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Publication Date

2026-06-25

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

Towards a Green Millennium?: American Environmentalisms and Politics, 1980-2001

By

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

History

in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

DAVIS

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2026

Acknowledgements

It is, at this point, a cliché to remark upon how inadequate this space is to fully express the thanks and appreciation that so many deserve, but I understand it now because there are so many people who deserve special attention. First, I would like to thank the organizations that made my research possible. The American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming and the Hoover Institution Library and Archives at Stanford University were both terrific hosts, and I am extremely grateful for the funding they offered that allowed me to actually take a breath and search, read, and digest the mountains of extremely useful materials they held. With this in mind, I also appreciate the support of the UC Davis History Department and its donors. The various fellowships, grants, and awards I received from the Department over the past seven years truly made my research trips across the country possible.

I remain deeply thankful for my time at the University of Oklahoma, and, therefore, a couple of names deserve mention. Kathy Brosnan has been a consistent mentor through the years. Her environmental history course in the spring of my senior year ranks among my most memorable courses and, in many ways, put me on the path to where and who I am today. Now, every year, I eagerly look forward to WHA or ASEH, where we'll get a drink at the hotel bar as we catch up and she offers her advice on whatever problem I'm having. As I look towards my own mentorship of students in the future, she is the example I aspire to. I equally treasure my work with Ben Keppel, who, as one of my first history professors, encouraged me to begin thinking historically. I still cherish his mentorship of my honors thesis and the advice and feedback he gave, which informs much of my thinking today. I could not have asked for a better set of role models as I set out on my history career.

Here at UC Davis, I have also been blessed with a community of friends, colleagues, and professors without whom this dissertation would have been quite literally impossible. I think my cohort set the standard for what a positive seminar experience should look like in our first year—thrown headfirst into E.P. Thompson, Spivak, and the dreaded Mbembe. I remember our “seminar before the

seminar” fondly, and I appreciate the tone of collegiality and mutual support that we established for the rest of our time here. Michael Haggerty was one of the best housemates one could ask for, and I could think of few others I would bunker down with during COVID again. Running into Charlotte Terry, meanwhile, was a guaranteed way to cheer up after a rough day. Movies were a great distraction from work, and I could count on many friends to join us for the latest release at Tower or Regal. I will particularly miss the buildup to Brianna Tafolla Riviere’s annual Oscars party, for which we would all race to watch as many of the nominees as we could—even if I never won the ballot competition.

But these friends were also tremendously helpful in thinking and writing this dissertation. I am thankful to the many fellow graduate students who read drafts of writing, offered comments, or generally acted as sounding boards for ideas, including Taylor Black, Nina Gonzalez, Pooja Hazra, Franklin Meyer, David Morales, Joel Olea-Calixto, Matthew Speir, Francisco Ulloa Garcia, and Patricia Vidal Olivares. Likewise, I am indebted to my many close friends in the program who not only helped me keep my sanity but also helped me think through many of the ideas of this dissertation. Faith Bennett, Emma Chapman, and Ellie Kaplan provided indispensable perspectives that helped guide my thinking across nearly every area of my work. Nearly every conversation with Ashley Nichole Lewis has helped me sharpen my ideas and encouraged me to venture into spaces and conversations I did not previously have the courage to pursue. Jen Alpers has been my companion in exploring the sometimes wild world of conservative history and an indispensable source of optimism and insight as I wrestled through the many difficult concepts of this dissertation. And, finally, Daniel Castaneda has been my closest friend and confidant throughout the entire Ph.D. He has listened attentively to my many tangents and rants, and I could always count on his wise judgment and ideas. Each of these friends—as well as friends from outside Davis like Alex Boynton, Caroline Johnston, Jacob Northcutt, and Abigail Scott—have amazing scholarship that continues to inspire me, and I look forward to seeing their success in the future.

Likewise, the faculty at UC Davis and beyond have been consistently valuable sources of advice, feedback, and encouragement. Outside Davis, I have appreciated the advice of Michael Childers, Leisl

Carr Childers, James Morton Turner, Darren Dochuk, Jefferson Decker, and Traci Brynne Voyles. At UC Davis, I would like to thank Greg Downs, Stacy Fahrenthold, Andrés Reséndez, and Adam Zientek for all the thoughtful help and advice they offered. Eric Rauchway has been a model of teaching and scholarship that I aspire to every day. Rachel St. John not only provided incisive comments and suggestions that significantly improved the quality of my work but also showed genuine concern for how I was doing mentally and emotionally throughout the Ph.D. Likewise, I have to thank Louis Warren for helping me reaffirm my love for environmental history. Indeed, the seeds for this dissertation came out of our conversations in my first year, and for that, I will always be thankful. I will always appreciate Louis's ability to deliver an effective historiography paper full of book recommendations in a single conversation, and I look forward to continuing our conversations in the future. But no one at UC Davis deserves greater thanks than Kathy Olmsted. I could not possibly ask for a more attentive, supportive, and nurturing advisor. She was always willing to seemingly drop everything to read a draft, offer advice, or talk through a problem—even at the last minute. She was unwavering in her support for me and my ideas, giving me the confidence I needed to finish this dissertation. In the end, she was the one who helped me to become the historian I am today, and for that I am eternally grateful.

Finally, my family has been immeasurably supportive of my work. My father, Danny Fleetwood, my mother, Hazel Fleetwood, and Angela Fleetwood never stopped believing in me, and without their unceasing encouragement, this Ph.D. would not have happened. Likewise, the support of my sister, Callie Fleetwood, has been crucial to helping me find my voice. Earl and Oolong are the best cats and writing companions. But, above all, my most sincere love and appreciation goes to Rohit Batra. You have been with me through every up and every down of this Ph.D., and I cannot imagine having done it without you. You have been my greatest supporter, advocate, and friend. You are my rock, my shelter, and my light in a world that sometimes feels rather dark. I look forward to our next stage together—and everything that comes after. This dissertation is dedicated to you.

Abstract

“Towards a Green Millennium” explores the evolution of environmentalism, anti-environmentalism, and broader environmental politics in the 1980s and 1990s. In doing so, it seeks to answer two related questions. First, how did environmentalism, once seemingly universal in its appeal in the 1970s, become so intensely polarized by the beginning of the twenty-first century? And second, why did practically all the participants in those environmental conflicts, including those we would normally label anti-environmentalists, claim the title of environmentalist? This dissertation argues that the answers to these questions lie in the changing nature of environmentalism itself. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 marked a moment of transition, ending the rough bipartisan consensus of 1970s environmentalism and throwing open the question of what it meant to be an “environmentalist.” The common markers of understanding of what characterized environmentalism began to break down as different groups advanced their own definitions and visions of environmental protection. These divergent visions ranged from mere differences of opinion in philosophy, strategy, and tactics—such as the conflicts amongst mainstream and radical environmentalists and environmental justice activists—to fundamentally distinct visions of the world, such as the pro-growth, anthropocentric attitudes of conservatives.

The fierce and sometimes violent environmental conflict in the period, therefore, went beyond the specific environmental policies and issues they ostensibly centered on to revolve around the question of whose vision of environmentalism would emerge triumphant. The breakdown of common understanding and areas of agreement resulted in environmentalism becoming yet another front in the polarizing Culture Wars of the period. Beset by internal conflict, environmentalists could hardly defend their gains from the 1970s—let alone advance their new goals. Conservative visions of environmentalism, meanwhile, failed to attract widespread support. Thus, by the beginning of the new millennium, environmental politics had reached an exhausted stalemate, even as new environmental crises loomed ever larger.

This dissertation, therefore, relates several flashpoints from the period that reveal the evolution of these attitudes towards the environment and environmentalism, including the fights surrounding the Reagan administration, the so-called Timber Wars of Northern California, the tensions between the Sierra Club and the environmental justice movement, the threat of violence in environmental conflict, and the chaotic development of the American Green movement. Through these stories, “Towards a Green Millennium” reveals the complex history of environmental politics at the end of the twentieth century, encouraging historians and scholars to understand the period’s conflicts and developments as fundamentally contingent and resistant to simple narratives of decline and reaction. In doing so, it not only offers a compelling look at an underexplored era of environmental history but also gestures towards areas of common ground that could be pursued in the present.

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Introduction

Election day was a disaster. That was, at least, the immediate reaction of most environmentalists in the aftermath of the 1980 election. After roughly a decade of widespread popularity and general access to the halls of power for environmental and land use policy, the election of Ronald Reagan was quickly identified as a moment of significant, if not existential challenge. Now, environmentalists faced, for the first time, a clearly antagonistic administration, outright opposed to the significant influence they once had. Sierra Club Executive Director Michael McCloskey, looking back on the moment, was clear about the trepidation that environmentalists felt. “We faced a kind of whirlwind... the Reagan administration proposing assaults on everything we had accomplished. We anticipated it with his election, but still it was disorienting to not know where the assaults were going to come from and just how great they would be.”¹ Writing at the end of Reagan’s term in 1988, McCloskey’s successor, Carl Pope, was less circumspect. His memory of the days after the election included the panicked proclamation of NBC News that the election marked not only “the end of the environmental movement,” but also “the demise of feminism and civil rights.”²

Yet, for both McCloskey and Pope, speaking from their particular corner of the Environmental Movement in the Sierra Club, the Reagan Administration proved to be less of a complete disaster than they initially thought. Alarm at the thought of a hostile federal government soon gave way to an organized political response. This response was characterized by a massive increase in membership in environmental organizations over the early-to-mid 1980s and a subsequent influx of donations and dues that fueled a surge in lobbying and advocacy efforts over the decade. “That’s what we learned to our great surprise,” McCloskey explained, being forced to take a defensive posture “had a reinvigorating effect on

¹ Michael McCloskey and Ann Lage, *Michael McCloskey: Sierra Club Executive Director and Chairman 1980s-1990s: A Perspective on Transitions in the Club and the Environmental Movement*, Sierra Club Oral Histories (Berkeley, CA: Regional Oral History Office, 1999), 1.

² Carl Pope, “The Politics of Plunder,” *Sierra*, Nov./Dec. 1988; See also: Doug Smith, “GOP Victory Seen as Blow to Environmentalists,” *Duluth News-Tribune*, Nov. 16, 1980; Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 147.

the movement. People rallied around, and they got damn mad that these things were going on.”³ While membership growth would decline in Reagan’s second term, from 1980 to 1985 Sierra Club membership doubled from 181,000 to 362,000, as did the Club’s net worth and revenues.

However, it wasn’t only mainstream environmental organizations that saw significant change. The wider environmental movement was shifting. Growing frustration with the institutionalization and corporatization of environmentalism over the 1970s and 1980s—transitions that were partially fueled by the political battle with the Reagan Administration—helped inspire the emergence of radical environmental movements that explicitly framed themselves against the compromise and shallow philosophies that they perceived as endemic to environmental activism “within the system.” At roughly the same time that mainstream environmentalists like McCloskey and Pope were struggling to figure out how to respond to the Reagan presidential campaign (and later administration), radical environmentalists like Dave Foreman were establishing the foundations of archetypal radical alternatives like Earth First! Likewise, within two years of the 1980 election, some of the first self-conscious articulations of environmental justice were being voiced at the protests against the construction of toxic waste dumps in communities of color in Warren County, North Carolina. Frustrated with the disregard (intentional or otherwise) of environmental hazards faced by economically disadvantaged communities of color by politicians, bureaucrats, and environmentalists (conservative and liberal alike), these activists would begin over the decade to explicitly link their long-standing civil rights concerns with the toxic environmental realities on the ground.

These stories of change in the environmental movement, often told in isolation and focused on the particular trajectories of individual strains of thought within the broader environmentalism—mainstream environmentalism or radical environmentalism or environmental justice—have grown in prominence

³ Michael McCloskey and Ann Lage, *Michael McCloskey: Sierra Club Executive Director and Chairman 1980s-1990s: A Perspective on Transitions in the Club and the Environmental Movement*, Sierra Club Oral Histories (Berkeley, CA: Regional Oral History Office, 1999), 3.

within the historiography of environmentalism over the past ten to twenty years. Tracking the development of the environmental movement from its “birth” in the late 1960s and early 1970s, through its “adolescence” in the 1970s, these histories present the 1980s as, if anything, a moment of maturity. Whether they see the 1980s as seeing the achievement of a degree of sophistication, for those supportive of the mainstream organizations’ “corporate” turn, or a moment of growing awareness of the depths of ecological decline and the subsequent need for radical change, or the linking of civil rights concerns with environmental in a broader progressive movement, for those less enthusiastic about the environmental mainstream, this was clearly a momentous shift.⁴

Yet, the contours of these narratives begin to become muddled as they advance through the rest of the decade into the 1990s and beginning of the twenty-first century. Stories of hope in the successful resistance of environmentalists to the destruction of the Reagan administration in the early 1980s, like those shared by McCloskey, fade by the following decade amid declining membership, financial crises, and political inaction. The flowering of radical protest at the beginning of the 1990s, seen in significant events like the 1990 Redwood Summer, soon fell into infighting and political reaction. The growing unity of environmental justice activists—and their embrace by some mainstream environmentalists—in the 1990s is challenged by the collision of these progressive alliances with longstanding anti-progressive tendencies within the environmental movement. To the degree these stories do reach the twenty-first century, the tone is far from positive, if not cynically jaded.⁵

⁴ Just a few of the works exploring these developments include: Ellen Spears, *Rethinking the American Environmental Movement Post-1945* (Routledge, 2020); Keith Makoto Woodhouse, *The Ecocentrists: A History of Radical Environmentalism* (Columbia University Press, 2018); Adam Rome, *The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-In Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation* (Hill and Wang, 2013); Bosso, *Environment, Inc.: From Grassroots to Beltway* (University Press of Kansas, 2005); Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington, D.C., 1993); Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Green Revolution: The American Environmental Movement, 1962-1992* (Macmillan, 1993); Philip Shabecoff, *A Fierce Green Fire: The American Environmental Movement* (Island Press, 1993).

⁵ For examples of this decline narrative, see: Hal Rothman, *The Greening of a Nation?: Environmentalism in the United States Since 1945* (Harcourt Brace College, 1998); Mark Dowie, *Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century* (MIT Press, 1995); Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).

When one turns from the environmentalists towards the conservative reaction that so many of these environmentalists decried, the picture hardly looks better. The failure of the Reagan administration to achieve its goal of rolling back many of the key environmental protections cherished by environmentalists was followed by conservative retrenchment in the years that followed. Stories of conservative “anti-environmentalism” after the first years of the Reagan administration portray a steady march of sophisticated attacks on environmentalists through the 1980s and 1990s. Whether coming from “grassroots” or “astroturf” political movements like the so-called Wise Use Movement or explicitly top-down efforts to obfuscate the evolving science around climate change, conservative opposition to the environmental movement only hardened by the end of the century, leaving in its wake an intense political and cultural chasm between liberal and conservative attitudes towards the environment.⁶

With these failures in mind, the clear inclination—particularly among popular writers and journalists—has been to frame the story of environmentalism and anti-environmentalism as one of decline—possibly holding room for hope, but seeing decline all around, nonetheless. Summarizing his popular survey of American environmental history, journalist Philip Shabecoff characterized that history as one of devastation wrought by human hands. It was environmentalism, even with its “limited successes,” that offered “the best hope that we will be able to save ourselves from the grave dangers we have created by our destructive use of the natural world.”⁷ Fellow journalist Mark Dowie was even more explicit in his pointed critique of 1990s environmentalism, *Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century*. Bitterly rejecting the prediction that environmentalism would one day be seen as “the most significant social movement of the twentieth century,” Dowie did not hold back in his brutal assessment of its failures:

⁶ Some of the most notable works of conservative history advancing this story includes: James R. Skillen, *This Land Is My Land: Rebellion in the West* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Jefferson Decker, *The Other Rights Revolution: Conservative Lawyers and the Remaking of American Government* (Oxford University Press, 2016); James Morton Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness: American Environmental Politics Since 1964* (University of Washington Press, 2012); Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Climate Change* (Bloomsbury Publishing Company, Inc., 2010).

⁷ Shabecoff, *A Fierce Green Fire*, xiii–xiv.

How, I wondered, could the American environmental movement—which had been unable to meet so many of its own stated goals, had lost so much ground during the 1980s, and was now so devoid of vision—possibly accomplish enough in the remaining few years of the twentieth century to be considered more significant than the labor, women’s, peace, civil, and human rights movements of earlier decades?⁸

For these authors, the final years of the twentieth century were ones of setbacks, not successes.⁹

But the fact that some would even posit the significance of environmentalism despite those setbacks should tell us that a more complicated story lies underneath the simple narrative of decline—a reality that historians have started to notice. As historian Ellen Griffith Spears has argued in her recent survey of the field, “narratives of humans’ technological triumphs over nature and apocalyptic accounts of ecological decline have given way to more nuanced accounts of often simultaneous advances and setbacks.”¹⁰ Faced with contingent historical moments amidst a world in flux, we can’t reduce the history of American environmental politics in the late twentieth century to uncritical stories of decline or ascent. The uncomfortable—and narratively difficult—reality is that both can be, and likely are, correct.¹¹

Part of the difficulty in narratively pinning down the story of environmentalism at the end of the century is the equally difficult task of defining what, exactly, we are talking about. Labeling it a “field of movements,” Ellen Griffith Spears notes the syncretic nature of environmentalism as “braiding several strands of conservationist, public health, and consumer advocacy.”¹² Far from being a monolithic entity,

⁸ Dowie, *Losing Ground*, ix.

⁹ For more on the debates over the potential costs and benefits of declension in environmental historical narratives, see: Ted Steinberg, “Down, Down, Down, No More: Environmental History Moves Beyond Declension,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 24, no. 2 (2004): 260–66; Conevery Bolton Valenčius, “Mudslides Make Good History,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 24, no. 2 (2004): 252–59; William Cronon, “The Uses of Environmental History,” *Environmental History Review* 17, no. 3 (1993): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3984602>; In a similar vein, Richard White notes the tendency of more recent environmental historians in the New Western History to frame their historical narratives as tragedies, if not lesser irony, compared to the “comedies” of Old Western Historians. See: Richard White, “Trashing the Trails,” in *Trails: Toward a New Western History*, ed. Patricia Nelson Limerick et al. (University Press of Kansas, 1991), 31–33.

¹⁰ Spears, *Rethinking the American Environmental Movement Post-1945*, 3–4.

¹¹ A very brief and incomplete list of works providing more nuanced takes on environmentalism in the period includes: Neall W. Pogue, *The Nature of the Religious Right: The Struggle Between Conservative Evangelicals and the Environmental Movement* (Cornell University Press, 2022); Woodhouse, *The Ecocentrists*; Darren Frederick Speece, *Defending Giants: The Redwood Wars and the Transformation of American Environmental Politics* (University of Washington Press, 2017); Mark Fiege, *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* (University of Washington Press, 2012).

¹² Spears, *Rethinking the American Environmental Movement Post-1945*, 4.

environmentalism held within it innumerable philosophies, strategies, and outlooks. These varieties of concern about their environments, while internally significant, were all characterized externally under the broad umbrella of “environmentalism.” Importantly, however, the people involved in environmental organizing in the period were no less divided in what made up the environmental movement or even whether they were in it. Historian Eileen McGurty has noted the initial reluctance of environmental justice activists to classify themselves as environmentalists, while the effective archetype of radical environmentalism, Dave Foreman, insisted on labeling himself a conservationist—not an environmentalist—well into the twenty-first century.¹³

Complicating this analysis further is the role of conservative opponents of the environmental movement. Historians of twentieth-century American environmental politics have long had to wrestle with the paradox of what historians James Morton Turner and Andrew Isenberg have labeled the “Republican Reversal.” Decades of Republican leadership of environmental (or proto-environmental) reforms was suddenly reversed around the time of the Reagan Administration, marking “the beginning of Republican backpedaling on environmental protections” that has lasted to the present.¹⁴ Turner and Isenberg blame this reversal on evolving attitudes and priorities within the Republican Party: the basics of free-market American conservative ideology, the growing influence of interest groups pushing this ideology within the Republican Party, and the apparent decline in urgency surrounding environmental problems. The result of these forces, they argue, was a vigorous Republican “embrace” of “an anti-environmental agenda.”¹⁵

¹³ Eileen Maura McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism: Warren County, PCBs, and the Origins of Environmental Justice* (Rutgers University Press, 2007), 10–11; Dave Foreman, *Take Back Conservation* (Raven’s Eye Press, 2012), 1.

¹⁴ James Morton Turner and Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal: Conservatives and the Environment from Nixon to Trump* (Harvard University Press, 2018), 5–6.

¹⁵ Turner and Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal*, 8–15; The work of J. Brooks Flippen has also been central in analyzing the evolving attitudes of Republicans and conservatives towards the environment, especially in the 1970s. See: J. Brooks Flippen, *Conservative Conservationist: Russell E. Train and the Emergence of American Environmentalism* (Louisiana State University Press, 2006); J. Brooks Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment* (University of New Mexico Press, 2000).

But I contend that a more nuanced approach is needed to understand conservative attitudes towards the environment in the period. One of the complications to the easy dismissal of conservative Republicans as “anti-environmentalists” is the very labels used by conservative Republicans themselves. Figures the historiography of late twentieth-century American environmental politics would immediately categorize as anti-environmentalists, like the first secretary of the interior in the Reagan administration, James G. Watt, or the 1990s Wise Use Movement leader, Ron Arnold, insisted on labeling themselves as environmentalists. Watt would, at times, refer to himself and the Reagan Administration as “the mainstream of the environmental movement.”¹⁶ Arnold, writing over a decade later, would insist that his ardent opposition to environmental activists simply reflected a “New Environmentalism”: an environmentalism where “people mattered.”¹⁷ Clearly, conservative politicians and activists in the period saw a world where they could be perceived as part of an environmental movement of some kind.

The immediate reaction to this is to reject such claims as pure political rhetoric. The historical popularity of environmentalism as a concept—if not its specific policies—meant that popular association of oneself with at least the label of environmentalism carried at least some political value. This was particularly true when one’s political career focused on challenging environmental protections. The self-appellation of “environmentalist” could, therefore, offer a valuable, albeit simplistic and easily rebutted, defense against charges of being an anti-environmentalist.

The problem with this instinctual, if not cynical, reaction is the reduction of complex environmental politics in the period to simplistic binaries. If all parties in the debates over environmental protections can be reduced to either “environmentalist” or “anti-environmentalist,” we lose sight of the complex motivations, philosophies, and politics of individuals who reside astride these conceptual lines. Over thirty years ago, historian Richard White wrote about the questionable assumptions that

¹⁶ Edited Remarks to American Mining Congress, James G. Watt, June 1, 1981, Box 18, Coll. 07667, James G. Watt Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

¹⁷ Ron Arnold, *Ecology Wars: Environmentalism As If People Mattered* (Free Enterprise Press, 1993), 113–35.

environmentalists and environmental historians have played into with our alignment of environmentalism with leisure and anti-environmentalism with work.¹⁸ But only slowly have we started to fully wrestle with the implications of White's warnings. Historian Steven Beda points towards a way out of this mess by examining the environmental attitudes of loggers in the Pacific Northwest—long villainized in stories about the so-called Timber Wars. Here, he offers a nuanced argument pointing to their simultaneous reliance upon the forests for work and leisure. “Rather than distancing working-class communities from the environment,” he argues, “life in the industrial woodlands created deep connections among timber workers, their families, and the forests; made them conscious of the environmental effects of their work; and made them intensely aware of their obligation to the forest.”¹⁹ Even while engaging in clearly destructive environmental action, loggers still possessed an environmental ethos that complicates any clear reduction into an environmental political binary.

I argue, therefore, that the claims to environmentalism of figures we would normally assume to be anti-environmentalists reveal a slipperiness to the historical label of “environmentalist” that offers ways of understanding the convoluted contours of American environmental politics in the 1980s and 1990s. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 was, indeed, a moment of significant change, shattering the rough bipartisan consensus of 1970s environmentalism and opening the door to a significant revision of what it meant to be an environmentalist. The common markers of conceptual understanding that guided who or what was environmentalist finally began to disintegrate between 1980 and 2001, aligning with the broader breakdown of “ideas and metaphors capable of holding in focus the aggregate aspects of human life” described by historian Daniel T. Rodgers in what he called the “Age of Fracture.”²⁰

¹⁸ Richard White, “‘Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?’: Work and Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (W.W. Norton, 1996).

