular narrative about the environment from one about individual responsibility to one about corporate responsibility?

THE ACTIVITY

Now, it’s time for you to turn to your activity. Your teacher is going to hand you at a set of documents (photographs, cartoons and pamphlets) about the first Earth Day. Take a moment to read and look at them and try to answer these two questions:

- What has changed and what hasn’t changed in terms of how we think about the environment today compared to 1970?
- How did visual material about Earth Day shape popular understandings of the environmental movement?

² <https://www.sciencefocus.com/planet-earth/pictures-the-first-earth-day-in-1970/>
<https://blog.altaplanning.com/earth-day-50-years-of-taking-action-b0ed0c727f5f>
<https://images.squarespace-cdn.com/content/v1/58b4791ad2b857c893179e34/1584650167210-2LEAL5BX7BAAY3LMHZ6H/2.jpg>