¹⁹ Steven C. Beda, *Strong Winds and Widow Makers: Workers, Nature, and Environmental Conflict in Pacific Northwest Timber Country* (University of Illinois Press, 2022), 19.

²⁰ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 6; Useful in revealing the socially and culturally constructed definitions of “environment” and “environmentalism” over the long term, which I examine in the 1980s and 1990s in particular, is: Etienne S. Benson, *Surroundings: A History of Environments and Environmentalisms* (University of Chicago Press, 2020).

This fracturing of the defining features of environmentalism is evident in its ostensibly internal battles. Much has been written about the conflict between mainstream and radical environmentalists beginning in the 1980s. While the major environmental organizations, carrying on the work of the 1970s environmental consensus, organized in response to the destruction of the Reagan administration, other environmentalists began to question the fundamental philosophies and strategies of mainstream environmentalism. Drawing upon long radical legacies of ecocentric thought ranging from John Muir to Aldo Leopold, some activists, such as Dave Foreman and Judi Bari of Earth First!, rejected what they saw as the timid, compromising attitudes of “corporate” environmentalism. Entering conflicts that were often framed in the public eye as simple fights between “environmentalists” and “anti-environmentalists,” radical environmentalists insisted on the right to criticize both. In doing so, they put forward their own vision of environmentalism—emphasizing direct action and an uncompromising commitment to an ecocentric outlook on the living world.

However, these radical environmentalists were no less divided than the larger movement. The acrimonious fights within Earth First! in the late 1980s and early 1990s only hinted at the larger war embroiling radical environmental thought in the period. The Green Party, or Greens, established as a political vessel for the radical environmental movement, quickly became ground zero for a battle over the very identity of American Green politics and radical environmentalism. Vicious debates between the post-materialist Deep Ecologists and the leftist-anarchist Social Ecologists over their competing visions of a radical environmental movement and its relationship to “social issues” left activists embittered, and the promise of the Greens as a radical environmental alternative slowly withered.

Similarly concerned about the environmental movement’s questionable relationship to these so-called “social issues” and holding out no less radical an alternative vision were environmental justice activists. Indignant at the reluctance of mainstream environmentalists to address the particular environmental problems facing communities of color, they made high-profile public criticism of mainstream groups like the Sierra Club. Struggling to figure out how to respond, the Sierra Club finally

began to more fully commit to progressive alliances with these environmental justice activists, agreeing to support their efforts. This new vision of environmentalism that the Sierra Club was signing onto, however, was not simply one of environmental protection but also social justice. This placed once central environmental issues like population control in a highly sensitive position, forcing the Club to decide whether it was fully committed to an environmental justice mission.

Nevertheless, these internal conflicts within the environmental movement over the definition, indeed the nature, of environmentalism masked the equally significant efforts by conservatives like Watt and Arnold to articulate their own alternative. Anathema to most mainstream and radical environmentalists, this conservative vision of environmentalism was practically everything that conventional notions of environmentalism was not: pro-growth, intensely anthropocentric, and laudatory of local users. But the divergence from conventional environmentalism does not, by itself, make this vision inauthentic as an expression of an environmental ethics. The operating principle of this conservative environmentalism was stewardship, a slippery term often employed by figures like Watt to summarize an ostensible balance between protection and development of natural resources. Arnold was even more direct in connecting this conservative vision of environmental ethics to the longer legacy of American environmental thought, labeling his ideas of a human-centric environmentalism as the “Wise Use” of resources once articulated by conservationist icon Gifford Pinchot. But the perceived shiftiness of this conservative vision of an alternative environmentalism ultimately proved to be its shortcoming. Failing to attract widespread public support for its heterodox positions, the environmental debates of the 1980s and 1990s continued apace.

Indeed, if the whole of American environmental politics in the final years of the twentieth century were to be reduced to one word, it would be conflict. And, I argue, that conflict went beyond the specific environmental policies and issues they ostensibly centered on to revolve around this question of whose vision of environmentalism would emerge triumphant. The unmooring of environmentalism as an idea from its conceptual markers provoked fierce, sometimes violent, debate as once common points of

understanding evaporated. Ultimately, this breakdown in common understanding resulted in environmentalism becoming yet another front in the broader Culture Wars. Environmentalists, roiled by internal dissent, could barely defend their existing gains, while conservative visions of a fervently anthropocentric, pro-growth environmentalism failed to garner widespread appeal. By the beginning of the new millennium, environmental politics had reached an exhausted stalemate, even as new environmental crises, such as climate change, loomed ever larger.

Given the centrality of rhetoric and subjective understanding to this project, it is necessary to be absolutely clear about who and what I write about. Throughout the project I am interested in the interplay between the broad categories of the mainstream, radical, environmental justice, and conservatives. Each of these categories can be as complex, multifaceted, and arguably problematic as a label, but there are clear enough characteristics that give them conceptual utility. When I reference mainstream environmentalists, sometimes referred to as “the nationals” by environmental historians, I mostly mean a set of philosophies, strategies, and tactics that revolve around working “within the system” to accomplish its goals.²¹ The astute reader will note my reliance upon the Sierra Club as an effective stand-in for the mainstream environmental movement. This was a conscious decision. In addition to simplifying what would otherwise be an arduous process of accounting for each of the major mainstream organizations’ various peculiarities and histories, I believe that the Sierra Club’s expansive scale in both membership and historically active campaigns, combined with its arguable status as first-among-equals given its long

²¹ A sampling of the extensive historiography on mainstream environmentalism includes: Spears, *Rethinking the American Environmental Movement Post-1945*; Rome, *The Genius of Earth Day*; Christopher Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature and the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness*; Bosso, *Environment, Inc.*; Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2001); Shabecoff, *A Fierce Green Fire*; Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985*; Spears notes the parallels in organizing between the environmental and civil rights movements, using historian Charles Payne’s categories of organizing traditions (citing civil rights organizer Bob Moses): the “mobilizing tradition” and the “organizing tradition.” Specifically here, mainstream groups largely relied upon the mobilizing tradition where “leaders make decisions and define the course of actions; followers carry out their plans.” Spears, *Rethinking the American Environmental Movement Post-1945*, 5; Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Struggle*, 2007 Edition (University of California Press, 1995), 3.

and storied history, makes it useful as an effective cross-section of the wider mainstream movement. Its democratic structure gives a rough sense of where the average mainstream environmentalist's thinking might have been on a given topic.²²

Radical environmentalists, while most publicly associated with their rejection of the negotiation and piecemeal reform championed by mainstream environmentalists, also focused on the control of human growth. As historian Keith Makoto Woodhouse explains, the central environmental concern for radical environmentalists “was always with limits: to natural resources, to industrial expansion, and to human population.”²³ Central to understanding radical environmentalism, therefore, was the goal of clearly defining those limits to the public and policymakers. The specifics of how this emphasis on limits translated into specific radical groups' philosophy and strategies varied. For Earth First! and the Deep Ecology movement, for instance, the clear emphasis was on what Woodhouse refers to as ecocentrism or the ascription of “an equivalent value to human beings and nonhuman nature” and the rejection of “the premise that people should occupy a privileged place in any moral reckoning.”²⁴ Other groups, however, like the so-called Social Ecologists, emphasized different philosophical frameworks that drew, for instance, upon radical leftist and anarchist traditions.²⁵

Environmental Justice, as a specific movement, emerged from a turn among civil rights activists in the 1980s and 1990s towards environmental language to describe and organize against environmental

²² The major organizational history of the Sierra Club is: Michael Cohen, *The History of the Sierra Club: 1892-1970* (Sierra Club Books, 1988); This organizational history could be supplemented by biographies of significant figures in Sierra Club history such as John Muir and David Brower such as: Robert Wyss, *The Man Who Built the Sierra Club: A Life of David Brower* (Columbia University Press, 2016); Tom Turner, *David Brower: The Making of the Environmental Movement* (University of California Press, 2015); Donald Worster, *A Passion for Nature: A Life of John Muir* (Oxford University Press, 2008); Stephen R. Fox, *The American Conservation Movement: John Muir and His Legacy* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

²³ Woodhouse, *The Ecocentrists*, 3.

²⁴ Woodhouse, *The Ecocentrists*, 2.

²⁵ Useful works examining the dynamics of radical and grassroots environmental organizations include: Woodhouse, *The Ecocentrists*; Speece, *Defending Giants*; Douglas Bevington, *The Rebirth of Environmentalism: Grassroots Activism from the Spotted Owl to the Polar Bear* (Island Press, 2009); Rik Scarce, *Eco-Warriors: Understanding the Radical Environmental Movement* (Left Coast, 2006); Carolyn Merchant, *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World* (Routledge, 2005).

threats that specifically affect communities of color. As historian Eileen McGurty explains, these ideas “gave a new language to activists working to improve the quality of life of people of color” at the same time that they “expanded the definition of traditional environmentalism.”²⁶ While individual campaigns and activists may have placed different emphases depending on the specific environmental threats their communities faced, they nevertheless relied on a common language of environmental justice and injustice to articulate their concerns.²⁷

Conservatives, on the other hand, represented a longer political tradition and movement, emerging out of organized opposition to twentieth-century American liberalism: first in the form of business opposition to the New Deal in the 1930s, and then in the form of broader social and cultural reactionaries from the 1950s to the 1980s— arguably to the present. Conservative politics must be understood in the context of this larger history of conservative organizing. The conservative movement would not have been able to get off the ground without the financial and political support of business leaders, but it also relied upon a base of activists and everyday voters to mobilize.²⁸ This cooperation can be seen in organized conservative reaction to environmental and land-use policies. The organizational foundation that business support provided, in the form of conservative think tanks and institutions like the Mountain States Legal Foundation, helped build the infrastructure that would prove critical to the long-

²⁶ McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism*, 10.

²⁷ The long and expansive historiography on environmental justice since the early 1990s includes: Tracy E. Perkins, *Evolution of a Movement: Four Decades of California Environmental Justice Activism* (University of California Press, 2022); McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism*; Ronald Sandler and Phaedra C. Pezzullo, eds., *Environmental Justice and Environmentalism: The Social Justice Challenge to the Environmental Movement* (MIT Press, 2007); Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster, *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Movement* (New York University Press, 2001); David Schlosberg, *Environmental Justice and the New Pluralism: The Challenge of Difference for Environmentalism* (Oxford University Press, 1999); Jim Schwab, *Deeper Shades of Green: The Rise of Blue-Collar and Minority Environmentalism in America* (Sierra Club Books, 1994); Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*; Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*, 3rd ed. (Routledge, 1990).

²⁸ Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Right Out of California: The 1930s and The Big Business Roots of Modern Conservatism* (The New Press, 2015); Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (University of Chicago Press, 2015); Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2011); Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2009); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

term efficacy of the movement. At the same time, it is important to recognize the grassroots anger against environmentalist and land use reforms among small-scale ranchers and loggers who saw their livelihoods threatened. It was only by tapping into these grassroots springs of anger that conservative organizing on the environment was able to find political success.²⁹

The scale of this story, however, prevents any comprehensive account of each and every battle. Rather, this project approaches this story episodically in a roughly chronological order, highlighting particular flashpoints where the competing visions of environmentalism and the subsequent breakdown of common understanding are most clear. The first chapter examines the Reagan administration and the first efforts to define a conservative environmentalism that helped finally shatter the fragile environmental consensus. Chapters two and three explore the cycling conflicts between mainstream and radical environmentalists, environmental justice activists, and conservatives over two concrete and roughly contemporaneous issues: old-growth forests in Northern California and the relative importance of environmental injustice as an issue in a world where the political lines surrounding environmentalism seemed to be shifting. Chapter four takes a step back to look at the consequences of these escalating debates over the nature of environmentalism as rhetorical ammunition gave way to actual ammunition. As the debates shifted from mere policy to culture, the stakes only grew higher, leading to violence and the threat of violence playing a greater role. Finally, chapter five rounds out the debates of the period by examining the fierce conflicts amongst radical environmentalists in the nascent Green Party leading into the fateful 2000 election.

²⁹ Some of the significant works on conservative organizing on the environment (especially conservative anti-environmentalism) includes: Skillen, *This Land Is My Land*; Turner and Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal*; Decker, *The Other Rights Revolution*; Alex J. Boynton, “Confronting the Environmental Crisis?: Anti-Environmentalism and the Transformation of Conservative Thought in the 1970s” (PhD Dissertation, University of Kansas, 2015); Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*; James Morton Turner, “‘The Specter of Environmentalism’: Wilderness, Environmental Politics, and the Evolution of the New Right,” *Journal of American History* 96, no. 1 (2009): 123–48; Jacqueline Vaughn Switzer, *Green Backlash: The History and Politics of Environmental Opposition in the U.S.* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997); David Helvarg, *The War Against the Greens: The “Wise-Use” Movement, the New Right, and the Browning of America*, 2004 Revised Edition (Johnson Books, 1994).

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the world of environmental politics looked radically different. Far from being the center of a political consensus, environmentalism was now the center of a political brawl. The promise of environmentalism as an issue where the majority of Americans could find agreement had evaporated as Americans grew increasingly divided. And now, environmentalism was simply another issue over which they fought. This story, however, also reveals the fundamentally contingent nature of that division. At one time, Americans did have a common language to talk about, understand, and respond to the environmental crises confronting them. Those common markers of understanding have become buried under decades of environmental conflict and distrust, but they are still there. Polls taken in March 2026 note growing concern about the environment amid the climate crisis and the need for substantive action. A record low of thirty-five percent of Americans see the nation's environmental quality positively, with two-thirds seeing it worsening. Sixty-three percent believe the government has not done enough, and fifty-eight percent support prioritizing the environment over economic growth.³⁰ The concern about the environment is real, and with the escalating crisis, it offers the hope that rekindled alliances and cooperation are possible.

³⁰ Megan Brennan, 'Americans' Rating of Environment Hits New Low,' *Gallup*, April 14, 2026, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/708413/americans-rating-environment-hits-new-low.aspx>.

Chapter 1 – Stewardship of the Land: Conservative Environmentalism and the Reagan Administration

It was a late November Monday morning and government employees across Washington were returning to work after the Thanksgiving holiday. The 1984 election was nearly three weeks ago and Republicans across the city looked forward to four more years of Ronald Reagan in the White House. As holiday season often brings, many Reagan Administration officials were engaged in thoughtful reflection about the achievements of the past four years and the opportunities that were open now that the election was increasingly in the past. Among these officials considering their legacy was William P. Clark, secretary of the interior. Clark, Governor Reagan's former chief of staff and later National Security Advisor had come into the cabinet position only a year earlier, after the chaotic exit of his controversial predecessor, James G. Watt. 1983 had been a bad year for Reagan's environmental and land use policies. Watt's departure in October, a scandal over coal leases over the summer, EPA Administrator Anne (Gorsuch) Burford's resignation in March, and chaos at the EPA over charges of political regulatory enforcement during the winter: all seemed to prove right environmentalists' criticisms of Reagan as the worst president on the environment. Indeed, by the end of 1983, one might have expected the growing crisis over environmental policy to become the issue of the 1984 campaign and potentially cost Reagan the election.

But that didn't happen. Instead, Clark found himself having—mostly—calmed the tumult along with Burford's successor at the EPA, William Ruckelshaus. The environment did not become a major campaign issue in 1984 and Reagan had blown the Democratic candidate, former Vice President Walter Mondale, out of the water winning 525 out of 538 electoral votes. Clark now looked forward to his anticipated retirement after the New Year and wrote privately to his old friend, the President. Thanking Reagan for the "trust and confidence" he had "placed in him the past 19 years," Clark now expressed his final thoughts and reflections on his government service and how Reagan should continue to approach topics like the Soviet Union, arms control, and interagency rivalries at the State Department and the White House. On his leadership at Interior, Clark offered only one note as he prepared to hand over the

reins to Secretary of Energy Donald P. Hodel, “The policies begun by Jim Watt are going well and I hope to make them your quiet legacy.”³¹

If one was to look at the Administration in spring of 1981, however, as Reagan moved to proclaim his “revolution,” it’d be difficult to imagine Reagan and his advisors wishing their efforts to rollback “restrictive” environmental regulations and open up public land for energy and mineral development to be seen as a “quiet legacy.” Certainly after watching the antics of Secretary of the Interior James Watt, one would quickly see that early Administration officials had no desire to achieve their aims in the shadows. They wanted a revolution ending government overreach, and they were not going to tiptoe around it. So, why would Clark now hope that these goals would be “quietly” achieved?

Environmental policy figures as a central, yet little analyzed, element of the Reagan Administration’s crusade against federal power and the liberal reforms of the 1960s and 1970s. The Administration’s approach to environmental policy, led by energetic appointees like Gorsuch and Watt who inspired nearly constant controversy, fit with the larger picture of deregulation and defanging of federal power. The fundamental goal of the “anti-environmentalists” in office was the rolling back of environmental and land-use regulations in the name of freeing businesses and individuals from the powerful hand of the federal government and the “extremist” environmental interlopers—breaking away from the environmentalist and regulatory trends of the previous decade.³²

But the path that this crusade against federal environmental regulation took was anything but straightforward. Scholars of environmental politics have noted the theatrics of Watt and Gorsuch in the

³¹ Letter, William Clark to Ronald Reagan, Nov. 26, 1984, Folder 2, Box 118, William P. Clark Papers, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

³² Other scholars and journalists that have engaged with Reagan and the environment, though often focusing narrowly on the tenure of Watt and Gorsuch, include: Charles Halvorson, *Valuing Clean Air: The EPA and the Economics of Environmental Protection* (Oxford University Press, 2021); Skillen, *This Land Is My Land*; Turner and Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal*; Decker, *The Other Rights Revolution*; Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness*; Switzer, *Green Backlash*; Helvarg, *War Against the Greens*; Shabecoff, *A Fierce Green Fire*; Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985*; For strong analysis of Reagan’s environmental policy by a historian of the broader Reagan Administration, see: Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980’s* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

first two years of the Reagan Administration, but less attention has been paid to the substance of the environmental policy they proposed. Rather than being a simple case of rabid anti-environmentalism, a vision of environmentalism—anthropocentric, pro-growth, and defiant of anything resembling ecocentrism though it may have been—nevertheless begins to come into view. Furthermore, scholars have dedicated less space to examining what came after them. While Watt and Gorsuch would come into office armed for battle against what they called “extreme environmentalists,” the controversy surrounding their policies and rhetoric—leading to their political demise—ultimately forced the administration to change tack in favor of a quieter and subdued approach to achieving their policy aims. Watt and Gorsuch would be replaced by less controversial figures like William P. Clark and William Ruckelshaus respectively for the 1984 elections, allowing the administration to continue their break with the environmentalist past while avoiding the scandal and turmoil that had marked the first two years of Reagan’s time in office. But the ultimate success of this endeavor was anything but clear, and by the end of Reagan’s eight years in office, many would be left wondering just what exactly had been achieved beyond an explosion of environmental conflict and debate that would continue through the next decade.

Environmentalism: the New Consensus?

While Republicans had played a prominent role in the development of key environmental legislation and regulations in the early 1970s under the Nixon Administration, that commitment to environmentalism had begun to wane over the course of the decade. Business opposition to the environmental regulations coupled with growing recognition of the limited political benefits of appealing to a political and social movement that was increasingly aligned with their Democratic opponents led many Republicans—especially in their conservative wing—to begin to shift away from the rough environmental political coalition.³³ This led to the environmental movement becoming increasingly aligned with Democratic candidates over the course of the 1970s as the League of Conservation Voters

³³ For more on early Republican support for environmentalism, refer to: Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment*; Flippen, *Conservative Conservationist*; Turner and Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal*.

indirectly endorsed Democratic presidential candidate, Jimmy Carter, in 1976 by giving Carter and his running-mate, Walter Mondale, high rankings in comparison to Republican President Gerald Ford and vice-presidential candidate Robert Dole. While environmentalists' enthusiasm for Carter dampened over the course of his time in office due to Carter's increasing emphasis on expanding fossil fuels production in response to the growing energy crisis, they would again offer their support in the 1980 election, with many environmentalist leaders formally endorsing Carter against his Republican opponent. But this environmental support for Carter's re-election in 1980 had less to do with specific support of Carter himself and much more to do with fear of the alternative.³⁴

Republican candidate Ronald Reagan's environmental credentials and beliefs were vague but increasingly disconcerting to environmentalists nationwide. He had quickly emerged over the course of the 1980 Republican Primaries as the front-runner, building upon a political base established during both his time as governor of California and attempts at the Republican presidential nomination in 1968 and 1976. As governor, Reagan had been focused on social and cultural issues in California, leading efforts to combat the growing student movement in the 1960s and roll back liberal civil rights programs like the 1963 Rumford Fair Housing Act. To the extent that Governor Reagan engaged in environmental policy, he compiled a mixed record that left many uncertain. While Reagan had appointed strong environmental administrators like Norman Livermore and William Penn Mott, Jr., signed major California environmental legislation such as the 1970 California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and made significant efforts to stop the construction of a highway across the Sierra Nevada Mountains, he also expressed stringent opposition to the expansion of Redwood National Park and made remarks that left many doubting Reagan's commitment to environmental principles—most infamously in a disputed claim about the Redwood National Park controversy during the 1966 gubernatorial election that “a tree is a tree.

³⁴ Lewis Regenstein, “The Candidates and the Environment: An Analysis,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), October 19, 1976; Gladwin Hill, “Conservationists Expecting Carter to Open New Era for Environment,” *New York Times* (New York), November 5, 1976; Philip Shabecoff, “Major Environment Leaders Back Carter Re-Election Bid,” *New York Times* (New York), September 28, 1980; A good summary of Carter's environmental policy can be found in: Jeffrey K. Stine, “Environmental Policy During the Carter Presidency,” in *The Carter Presidency: Policy Choices in the Post-New Deal Era*, ed. Gary M. Fink and Hugh Davis Graham (University Press of Kansas, 1998).

How many more do you need to see?”³⁵ If environmentalists were hoping that Reagan’s background as governor was going to offer some insight into his plans, they were sorely mistaken.³⁶

The Sagebrush Rebellion

Complicating this picture was Reagan’s alignment with the so-called “Sagebrush Rebellion” during the 1980 campaign. Beginning in the late 1970s, rural Westerners—focused around rural Nevada—began to call attention to the large amount of federally owned lands in the American West. Referred to by historian James Skillen as the “nation’s largest landlord,” the federal government owns a vast expanse of Western land: 49 percent of land in Wyoming, 64 percent in Utah, 86 percent in Nevada. This meant that the federal government and its diverse departments and agencies exercised an outsized role in management and policymaking over Western lands and the people who lived or worked on them. Agencies like the Bureau of Land Management, the Bureau of Reclamation, and the Forest Service were effectively major powerbrokers in these Western states, holding great statutory power to regulate the Western lands as they saw fit—regardless of whether the locals agreed with them or not.³⁷

While these agencies had long worked in close conjunction with these Western constituents, shaping policy and management practices to favor Western ranchers, farmers, and loggers, the situation had begun to shift over the course of the 1970s as environmentalists increasingly began to force the agencies to consider the environmental impacts of their policies rather than just the local economic or political impacts. Growing skepticism of large dam projects—particularly in the Carter Administration—

³⁵ As Lou Cannon notes in his history of Reagan’s time as Governor of California, Reagan’s comments here during the 1966 campaign was subsequently paraphrased by aides of his opponent, incumbent Gov. Pat Brown, as “If you’ve seen one redwood, you’ve seen them all.” Cannon notes that this stretched paraphrase allowed Reagan to claim he was misquoted even though his actual words were just as damaging. Lou Cannon, *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power* (Public Affairs, 1984), 177–78; See Also: Thomas H. Harris, “How Many Trees Do You Need to See? Said the Governor,” *New York Times* (New York), June 24, 1973; Constance Holden, “The Reagan Years: Environmentalists Tremble,” *Science* 210, no. 4473 (1980): 988–91; Lou Cannon, *Ronnie and Jesse: A Political Odyssey* (Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1969), 135–36.

³⁶ For more on environmental and conservation policy during Reagan’s time as governor, see: Cannon, *Ronnie and Jesse*, 135–36, 140–41, 213–27.

³⁷ James R. Skillen, *The Nation’s Largest Landlord: The Bureau of Land Management in the American West* (University Press of Kansas, 2009).

and planning for a nearly 15.4 million acre expansion of wilderness areas as part of the Roadless Area Review and Evaluation II (RARE II) combined with new legislation such as the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) to apparently overturn the relationship between the public lands bureaucracy and its Western constituents. Armed with an evident disregard for the Western thirst for water projects, a growing willingness to cut off economic access to land as wilderness areas, and increased restrictions on public land leases and grazing rights, the federal government looked increasingly like an occupying power to many rural Westerners.³⁸

Indeed, these ranchers, farmers, and miners found the arrangement not only unacceptable but also unconstitutional. The federal ownership of such large portions of Western states, they argued, violated the sovereignty of those states, placing them at the mercy of the federal government. As political scientist Jacqueline Vaughn Switzer explains, “The issue was centered on how lands should be managed; management is a prerogative attached to ownership. The states clearly have sovereignty over the people on the federal lands, but lacking ownership, it is argued, they cannot manage the lands.”³⁹ Thus, these Westerners argued, the continued federal ownership of these Western lands prevented the Western states from claiming the sovereignty and equal station among states guaranteed to them by the Constitution. To rectify this unequal power balance, many began to organize a political effort to challenge this federal ownership of public lands.⁴⁰

Beginning largely with the work of Nevada state politicians—particularly state senator Dean Rhoads—the Sagebrush Rebellion made a relatively straightforward demand: the direct transfer of ownership of all federal lands in the West to the Western states. This, they argued, would grant them the ability to effectively manage their lands and peoples, placing the Western states on an equal footing with

³⁸ Skillen, *This Land Is My Land*, 45–63; Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness*, 220–26; For more on Carter’s retreat from water projects, see: Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (Viking Penguin Inc., 1986; Revised and Updated, Penguin Books, 2017), 306–31.

³⁹ Switzer, *Green Backlash*, 174.

⁴⁰ Switzer, *Green Backlash*, 171–74; Turner, “The Specter of Environmentalism,” 130–37; Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness*, 192–95, 227–32.

their Eastern counterparts and protecting the states from encroaching and tyrannical federal power. What Western states could do with this new land was then up to them. They would be free to continue to pursue environmentalist or conservationist policies if they so desired. But they would also be able to encourage economic development: expanding grazing leases, increasing mining or drilling for minerals and energy development, or opening forests for logging. Regardless of their new priorities, it would now be the states, not the federal government, driving public lands policy. Indeed, the federal government would now have no role in the discussion at all.⁴¹

As the 1980 election approached, this growing “rebellion” against federal power and its new environmental regulations figured alongside a wider conservative backlash, intersecting with the so-called “New Right” in its strategies and opposition to the federal government. Both movements relied heavily on a complicated but effective organizational framework designed to make themselves look like broad-based grassroots movements. Using funding from conservative business leaders and industrial groups, both movements employed conservative media and think tanks to amplify conservative voices, encouraging the image of widespread popular support for conservative or Sagebrush policies. While many rural Westerners had clear grievances with the federal government and its public lands management, the true percentage of Westerners supporting the effort was unclear. Polls conducted in 1979 and 1980 showed some support for giving states “more control” over public lands but not necessarily in the form of direct transfer. A 1979 poll of the eight Intermountain West states found “a relatively uniform pattern of about 30 percent in favor of a state takeover with 60 percent opposed,” with the only exception being Nevada, the birthplace of the Sagebrush Rebellion.⁴²

⁴¹ Skillen, *This Land Is My Land*, 58–63; Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness*, 221–26; Switzer, *Green Backlash*, 176–77.

⁴² David F. Salisbury, “Sagebrush Rebels See Open Range in Reagan’s Victory,” *Christian Science Monitor*, November 18, 1980; For more on intersections between Sagebrush Rebellion and conservative organizing, see: Decker, *The Other Rights Revolution*, 73–94; Skillen, *This Land Is My Land*, 64–81; For a strong history of conservative anti-government organizing, see: Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*.

But the ideological and political affinities between the Sagebrush Rebellion and the conservative movement were clear, pushing many conservative Republicans like Ronald Reagan to adopt Sagebrush rhetoric in an effort to capitalize on the shared antipathy towards federal bureaucrats. For Reagan, this was explicitly laid clear in an August 1980 speech in Salt Lake City where he declared his support for the Sagebrush Rebellion, telling the crowd to “count me in as a rebel.”⁴³ For rural Westerners outraged at the environmental and land use policies of President Carter, their choice for 1980 was becoming increasingly clear.

Environmentalists, meanwhile, saw the same factors and were horrified at the prospect of a Reagan presidency and the rollback of environmental regulations that it portended. While Reagan made claims that he was an environmentalist, he would also regularly call for “common sense” enforcement of environmental regulations that many environmentalists read as a euphemism for a wholesale attack on the environmental establishment in the executive bureaucracy. Thus, as the electoral returns came in after November 4, environmentalists reacted to the election with alarm. Amid claims by NBC News that the election of Reagan marked an “end to the environmental movement,” environmentalists organized, believing that the developments, indeed, marked a major threat and calling on their supporters to prepare for battle.⁴⁴

Organizing a Revolution

Meanwhile, Reagan’s team behind the scenes was trying to figure out, for itself, what exactly its plan was. The campaign’s task force on the environment—formed only in the final days of the campaign, then acting as the new administration’s transition team on the environment—offered a moderate stance

⁴³ Salisbury, “Sagebrush Rebels See Open Range in Reagan’s Victory.”

⁴⁴ E. J. Dionne, Jr., “A Shifting Wind Alters Energy and Environment as Political Issues in Presidential Race,” *New York Times* (New York), October 28, 1980; Lou Cannon, “Reagan, Echoing ‘New Deal,’ Woos Hard-Hats,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), October 2, 1980; Lee Lescaze, “Reagan Defends Stand on Air Pollution Rules,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), October 10, 1980; For NBC News quote, see: Carl Pope, “The Politics of Plunder,” *Sierra*, December 1988; Doug Smith, “GOP Victory Seen as Blow to Environmentalists,” *Duluth News-Tribune* (Duluth, MN), November 16, 1980; Troy, *Morning in America*, 141; For a good overview of the 1980 campaign, see: Rick Perlstein, *Reaganland: America’s Right Turn, 1976-1980* (Simon and Schuster, 2020).

that tried to walk a middle line between the conservative goal of cutting regulations and maintaining some level of environmental protection. Its final report to the president-elect talked extensively about the new administration's goal of "balancing" concerns about the environment with economic growth and the problem of over-regulation based on unattainable and impractical goals such as "zero pollution." While the task force recommended that the new administration continue to protect the environment, that goal should be tempered with a commitment to ensuring that protection would threaten neither the economic growth of the country nor the viability of individual firms. Thus, while task force member Raymond Nesbitt claimed to the *New York Times* that there would be no "meat ax approach to the environment," the task force made it clear that environmental regulations would undergo review and legislation coming up for renewal—like the Clean Air Act—would be considered for changes.⁴⁵

This moderate stance by the transition team reflected its makeup. While figures that would come to be major players in the early Reagan administration's environmental policy, such as James G. Watt and Anne M. Gorsuch, were not involved, several moderate conservatives with extensive environmental records were included, including former EPA administrator William Ruckelshaus and former Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) chairman Russell Train. Train, while privately expressing concerns with the direction of the incoming administration, nevertheless took part in the task force in the belief that their recommendations would balance the skepticism of environmental agencies by Reagan and his advisors.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Report to the President-Elect on the Environment, 1980, folder "Environment – Reagan Task Force," box H79, Danny J. Boggs Files, Reagan Presidential Library; Philip Shabecoff, "Reagan Group Seeks Shift in Pollution Law," *New York Times*, Nov. 14, 1980; See also: Flippen, *Conservative Conservationist*; Halvorson, *Valuing Clean Air*, 137–38.

⁴⁶ Train's major contribution to the Task Force's recommendations was to author the section on US engagement on international environmental issues and to recommend during discussion that the President take a strong stance in favor of highly visible but substantively minor issues like the protection of whales and the National Park System to balance the more politically contentious components of his environmental program. Report to the President-Elect on the Environment; Memo on Global Environmental Issues, Nov. 6, 1980, folder "Environment – Reagan Task Force," box H79, Danny J. Boggs Files, Reagan Presidential Library; Summary of First Meeting of Environmental Task Force, Oct. 29, 1980, folder "Environment – Reagan Task Force," box H79, Danny J. Boggs Files, Reagan Presidential Library; See also: Flippen, *Conservative Conservationist*.

But behind the optics of the moderate Task Force on the Environment, Reagan and his inner circle had much more ideological ambitions that became increasingly clear over the first few months of Reagan's first term—namely, cutting regulations and curtailing enforcement. Soon after coming into office, Reagan announced a dedicated policy of regulatory freeze and review. All new proposed regulations would undergo strict review by David Stockman, director of the Office of Management and Budget, to consider the fiscal and economic impact of the proposed regulatory rules while those that “diminished ‘regulatory burden’” were exempt.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Vice President George H.W. Bush was tapped to lead a new Presidential Task Force on Regulatory Relief that would “review pending regulations, study past regulations with an eye toward revising them, and recommend appropriate legislative remedies.”⁴⁸ As President Reagan explained in his announcement of the task force, “Government regulations impose an enormous burden on large and small businesses in America, discourage productivity, and contribute substantially to our current economic woes.”⁴⁹ The only solution was “to cut away the thicket of irrational and senseless regulations.”⁵⁰

But the Administration's attack on Big Government went beyond regulations, also restricting spending across the federal bureaucracy: on replacements for recently retired civil servants, on department travel and consulting contracts, and even office supplies. Ostensibly, this was an effort to bring under control a budget shortfall during what Reagan argued was a growing fiscal emergency. But this also had the effect of signaling Reagan's attack on the bureaucracy. Attacking the years of expansive

⁴⁷ Halvorson, *Valuing Clean Air*, 138.

⁴⁸ “Remarks Announcing the Establishment of the Presidential Task Force on Regulatory Relief,” Jan. 22, 1981, *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*. Reagan Presidential Library. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-announcing-establishment-presidential-task-force-regulatory-relief>.

⁴⁹ “Remarks Announcing the Establishment of the Presidential Task Force on Regulatory Relief,” Jan. 22, 1981, *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*. Reagan Presidential Library. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-announcing-establishment-presidential-task-force-regulatory-relief>.

⁵⁰ “Remarks Announcing the Establishment of the Presidential Task Force on Regulatory Relief,” Jan. 22, 1981, *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*. Reagan Presidential Library. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-announcing-establishment-presidential-task-force-regulatory-relief>; See also: Halvorson, *Valuing Clean Air*, 138–41.

federal spending since 1960, Reagan made it clear to both the agencies themselves and the public at large that Reagan intended to tame what he saw as “uncontrolled government growth.”⁵¹

One of the first victims of the Administration’s crusade was the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ). First established by President Nixon as part of his erstwhile environmental turn, the CEQ had been a major part of the federal government’s efforts to protect the environment over the past decade. Conducting independent studies, writing an annual report on the state of the environment, and overseeing the completion of environmental impact assessments required by the National Environmental Policy Act across the entire federal government, the CEQ formed a critical institution of federal environmental protection across the Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations.⁵²

But in the months that followed Reagan’s inauguration, the CEQ was in a state of limbo. While Malcolm F. Baldwin, a holdover member of the council, was serving in an interim role as chairman of the council, the specific plans of the administration for the CEQ were unclear. Despite numerous attempts by Baldwin to get some sort of sense of what the Administration planned to do with the CEQ—including meetings with President Reagan’s Senior Policy Advisor Danny J. Boggs and letters to Chief of Staff James Baker III and Counselor to the President Edwin Meese III—he met with an eerie silence. Meanwhile, rumors began to emerge in late February and early March about a wide variety of plans, including lowered funding with massive layoffs and even complete dissolution of the council, with the argument that “it serve[d] no function that could not be performed in another agency.”⁵³ However, by early April, the Administration had decided to avoid fully eliminating the council but did commit to heavy defunding. The staff of the council was to be reduced from 50 to 16, with only three of the existing

⁵¹ “Address to the Nation on the Economy,” Feb. 5, 1981, *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*. Reagan Presidential Library. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-nation-economy-february-1981>; Steven R. Weisman, “Freeze Set on Hiring: Californian Stresses Need to Restrict Government and Buoy Economy,” *New York Times* (New York), January 21, 1981; Steven R. Weisman, “Reagan Orders Cut in Federal Travel and Consultant Use,” *New York Times* (New York), January 23, 1981.

⁵² For more on the history and role of the CEQ, see: Richard N. L. Andrews, *Managing the Environment, Managing Ourselves: A History of American Environmental Policy*, Third (Yale University Press, 2020), 215–21.

⁵³ Philip Shabecoff, “Environmental Council Called a Target of Budget Cuts,” *New York Times* (New York), February 26, 1981.

staff—many of whom had worked in the Council since the Nixon Administration—promised a position in the reformed council. While Frederick N. Khedouri, associate director of the Office of Management and Budget for natural resources, claimed that the cuts did not represent the administration’s hostility to environmental protection—again claiming that the cuts were responding to the council’s redundant nature—interim chairman Malcolm Baldwin retorted that the cuts were designed to curry favor with the new administration’s business backers.⁵⁴

Indeed, Baldwin’s public and pointed criticism of the new administration’s policy towards the CEQ reveals the complexity of the moment for Republicans and conservatives—many of whom remained committed to the protection of the environment. In a March 2 memorandum to James Baker and Edwin Meese, Baldwin—making it clear to the administration that he was a Republican “and a supporter of President Reagan in the last election”—nevertheless expressed frustration with the administration’s cold attitude towards the council.⁵⁵ As he bluntly explained, “since January 20, the lines of communication between the Council and the White House have been almost nonexistent despite my efforts to establish them.”⁵⁶ His vocal—and public—frustration with the new administration would continue after he was replaced in the spring of 1981 by A. Alan Hill, a former California environmental official during Reagan’s time as Governor. Expressing “misgivings” about the Administration as he left office, he would remain vocal in opposing their approach to the CEQ and environmental policy in general—blasting the Administration’s policy on acid rain in a 1982 *Washington Post* letter to the editor as guided by “ideology and ignorance, not science, and certainly not statesmanship.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Philip Shabecoff, “Reagan Is Not Killing Environmental Council, But Some Fear He Is Crippling It,” *New York Times* (New York), April 18, 1981.

⁵⁵ Memo, Malcolm Baldwin to James A. Baker, III, and Edwin Meese, III, March 2, 1981, folder CEQ General (2), box 58, Edwin Meese Files, Reagan Presidential Library.

⁵⁶ Memo, Malcolm Baldwin to James A. Baker, III, and Edwin Meese, III.

⁵⁷ Peter Behr, “CEQ: An Interview with A. Alan Hill,” *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* 23, no. 6 (1981): 38–42; Malcolm Forbes Baldwin, “Who’ll Stop the Acid Rain?,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), October 7, 1982.

And Baldwin wasn't alone among Republicans and supporters of the President in their dismay at the unfolding Reagan environmental policy. Even figures ostensibly close to Reagan and active in his campaign and election were shocked at the turn of the President against environmental protection. Dan W. Lufkin, former Connecticut Commissioner of Environmental Protection and chairman of the aforementioned Reagan Campaign Task Force on the Environment, wrote an open letter to the President in the fall of 1981 calling the Administration's actions "crazy." Noting that he was "not some 'environmental nut,'" and that he was "a lifetime Republican; a strong supporter of the Reagan-Bush ticket [and] a businessman," he explained that Reagan's "appointments have been at best extreme, at worst bizarre" and that the administration's environmental policies "have been retrogressive," amounting to a "meat ax... gutting programs under the guise of cutting budgets."⁵⁸ These strong words, coming from a figure that was supposed to have been one of the new President's key environmental advisors during the campaign, reflect the alarm by conservatives who still supported the bipartisan environmental consensus of the 1970s. Lufkin and Reagan's Task Force on the Environment had advocated some level of reform of environmental policies, but even they were shocked at how far the President was now going. The Administration seemed to dismiss the moderate course laid out by the environmentally conscious advisors from the campaign and transition. It was now charting out its own course that contemporary political scientists Michael Kraft and Norman Vig argued was "far more aggressive, narrow, and ideological."⁵⁹

The "Anti-Environmentalist"

The architect of this new strategy was, in many ways, Secretary of the Interior James G. Watt. Among the most controversial figures in the Reagan Administration, Watt was a flashpoint in everything dealing with environmental and land use policies. Watt's career over the previous decade and a half had long focused on the issues of land use policy and conservatism in the American West: aide to Republican

⁵⁸ Dan Lufkin, "An Open Letter to the President," folder, "EPA—Miscellaneous," Box 31, Douglas M. Costle Papers, Carter Presidential Library.

⁵⁹ Michael E. Kraft and Norman J. Vig, "Environmental Policy in the Reagan Presidency," *Political Science Quarterly* 99, no. 3 (1984): 423, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2149941>; Halvorson, *Valuing Clean Air*, 147–48.

Senator Milward Simpson of Wyoming, advisor and spokesman on resource and the environment at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, deputy assistant secretary for water and power resources at Interior, director of the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, and vice-chairman of the Federal Power Commission. After the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976, however, Watt joined the wave of conservative Republicans across the government leaving to take positions with think tanks, foundations, and organizations aligned with the emerging New Right. Watt found himself hired by the conservative business magnate Joseph Coors to lead the newly formed Mountain States Legal Foundation (MSLF) where he went to work as part of what Jefferson Decker calls the “public-interest right.” Pursuing a variety of cases and legal strategies, the Watt-led MSLF actively pushed an activist conservative agenda that worked to limit the bureaucracy’s ability to regulate businesses—particularly those in the West reliant upon public lands—and reverse the trend of the courts toward liberal and environment viewpoints.⁶⁰

Watt’s conservative credentials certainly put him on the radar of newly-elected Ronald Reagan and his advisors, but he wasn’t exactly an obvious choice for secretary of the interior. Needing to staff an expansive federal bureaucracy, the new Administration looked to the ranks of conservative lawyers and policymakers that had worked to combat the administrative state the previous four years. These conservative activists would now be tasked with running the agencies they had just previously been suing in court. Watt, therefore, was likely to receive some sort of government position. But that wasn’t necessarily going to be a cabinet position. While he had ample experience in the department and obvious conservative principles, he had never served in an elected office and therefore was not widely known—unusual for cabinet positions like the secretary of the interior which often served as a prize for Western political leaders who had backed the newly-elected president. Stewart Udall served as secretary of the

⁶⁰ For more on the “public-interest right” and conservative organizing in the 1970s, see: Decker, *The Other Rights Revolution*; Steven M. Teles, *The Rise of the Conservative Legal Movement: The Battle for Control of the Law*, Princeton Studies in American Politics: Historical, International, and Comparative Perspectives (Princeton University Press, 2010); Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*; For more on Watt’s background, see: Decker, *The Other Rights Revolution*, 76–94; Shabecoff, *A Fierce Green Fire*, 207–8; Mark Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America* (University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 190; Ron Arnold, *At the Eye of the Storm: James Watt and the Environmentalists* (Regnery Gateway, 1982), 1–26.

interior under President Kennedy and President Johnson after serving as a congressman for Arizona. Walter Hickel had been governor of Alaska before being selected by President Nixon. Cecil Andrus had been governor of Idaho before serving as secretary under President Carter. Indeed, James Watt wasn't even Reagan's first choice for secretary. Clifford Hansen, former governor of Wyoming, turned down Reagan's nomination due to the financial divestments that he would have to complete to avoid conflicts of interest as a Wyoming rancher.⁶¹

Nevertheless, James Watt's commitment to conservatism and opposition to environmentalism made him an obvious second choice for Reagan's advisors like Nevada senator Paul Laxalt, who suggested Watt's nomination with Joseph Coors' enthusiastic support. His views reflected those of Reagan and his advisors, including general support for the Sagebrush Rebellion—characterizing himself soon after his nomination as part of the movement—support increased development of Western energy and mineral resources as a response to the energy crises of the 1970s, and a deep ambivalence about the environmental movement that threatened their shared vision for the West. While both Watt and Reagan would call themselves “environmentalists,” they also expressed concern about what they saw as the radical fringe of the movement, with Watt repeatedly referring to his environmentalist opponents as “extreme environmentalists” or “no-growth advocates” who were an obstacle for energy independence and true “multiple-use” or the simultaneous protection and controlled development of public lands.⁶²

On the other hand, while these factors made Watt a great choice for the Administration, they also made him a perfect target for environmentalists who unsuccessfully sought to prevent his nomination. Environmentalists immediately reacted to Watt's nomination with outrage. Wilderness Society director

⁶¹ Decker, *The Other Rights Revolution*, 124–26.

⁶² Excerpts from Remarks Before American Paper Institute, Inc., James G. Watt, March 14, 1977, Box 14, Coll. 07667, James G. Watt Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming; Excerpts from Remarks Before Independent Petroleum Association of America's Mid-Year Meeting, James G. Watt, May 11, 1976, Box 14, James G. Watt Papers; Mountain States Legal Foundation Second Annual Report, 1978-1979, Box 7, Folder 4, James G. Watt Papers; “Excerpts from News Conference With Reagan's Cabinet Choices,” *New York Times*, December 23, 1980; See also: Shabecoff, *A Fierce Green Fire*, 207-210.

William Turnage called the appointment “disastrous.”⁶³ John McComb, chief lobbyist for the Sierra Club agreed, claiming that Watt’s record proved he was incapable of balancing “conservation interests with other interests.”⁶⁴ Indeed, the outrage was so strong and swift—twelve major conservation organizations, including the National Audubon Society, the Sierra Club, and the National Wildlife Federation, signed a telegram to President-Elect Reagan urging him to reconsider—that sources inside the transition team reported that Reagan briefly had second thoughts about the appointment.⁶⁵

But that fight had little effect on the immediate situation: Watt’s nomination. Republican control of the Senate—newly re-established in the 1980 election—meant that they also now had control of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. This ensured a relatively smooth confirmation process. Watt faced intense criticism from environmentalists during the hearing testimony, including Gaylord Nelson, the incoming chairman of the Wilderness Society and former senator of Wisconsin, who argued that Watt was “consistent and persistent in [his] attacks on almost every aspect of the environmental movement.”⁶⁶ But without the votes to substantively challenge Watt’s nomination, liberal Democrats on the committee offered only muted opposition. Washington senator and longtime environmental champion Henry M. “Scoop” Jackson initially attacked Watt on his refusal to promise recusal in decisions relating to his former employer, the MSLF. But he soon backed down once Watt agreed to do so. Summarizing the point of view of many Democrats on the committee, liberal Senator Paul E. Tsongas of Massachusetts admitted to Watt that his confirmation was all but guaranteed: “You are going to be confirmed. It’s not my doing. I’m speaking mathematically.”⁶⁷ Instead of obstinately opposing Watt, the committee Democrats instead approached him in a conciliatory manner, with Tsongas even remarking that he would consider backing Watt’s nomination after Watt promised to pursue balance in his

⁶³ Joanne Omang, “Choice for Interior An Agency Adversary,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), December 16, 1980.

⁶⁴ Joseph Seldner, “Watt: A Career of Fighting ‘Extreme Environmentalists,’” *Boston Globe* (Boston, MA), December 23, 1980.

⁶⁵ “Conservation Battle Begins,” *Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, WA), December 20, 1980, Idaho Edition.

⁶⁶ Arthur Siddon, “Environmentalists Hit Watt At Senate Hearing,” *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago), January 9, 1981.

⁶⁷ Stephen E. Nordlinger, “Watt Labels Interior Officials ‘Arrogant,’ ‘Inept,’ At His Confirmation Hearing,” *[Baltimore] Sun* (Baltimore, MD), January 8, 1981.

administration of the department, much to the dismay of environmentalists in attendance.⁶⁸ And, indeed, Watt proceeded without difficulty as the committee voted to recommend approval of Watt's nomination 16-0—with Tsongas abstaining.⁶⁹ Giving Watt the benefit of the doubt, the Senate would instead focus on its oversight role—with Senator Howard M. Metzenbaum of Ohio warning Watt during the Senate debate on the confirmation: “we’ll be watching.”⁷⁰

This cautious yet conciliatory approach to Watt continued even in the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives, where he gave his first briefing to the House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs. Both Watt and the committee members reiterated their hope that they could work together to tackle the major issues facing the management of the millions of acres of federally owned land.⁷¹ Watt, himself, consistently maintained a conciliatory rhetoric over the course of the hearing—repeatedly framing himself as a “concerned westerner” who sought to strike a “balance” between his electoral mandate to develop natural resources and his obligation to preserve the country’s natural beauty. As Watt explained in the hearing, he viewed these two goals as not being mutually exclusive and as something that could—with appropriate administration—be simultaneously achieved. Interior Department policies under his predecessors, Watt argued, had favored preservationist and environmentalist goals, forsaking what he saw as the public demand for development of natural resources in the shadow of the energy crises of the 1970s. He would bring the Department back into balance by encouraging this resource development and “removing unnecessary and burdensome regulations.”⁷² Even further, Watt framed his resource

⁶⁸ Stephen E. Nordlinger, “Watt Hearings Dismay Environmentalists,” *[Baltimore] Sun* (Baltimore, MD), January 11, 1981.

⁶⁹ “Watt and Edwards Win Approval of Senate Panel,” *New York Times* (New York), January 15, 1981.

⁷⁰ Steven V. Roberts, “The Confirmation Message: Hearings Are Used by Senators to Signal Views to New Administration and Elicit Commitments,” *New York Times* (New York), January 24, 1981; For more on environmentalist opposition to Watt, see: Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness*, 232–38; Turner also writes about the importance of the new Republican control of the Senate in understanding anti-environmentalist politics at this point in time. This control effectively “short-circuited” environmental initiatives in Congress and, I might add, thereby removed pressure on the Administration to oppose specific measures, see: Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness*, 201–2.

⁷¹ *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior: Oversight Hearing Before the Comm. On Interior and Insular Affairs*, 97th Cong. (1981). <https://congressional.proquest.com/congressional/docview/t29.d30.hrg-1981-ii-a-0001?accountid=14505>.

⁷² 1981 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 4-5

development program as environmentally necessary, arguing that the lack of controlled development would lead to a “crash program” of rapid and environmentally harmful exploitation of Western resources in the event of a crisis. As he explained, “Those of us who love and are committed to preserving the beauty of our environment, fear this possibility. We want the right kind of development to come over time, not the wrong kind of development to come in a crisis.”⁷³

This idea of “balance” was a key characteristic of Watt’s approach to environmental protections. By framing himself as the “balanced” participant in debates over the issue, he implicitly framed his opponents as unbalanced—the environmental “extremists” that Reagan had spoken of before. At the moment, his conciliatory language of “balance” resonated with many members of the committee, but reservations remained as they considered the rhetorical implications. In a particularly telling response to Watt’s testimony, Democratic Congressman Morris Udall of Arizona, chairman of the committee, noted that while Watt’s description of his role and duties as the pursuit of balance reflected the committee’s own understanding, there was likely a disparity in views over what “balance” actually meant. As he explained, “To many conservationists and environmentalists, it is they who have the balance,” while conservatives like Watt were the “extremists.”⁷⁴ “Balance,” Udall thus noted, was intensely subjective and prone to rhetorical twisting. Watt might have found “balance” in his policies, while environmentalists and wilderness advocates saw shameful exploitation.

And, indeed, Watt’s commitment to “balance” as secretary of the interior proved increasingly questionable to environmentalists as he took office. The first months of Watt’s tenure saw a whirlwind of actions and announcements that left environmentalists apoplectic. He immediately announced that there would be no further acquisitions of land for new or existing national parks for the foreseeable future, dedicating all funding instead to the improvement of facilities in existing parks. Furthermore, he announced his intention to abide by President Reagan’s larger bureaucratic reorientation, including a

⁷³ 1981 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 5.

⁷⁴ 1981 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 5-6.

freeze in hiring, curtailing department travel, and reviewing consulting contracts. In April, he began a new inventory of energy and mineral resources on public lands—including some wilderness areas—and energy exploration in the National Petroleum Reserve and the Federal Arctic Management Area in Alaska. In May, he announced a massive restructuring of the Office of Surface Mining, with the closing of all five regional offices and the transfer of most responsibility for strip mining regulation to the states. While some of these plans—like an attempt to allow energy exploration in the Bob Marshall, Scapegoat, and Great Bear Wilderness Areas in Montana—were blocked by the Democrat-controlled House Interior Committee,⁷⁵ others, like his dealings with the Sagebrush Rebellion, would prove to be at least partially successful.⁷⁶

While both Watt and Reagan had come into office claiming to be members of the Sagebrush Rebellion, their actions in office were less definitive. Watt repeatedly expressed his belief that reform of federal land policy made the transfer of public lands to state control unnecessary. As he explained during questioning at the 1981 House briefing, “We need not bring about massive land transfers if we will properly manage the Federal resource base. That is key: management as a good neighbor. We will implement those programs in an effort to defuse the ‘sagebrush rebellion.’”⁷⁷ This “good neighbor” policy involved close cooperation with the Western state and local governments to get their feedback on federal policies.⁷⁸ The effect of this change in policy—along with Watt’s other efforts—resulted in defusing much of the Rebellion’s vitriol. After years of failures in the courts, inability to convince Congress and

⁷⁵ The opening of wilderness areas for energy and mineral exploration and development stemmed from a 20-year waiting period imposed by section 4(d)(3) of the 1964 Wilderness Act before lands could be permanently closed to resource exploration and development—a concession secured by former Colorado Congressman Wayne N. Aspinall. The deadline for that exploration and development was, at that time, coming up on Dec. 31, 1983 though, as discussed below, efforts were made to extend that deadline. For more information, see Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness*, 234–35.

⁷⁶ 1981 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 4. Seth S. King, “Environment Policy Still Being Planned: Administration Is Hoping to Spur Private Development,” *New York Times* (New York), May 31, 1981; Ben A. Franklin, “Interior Chief Orders Strip-Mine Overseers to Reduce Operation,” *New York Times* (New York), May 22, 1981; William E. Schmidt, “U.S. Considers Land Preserves For Oil Drilling: Precedent Could Be Set For Wilderness Regions,” *New York Times* (New York), August 30, 1981; For more summary of Watt’s policies, see: Shabecoff, *A Fierce Green Fire*, 207–10.

⁷⁷ 1983 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 10.

⁷⁸ 1981 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 8.

Executive officials to pursue their vision, and increasing division over what the best course was, the movement had begun to lose its momentum.⁷⁹ Indeed, the Nevada Legislature Select Committee on Public Lands—one of the major proponents of Sagebrush Rebellion legislation and activism—felt forced to clarify its stance in an October 1982 open letter. While promising that it had “not ‘waffled’ on the Sagebrush Rebellion,” it also acknowledged that “divestiture of federal lands into state ownership will take our continuing efforts and many years to accomplish.”⁸⁰ For the moment, under a generally friendly Administration, the Sagebrush Rebellion was increasingly willing to call a truce.⁸¹

Besides the “Good Neighbor” policy, much of the confusion in the Sagebrush Rebellion after the election of Reagan focused on an emerging policy idea in the first several years of the Administration: privatization. This policy proposal, raised in 1982, called for the sale of public lands to private interests to raise money to pay off the national debt. This proposal was translated into action when President Reagan created the Property Review Board in February 1982. In its subsequent inventory of federal lands—primarily managed by the Bureau of Land Management—4.4 million acres of land was marked for sale before being revised down to a specific 60,000 acres in 307 parcels—estimated to “generate receipts of \$1.3 billion in fiscal year 1983, and more than \$4.25 billion in each of fiscal years 1984-87.”⁸² The subsequent uproar by environmentalists—and Western state leadership who opposed general land sales without their input—led the administration to backtrack with the Board being disbanded in mid-1983, having only sold 4,600 acres and generating only \$4.8 million in revenue.⁸³ While the federal land

⁷⁹ Dan Balz, “Once Riding High, Sagebrush Rebels Turn in Midstream,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), April 10, 1982.

⁸⁰ Letter From Assemblyman Karen W. Hayes, Chairman, October 7, 1982, Box 2, Folder 23, Coll. 85-04, Sagebrush Rebellion Papers, University of Nevada, Reno, Special Collections. Emphasis in original. Notably, while the letter argues that the Sagebrush rebels had “not yet begun to fight,” the letter—included in a collection of papers related to the Sagebrush Rebellion organized and donated by Nevada State Senator Norman Glaser, a founder of the Rebellion movement, in 1985—is nestled in one of the final folders of the chronologically-arranged collection, simply titled “Riding Down the Canyon To Watch the Sun Go Down.” Clearly, Sen. Glaser saw the Sagebrush Rebellion as falling apart in the face of an “allied” Republican administration.

⁸¹ Skillen, *This Land Is My Land*, 78–80.

⁸² George Cameron Coggins and Doris K. Nagel, “‘Nothing Beside Remains’: The Legal Legacy of James G. Watt’s Tenure As Secretary of the Interior on Federal Land Law and Policy,” *Boston College Environmental Affairs Law Review* 17, no. 3 (1990): 495.

⁸³ Coggins and Nagel, “‘Nothing Beside Remains,’” 494–97.

privatization plan failed, it nevertheless inspired controversy within the Sagebrush Rebellion as it divided the movement between those who saw the program as an effort to achieve effective local control—through outright private ownership—and avoid over-regulation from both federal and state governments and those who saw such a move as threatening to sell land leased by Western ranchers to developers and foreign investors who might cut off their access. Faced with the potential chaos of private ownership, many Sagebrush Rebels decided to trust the devil they knew.⁸⁴

While successful in defusing the Sagebrush Rebels, Watt had more difficulty securing drilling leases for the Outer Continental Shelf off the Pacific, Atlantic, and Gulf Coasts. Inspired by the continued specter of the Energy Crises of the 1970s, the Administration made this one of its signature policy agendas—stretching over the course of all eight years of the Reagan Administration. Involving the leasing of nearly a billion acres of land off the U.S. coast, the policy provoked intense controversy. With lingering memories of the 1969 Santa Barbara Oil Spill, California proved to be one of the most consistent antagonists of the proposed policy, with Governor Jerry Brown succeeding in a lawsuit to temporarily halt the leases. This case would drag on for the next several years despite Watt's best efforts to move the program forward.⁸⁵

Beyond these specifically Interior-based policies, Watt also figured as a central figure in Administration-wide environmental policy-making. As secretary of the interior, Watt served as chairman pro tempore of the Cabinet Council on Natural Resources and the Environment—with President Reagan serving as official chairman in cases where he attended the meeting. The Cabinet Council system

⁸⁴ Balz, "Once Riding High, Sagebrush Rebels Turn in Midstream"; Shabecoff, *A Fierce Green Fire*, 209, 217; Helvarg, *War Against the Greens*, 37–39; Skillen argues that Watt took a middle line between the libertarians in the Reagan Administration seeking privatization and the Sagebrush Rebels, publicly supporting the proposal while working behind the scenes to stop it, see: Skillen, *This Land Is My Land*, 79–80; For a conservative anti-environmentalist perspective on privatization, see: Wayne Hage, *Storm Over Rangelands: Private Rights in Federal Lands*, 3rd ed. (Free Enterprise Press, 1994), 21.

⁸⁵ Philip Shabecoff, "Watt Presses Offshore Leasing Despite Opposition," *New York Times* (New York), November 25, 1981; Jane Perlez, "Watt Runs Into Criticism of Offshore Leasing Plan," *New York Times* (New York), September 9, 1982; Shabecoff, *A Fierce Green Fire*; For more on the 1969 Santa Barbara Oil Spill and its impact on environmental policy, see: Teresa Sabol Spezio, *Slick Policy: Environmental and Science Policy in the Aftermath of the Santa Barbara Oil Spill* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018).

involved numerous sub-Cabinet committees. It was designed in Reagan's first term as effectively a forum for Cabinet officials with similar jurisdiction in a particular area to discuss policy without other unrelated Cabinet officials interfering. It also facilitated control over interactions between specific Cabinet members and the President. Instead of Cabinet officials independently lobbying the President for specific actions, they would instead take their ideas and requests to their respective Cabinet Council, where they would be debated and then, with majority agreement, raised to the President for his review. Given Reagan's reported disinterest in many of the more tedious aspects of governance—Deputy White House Chief of Staff Michael Deaver even admitted in 1984 to Reagan's regular napping during Cabinet meetings—Watt's leadership of the Cabinet Council on Natural Resources and the Environment gave him significant influence over the course of environmental and land use policy.⁸⁶

Given his increasingly central position in Reagan's environmental policy, environmentalists continued their attacks, successfully framing him as the chief anti-environmentalist of the Reagan Administration and a foil for themselves. From the beginning, they worked to force him from office or, at the very least, block his policy agenda from moving forward. Environmental organizations consistently sued to stop specific Interior Department policies—a strategy that worked well in the case of delaying offshore oil leasing, where, working with California Governor Jerry Brown, environmental organizations achieved a temporary injunction blocking implementation of leasing off the California coast. But they also used the outrage that Watt's frequent antics inspired among the public at large to build a mass movement against Watt himself. Polls taken in March 1981, just a couple of months after Watt's confirmation, found that 42 percent of Americans felt that a slower rate of economic growth had to be

⁸⁶ James P. Pfiffner, "White House Staff Versus the Cabinet: Centripetal and Centrifugal Role," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1986): 680–84; Michael Schaller, *Reckoning With Reagan: America and Its President in the 1980s* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 40; "Deaver Says Cabinet Bores Reagan to Sleep Sometimes," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), August 14, 1984.

accepted in order to protect the environment—compared to only 25 percent saying that relaxed environmental standards were necessary to achieve economic growth.⁸⁷

Recognizing the continued public support for environmental protections even after the election of Reagan, the environmental organizations attracted growing numbers of Americans who were outraged at what they saw as a full-fronted assault on the environment and environmental protections. Environmental organizations readily accepted the new members and their organizational dues, putting them to work not only in fashioning massive volunteer networks and increasing lobbying efforts, but also expanding organizational staff to reach even larger audiences. In this effort, they specifically targeted Watt as a foil to themselves—an arch-nemesis for the environmental movement to focus the general anger towards Reagan Administration environmental and land use policies. One example of this personality-based campaign can be seen in the so-called “Watt Book.” This two-volume, 612-page book compiled by the Wilderness Society includes not only analysis of Watt’s actions in office—“Watt’s Wrongs”—but also a variety of news articles, speeches, and congressional testimony by and about Watt—intended to be a reference for environmental activists and informative for the general public. As Wilderness Society leaders Gaylord Nelson and William Turnage explain in the introduction, they believed that “an informed public is the best defense against... a profound a fundamental attack on one of our country’s most cherished traditions: conservation.”⁸⁸ Environmentalists also organized a campaign to force Watt out of office including a petition that would gain over a million signatures.⁸⁹ Thus, Watt inadvertently helped rally the environmental organizations in opposition to him. Michael McCloskey, then Executive Director of the Sierra Club, would later note that “in that period, 1980 to 1985, the Sierra Club’s membership

⁸⁷ Opinion Research Corporation, Opinion Research Corporation Poll: March 1981, Question 5, USORC.81MAY.R04, Opinion Research Corporation (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1981), Dataset, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/ipoll/study/31103678/questions#bac46a42-645e-4861-b8c0-1f618278d6a6>.

⁸⁸ The Watt Book, Vols. 1 and 2, Box 17, Coll. 07667, James G. Watt Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

⁸⁹ Michael McCloskey and Ann Lage, *Michael McCloskey: Sierra Club Executive Director and Chairman 1980s-1990s: A Perspective on Transitions in the Club and the Environmental Movement*, Sierra Club Oral Histories (Regional Oral History Office, 1999), 2–3.

doubled. It went from 181,000 to 362,000, and our net worth did too, and our revenues.”⁹⁰ As he explained, Watt’s policies—and active opposition to environmentalists—“had a reinvigorating effect on the movement. People rallied around, and they got damn mad that these things were going on.”⁹¹

But this resistance sometimes veered into misinformation. One of the most common stories that emerged in the period—fueled by a mix of environmentalist animosity towards Watt and a distrust of evangelical Christianity—dealt with supposed comments he made during congressional testimony in response to a question from Rep. James Weaver about the need to preserve natural resources in the long term. Watt, a devout evangelical, voiced his agreement, calling attention to the indefinite number of generations until the Christian prophecy of the Second Coming of the Lord was fulfilled:

That is the delicate balance the Secretary of the Interior must have, to be steward for the natural resources for this generation as well as future generations. I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns, whatever it is we have to manage with a skill to have the resources needed for future generations.⁹²

While these comments failed to trigger an immediate negative response in the hearing, the following months saw a fury of discussion and accusation that dogged Watt for the rest of his time in office. A *Wall Street Journal* feature on Watt later that spring called the remarks “cryptic,” but most later coverage of the comments in newspapers across the country took it as an assertion of the permissibility of environmental degradation due to the imminent end of the world.⁹³ Columnist Colman McCarthy of the *Washington Post* interpreted the remarks as meaning that federally owned lands are “now under divine mandate to be bulldozed, leveled, drilled, mined and leased down to the last holy square yard.”⁹⁴ Peter Hegemen of the Baltimore *Sun* called it a nihilistic “combination of millennialism and advocacy of

⁹⁰ McCloskey and Lage, *Michael McCloskey: A Perspective on Transitions*, 3.

⁹¹ McCloskey and Lage, *Michael McCloskey: A Perspective on Transitions*, 3.

⁹² 1981 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 37.

⁹³ Andy Pasztor, “James Watt Tackles Interior Agency Job With Religious Zeal,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 5, 1981.

⁹⁴ Colman McCarthy, “James Watt & The Puritan Ethic,” *Washington Post*, May 24, 1981.

development.”⁹⁵ Across the country, political and journalistic circles increasingly regarded Watt’s comments as a religious imperative for development.⁹⁶

These columnists misinterpreted Watt’s comments. In the exchange, Representative Weaver had asked Watt whether he believed that some resources should be preserved for future generations. Watt agreed, noting that the indefinite number of generations left until the Second Coming of Christ meant that people should consider future generations. He elaborated upon this point in a later *Wall Street Journal* article, noting that his responsibility is to “follow the scriptures,” which, he argued, “call upon us to occupy the land until Jesus returns.” But as he explains, this involves a balance between preservation and use of resources that makes sure that “people are provided for until He does come.”⁹⁷ Watt was not arguing, as many began to contend over the subsequent years—and decades—that imminent apocalypse justified unlimited exploitation. Rather, he ostensibly advocated for a more balanced form of development that ensured ready access to natural resources while leaving at least some in place for future use and development. The question was what that balance would look like. The real debate between environmentalists and Watt was over defining this balance—a point Rep. Udall had, as previously noted, remarked upon—not religious differences.⁹⁸

Furthermore, in their analyses of the exchange, many commentators failed to notice one of Watt’s language of “stewardship,” arguably the most important in understanding Watt’s vision of environmental protection. In his response to Rep. Weaver, Watt agreed that the role of secretary of the Interior required thinking about future generations as well. “That is the delicate balance the secretary of the Interior must

⁹⁵ Peter Hegeman, “Interpreting God’s Will as Public Policy,” [Baltimore] *Sun*, June 21, 1981.

⁹⁶ See also Darren Dochuk, *Anointed With Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (Basic Books, 2019), 523; Decker, *The Other Rights Revolution*.

⁹⁷ Pasztor, “James Watt Tackles Interior Job With Religious Zeal.”

⁹⁸ Numerous histories of the Reagan Administration have repeated this myth to varying degrees, including: Helvarg, *War Against the Greens*, 38; Shabecoff, *A Fierce Green Fire*, 203–4; Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008* (Harper Collins, 2008), 140; A subtler framing by historian Darren Dochuk, notes Watt’s “end-times fervor.” See: Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil*, 523; The intersection between debates over religion (particularly Christianity) and environmental protection is a fascinating topic that has been strongly explored in recent work of Neall Pogue: Pogue, *The Nature of the Religious Right*.

have, to be steward for the natural resources for this generation as well as future generations.”⁹⁹ Watt refers to the role of the secretary of the interior as a “steward,” and he would repeatedly use the term as secretary. In a winter 1982 *Saturday Evening Post* article, “Ours Is The Earth,” he argued that stewardship was Americans’ collective responsibility. “We Americans are blessed with the human and natural resources to build a great nation. This blessing carries with it a responsibility for good stewardship.”¹⁰⁰ In a summer 1981 interview in the *U.S. News & World Report*, Watt asserted that the deterioration and degradation of the National Park System was the result of a failure by previous administrations to be “good stewards.”¹⁰¹ In another interview a year later, Watt repeated his focus on stewardship, explaining his administration’s reluctance to add to the endangered species list because it valued its role as a steward—in this case, taking care of species already on the list.¹⁰² Again and again, Watt repeated this talking point of being a “steward.” He meant that the secretary of the interior was, like medieval stewards of manorial estates, obligated to prudent care and management of the public lands.¹⁰³

This language of stewardship gives us an insight into a very particular conservative vision of environmentalism that Watt is, here, laying a groundwork for. Building upon late nineteenth-century conservationist principles, Watt’s conception of stewardship as a guiding principle in an environmental ethos advances a particularly anthropocentric, but no less meaningful idea of environmental protection. The similarities between Watt’s insistence on development of natural resources—particularly energy and strategic minerals—and those of Gifford Pinchot, for instance, are notable. Pinchot’s succinct 1910 statements of the “Principles of Conservation,” for instance begin with “the first great fact” that conservation “stands for development.” As Pinchot explains, “Conservation does mean provision for the future, but it means also and first of all the recognition of the right of the present generation to the fullest

⁹⁹ 1981 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 37.

¹⁰⁰ James G. Watt, “Ours Is the Earth,” *Saturday Evening Post*, February 1, 1982, 75.

¹⁰¹ James G. Watt, ““We Can Protect Environment --And Bring On Development: Interview with James G. Watt, Secretary of the Interior,”” *U.S. News & World Report*, May 25, 1981, 90th ed.

¹⁰² James Watt, “James Watt Lashes Back at Critics,” *U.S. News & World Report*, June 14, 1982.

¹⁰³ “stewardship, n.” OED Online. March 2021. Oxford University Press.
<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/190092?redirectedFrom=stewardship> (accessed March 03, 2021).

necessary use of all the resources with which this country is so abundantly blessed.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, by speaking of “balanced” “stewardship” of natural resources, Watt positions himself within a long tradition of environmental thinking. After years of “environmental extremism,” he now saw his role as moving the pendulum back towards the other side.¹⁰⁵

Thus, Watt worked to articulate a distinctly conservative vision of environmentalism in opposition to those advanced by mainstream environmentalists. He built upon Reagan’s 1980 campaign rhetoric to attack environmentalist opponents as being “extreme environmentalists” who would “deny economic development... or resources for the benefit of consumers and for all of America.”¹⁰⁶ This also involved the populist framing of the environmental movement as Washington “elites”—contrasting with what he framed as his own, popular position. Environmentalists were “elite groups” who sought to “lock away public lands and resources for their own special use” and were only interested in “membership dollars and headlines.”¹⁰⁷ In contrast, Watt framed himself and the rest of the Reagan Administration as

¹⁰⁴ Gifford Pinchot, “Principles of Conservation,” in *The Fight for Conservation* (Doubleday, Page & Col, 1910), 42.

¹⁰⁵ There is also a religious element to the concept of stewardship that is potentially significant given Watt’s well-known Evangelical beliefs. Drawing from the Parable of the Talents in the Gospel of Matthew, some have noted a capitalistic and developmental mode of thinking about natural resources. To this end, historian Mark Stoll has argued that, for conservative Christians, stewardship “has economic connotations of making the most out of what has been given to mankind’s care.” Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America*, 191; For more on the history of conservation, see: Miles A. Powell, *Vanishing America: Species Extinction, Racial Peril, and the Origins of Conservation* (Harvard University Press, 2016); Robert W. Righter, *The Battle Over Hetch Hetchy: America’s Most Controversial Dam and the Birth of Modern Environmentalism* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (University of California Press, 2001); Char Miller, *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism* (Island Press, 2001); Louis S. Warren, *The Hunter’s Game: Poachers and Conservationists in Twentieth-Century America* (Yale University Press, 1997); Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (Harvard University Press, 1959).

¹⁰⁶ “Excerpts From News Conference With Reagan’s Cabinet Choices,” *New York Times* (New York), December 23, 1980; Bill Stall, “Environment No Longer a Forgotten Campaign Issue,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), October 26, 1980.

¹⁰⁷ Bill Stall, “Watt Raps ‘Elite Groups’ in Environment Movement,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), March 24, 1981; Eleanor Randolph, “Watt Seeks to Ease His Negative Image,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), May 14, 1981; Watt’s populism is best understood as a rhetorical tool rather than an ideological stance. While many recent scholars such as Cas Mudde have argued that “Populism is only a ‘thin-centered ideology’” focused on conflict between the “people” and the “elite,” other scholars such as Michael Kazin and Paul Elliott Johnson provide a better understanding of populism that acknowledges its shifts in specific meaning over time. As Kazin explains, “Populism, more an impulse than an ideology, is too elastic and promiscuous to be the basis for [formal, ideological] allegiance.” Watt’s populist appeals in favor of his anti-environmentalist policies (indeed, I would argue, those of most conservative anti-environmentalists in the late 20th century) therefore, are best understood as being just that-- rhetorical appeals that are not necessarily part of a carefully considered political ideology. For more on political populism, see: Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541–63; Michael

the “common sense” political center of the debate—distinct from the fringe of “environmental extremists.” During a speech at the annual coal convention of the American Mining Congress in 1981, Watt referred to himself and, indeed, the wider Reagan Administration as the “mainstream of the environmental movement.”¹⁰⁸ In comments afterwards to reporters, Watt dismissed “environmental ‘special interest’ groups promoting ‘frivolous uses’ of public lands” as being “the ones outside most people’s thinking toward environmental issues.”¹⁰⁹ Watt, therefore, tried to portray his political program as not only representing the majority of Americans, but also the “true” environmentalism that considered humanity’s needs as well as the needs of the environment—unlike those of the Washington-based environmentalists and liberal politicians who Watt framed as fundamentally un-American and morally and politically corrupt. Indeed, Watt explicitly made such an assertion in a 1981 private luncheon, explaining that he never used “the words Republicans and Democrats... It’s liberals and Americans.”¹¹⁰ While Watt later dismissed the comment as a joke, the quote still retained its populist rhetorical force.¹¹¹ By delegitimizing liberal and environmentalist opposition to the Administration’s policies as effectively un-American, Watt was working to rhetorically define both the American people and environmentalism as Republican, conservative, and pro-development.¹¹²

Yet, for his part, Watt seemed to take pleasure at sparring with environmentalist opponents. Robert Jones of the *Los Angeles Times* noted in his spring 1981 profile that after environmental groups began to refer to him as a “fox in henhouse, Watt promptly hung over the fireplace of his office a photograph of a “sleepy but obviously hungry red fox.”¹¹³ Dale Russakoff of the *Washington Post* quoted

Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, 2017 Revised Edition (Cornell University Press, 2017); Paul Elliott Johnson, *I The People: The Rhetoric of Conservative Populism in the United States* (University of Alabama Press, 2022); Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (University of California Press, 2019).

¹⁰⁸ Edited Remarks to American Mining Congress, James G. Watt, June 1, 1981, Box 18, Coll. 07667, James G. Watt Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

¹⁰⁹ “Watt Says He’s An Environmentalist,” *Casper Star-Tribune* (Casper, WY), May 12, 1981.

¹¹⁰ John Johnson and Thorne Gray, “Watt Pledges Aid For San Luis Dam,” *Sacramento Bee* (Sacramento, CA), October 31, 1981.

¹¹¹ Richard D. Hall, “Farmers Question Watt’s Dry Wit on Water Issue,” *Sacramento Bee* (Sacramento, CA), December 15, 1981.

¹¹² McCloskey and Lage, *Michael McCloskey: A Perspective on Transitions*, 2.

¹¹³ Robert A. Jones, “New Interior Chief: None Like Him,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), May 31, 1981.

a Watt aide remarking “with delight” during the intense preparation for a hearing with Democratic congressmen that Watt was “going into the jaws of the dragon... He loves it.” Russakoff also cited an exchange between Watt and Democratic Representative James Weaver of Oregon in which Watt interrupted an intense line of questioning to say exuberantly “‘I always love you Congressman Weaver. You’re tremendous.’ To which Weaver responded dryly: ‘I don’t love you, Mr. Watt.’”¹¹⁴ In his first months in office, Watt seemed to love the confrontations with his opponents, fueling a growing intensity of conflict between the Administration and environmentalists in the first years of Reagan’s first term as Watt took the fight to the environmental movement.¹¹⁵

“The Ice Queen”

But Watt wasn’t the only member of the Reagan Administration to become the poster child of Reaganite Anti-Environmentalism. A similar trend was happening on the other side of Washington, D.C., at the Environmental Protection Agency. Seen as a thorn in the side of conservative businessmen since its foundation in 1970, the EPA had established a reputation over the course of the 1970s as a center of environmentalist employment in the federal government and an aggressive proponent of environmental regulation.

These factors were likely in mind as Reagan came to the decision to appoint Anne Gorsuch as Administrator of the EPA after coming into office. Like Watt and his Bureau of Land Management Director, Robert Burford, Gorsuch came to Washington by way of Denver—forming a group that came to be known as the “Colorado Mafia.”¹¹⁶ A lawyer by trade, Gorsuch had served with Burford in the Colorado state legislature, resisting federal regulatory efforts in Colorado during the Carter Administration with other right-wing legislators as part of an informal caucus known as the “House Crazies.” Furthermore, together with Watt, who was then serving as President of the MSLF, they sued the

¹¹⁴ Dale Russakoff, “Watt and His Opponents Love Their Mutual Hate,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), March 23, 1982.

¹¹⁵ Shabecoff, *A Fierce Green Fire*, 207–10.

¹¹⁶ William E. Schmidt, “The ‘Colorado Mafia’ Puts Its Stamp on the Government,” *New York Times* (New York), September 6, 1981.

EPA, attempting to block their efforts to force Colorado to control air-polluting automobiles. While Gorsuch was not formally part of the suit—having been out of town when the suit was filed—she expressed her support for it. Nevertheless, she would later reluctantly sponsor legislation to enact a more limited form of air pollution controls, later expressing doubt that there was “any adequate data to show that it works.”¹¹⁷ These actions—along with the support of Joseph Coors—helped to place Anne Gorsuch on the radar of Reagan’s advisors as the new administration came into office.¹¹⁸

Gorsuch’s nomination, like that of Watt, raised concerns among Democrats and environmentalists, but not for the same reasons. At the time of her confirmation hearings, there was some uncertainty about how to perceive her and her record. While she had a conservative reputation in Colorado as one of the “House Crazies,” she had also, after all, sponsored at least a compromise air pollution bill in the Colorado state legislature. The uncertainty was best represented by the *Washington Post*’s interview of Reed Kelly of the environmentalist Colorado Open Space Council, who noted that the Council had, during her three terms in the state legislature, given her legislative rating scores of 33, 8, and 72 on a 100-point scale.¹¹⁹ Unlike Watt, who had firmly established a reputation as an opponent of the mainstream environmental movement in the previous decade, Gorsuch remained an enigma. The primary concerns of Democrats and environmentalists about Gorsuch focused less on fears of her anti-environmentalist leadership of the EPA and more on her lack of experience and connections to other, more established opponents of the environmental movement. Environmentalist opponents to Gorsuch’s nomination repeatedly expressed this view around the hearings, questioning whether “the White House or the Interior Department [was] going to be running the agency through a figurehead.”¹²⁰ Meanwhile, as Gorsuch went into her confirmation hearings—delayed some months to complete security background

¹¹⁷ Joanne Omang, “Denver Lawyer Reagan’s Choice to Head EPA,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), February 21, 1981.

¹¹⁸ Dale Russakoff, “Denver Allies Became Keepers of the Rules They Had Attacked,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), March 3, 1983; Larry Eichel, “Reagan’s Gang of 4 on Environment,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia), March 30, 1981.

¹¹⁹ Omang, “Denver Lawyer Reagan’s Choice to Head EPA.”

¹²⁰ Andy Pasztor, “Stormy Hearing Likely for EPA Nominee, But Backers Expect Her to Weather It,” *Wall Street Journal* (New York), May 1, 1981.

checks because of time spent abroad—environmentalist Republican Senator John Chafee repeatedly asked her about her ability to independently advocate for the protection of the environment in the administration. And, while she insisted she would be able to hold her own in the administration—a stance questioned by the environmentalist testimony following hers—many like Sen. Gary Hart of Colorado expressed frustration with her refusal to take a stance on many issues—with Gorsuch frequently obfuscating, saying that she will follow the policies set forth by the President.¹²¹

While Gorsuch easily sailed through the confirmation given the Republican majority, the Committee’s concerns regarding Gorsuch’s independence and ability to voice concern for environmental issues were based on some solid ground. As noted, much of the Administration’s policy deliberation in the first term took place in the Cabinet Councils. And for those hoping Gorsuch to be a voice for the environment in the fiscally minded administration, there was one major problem: the EPA Administrator wasn’t on the Cabinet and was only invited to Cabinet Council on Natural Resources and the Environment meetings relating to the upcoming Clean Air Act reauthorization.¹²² But the problems didn’t just have to do with the White House and the Cabinet. She was pursuing her own efforts in the EPA. She moved quickly to abolish the EPA Office of Enforcement, instead splitting its enforcement duties amongst the different divisions of the EPA—helping, she argued, to streamline enforcement under the different assistant administrators. Furthermore, she worked to aid in the Administration’s efforts at “industrial revitalization” and ending regulatory “overburden.”¹²³ However, Gorsuch was careful in her wording of such a program. In a report to Vice President Bush’s Task Force on Regulatory Relief, Gorsuch emphasized the rhetorical point that they were “not deregulating environmental polluters,” but

¹²¹ *Hearing on the Nominations of Anne M. Gorsuch and John W. Hernandez, Jr., Before the Senate Comm. on Environment and Public Works*, 97th Cong. (1981), 27-62.; Joanne Omang, “Nominee for EPA Voices a Credo of ‘Non-Confrontation?’”, *Washington Post*, May 2, 1981.

¹²² CCNRE Participants List, May 28, 1981, Folder “CCNRE Meeting – May 28, 1981,” Box 55, Martin Anderson Files (hereafter referred to as MAF), Reagan Presidential Library; CCNRE Participants List, June 10, 1981, Folder “CCNRE Meeting – June 10, 1981,” Box 55, MAF; CCNRE Participants List, July 1, 1981, Folder “CCNRE Meeting – July 1, 1981,” Box 55, MAF; CCNRE Participants List, Sept. 3, 1981, Folder “CCNRE Meeting – Sept. 5, 1981,” Box 55, MAF.

¹²³ Philip Shabecoff, “New Environmental Chief Vows to Lift Regulatory ‘Overburden,’” *New York Times* (New York), June 21, 1981.

rather “rationalizing regulation in the environmental area.”¹²⁴ And she was perfectly willing to pursue strict regulation if it served a particular purpose for the Reagan Administration—such as when she threatened to hold U.S. cities to account for not meeting air quality standards under the Clean Air Act, which environmentalists argued was an attempt to prod Congress to reauthorize the law with lowered standards.¹²⁵

This emphasis on regulatory “rationalizing” as well as her general distrust of career staff did not make her many friends amongst the employees of the agency, with some taking to calling her gendered pejoratives such as the “Ice Queen.”¹²⁶ But with seemingly little interest in enforcement—while the EPA referred 200 cases to the Department of Justice on average each year during its first decade, that number had declined to around 30 in 1982—and the threat of massive layoffs being in the works, the morale of the agency was suffering by the time 1982 was coming to a close.¹²⁷

The Crises of ‘83

It was this growing crisis of morale and anti-environmental reputation that would eventually become Gorsuch’s undoing. After House oversight committees led specially by Democratic Representatives John Dingell and Elliott Levitas began to subpoena EPA documents related to EPA administration of Superfund in the fall of 1982, the EPA became caught up in a constitutional fight between Attorney General William French Smith and Congress as the White House directed Gorsuch and Assistant Administrator for Hazardous Waste Rita Lavelle to not turn over any documents on the basis of executive privilege. Congress responded by citing Gorsuch with contempt of Congress. In the tempest that grew over the weeks and months that followed, Congressional investigators began to investigate any

¹²⁴ Memo, Edwin Harper to Danny Boggs, on EPA Regulatory Review, March 4, 1982, Folder “Environment – Environmental Protection Agency,” Box H81, Danny J. Boggs Files, Reagan Presidential Library.

¹²⁵ Philip Shabecoff, “Mrs. Gorsuch as a Crusading Tiger? Critics Wonder Why,” *New York Times* (New York), December 26, 1982; Joanne Omang, “EPA Enforcement Split Up in Agency Reorganization,” *Washington Post*, June 13, 1981; Halvorson, *Valuing Clean Air*.

¹²⁶ Eleanor Randolph, “Feisty, Intense EPA Chief at Open War With Staff,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), November 2, 1981.

¹²⁷ Randolph, “Feisty, Intense EPA Chief at Open War With Staff”; Caroline E. Mayer, “U.S. Relaxing Enforcement of Regulations,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), November 15, 1981; Halvorson, *Valuing Clean Air*.

and all areas of possible malfeasance, including accusations of silencing career EPA employees, lax enforcement of industrial regulations, and politically-influenced administration of Superfund. As more and more revelations emerged supporting Congressional investigators' accusations—including a memo by Lavelle explaining her belief that career EPA employees were “systematically alienating the primary constituents of this Administration, the business community”—pressure on the White House to prove it wasn't anti-environmentalist increased.¹²⁸

Even after firing Lavelle after she refused to resign, the Administration found itself still besieged. Many in the agency and beyond saw Lavelle's termination as an effort by Gorsuch—still under contempt charges—and the Administration to set her up as a scapegoat for the Agency's growing troubles, offering liberal and environmental opponents of the Administration even more ammunition to attack Reagan's environmental record. New polling—with the 1984 election season only a little over a year away—now showed the public was beginning to believe that Reagan's policies were “more favorable to the polluters than to the public.”¹²⁹ While Reagan pushed back on the charges, returning to his old characterization of critics as “environmental extremists,” the situation for Gorsuch—who was now Anne McGill Burford after her late February marriage to fellow “Colorado Mafia” member Robert Burford—was becoming increasingly untenable.¹³⁰ She finally resigned on March 9th, a week after Chief of Staff James A. Baker, III, encouraged President Reagan to fire Burford if she didn't resign soon. Accompanied by her husband,

¹²⁸ Craig Fuller Notes on Meeting with Rita Lavelle and Attached Memo, Feb. 8, 1983, ID #124220, FG122, WHORM: Subject File, Reagan Presidential Library; Chronology of Events in the E.P.A. Dispute,” *New York Times*, March 10, 1983; Mary Thornton, “Gorsuch Being Called to Tell Hill Why She Withheld Data,” *Washington Post*, October 27, 1982; Philip Shabecoff, “Agency Stand on Dioxins and PCB's Is Challenged,” *New York Times*, November 20, 1982; Wayne Biddle, “Tug of War Develops Over Access to Data on Toxin,” *New York Times*, December 5, 1982; David Burnham, “Environmental Unit Accused of Seeking to Silence a Critic,” *New York Times*, December 11, 1982; Mary Thornton, “Charges Weighed FOR EPA's Lavelle,” *Washington Post*, January 11, 1983; Cass Peterson, “EPA's Lavelle Hires Lawyer in Waste Case,” *Washington Post*, January 29, 1983; Mary Thornton, “Gorsuch Aide, Accused of Lying, Quits the EPA,” *Washington Post*, February 5, 1983.

¹²⁹ Francis X. Clines, “Reagan Makes Counterattack in E.P.A. Fight,” *New York Times* (New York), March 12, 1983.

¹³⁰ Rumors swirled as early as their time together in the Colorado state legislature that a romantic affair existed between Burford and Gorsuch. Some environmentalists even used the rumors to support their claims that Gorsuch would not be independent and impartial in her leadership of the Agency, instead deferring to Burford--and Burford's supervisor James Watt--on environmental issues “E.P.A. Head Becomes Anne McGill Burford,” *New York Times* (New York), February 22, 1983.

Robert Burford, James Watt, and White House Counselor Edwin Meese II, Anne Burford cited the ongoing crises in her resignation letter, seeing her situation as disabling the Agency and distracting the President from other important issues, while privately expressing her outrage at what she saw as the White House abandoning her.¹³¹

Watt's position in the aftermath of Gorsuch's collapse was unclear. Many commentators and environmentalists predicted that Watt would soon go as well, intimately tied to the overt opposition to environmentalists that now appeared to be discredited to a White House looking forward to the 1984 election. But Watt remained, not only as secretary of the interior but also in his leadership positions on the Cabinet Council for Natural Resources and the Environment. But Watt's tone was changing as the summer of 1983 began. In an interview in June, he claimed that much of his policy agenda was now complete and that "he was now planning to swing the emphasis of his decision-making away from the development of public lands and resources and toward conservation."¹³² With Reagan's environmental legacy now in jeopardy, the Administration was feeling the need to be very careful about its image.

But then a new crisis emerged. In April 1982, the Department of the Interior under Watt organized leases for coal development in the Powder River Basin in Wyoming and Montana. These leases, long controversial for their sale in the middle of a glut in the coal market, had attracted few buyers; all but two drew only a single bidder. But in the spring and summer of 1983, a General Accounting Office audit of the leases found many more questionable issues. In its report, the GAO found that the Department of the Interior had sold the leases for \$100 million under market value, that leaks from the Department on the value of the coal had preceded their lowering the minimum bid by \$40 million, and that many of the leases were custom assembled to favor a particular bidder. While Watt and

¹³¹ Dale Russakoff and Mary Thornton, "Lavelle Defends Record at EPA, Disavows Memo," *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), February 13, 1983; Clines, "Reagan Makes Counterattack in E.P.A. Fight"; Eleanor Randolph, "Gorsuch Reported on Shaky Ground," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), February 15, 1983; David Hoffman and Cass Peterson, "Burford Quits as EPA Administrator," *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), March 10, 1983; See also Burford's memoir: Anne M. Burford and John Greenya, *Are You Tough Enough?* (McGraw-Hill, 1986).

¹³² Philip Shabecoff, "Watt Says He'll Shift Toward Conservation," *New York Times* (New York), June 26, 1983.

the Department denied that it had conducted a “fire sale” of the leases, House investigatory committees began to turn their attention to the issue, and the GAO also critiqued the performance of the Department’s inspector general for not catching the issue due to pressure from Watt to finish the internal probe. Finally, amidst a back-and-forth effort by the House of Representatives to halt further coal leasing and Watt’s persistent refusal to do so—even going so far as to defy an order by the House Interior committee to halt sales, citing a recent Supreme Court decision overturning legislative vetoes—Congress created a commission to investigate the federal coal leasing policies.¹³³

Ironically, while this controversy slowly heated up over the summer of 1983, what ultimately brought the entire issue to a boil had very little to do with environmental policy. In a speech to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce where he defended his choice of appointees to the new commission on coal leasing, Watt used offensive language, saying that “we have every kind of mix you can have. I have a black, I have a woman, two Jews and a cripple.”¹³⁴ The political blowback to the remarks were immediate, leading the *Washington Post* to note that the comments had “brought the loudest and most widespread condemnation of Watt since he took office” including criticism by GOP senators and a Republican newspaper.¹³⁵ While Watt initially wrote an apology, he later submitted a letter of resignation citing the end of his “usefulness” to the Reagan administration. Reagan accepted this resignation, noting

¹³³ Dale Russakoff, “GAO Investigation: Watt Leased Coal at a Loss,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), May 11, 1983; Dale Russakoff, “Watt Denies ‘Fire Sale’ of Coal,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), May 13, 1983; Peter Grier, “As Attacks on EPA Cool, Interior Department Gets the Heat,” *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston, MA), May 12, 1983; Howard Kurtz and Dale Russakoff, “GAO Hits Interior Coal-Lease Probe,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), June 12, 1984; Leonard M. Apcar, “Senate Votes Ban on Watt’s Sale of Coal Leases,” *Wall Street Journal* (New York), September 21, 1983; Dale Russakoff and Al Kamen, “U.S. Judge Tells Watt to Hold On to 5 Coal Leases,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), September 17, 1983; “Watt Defies Lawmakers, Presses U.S. Coal Sale,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), August 13, 1983; “Illinois Professor Is Named Head of Study Group on Coal Leasing,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), August 5, 1983.

¹³⁴ Dale Russakoff, “Watt’s Off-the-Cuff Remark Sparks Storm of Criticism,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), September 22, 1983.

¹³⁵ Dale Russakoff, “6 GOP Senators Call for Watt’s Resignation,” *Washington Post*, Sept. 23, 1983; “Staunchly Republican Paper Declares Watt ‘Has to Go,’” *Washington Post*, Oct. 1, 1983.

in a statement that Watt had succeeded in initiating a “careful balance between the needs of the people and the importance of protecting the environment.”¹³⁶ Watt’s career in government was effectively over.

Picking Up the Pieces

Thus, as 1983 progressed into the fall, the Reagan Administration’s environmental policy was ostensibly in shambles. The two major public figures in environmental policy for the Administration had been forced out of office amidst scandal and controversy. White House officials now had to consider what its next steps would be. Would the Administration double down on its policy stance up to this point and nominate conservative hardliners? This would allow the Administration to continue its policy agenda of deregulation and defanging of federal power, but it would mean having to put up a major fight in Congress. Democrats on the environment and natural resource committees would be more aggressive now that the specifics of Reagan environmental policy were clear—leading to a confirmation battle that even with Republican control of the Senate would be risky. Or would the Administration nominate moderates who would work to defuse the controversy surrounding the Department of the Interior and the EPA? This could get the environmentalists off the back of the Administration, but it could also mean the collapse of their policy agenda as the moderate leaders went too far in compromise. Ultimately, the Administration would try to pursue both.

It was initially unclear who Burford’s successor would be. Deputy Administrator John Hernandez, a Reagan political appointee, was selected to lead the Agency as acting head. But he was ultimately rejected as an option for the permanent position due to charges he had intervened to soften EPA studies critical of the chemical industry—a fact that made it impossible for him to lead an agency in turmoil over questionable political interference in regulatory enforcement. Instead, the Reagan Administration began to search for possible candidates who wouldn’t be seen as pawns of industry or the Administration. In one memo, White House officials even floated the idea of naming Dan Lufkin, the

¹³⁶ David Hoffman, “Cites End of His ‘Usefulness’: President Accepts Watt’s Resignation,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 10, 1983.

former Connecticut EPA Director and chair of the Reagan campaign’s environment task force—who, as noted, had subsequently attacked the administration for its environmental stances.¹³⁷ The name they finally settled upon was familiar to many: William “Bill” Ruckelshaus. Ruckelshaus was not new to Washington politics—and certainly not new to EPA politics. He had served as the first EPA administrator when it was founded in 1970 under the Nixon Administration—serving in the position until 1973 when, amidst the escalating Watergate Scandal, he was moved first to head the FBI and then promoted to Deputy Attorney General. It was there that Ruckelshaus would most firmly establish a name for himself when he, along with Attorney General Elliot Richardson, refused President Nixon’s orders to fire special prosecutor Archibald Cox, resigning instead in what came to be known as the Saturday Night Massacre. In the years since, Ruckelshaus had worked in the private sector, but his reputation as both a longtime, loyal Republican and an honorable, respected official made him the perfect choice for Reagan Administration officials desperate for someone to calm the tensions at the EPA.¹³⁸

Ruckelshaus’s imperative in the new position was to restore morale and confidence in the EPA, rebuilding the agency after the controversy and scandal of the previous years. This would involve both restoring trust among agency employees and trust in the agency by the American people. As Ruckelshaus explained after his nomination, he saw his task as “to stabilize EPA... to re-instill in the people there the dedication to their task, to their job, that they have had from the outset of the agency and to get on with this enormously complicated job of cleaning up our air and water and protecting our citizens against toxic substances.”¹³⁹ Before taking the position, Ruckelshaus asked the President for a degree of independence in the Agency, including direct access to the President and full participation in the Watt-led CCNRE and

¹³⁷ Memo, Craig Fuller to Helene von Damm, on Candidates for EPA Administrator, March 16, 1983, ID #130566, FG122, WHORM: Subject File, Reagan Presidential Library.

¹³⁸ Philip Shabecoff, “President Is Reported Ready to Name a New E.P.A. Chief,” *New York Times* (New York), March 18, 1983; Lou Cannon and David Hoffman, “President Names Ruckelshaus to Administer EPA,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), March 22, 1983; For more on the background of Ruckelshaus in the Nixon Administration, see: Michael Koncewicz, *They Said No to Nixon: Republicans Who Stood Up to the President’s Abuses of Power* (University of California Press, 2020).

¹³⁹ Remarks of William Ruckelshaus at His Announcement as Administrator-Designate of EPA, March 21, 1983, Folder “Environment-General [EPA],” Box H77, Danny J. Boggs Files, Reagan Presidential Library.

the ability to choose his own assistants and deputies. While this independence did make the Administration nervous of upsetting conservative officials supporters who might see the selection as a “sellout” to the environmentalists, the response was generally positive. Even Watt—who reportedly played a significant role behind the scenes convincing skeptical officials to support his appointment—expressed his enthusiastic support for Ruckelshaus.¹⁴⁰ The reality was that the 1984 presidential elections would be coming soon and the less potential for environment to be a campaign issue, the better. Environmentalists, meanwhile, reacted to the appointment with caution. While many were happy to see a more committed administrator, they also expressed concern about Ruckelshaus’s business ties to his former employer, the Weyerhaeuser Co. timber company. And others were still worried about the reality of Ruckelshaus’s independence in the administration and the long process of restoring trust in the EPA.¹⁴¹

And, while in many ways Ruckelshaus would succeed in righting the EPA, the question of independence would continue throughout his tenure as administrator in ways that seriously questioned the Administration’s portrayal of him as having overcome the troubles of the Burford years. First, while Ruckelshaus was quite popular in the Agency and succeeded in restoring morale, his influence over Administration policy was questionable. During his time at the EPA, he worked to begin a program to curb air pollution causing acid rain. In this endeavor, Ruckelshaus faced intense pushback from David Stockman and the Office of Management and Budget over anticipated costs. Ultimately, despite Ruckelshaus’s efforts, the Administration not to pursue any curbs and instead to fund continued research—a move that the *Wall Street Journal* bluntly referred to as a “political and personal defeat” for the EPA administrator. The *Wall Street Journal* argued that the decision apparently reflected the belief of

¹⁴⁰ Cannon and Hoffman, “President Names Ruckelshaus to Administer EPA”; Philip Shabecoff, “Watt Says Status of Ruckelshaus at E.P.A. Surpasses Predecessor’s,” *New York Times* (New York), March 23, 1983.

¹⁴¹ Steven R. Weisman, “President Names Ruckelshaus Head of Troubled E.P.A.,” *New York Times* (New York), March 22, 1983.

White House officials that the costs would be too great and that it would not figure as a major issue in the 1984 campaign.¹⁴² Clearly, Ruckelshaus did not have the influence that some were hoping.¹⁴³

Furthermore, Ruckelshaus's conflict with David Stockman and the OMB extended well beyond acid rain, deepening a split between the two agencies over regulatory review that would continue for much of the rest of the Reagan presidency. In December, 1983, Ruckelshaus and the EPA issued a press release announcing a new regulation of air emissions standards for benzene. But the regulation had not been reviewed by the OMB, even though Reagan's Executive Order 12291 required an OMB cost-benefit analysis of any proposed regulations. In a memorandum from Christopher DeMuth, the OMB contact for the EPA, to OMB leadership, DeMuth expressed outrage at the move, calling it the "most flagrant violation" of the executive order ever. DeMuth speculated that "the EPA action was not a matter of accident or happenstance," noting several other instances in recent weeks where Ruckelshaus and the EPA had seemed to try to get around the OMB.¹⁴⁴ In February, after a similar incident with regulations of asbestos, DeMuth accused the EPA of using "salami tactics" to "violate or evade the procedures of Executive Order 12291" citing several cases from late 1983 to early 1984.¹⁴⁵ While the EPA agreed to abide by the executive order after mediation by White House officials between the two units, similar problems would continue to exist well into the tenure of Lee Thomas, Ruckelshaus's successor.¹⁴⁶

These background conflicts, combined with the growing realization of his limited influence in shaping overall Administration policy likely helped to push Ruckelshaus to decide to suddenly leave soon after the 1984 election. On Nov. 28, Ruckelshaus made the apparently abrupt and surprising decision to

¹⁴² Andy Pasztor, "Reagan to Request Added Funds to Probe Acid Rain But Won't Seek Pollution Curbs," *Wall Street Journal* (New York), January 25, 1984.

¹⁴³ "Disagreement Within Cabinet Said to Delay Acid Rain Plan," *[Baltimore] Sun* (Baltimore, MD), November 28, 1983.

¹⁴⁴ Memo, Christopher DeMuth to David Stockman and Joseph R. Wright, on EPA Violation of E.O. 12291, Dec. 15, 1983, ID #193401, FG122, WHORM: Subject Files, Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁴⁵ Memo, Christopher DeMuth to OMB Leadership, on EPA Salami Tactics Against E.O. 12291, Feb. 29, 1984, ID #211232, FG122, WHORM: Subject Files, Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁴⁶ Memo, Joe Wright to Dick Darman, Craig Fuller, and Jack Svahn, on Meeting with Al Alm/EPA, March 10, 1984, ID #211839, FG122, WHORM: Subject Files, Reagan Presidential Library.

hand in a letter of resignation. Explaining that he was “leaving with a sense of accomplishment” amid improved employee moral and confidence, “he asserted that the ship called EPA has righted and is steering a steady course.”¹⁴⁷ Behind the scenes, however, the conflict with the OMB and White House officials had apparently been growing. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, White House proposed budget cuts for the EPA of as much as 30 percent led Ruckelshaus to threaten to resign the previous week, after making a personal appeal to President Reagan and Chief of Staff James A. Baker. While Reagan and Baker made “preliminary assurances” of reducing the cuts, Ruckelshaus eventually concluded that “he faced too much opposition within the administration to continue to run the agency effectively.”¹⁴⁸ Ruckelshaus, for his part, denied the reports that the budget cuts had affected his decision, instead pointing to “personal things” and his decision that he had “accomplished what I could accomplish.”¹⁴⁹ But a November 12 memo from within the administration points to a possibly imminent departure by Ruckelshaus, with White House domestic policy advisor Craig L. Fuller discussing possible candidates for administrator and deputy administrator “should a vacancy occur at EPA in the near future.”¹⁵⁰ Clearly, the Administration saw the potential for Ruckelshaus’s imminent departure.

A Friendly Revolution

At the Department of the Interior, meanwhile, another interregnum took place. After Watt’s resignation in Oct. 1983, questions again swirled over who would be selected to take his place. Given Ruckelshaus’s appointment earlier that year, some thought that Reagan could potentially tap another moderate to prevent Democrats from running on the environmental issue in the upcoming 1984 election. But more widely accepted—particularly among environmentalists—was the expectation that Reagan

¹⁴⁷ Andy Pasztor, “Ruckelshaus Quits EPA Amid Disputes With White House on Budget Cuts, Policy,” *Wall Street Journal* (New York), November 29, 1984.

¹⁴⁸ Pasztor, “Ruckelshaus Quits EPA Amid Disputes With White House on Budget Cuts, Policy”; Lou Cannon, “EPA Administrator Resigns,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), November 29, 1984.

¹⁴⁹ Philip Shabecoff, “President Names Toxic Waste Chief to Head the E.P.A.: Apointee Says He Will Follow Policies That Ruckelshaus Set in Motion Last Year,” *New York Times*, November 30, 1984.

¹⁵⁰ Memo, Craig Fuller for John Herrington, on EPA, Nov. 12, 1983, ID #246945, FG122, WHORM: Subject Files, Reagan Presidential Library.

would appoint a Westerner with similar policy beliefs as Watt but with a less inflammatory personality. Rafe Pomerance, president of the environmental organization, Friends of the Earth, summed up the reaction among environmentalists, arguing that “you can’t change Ronald Reagan by changing James Watt... the policies will remain but the Lip will be gone.”¹⁵¹ Possible Watt replacements included former Senator Clifford Hansen of Wyoming, former congressman John Rhodes of Arizona, and congressman Manuel Lujan, Jr., of New Mexico.¹⁵²

The ultimate selection would shock nearly everyone involved. On Oct. 13, Reagan announced at the end of a speech to organizations of Christian women that he would appoint William Clark, his national security advisor and a proven “troubleshooter and... result-oriented professional.”¹⁵³ Reagan had difficulty finding a nominee willing to accept the position; meanwhile, Clark was eager for a change. As national security advisor, Clark had been caught up for the past two years in intense interpersonal rivalries and disputes between the National Security Council, State Department, and Defense Department over foreign policy and had, for a time, even considered resigning and returning to California. Now, Interior offered—in Clark’s mind—a comparatively quiet time. He asked Reagan for the position. Clark had little to no experience on environmental or public land issues aside from his tangential work as a California rancher and stints as Governor Reagan’s chief of staff and as a justice on the California Supreme Court. His nomination prompted a mixed reaction. While Western conservatives like Senator Paul Laxalt of Nevada and congressman Dick Cheney of Wyoming applauded the appointment of another Western loyalist, environmentalists had a more visceral reaction. “After first reacting with disbelief to the news of

¹⁵¹ “Comments Are Mixed On Watt’s Resignation,” *New York Times* (New York), October 10, 1983.

¹⁵² Philip Shabecoff, “Aides Hope to Fill Watt’s Post Soon: Administration to Try to Have a New Secretary in Office Before Thanksgiving,” *New York Times* (New York), October 11, 1983; Peter Grier, “Interior After Watt: What Course Will Reagan Take?,” *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston, MA), October 11, 1983.

¹⁵³ Remarks of the President in Meeting with Women Leaders of Christian Religious Organizations, Ronald Reagan, Oct. 13, 1983, Folder 3, Box 80, William P. Clark Papers, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

Clark's appointment... leaders of environmental groups issued statements... criticizing Reagan for selecting someone they said had no expertise on environmental problems."¹⁵⁴

Clark, nevertheless, made serious efforts to change the rhetoric of the secretary of the interior—if not the specific policies. Immediately meeting with several leaders of environmental organizations, Clark represented—according to Jay Hair, executive vice president of the National Wildlife Federation—a new style of Interior leadership that was “a refreshing change.”¹⁵⁵ At his confirmation hearings, Clark related his concern about the number of lawsuits facing the Department and expressed a desire to settle many of them. He also pledged to increase, if possible, purchases of land for the national park system and wildlife refuges. And after taking office, Clark moved quickly to dismiss several Watt loyalists in Interior leadership, including replacing the second-in-command of the Department with Ann McLaughlin, a public relations specialist from the Department of the Treasury. Indeed—given the ongoing 1984 presidential campaign—he explicitly focused on a rhetorical shift in tone and language. In correspondence on drafts of a speech Clark would give to the National Wildlife Federation in December, Clark's aides and speechwriters noted their attempts to “avoid any terms or phrases identified with your predecessor such as steward and pendulum,” and that they were trying “to stay away from statements of continuation of things as they were, except when we were clearly speaking of the Administration's initiatives.”¹⁵⁶ Any resemblance to the Watt—even down to the words used—was to be avoided.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Lou Cannon and David Hoffman, “Decision Made Suddenly: Reagan Names Security Advisor to Succeed Watt,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), October 14, 1983; There has been little substantive historiographical evaluation of William Clark's tenure as secretary of the interior. The general historiographical stance on Clark can be found in Shabecoff where he utterly skips over Clark to briefly talk about Donald Hodel's tenure: Shabecoff, *A Fierce Green Fire*, 214.

¹⁵⁵ Philip Shabecoff, “Environmental Leaders Talk to Clark on Policy and Staff,” *New York Times* (New York), October 22, 1983.

¹⁵⁶ Note, Douglas Baldwin to William Clark and Dick Morris, on NWF Speech Draft, Dec. 6, 1983, Folder 6, Box 87, William P. Clark Papers, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

¹⁵⁷ Philip Shabecoff, “Will William Clark Pick Up Where James Watt Leapt Off?,” *New York Times* (New York), November 6, 1983; Eleanor Randolph, “Clark Shifts Aides in Move to Appease Critics of Watt,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), December 23, 1983.

But the substance of Clark's policies as secretary of the interior remained largely the same as under Watt's leadership. While the amount of the outer continental shelf included under the sale of drilling leases was decreased, the sales would still go on, reiterating "the Administration's conviction that speeding development of offshore energy resources was necessary for national security and economic wellbeing."¹⁵⁸ While the specific procedures for coal leasing changed from those while Watt was secretary, the amount of coal sold under the leases remained the same. This came despite the report of the Commission on Fair Market Value for Federal Coal Leasing—about which Watt was forced to resign—finding that the Interior Department was selling too much coal.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, Clark approached his leadership of the Department as the continuation of his predecessor. In his personal letter to President Reagan in the run-up to his resignation, Clark signaled his continuation of Watt-era policies simply with a new paint: "The policies begun by Jim Watt are going well and I hope to make them your quiet legacy."¹⁶⁰ Thus, while many things changed in the administration of the Department of the Interior, many others stayed the same.

Stalemate

Clark would announce his resignation soon after, beginning the search for a new replacement that would ultimately settle on Secretary of Energy Donald Hodel. Citing his desire to return to his ranch, Clark publicly expressed to the President his belief that his job was "substantially accomplished and it's time to go."¹⁶¹ In the years that followed, Hodel would largely continue Clark's style and approach to the position, quietly pursuing the Administration's emphasis on energy development through OCS and coal leasing while trying to avoid the public conflict with environmentalists that had marked Watt's time in office. Summarizing the accomplishments of the Reagan Administration at the end of his term, Hodel

¹⁵⁸ Philip Shabecoff, "Clark Says He Will Offer a Role to Critics in Offshore Oil Leasing," *New York Times* (New York), January 13, 1984.

¹⁵⁹ Philip Shabecoff, "Changes Proposed for Coal Leasing," *New York Times* (New York), March 20, 1984.

¹⁶⁰ Letter, William Clark to Ronald Reagan, Nov. 26, 1984, Folder 2, Box 118, William P. Clark Papers, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

¹⁶¹ Stephen Engelberg, "Clark to Resign His Cabinet Post to Return Home," *New York Times* (New York), January 2, 1985.

argued that the “Reagan revolution had succeeded ‘far better than we could have expected,’ because it demonstrated that ‘we can have a generally improving environment’ and still make more public resources available to the private sector.”¹⁶² While environmentalists would dispute that characterization, such a framing allowed the Administration to view its public land policy as successful.¹⁶³

Meanwhile, at the EPA, Ruckelshaus’s successor, Lee Thomas, charted his own path using Ruckelshaus’s experience as a guide. Taking a more independent line, Thomas would continue to pursue a moderate but nevertheless active stance on environmental protection. While Thomas would continue the slow approach to pushing cities to meet air quality standards, he would also pursue water pollution issues more aggressively and spearhead international efforts to control chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) that were in the midst of destroying the ozone layer. Additionally, Thomas would carry on Ruckelshaus’s low-intensity conflict with the Office of Management and Budget, publicly critiquing OMB efforts to force the Agency to “weigh the dollar value of human life when considering how to regulate asbestos.” Likely fearing the accusations of political interference in the EPA that had struck the White House during the Gorsuch years—especially amidst the controversy and fallout of the Iran-Contra Affair—the White House senior leadership largely avoided interfering with the Agency.¹⁶⁴

Thus, as the Reagan Administration came to a close in 1989, many were left wondering: what exactly was the effect of Reagan environmental policy? To all parties involved, there was a feeling of dissatisfaction. Conservatives didn’t get the complete deregulatory revolution they were aiming for. But for environmentalists, Reagan’s time in office nevertheless marked eight years of seemingly unceasing attacks on the environmental protections that they held dear. Administration efforts to expand energy development had marginally succeeded, but they had inspired a backlash by a reinvigorated environmental opposition that forced the Administration to keep its gains quiet. Politically, however, if

¹⁶² Philip Shabecoff, “Reagan and Environment: To Many, a Stalemate,” *New York Times* (New York), January 2, 1989.

¹⁶³ For more on Hodel’s tenure, see: Shabecoff, *A Fierce Green Fire*, 214.

¹⁶⁴ Philip Shabecoff, “Budget Office Disputed on Cost Basis for Asbestos,” *New York Times* (New York), April 17, 1985; For more on Thomas’s tenure, see: Halvorson, *Valuing Clean Air*, 171.

there was a success for Reagan on environmental policy, it was in consolidating the trenches of the nationwide fight over environmentalism. Watt's conservative vision of environmentalism was still in its infancy, but the battle with mainstream and, increasingly, radical environmentalists raged on, with conservatives still caught up in the assumptions of 1970s environmentalism, increasingly pushed to the side. On the eve of Bush's inauguration in January 1989, Philip Shabecoff of the *New York Times*—who had covered the environmental policy beat since Reagan's inauguration—summarized the situation and popular perception of Reagan's environmental policy this way: “To many, a stalemate.”¹⁶⁵ Neither side appeared to be ahead, but with new battles emerging out West, the war continued.

¹⁶⁵ Shabecoff, “Reagan and Environment: To Many, a Stalemate.”

Chapter 2 – Working as an Environmentalist for a Living: Environmental Conflict in the Northern California Timber Wars

As the nation once again returned to the polls in November 1988, the people of Northern California watched with interest and not a small degree of uncertainty. This election year's matchup offered a strange situation after eight years of attacks on "environmental extremists": both candidates were running, in part, on their supposed environmental record. Michael Dukakis, the Democratic governor of Massachusetts, attacked Republican Vice President George H.W. Bush for his association with the Reagan Administration and its attacks on the environment and environmental movement. Bush, on the other hand, responded with his own volley. Standing on a ferry in Boston Harbor—what he called the "dirtiest harbor in America"—Bush attacked Dukakis for lack of action on cleaning up his own backyard: saying his response to the harbor's pollution was to "delay, fight. Anything but clean up... I don't call that leadership, and I certainly don't call that competence."¹⁶⁶ If voters hoped to easily find a "hero" and "villain" on environmental policy, the candidates weren't making it easy for them.¹⁶⁷

Northern California, however, was seeing its own debate on the candidates. While many environmentalists readily admitted that Dukakis was their preferred candidate—eyeing Bush's environmentalist credentials with no small degree of skepticism—there remained some hesitance among mainstream environmentalists to firmly step into the race. In late summer 1988, the Sierra Club Board of Directors ultimately voted to not make an official endorsement. Still stinging from the 1984 defeat of Democratic candidate Walter Mondale after their endorsement, the national leadership of the Sierra Club committed to now only entering presidential races in "extraordinary circumstances" where they felt they would not be able to push one of the candidates to make stronger environmental commitments. Bush, they believed, might still be pliable if he was so committed to running as an environmentalist. Furthermore, they expressed concern about upsetting the Republican membership of the organization which they

¹⁶⁶ Bill Peterson, "In Boston, Bush Sails Into Dukakis: Aboard Harbor Ferry, Republican Blasts 'Neglect' of Environment," *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), September 2, 1988.

¹⁶⁷ Gerald F. Seib and Bruce Ingersoll, "Campaign '88 - The Issues: This Year, Events Force Topics of Environment, Energy, Agriculture to Fore in Presidential Race," *Wall Street Journal* (New York), October 7, 1988.

estimated to be about 40%. As a compromise to those desiring to take more substantive action to support the Dukakis campaign, Sierra Club members would be allowed to identify themselves as such in private work for Dukakis—a privilege not given those working for the Bush campaign until the “Bush campaign were to provide a sufficiently adequate environmental platform.”¹⁶⁸ The national Sierra Club was going to tread carefully in this election lest they destroy any chance of working with a Bush Presidency and turn it into another round of Reagan.

Grassroots environmentalists along California’s North Coast, on the other hand, firmly endorsed Dukakis in a news conference by several local conservation groups, calling the choice between the two candidates “clearer than either our air or water.” Jim Owens of the local Sierra Club chapter—making use of the latitude given by the national leadership—noted his astonishment “at Bush’s cynical attempt to disguise his poor environmental record while he’s been Vice-President,” pointing out how he had “opposed the phasing-out of below-cost timber sales, acted to weaken toxic-waste rules, tried to roll back energy efficiency standards and even supported the veto of the Clean Water Act.”¹⁶⁹ Similarly, environmentalists in Sonoma County attacked Bush, calling Bush’s claims to the environmental label “deceitful,” with one activist arguing that “George Bush posing as an environmentalist is the biggest masquerade since Calvin Coolidge posed for a picture wearing an Indian headdress.”¹⁷⁰ While the national Sierra Club may have been reluctant to make any firm commitments, the environmentalists on the ground in Northern California were certainly going to.

Opponents of those local environmentalists in Northern California, for their part, had no qualms in expressing their disdain for Dukakis, regardless of whether the environmentalists came out in support of him. David Kaupanger, director of the local “Intermountain Community Alliance for Resources and

¹⁶⁸ Memo, Doug Scott to All Conservation & Public Affairs Staff, on Board and SCCOPE Committee Action on Presidential Race, Folder 22, Box 317, Sierra Club Records, BANC MSS 71/103 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

¹⁶⁹ “Real Choices Confront Voters,” *ECONeWS* Newsletter, Nov. 1988. Found in Box 35, Tim McKay Collection. Cal Poly Humboldt Library, Arcata, CA.

¹⁷⁰ Eileen Klineman, “Activists Call Bush TV Ads Deceitful,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), November 2, 1988.

Environment,” (I CARE) repeatedly wrote letters to the editor in various regional publications over the fall of 1988, attacking both Dukakis and environmentalists as “distorting [the] realities” of the area’s timber industry “for their own selfish reasons.”¹⁷¹ Namely, he accused them of working to “lock the lion’s share of public land away from the public” as wilderness and thereby “trying to steal them from this generation and future generations.”¹⁷² The loggers were, in Kaupanger’s estimation, the real friends of the environment: “We who work closely with our environment will not tolerate anyone who causes it harm.” And they weren’t going down without a fight: “A movement spawned by a deep-rooted resentment against the so-called environmentalists is stirring across this land.”¹⁷³ If the environmentalists were divided over how to approach the election, their opponents knew exactly where they stood.

Ultimately, Bush would win the election in a landslide similar to those seen by President Reagan. But the election highlighted a new front that was developing in the ongoing battle over the environment. The transition from the 1980s to the 1990s saw a collapse of consensus over what environmentalism exactly was. In the years of the Bush Administration, a wide variety of groups—from mainstream environmentalists, to radicalizing grassroots activists, to even conservative anti-environmentalists—would claim the mantle of “environmental protection,” with often strongly diverging definitions of what that meant.

This was particularly the case in Northern California where conflict over the fate of the last vestiges of the once massive old growth forests of the Pacific Northwest resulted in a furor over the definition of environmental protection and who were the ones really pursuing it. While grassroots environmental activists in the region became increasingly radicalized by the blatant efforts of increasingly globalized timber companies to destroy the ancient forests they loved, the mainstream environmental organizations struggled to find a way to respond with a resistant state bureaucracy formed on the basis of

¹⁷¹ David Kaupanger, “Where Do You Stand, Mike?,” *Ukiah Daily Journal* (Ukiah, CA), September 19, 1988.

¹⁷² David Kaupanger, “Dukakis Is an Obstructionist,” *Ukiah Daily Journal* (Ukiah, CA), November 3, 1988; David Kaupanger, “Michael Dukakis Clearly Strong Preservationist,” *Record Searchlight*, November 5, 1988.

¹⁷³ Kaupanger, “Where Do You Stand, Mike?”

supporting the timber industry, limited resources and popular appeal, and loggers who refused to give in to the groups who threatened to destroy their livelihoods which they saw as being closer to nature than environmentalists who only recreated in the forests.

Much of the literature of the so-called “Timber Wars” has emphasized the seemingly simple story of conflict between environmentalists and loggers, but the fight was much more complex than that.¹⁷⁴ The ostensible fight between recreation and labor, famously framed by historian Richard White as the question “Are You An Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living,” was held alongside intense debate and division over the very definition of environmentalism, paralleling the 1988 contest between Bush and Dukakis.¹⁷⁵ Some historians have confronted the Timber War’s connection to conflict between mainstream and radical environmentalists. The disagreement over philosophy, strategies, and tactics between radicalized grassroots environmentalists and the comparatively moderate national environmental organizations played out in sharp relief in the disputed and halting efforts to save the remaining old-growth forests of the region.¹⁷⁶

However, the entry of conservative anti-environmentalist activists turned these seemingly parallel stories of work and recreation, and of radicalism and moderation, into a surreal tale of apparent contradictions not adequately explored by the literature. What was once anti-environmentalism was now, according to these conservative activists, a “New Environmentalism.” Claiming through their appeal to “wise use” that they represented a middle ground between extreme preservation and extreme environmental destruction—language once toyed with by Secretary of the Interior James Watt—the Wise Use Movement was able to enter into the Northern Californian conflict over the old growth forests and

¹⁷⁴ Key works in the literature on the Timber Wars include: Beda, *Strong Winds and Widow Makers*; Speece, *Defending Giants*; Erik Loomis, *Empire of Timber: Labor Unions and the Pacific Northwest Forests* (Cambridge University Press, 2015); Richard Widick, *Trouble in the Forest: California’s Redwood Timber Wars* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009); William Dietrich, *The Final Forest: Big Trees, Forks, and the Pacific Northwest* (University of Washington Press, 1992).

¹⁷⁵ White, “Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living.”

¹⁷⁶ For discussion of conflict between the environmental radical and mainstream, see: Woodhouse, *The Ecocentrists*; Bevington, *The Rebirth of Environmentalism*; Merchant, *Radical Ecology*; Susan Zakin, *Coyotes and Town Dogs: Earth First! And the Environmental Movement*, 1st Paperbound Edition (University of Arizona Press, 2002).

Spotted Owl and channel local workers' job anxiety into a countermovement to environmentalism that, nevertheless, claimed to be a form of environmentalism itself.¹⁷⁷

Environmentalists immediately rejected the premise, arguing that the Wise Use Movement's anti-environmentalist policy agenda was abundantly clear, but the blatant attempt to co-opt the label of "environmentalist" highlighted its unmoored state as the 1990s began. The majority of Americans still considered themselves environmentalists, but with increasing divisions over who the "real" environmentalists were, the label was no longer definitively connected to a particular set of policies or political strategies. This lack of a clearly defined, unified environmental movement allowed opponents to claim the title for themselves. Framing themselves as the "common sense" mainstream, these conservatives were able to obfuscate the larger picture, painting moderate groups like the Sierra Club as effectively equivalent to more radical environmentalists like Earth First! despite the clear distinctions between them. This put environmental activists in Northern California on the defensive even as they achieved not insignificant political and legal victories in the battle over Old Growth Forests.

The Lost Coast

Environmental conflict over logging in Northern California and the broader Pacific Northwest had a long history over the course of the twentieth century. Long isolated—especially Northern California's so-called "Lost Coast"—logging had emerged by the beginning of the twentieth century as a driver of local economies. A key target of loggers and timber companies in the period were the massive coastal redwoods found in old-growth forests stretching along the coastal ranges from San Francisco Bay to Washington. Fueled by speculation and growing markets for timber products, logging continually expanded and began to define the cultural landscape of the region.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ The work coming nearest to confronting these forces is: Beda, *Strong Winds and Widow Makers*; Other historical treatments of conservatives in these debates include: Turner and Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal*; Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness*.

¹⁷⁸ Beda, *Strong Winds and Widow Makers*, 29–108; Speece, *Defending Giants*, 27–42.

By the mid-twentieth century, however, public discomfort with the expansive logging of the region had begun to grow. Continuing the legacy of turn-of-the-century preservationists like John Muir, many individuals and organizations like the Save the Redwoods League expressed concern about the impending destruction of all old-growth forests on the West Coast and the accompanying loss of the magnificent redwood trees. In particular, many were outraged at the massive clearcuts that left once dense forests looking like warzones and evoked frightening visions of an empty, scarred landscape like that of the Great Lakes after logging in that region. This popular discontent—focused especially in other regions of the state like the San Francisco Bay Area—formed the basis of organizing to preserve some old growth forest in the region for recreation and spiritual sustenance. First through state parks administered by the state of California and then through federal creations like Redwood National Park, activists eventually secured the protection of small stretches of these old-growth forests. Fights would continue over the 1960s and 1970s, however, seeking the expansion of those parks and further restriction of logging in areas outside formal state and national parks—including the establishment of wilderness areas in other areas of public land like National Forests where no logging would be allowed.¹⁷⁹

These efforts to restrict logging on public land in the region inspired intense reactions by local loggers and Western conservatives who began to identify themselves with the logging companies against government regulations that would stifle the local economy. Again, Reagan had begun to establish his anti-environmentalist credentials and reputation especially with his opposition to efforts to expand Redwood National Park and his infamous remark that “a tree is a tree. How many more do you need to see?”¹⁸⁰ Loggers and conservative activists expressed concern that the closing of wide stretches of National Forests as wilderness areas—a distinct threat under the RARE II evaluations of public lands ordered by President Jimmy Carter—would reduce the forested land open to loggers and thereby devastate both the industry and the local communities that relied upon it. For their part, the United States

¹⁷⁹ Speece, *Defending Giants*, 42–57.

¹⁸⁰ See Page 20, Note 35

Forest Service—with its nearly century-long commitment to conservationist principles and treatment of trees as a crop inside the Department of Agriculture—faced internal tensions between maintaining its historical focus on multiple-use and following new directions in ecology and conservation as the new environmental movement challenged the very assumptions of conservationism.¹⁸¹

But amidst these debates over conservation on public lands was the continuing logging of old-growth forests on private lands. Federal conservation law dictated controls on logging on public lands but specified no such regulations on private land owned or leased by timber companies. These lands were, instead, regulated by state regulatory bodies such as the California Department of Forestry (CDF). While the CDF ostensibly worked to control logging on these private stretches of forest, ensuring limited clearcutting and long-term sustainability of the industry, the reality of the regulatory relationship was less clear. Industry retained near total control of the CDF through outsized influence over political appointments, making sure that restrictions on the industry remained limited and effectively acting as a rubber stamp on timber companies' applications for logging actions.¹⁸²

By the 1980s, however, anger at this loose regulatory arrangement was growing as more and more environmentalists found themselves confronted with the realities on the ground in Northern California forests. The 1970s had seen the migration of many people from the Bay Area and beyond to the remote forests of Northern California, Oregon, and Washington. Many had been part of the counterculture of the 1960s and brought their social and cultural principles with them, including a commitment to environmental consciousness as defined by the environmentalist milieu of the 1970s. Reacting with disgust at what they saw as the environmental destruction of logging around them, many began to organize specifically around the preservation of all old-growth, not simply small stretches found in public lands or able to be purchased by state or federal agencies. These efforts had limited success in the late 1970s and early 1980s as timber companies remained in control of the CDF, ensuring their

¹⁸¹ Beda, *Strong Winds and Widow Makers*, 163–94; Speece, *Defending Giants*, 57–66.

¹⁸² Speece, *Defending Giants*, 41–42.

commitment to limited regulations. Meanwhile, efforts to pass new legislation mandating greater regulation faced steep challenges from state legislators committed to protecting local jobs and reluctant to challenge the timber industry.¹⁸³

Loggers, feeling increasingly threatened by environmental regulations that they saw as a harbinger of job loss and destruction of their livelihoods, also began to organize. Already, increasing environmental regulations of federally-owned public lands by the Forest Service over the course of the 1970s combined with increasing competition internationally had led to more and more companies not only pursuing swift clearcutting of their private lands in anticipation of future environmental regulations limiting them further but also changing the very nature of the industry and its labor. Once dominated by large teams of unionized loggers employed directly by the timber company, the timber labor market now moved in the direction of smaller teams of non-union loggers working for timber companies as contractors known as “gyppos.” This arrangement, while erasing union protections, gave individual loggers and their contracting companies a degree of flexibility in finding work with companies that would be able to pay more competitive prices now that they didn’t provide benefits.¹⁸⁴

The threat of further regulations—especially those pushed by perceived radical outsiders to a North Coast long dominated by timber—led many loggers to stiffen in their opposition to what many regarded as an environmentalist menace. Amidst cultural changes that began to question longstanding principles that upheld loggers and other “producers” of the land as heirs of the populist heritage of westward expansion and frontiersmen, loggers began to view the environmentalists moving into their communities with suspicion and paranoia—seeing them not as neighbors but rather as outsiders.¹⁸⁵

This was compounded by the fact that many loggers saw themselves as practicing their own, unique version of environmentalism. Engaging in what historian Stephen Beda calls “labor

¹⁸³ Speece, *Defending Giants*, 86–89; Beda, *Strong Winds and Widow Makers*, 177–94.

¹⁸⁴ Beda, *Strong Winds and Widow Makers*, 166–77; See also: Loomis, *Empire of Timber*.

¹⁸⁵ Beda, *Strong Winds and Widow Makers*, 181–94.

environmentalism,” these loggers understood themselves as intimately tied to nature—not only through their recreation, but also their work. Loggers in the Pacific Northwest and Northern California had long relied upon surrounding nature to support themselves and their families through hunting and foraging. And even as paychecks rose and a living, albeit meager, became possible, loggers and their families continued to return to the forests to hunt, fish, and relax for recreation. Furthermore, unlike environmentalists who loggers saw as only seeing the forests for their recreational value, loggers “worked for a living.” Their jobs of cutting down trees were seen as not destructive, but rather part of maintaining balance in forests environments. Trees, including old-growth, would be cut down and then replanted to ensure an active and constantly recycled forest. Understanding forests as fundamentally dynamic, rather than static, loggers rejected expansive calls to halt all logging of old-growth, arguing that to do so would not only harm themselves and their families but also the forests themselves by trying to enforce an artificial stasis on forests environments that, in their experience and opinion, would only lead to overgrowth and unhealthy forests.¹⁸⁶

By the mid-1980s, however, the economic stresses on the timber industry from regulation and international competition were growing too great for companies to bear. These developments put timber companies in the target of corporate raiders. Deregulation of securities had led to a growing number of investors pursuing targeted acquisitions of companies through the purchase of majority shares for the express purpose of liquidating their infrastructure and assets. Among these corporate raiders was Texas hedge fund manager, Charles Hurwitz. Hurwitz had a colorful past of corporate takeovers ranging across industries from energy to savings and loans.¹⁸⁷

As he looked at the timber industry, Hurwitz particularly focused on the Pacific Lumber Company which was a bit of an anomaly in the larger industry. Pacific Lumber had a long history of logging in Northern California and had established a reputation in the region as a maintaining—

¹⁸⁶ Beda, *Strong Winds and Widow Makers*, 20–23.

¹⁸⁷ Speece, *Defending Giants*, 132–35.

comparatively—reasonable and sustainable business practices. The company paid relatively close attention to providing for the needs of its workers, including the building of expansive company towns like Scotia, CA, which included amenities like stores, schools, and parks. Likewise, it engaged in fairly sustainable logging of its forests. Instead of quickly clearcutting through its property, it reserved large sections for long periods of time, believing that slow logging operations will ensure the continued viability of the company over the long term. Thus, in a period when most logging companies were rapidly cutting down its property reserves of old-growth timber, Pacific Lumber remained the exception in holding vast acres of relatively untouched old-growth forests on its spreadsheets. This made the company a particular target for corporate raiders like Hurwitz who began to organize a bid to take over the company. Hurwitz incurred large debts financing loans to purchase a majority share of the company. At first the company resisted but was eventually overcome and Hurwitz came in with an entirely new philosophy that dropped the sustainability the company was known for and instead focused on paying off his loans by rapidly liquidating old-growth forests owned by the company.¹⁸⁸

The rapid expansion of logging operations in Northern Californian old-growth forest by Pacific Lumber—supposedly the reasonable timber company in the region—alongside the ongoing efforts of companies like Louisiana-Pacific and Georgia-Pacific left environmentalists in the region outraged. The growing number of local environmentalists began to organize to oppose the logging operations in the region, building out from environmental organizations founded in the region in the 1970s like the Mendocino Environmental Center, the Environmental Protection Information Center (EPIC) and the Northcoast Environmental Center, the latter two both based out of Arcata, CA, in Humboldt County. These organizations acted as clearinghouses for environmental activism, gathering information from activists on the ground and sharing them with other activists across the region and larger state—thereby forming the foundation for environmental activism across the area.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ Speece, *Defending Giants*, 124–28, 135–42.

¹⁸⁹ Speece, *Defending Giants*, 22, 84–89.

The Radicals

Northern California and the battles unfolding over its old-growth forests also figured significantly in the development of a unique local tradition of radical environmentalism. In addition to the waves of former counterculture environmentalists to the region who began to spearhead the opposition to old-growth logging, the region also served as home to some of the central philosophers and writers of radical environmentalist thought. Figures like Gary Snyder, an English professor at nearby UC Davis, Bill Devall, a sociology professor at Humboldt State University, and George Sessions, a philosophy professor at Sierra College, all figured prominently in the emerging Deep Ecology movement. This radical environmental ethos, first articulated by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, contrasted the “shallow” environmental consciousness and activism of mainstream environmentalists with their own “deep” analysis, which questioned the basic principles of American society, politics, and culture. Fundamental to their perspective was the rejection of anthropocentrism, embracing the equality of all life. This formed the foundation of what historian Keith Makoto Woodhouse describes as “ecocentrism,” and would influence much of the radical environmentalism in the 1980s and 1990s—especially after the publication of Bill Devall and George Sessions’s 1985 book, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*. This influence was particularly seen in the development of Earth First!, arguably the archetypal radical environmental organization of the period, and its founder Dave Foreman.¹⁹⁰

Earth First!, however, went beyond the theory of these Deep Ecology theorists to emphasize direct action efforts to protect nature and especially wilderness areas. Direct action by Earth First! activists could take the form of protests and demonstrations, but also sabotage of efforts to exploit or extract natural resources from nature. Known as “monkeywrenching,” from the literature of fellow radical

¹⁹⁰ For more details, see Chapter Five. See also: Arne Naess, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary,” *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 16, nos. 1–4 (1973): 95–100, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/00201747308601682>; Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living As If Nature Mattered* (Peregrine Smith Books, 1985); Woodhouse, *The Ecocentrists*, 1–9, 114–28; Robert Hass, “The Nature of Gary Snyder,” *The Paris Review*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/09/10/the-nature-of-gary-snyder/>.

environmentalist Edward Abbey, Foreman and other Earth First! leaders encouraged followers to target the machinery of industrial capitalism through questionably nonviolent means. This often took the form of fairly innocuous actions like removing survey stakes for logging roads or more financially destructive acts like pouring sand into the fuel tanks of machinery such as bulldozers. But there were also more controversial practices such as “tree-spiking.” This involved the hammering of nails and spikes into old-growth trees with the explicit purpose of making them hazardous for loggers and mill workers. Spikes in trees could cause loggers’ chainsaws or mill’s saws to explode upon contact with the metal object, not only destroying the machinery but also posing possibly serious injury to nearby loggers and mill workers. To minimize the risk of human harm, monkeywrenchers encouraged practitioners to treat tree spiking as a deterrent to logging, not a weapon against loggers. Those spiking the trees would publicize the presence of the tree spikes by leaving notices to any loggers venturing into the area or notifying the timber company or Forest Service of the general area of tree spikes. Radical environmentalists emphasized the nonviolent purpose of these activities: dissuade or slow destruction of wilderness rather than causing harm directly to those engaged in that destruction—thereby minimizing the chance of public opinion turning against the activists as violent terrorists.¹⁹¹

But as these ideas were translated into the Northern California Timber Wars, the peculiar political situation of the region led to unique formulations of Earth First! and radical environmentalist ideas. While retaining the wider Earth First!’s broader anti-authoritarian politics and suspicions of modern American society, the Northern California Earth First! was influenced by the presence of counterculture types and New Leftists to incorporate leftist ideological stances that figures like Dave Foreman dismissed as anthropocentric concerns. In many ways, this regional variation of Earth First! was dominated by three figures: Mike Roselle, Darryl Cherney, and Judi Bari. Roselle had long been a compatriot of Dave Foreman through much of the early history of Earth First! until his move to Northern California and

¹⁹¹ For more details, see Chapter Four. See also: Woodhouse, *The Ecocentrists*, 128–42, 221–28.

introduction to the region's political flavor which encouraged leftist political beliefs that encouraged a growing split with Foreman and other Earth First! leaders in New Mexico.¹⁹²

But much of the organizing energy of Northern California Earth First! was led by Cherney and Bari. Cherney, originally from New York, had moved to the region in 1985 after previously growing attached to the region and its redwoods on a family vacation in 1970. Soon, Cherney had joined with the efforts of local activists like Earth First! to protect old-growth redwoods from logging, deeply influenced by the Deep Ecology work of Bill Devall. Cherney would soon establish himself as a fixture in North Coast environmental circles. Bari was another transplant to Northern California from Maryland who brought with her strong leftist political beliefs that informed her activism in the region. After graduating from the University of Maryland, Bari worked in a series of jobs while dedicating herself to labor activism. In the course of this work, Bari moved to Sonoma County, California, in 1979 after marrying a fellow union organizer—a marriage that had fallen apart by 1988. However, after meeting Cherney in 1989 while working on a project for the Mendocino Environmental Center, Bari and Cherney briefly became a couple—leading to Bari embracing the environmental activism of Cherney. In many ways, Bari's activism combined these twin leftist and environmental critiques of modern American society, arguing not only that the practices of Northern California timber companies not only devastated the local environment and ecosystem, but also harmed workers in the long run by ensuring that eventually they would be out of a job once the last old-growth forests were cut down.¹⁹³

Thus, Bari and Cherney's growing leadership of Northern California Earth First! infused leftist political strategies that alienated others in the national Earth First!—especially the leadership. While Foreman dismissed Bari and the leftist EF!ers as anarchists and “woo woos.” Bari criticized in a 1991 article entitled “Why I Am Not a Misanthrope” what she saw as many Earth First!ers' penchant for attacking humanity broadly as opposed to specific actions, individuals, and groups primarily responsible

¹⁹² See Chapter Five. See also: Woodhouse, *The Ecocentrists*, 218–28.

¹⁹³ Speece, *Defending Giants*, 143–46, 159–63.

for environmental degradation and also particularly attacked “misanthropes” for condemning women along with men which she argued to be the main actors in humanity’s historical destruction (of both nature and their fellow humans). Bari dismisses the misanthropy within Earth First! as “not a form of humility,” but rather a “form of arrogance” that blames “the entire human species for the crimes of technocratic men.” Bari further notes that many of these misanthropes are members “of the group that most benefits from our consumptive society—privileged white urban men.”¹⁹⁴ Ultimately, Bari argues, misanthropy:

Preserves the status quo by refusing to distinguish between oppressor and oppressed. It goes against one of the basic instincts of all life forms, preservation of the species. And, without contributing anything of value to an analysis of the problem, it alienates us from the people we need to work with to bring out change—people whose ideas are grounded in reality and experience, not in college textbooks.¹⁹⁵

Thus, in the view of Bari, environmentalists needed to focus their attention on the actual forces destroying the environment—timber company executives—not humanity as a whole.¹⁹⁶

While Foreman dismissed loggers as effectively environmental parasites that deserved their eventual unemployment, Bari believed that political alliances with loggers were possible if she could overcome the loggers’ belief that environmentalists were the greater enemy compared to timber management. One component of this effort was the explicit disavowal of tree spiking as a direct action tactic. This change from the national Earth First! strategic line fit into specific local concerns. The one recorded case of an injury from tree spiking came from George Alexander, a mill worker from Cloverdale, CA, who was seriously hurt when the sawmill they were operating exploded as it came upon a tree spike. The reality, however, was that the tree spiking was not conclusively linked to Earth First! and many questioned the likelihood of Earth First! involvement. The spiked tree was second growth, not old-growth, and was involved in an uncontroversial sale. Furthermore, the tree-spiking had no warnings associated with it as was usual for Earth First! tactics. But the situation gave rhetorical ammunition to

¹⁹⁴ Judi Bari, “Why I Am Not a Misanthrope,” in *Timber Wars* (Common Courage Press, 1994), 84.

¹⁹⁵ Bari, “Why I Am Not a Misanthrope,” 84.

¹⁹⁶ Bari, “Why I Am Not a Misanthrope,” 82–84.

timber industry executives and supporters who seized upon the incident to build upon their argument that Earth First!—and environmentalists in general—were violent terrorists.¹⁹⁷

This led Judi Bari and other Northern California Earth First!ers to reevaluate the situation, including their commitment to tree-spiking as a political strategy. While tree-spiking had long been claimed by Earth First!ers as a valuable method to subtly but definitively sabotage exploitation of nature—the “monkeywrench” in industrial capitalism—the potential for violence proved too difficult to justify. At a time when Bari and other Northern California radicals wanted to instead build alliances with working-class loggers, tree-spiking undercut their arguments that environmentalists and loggers were on the same side against the timber company management—represented increasingly by figures like Charles Hurwitz.¹⁹⁸

The Mainstream

Meanwhile, over the winter and early spring of 1990, mainstream environmentalists began to focus in on possible institutional solutions to the escalating crisis in Northern California as Hurwitz accelerated logging of old-growth forests, including ballot measures. Environmentalists, funded by Hal Arbit, a hedge fund manager from San Mateo and quiet supporter of environmentalist causes, finally organized and announced Proposition 130, a ballot initiative that they named Forests Forever that would ban clear-cutting and log old growth in Northern California selectively. This initiative figured alongside another ballot initiative secured by environmentalists for that same year, Proposition 128, otherwise known as Big Green. While Forests Forever focused specifically on the issue of old-growth logging and

¹⁹⁷ Judi Bari, “The Secret History of Tree-Spiking--Part 1,” in *Timber Wars* (Common Courage Press, 1994); Larry B. Stammer, “Environment Radicals Target of Probe Into Lumber Mill Accident,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), May 15, 1987; Harold Gilliam, “Violence Begets Violence,” *San Francisco Examiner* (San Francisco), November 1, 1987; K. Patrick Conner, “Fighting Fire With Fire,” *San Francisco Examiner* (San Francisco), November 1, 1987; Woodhouse, *The Ecocentrists*, 223.

¹⁹⁸ Judi Bari, “The Secret History of Tree-Spiking--Part 2,” in *Timber Wars* (Common Courage Press, 1994).

clear cutting, Big Green ranged across the board of environmental issues—including provisions intended to improve water quality, control pesticides, and reduce gas emissions.¹⁹⁹

These two ballot measures, combined with the growing conflict in Humboldt and Mendocino counties, pushed timber industry supporters to organize—eventually coalescing around Proposition 138, a competing ballot initiative. Proposed by a timber group calling itself “Californians for Sensible Environmental Protection,” the ballot initiative was entirely focused around the presentation of itself as the “moderate” alternative to the “radical” environmentalist measures. In addition to voiding Forests Forever and Big Green’s forestry provisions if it got the most votes, the initiative ostensibly banned clearcuts in old-growth timber but also defined clearcuts in extremely narrow terms to the point that “a logging plan that cut every tree on a parcel but spread the cut over three years would not be defined as a clear-cut at all.”²⁰⁰ This seemingly environmentalist rhetorical strategy could also be seen in the measure’s formal title, the “Global Warming and Clear-Cutting Reduction, Wildlife Protection, and Reforestation Act of 1990.” Young trees replanted in clearcuts, proponents argued, would be able to capture more carbon dioxide from the atmosphere than “old, dying” old-growth, making clear-cutting not only economically advantageous but also environmentally sound in the face of growing recognition of climate change. This “green” language of the measure was intentional in obfuscating the issue for California voters regardless of its ultimate odds. As sociologist Richard Widick explains, the timber industry wrote the measure “not to win but rather to defeat Proposition 130 by dividing the field and clouding the issue with a separate initiative disguised in eco-friendly terms.”²⁰¹ While environmentalists might have balked at such language as clear misdirection of voters—referring to the measure derogatively as “Big Stump”—their opponents recognized the value in shifting the terms of debate.²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ Richard C. Paddock, “A Clear-Cut Issue: Future of Redwoods,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), October 18, 1990; Eric Brazil, “‘Big Green’ It Is: \$24 Million Raised: Contributions Roll in For Both Sides in Environmental Battle,” *San Francisco Examiner* (San Francisco), October 11, 1990.

²⁰⁰ Widick, *Trouble in the Forest: California’s Redwood Timber Wars*, 227.

²⁰¹ Widick, *Trouble in the Forest: California’s Redwood Timber Wars*, 227.

²⁰² “Out of the ‘Big 3,’ Only Prop. 138 Is a Winner,” *Record Searchlight* (Redding, CA), October 28, 1990; Widick, *Trouble in the Forest: California’s Redwood Timber Wars*, 227; Speece, *Defending Giants*, 183.

The battle between the opposing propositions loomed in the background as environmental activists in Northern California began to organize one of the most famous chapters of the Northern California Timber Wars: Redwood Summer. The brainchild of Judi Bari and Darryl Cherney, Redwood Summer was initially framed as an environmentalist version of the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer organized by civil rights activists. In the 1964 Freedom Summer, civil rights organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had brought college students into Mississippi from around the country to aid in organizing efforts—particularly around voter registration and civics education. Providing aid to local activists as well as exposing college students to the realities of Mississippi and the wider South, the effort helped to nationalize the regional issue of Southern desegregation and civil rights organizing. White students who had, up to this point, little to no knowledge of the realities in the South now could bring their experiences over the summer of 1964 back with them to their college campuses—in turn inspiring much of the Student Movement organizing over the mid-to-late 1960s.²⁰³

Bari and Cherney imagined an environmentalist version of Freedom Summer that would bring college students from the rest of California—and the nation—up to Northern California where they would take part in direct action campaigns and protests against old-growth logging. This included both efforts to directly stop logging operations in redwood groves and demonstrations in Northern California cities like Eureka and Fort. Bragg to publicize the issue. The series of events and protests were explicitly imagined to be nonviolent and, by literally evoking the name, connect environmental organizing to civil rights organizing in the public mind. Indeed, early planning for the campaign referred to it as “Mississippi Summer in the California Redwoods” and talked of “freedom riders for the forests” traveling up to Northern California. Only later did the campaign begin to refashion itself “Redwood Summer,” fitting Bari’s evolving belief that the “North Coast timber protests [had] become a historical movement in their

²⁰³ For more on the 1964 Freedom Summer, see: John Dittmer et al., eds., *Freedom Summer: A Brief History with Documents* (Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2017); Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*.

own right.” But even then, Bari maintained the analogy to 1964, insisting that associations between the campaigns were “not one bit inaccurate.”²⁰⁴ Furthermore, this characterization was widely shared. Mendocino County Sheriff Alvie G. Rochester noted in March 1990 that he had “no intention of becoming the Bull Connor of California” by violently dispersing or detaining protestors.²⁰⁵ Indeed, connecting to the student-volunteer legacy of Freedom Summer, Bari and Cherney promoted the campaign by visiting college campuses across California including UC Berkeley and UC Santa Cruz.²⁰⁶

It was on the way back to Northern California from these college visits to begin the Redwood Summer campaign that the most infamous event of the summer took place. The car bombing of Judi Bari and Darryl Cherney in Oakland on May 24 shocked the environmentalist community of Northern California, but it was the official response to the bombing that particularly angered environmentalists. Despite injuries—in the case of Bari, a shattered pelvis and tailbone—the Oakland Police Department immediately placed Bari and Cherney under arrest on suspicion of the bomb being their own. This outraged environmentalists across the region, including not only fellow radical environmentalists like Dave Foreman who was, himself, awaiting trial for his alleged involvement in a plot to destroy transmission lines in Arizona after an FBI sting operation that many saw as entrapment. Foreman joined many Earth First!ers in pointing to such activities as evidence of a possible plot by authorities to frame and discredit Earth First!²⁰⁷ Bari agreed with such an assessment, arguing in the following years that the history of the FBI and its Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) lent support to claims that the FBI were actually behind the bombing.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁴ Mike Geniella, “Berkeley Group to Aid ‘Redwood Summer,’” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), May 17, 1990.

²⁰⁵ “‘Redwood Summer’: A Chronology,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), May 25, 1990.

²⁰⁶ Speece, *Defending Giants*, 171–72.

²⁰⁷ Mike Geniella, “First! Founder Warns of Plot,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), May 27, 1990; See also Email on Cherney & Bari Injured in Car Bomb, Mike Lewis, May 25, 1990, Box 2, Folder 18, Dave Foreman Earth First! Collection (MSS 1102 BC), Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections, University of New Mexico Libraries.

²⁰⁸ Bari wrote extensively about her belief that the car bombing and its investigation was a continuation of old COINTELPRO tactics previously used against other radical groups such as the Black Panthers and American Indian Movement. See Chapter Four and: Judi Bari and Sami Riest, “KPFA Interview,” in *Timber Wars* (Common Courage Press, 1994); Judi Bari, “For F.B.I., Back to Political Sabotage?,” in *Timber Wars* (Common Courage Press, 1994);

However, the concern in the environmentalist community extended beyond grassroots and radical activists. Even mainstream organizations such as the Sierra Club publicly expressed apprehension at the official response. In a series of letters written to state and federal officials including California Attorney General, John van DeKamp, and Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman, Joseph Biden, Michael Clark of the Friends of the Earth and Michael Fischer of the Sierra Club—along with leaders from NAMES—expressed alarm at what they argued to be “premature” conclusions drawn by the FBI and Oakland Police Department that Bari and Cherney were involved. Indeed, their letter to Senator Biden urged him to launch a congressional investigation of the bombing that also explored whether the rights of Bari and Cherney had been violated. However, not all mainstream environmentalists were happy with the explicit support given to Earth First!ers. Dan Sullivan, chairman of Sierra Club California, expressed indignation in an email to national Sierra Club leadership about Fischer’s signature on the letter to Senator Biden, arguing that the Club needed to be distancing itself from Earth First!, not allying itself with them. A senate investigation, Sullivan argued, would only give timber companies and conservatives a platform to equate the Sierra Club and Earth First!—threatening the difficult campaign for the Forests Forever initiative. Indeed, such an undercurrent of concern about the letters apparently rose that Sierra Club President Sue Merrow had to reiterate in a memorandum to fellow Directors that the letter had been signed by Fischer with her concurrence and focused on civil rights issues, having been carefully worded to avoid association with Earth First! itself. Clearly, radical activists weren’t alone in their suspicions of their fellow environmentalists—even as they came under attack.²⁰⁹

Judi Bari, “Exposing the FBI,” in *Timber Wars* (Common Courage Press, 1994); Judi Bari, “FBI Still Covering Up Bombing Case,” in *Timber Wars* (Common Courage Press, 1994); Judi Bari, “The Earth First! Car Bombing,” in *Timber Wars* (Common Courage Press, 1994).

²⁰⁹ Letter to John van DeKamp, July 16, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 21, Sierra Club Office of the Executive Director Records, BANC MSS 2002/230c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Letter to Sen. Joseph Biden, July 16, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 21, Sierra Club Office of the Executive Director Records, BANC MSS 2002/230c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Email, Dan Sullivan to Michael Fischer, July 17, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 21, Sierra Club Office of the Executive Director Records, BANC MSS 2002/230c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Email, Sue Merrow to Fellow Directors, July 30, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 21, Sierra Club Office of the Executive Director Records, BANC MSS 2002/230c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Only when it became clear that no reasonable evidence existed to link Bari and Cherney to the bombing did the Oakland district attorney reluctantly drop charges against the pair. In the years that followed, investigations went nowhere even as a strange letter to local journalists from “the Lord’s Avenger” claimed responsibility for the car bombing as well as an earlier bombing at a saw mill in Cloverdale, CA, that only resulted in minor damage. Despite the long efforts of activists and investigators, the bombing remains unsolved. Yet, in the moment of these growing tensions and violence, Sierra Club made the decision to move its Redwood Chapter offices out of office space it was sharing with Earth First! “due to worry of exposure of Club volunteers to violence or other direct action incidents.”²¹⁰ With violence on the rise, solutions to the conflict seemed remote.²¹¹

Meanwhile, the competition between the Forests Forever and New Forestry initiatives heated up as both campaigns sought to present themselves as the common-sense solution to the fight over old-growth forests. For timber executives pushing New Forestry, this meant linking Forests Forever to Redwood Summer and the radical environmental stand of Northern California Earth First! In language submitted for an opposing argument against the Forests Forever initiative on the ballot, timber industry supporters argued that the initiative was “sponsored by a radical environmental group notorious for driving spikes into trees, vandalizing logging equipment and harassing timber workers and their families” while specifically mentioning Darryl Cherney as a supporter who advocated eco-terrorism. Responding to threats of a lawsuit over the language by Forests Forever, a spokesman for the Timber Association of California went a step further and highlighted the advisory role of Dave Foreman in the early campaign. This was dismissed by Forests Forever who insisted that the earlier form of the initiative connected to Foreman was an “entirely different” and that the current initiative had “never been endorsed by Earth First!,” instead highlighting the endorsements by mainstream organizations such as the Sierra Club,

²¹⁰ Sierra Club Executive Committee Minutes, June 7, 1990, Carton 318, Folder 5, Sierra Club Records, BANC MSS 71/103 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

²¹¹ Chris Coursey et al., “‘I Built Bomb,’ Letter Says: Anonymous Writer Takes Credit for Earth First!, Mill Blasts,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), May 31, 1990; Chris Coursey and Mike Geniella, “Letter Widens FBI Probe: Writer Had ‘Good’ Knowledge of Two Bombs,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), June 1, 1990.

Wilderness Society, and even the California Teachers Association. From the point of view of Forests Forever, any association with radical groups was to be painstakingly disavowed to preserve the appearance of moderation.²¹²

But as the summer turned into fall in 1990, a decisive victory in efforts to finally stop logging in old-growth forests remained elusive. While drawing large crowds of supporters to its direct actions and protests, Redwood Summer also inspired intense counterdemonstrations by loggers and their supporters. And, in the end, the efforts failed to directly slow or stop the logging operations. Meanwhile, as the 1990 election unfolded, environmentalists faced disappointing returns. \$20 million in publicity by both sides had resulted in a draw. While the industry-backed New Forestry initiative failed, both environmentalist initiatives—Forests Forever and Big Green—were defeated as well. While the Sierra Club Board of Directors tried to dismiss the ultimate significance of the results as a general rejection of California voters of complicated and costly initiatives and pointed to the election of pro-environmental candidates, the reality on the ground was that fights over old-growth forests in Northern California would continue. Thus, as 1990 ended, the stalemate between environmentalists and the timber industry continued.²¹³

²¹² Mike Geniella, “Timber Ballot Wording Hits Nerve: Forest Forever Backers Threaten Suit,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), July 21, 1990.

²¹³ Nov. 10-11, 1990 Meeting Minutes, Sierra Club Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, BANC FILM 2945, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

The Accords

Thus, as 1991 began, all parties began to look for a solution to the stalled fight. With both sides fearing another protracted and costly electoral season of competing ballot initiatives, the Sierra Pacific timber company reached out to Forests Forever funder, Hal Arbit, to propose negotiations for an alternative legislative agreement. With the support of an ad-hoc group of the major California environmental organizations such as Sierra Club, Audubon Society, and the Wilderness Society—among others—longtime Sierra Club California forestry chair, Gail Lucas, was selected as environmentalist negotiator along with attorney Tom Lippe and economic consultant Robert Hrubes. On the other side of the table, the Timber Association of California took charge, selecting its own president Bill Dennison, Simpson Timber manager Dave Kaney, and Sierra Pacific vice president Dan Tomaschinski as timber negotiators.²¹⁴

Immediately, the negotiations provoked intense reactions from environmentalists around the state but especially grassroots organizations in Northern California. Some complained that the environmentalist negotiators seemed to be “working for Arbit rather than for [environmental] groups,” arguing that Arbit’s domination of the issue in the environmentalist camp was “autocratic.” Mainstream national groups, they argued, had only gotten involved upon discovering that they could raise a great deal of money on the issue of ancient forests and were happily “backing an elitist process while claiming concern” about the perspectives and exclusion of grassroots activists. Angered at the idea of mainstream groups having “once again” sold out their environmental principles in the name of compromise, grassroots activists looked quickly turn to articulate their own purist vision of protecting old-growth forests that emphasized “forests as entire biological ecosystems” rather than limited spaces based on political boundaries.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ “Memo, Meeting of FF Area Coordinators,” Don Lipmanson to Forests Forever directors and area coordinators. Jan. 12, 1991. Box 15, Folder 3, Tim McKay Collection, Cal Poly Humboldt Library Special Collections and Archives.

²¹⁵ “Memo, Meeting of FF Area Coordinators,” Don Lipmanson to Forests Forever directors and area coordinators. Jan. 12, 1991, Box 15, Folder 3, Tim McKay Collection, Cal Poly Humboldt Library Special Collections and Archives.

Nevertheless, the negotiations seemed to start bearing fruit. Despite many North Coast timber companies quickly withdrawing from the negotiations once it became clear that real concessions from the timber industry was on the table, other parties remained. Finally, the Sierra-Pacific Company reached a deal with Lucas and the environmentalist representatives. The resulting Forest Practices Agreement—later dubbed the “Sierra Accords” to reflect the names of the principal negotiators—promised to finally “bring peace to the north coast timber wars.” Initially endorsed by a swathe of other mainstream environmental organizations such as the Audubon Society, the Wilderness Society, and the California-based Planning and Conservation League, supporters claimed that the plan would “end clearcutting in privately owned ancient forests and reduce other clearcutting by 85%” as well as ensuring “that forests are not cut faster than they grow back” and strengthening both protections for streams and wildlife and public involvement in the rule making processes of the California Board of Forestry.²¹⁶

But the negative reaction to the agreement was swift—and from both sides. Aside from Sierra-Pacific, timber companies throughout Northern California quickly denounced the agreement, arguing that the concessions from environmentalists would work for Sierra-Pacific which primarily had operations in the Sierra Nevada Mountains but remained unprofitable for firms operating on the North Coast. With the support of the Timber Association of California, companies operating on the North Coast such as Louisiana Pacific and the Maxxam-owned Pacific Lumber argued that clear-cutting was necessary on the North Coast as opposed to the Sierra Nevada “because of the difference in types of trees harvested”. In offering their own, alternative plan, the Timber Association of California also included proposals to address topics like watershed and wildlife protect, review times for harvest plans, and public membership on the Board of Forestry, but were almost uniformly less intrusive into logging operations than the Sierra Accord.²¹⁷

²¹⁶ “Bringing Peace to the Timber Wars,” Gail Lucas, Carton 18, Folder 37, Sierra Club California Legislative Office Records, BANC MSS 91/1 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

²¹⁷ Bleys W. Rose, “Timber Companies Reject Negotiated Pact: Association Offers Rival Plan,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), March 26, 1991.

Meanwhile, environmentalists from across the region expressed outrage not only at what they deemed to be excessive compromises to the timber industry, but also the lack of involvement of local, grassroots environmental organizations. Complaining that the agreement lacked adequate protections for privately-owned old-growth forests and that the agreement's new timber harvest plans would not provide the same protections as existing environmental impact assessments, Mendocino Environmental Center representative Betty Ball urged environmentalist supporters "to abandon this disaster that could actually set forest practices back." Judi Bari, on the other hand, had stronger words. Still recovering from injuries in the 1990 car bombing, Bari attacked Lucas as a stooge of the timber companies, calling her a "better representative of Sierra Pacific than Sierra Club," and noting that her salary as a negotiator was paid for by Hal Arbit—dismissing her environmentalist credentials as tainted by big business²¹⁸ Ultimately, Bari denounced "Lucas' backroom deal" as a "surrender" by the Sierra Club to Big Timber.²¹⁹ While the deal claimed to protect old-growth forests, Bari argued, it actually allowed all old-growth to be logged "as long as they take only 50% on the first cut, and eventually leave six 'mature trees' per acre."²²⁰

Not all radical environmentalists, however, opposed the negotiations. Dave Foreman expressed support for Lucas and the negotiators. After leaving Earth First! the previous year amidst his legal troubles and fights with the Northern California Earth First!, Foreman had pursued new opportunities including the establishment of a new organization with fellow Earth First! founder (and now exile) John Davis, the Wildlands Project, with its own newsletter, *Wild Earth*. Meanwhile, Foreman had begun to grow more involved with the Sierra Club, even joining with famed Sierra Club leader David Brower in speaking at the Sierra Club International Assembly in 1989.²²¹ While he praised the work that Northern California Earth First! and other grassroots activists had done in "publicizing, dramatizing and creating the new political landscape so mainstream groups could come out with stronger opinions," Foreman

²¹⁸ Judi Bari, "The Sierra Club Surrender," in *Timber Wars* (Common Courage Press, 1994), 93.

²¹⁹ Bari, "The Sierra Club Surrender."

²²⁰ Bari, "The Sierra Club Surrender," 93.

²²¹ Jane Kay, "Tree Wars," *San Francisco Examiner* (San Francisco), December 17, 1989.

nevertheless argued that it was the groups that could “sit down and talk to the timber companies,” like Sierra Club, Wilderness Society, and Audubon Society that would be doing the “saving of ancient forests.”²²² While direct action and grassroots groups like Earth First! were essential to publicizing environmental fights, it was the mainstream organizations in Foreman’s mind that would actually achieve real success through compromise.

The irony of Foreman’s argument for compromise was not lost on the other side of the debate. Judi Bari responded by attacking the “contradiction between his radical theories and conservative politics,” while arguing that his comments came less from a desire to “marginalize” or “discredit” Northern Californian environmentalists and more from a simple lack of understanding of the region’s environmental politics. As Bari argued, while Foreman saw “Earth First! as a catalyst group that brings attention to an issue so the mainstream groups can come in and negotiate,” the reality was that “changes... taking place in redwood forest practices are coming directly from the activism of Earth First!, EPIC, and other grassroots groups, without the intervention of the so-called professionals.”²²³ Indeed, Bari even attacked Foreman’s radical environmentalist credentials, noting that “he still talks about demos that happened in 1983 because that’s the last time he was out there on the front lines. He is unable to assess the success or failure of our tactics because he doesn’t talk to us enough to know what’s going on.”²²⁴ As if to prove the point that Foreman was no longer a true radical environmentalist, Bari went on to note Foreman’s campaign for the Sierra Club Board of Directors—arguing that “if that’s where he feels more comfortable, then that’s where he should work.”²²⁵ Thus, Bari argued, if Foreman was going to act like a mainstream environmentalist with his support of the Sierra Accord, he should stop relying upon his radical environmentalist public persona.

²²² Bley W. Rose, “Earth First! Co-Founder: Time for Group to Take a Hike,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), March 7, 1991.

²²³ Judi Bari, “Dave Foreman Comes to Ecotopia,” in *Timber Wars* (Common Courage Press, 1994), 89–90.

²²⁴ Bari, “Dave Foreman Comes to Ecotopia,” 90.

²²⁵ Bari, “Dave Foreman Comes to Ecotopia,” 91.

Despite this opposition from both environmentalists and much of the timber industry, the Sierra Club and other mainstream environmental groups remained, for the moment, committed to the agreement through much of the spring and summer of 1991. Calling it a “historic agreement,” Gail Lucas worked hard to highlight its value as a possible “last chance to reform California’s forestry laws before it’s too late.” Using the language of conservative anti-environmentalists, Lucas dismissed opponents among both timber industry and environmentalists as “extreme elements” and insisted that “those who claim to support a ‘fair balance’ between environmental and economic interests should support the agreement.” Divisions in Northern California were everywhere—between environmentalists themselves as well as between activists and loggers.²²⁶

Nevertheless, this growing opposition from all sides—combined with further concessions forced onto the agreement as its associated legislation struggled through the California legislature over the spring and summer of 1991—finally led to even Sierra Club backing away from the agreement. While Governor Pete Wilson nominally supported an agreement to end the controversy surrounding old-growth forests—having made it a focus of his administration since his inauguration earlier in the year—his office increasingly voiced support for further concessions including loosening of restrictions on clearcutting in watersheds. Hoping that these further compromises would bring other timber companies from the North Coast into the fold, Wilson’s tinkering with the deal only aggravated environmentalists who were already agitated about the compromises baked into the Sierra Accord.²²⁷

Moreover, having now lost one of its central environmentalist supporters, the Sierra Accord and its coalition was in shambles. Despite finally passing the state legislature, the agreement ultimately went

²²⁶ “Bringing Peace to the Timber Wars,” Gail Lucas, Carton 18, Folder 37, Sierra Club California Legislative Office Records, BANC MSS 91/1 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

²²⁷ Bley W. Rose, “Resources Chief Sings of Preservation: Wheeler Aims to Protect Forests,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), April 28, 1991; Mike Geniella, “Activists Say Timber Accord Suffering From Compromises,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), July 18, 1991; Chris Bowman, “Governor Proposes Logging Compromise: Environmentalists, Timber Industry Say They’ll Reserve Comment For Now,” *Sacramento Bee* (Sacramento, CA), August 2, 1991; Kathleen Grubb, “Bill Amendments Strain ‘Sierra Accord’ Coalition,” *Independent Coast Observer* (Gualala, CA), August 30, 1991.

down in defeat as Governor Wilson vetoed the final bill, with his Secretary of Natural Resources Douglas Wheeler arguing that the agreement was “seriously deficient” and failed to “adequately advance the cause of constructive, balanced forestry reform.” Clearly, for all parties involved, the failure of the Sierra Accord was seen as a frustrating example of the seemingly intransigent nature of the debate. Wheeler, himself, would be cast aside as the Administration’s “point man on the forestry issue,” replaced by Terry Gorton, a Wilson-appointed chair of the Board of Forestry and member of Wilson’s inner-circle.²²⁸

In place of the failed Sierra Accord, Governor Wilson now offered his own “Grand Accord.” Building out of a draft proposal that the Wilson Administration had circulated in the final months of debate over the Sierra Accord, the new plan continued to focus on attracting the support of North Coast timber companies. While the new compromise attracted the same establishment support of North Coast Democrats such as Assemblyman Dan Hauser and Senate Majority Leader Barry Keene, the Grand Accord was widely seen—even by supporters—as tougher than the existing regulations, but less stringent than the vetoed deal. This included, for instance, raising the limits on clear-cutting from the 20 acres in the Sierra Accord to 30 acres. Furthermore, many environmentalists feared even more compromises to the proposal going forward.²²⁹

For their part, timber companies also remained just as divided as they were before. Georgia-Pacific and the Pacific Lumber Company now joined Sierra Pacific Industries in supporting the Grand Accord—drawn by compromises wrested from Governor Wilson in the previous months and willing to

²²⁸ Douglas Wheeler, “Timber Bill Demands Veto,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), October 1, 1991; Bleys W. Rose, “New Battle Lines: Vote Looms on Logging Pact,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), January 26, 1992; Tom Arrandale, “Branching of Their Philosophies Divide Environmentalist Factions,” *Record Searchlight* (Redding, CA), May 17, 1992; Mike Geniella, “Forestry Chief Says Wilson Seeks New Accord: Timber Reforms Still a Priority,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), December 13, 1992; Mike Geniella, “Gorton Learns Politics’ Harsh Lessons,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), December 13, 1992.

²²⁹ Virginia Ellis, “Wilson Offers New Plan for Logging Restrictions,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), December 4, 1991; Mike Geniella and Bleys W. Rose, “Wilson’s ‘Grand Accord’ on Timber,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), December 4, 1991; Kathleen Grubb, “‘Grand Accord’: Wilson Unveils His Timber Bill,” *Independent Coast Observer* (Gualala, CA), December 6, 1991 Wilderness Society Statement on the Governor’s Announcement of the Proposed Forest Practices Legislation, December 3, 1991, Carton 18, Folder 46, Sierra Club California Legislative Office Records, BANC MSS 91/1 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

entertain limited reforms in the hope that voter enthusiasm for ballot initiatives for further restrictions would be dampened. Others, however, remained obstinate in their opposition. Louisiana-Pacific and the Simpson Timber Company continued to oppose any “arbitrary harvesting restrictions which are not based on science and which would have an impact” on their operations.²³⁰ Fearing that any new regulations would jeopardize their delicate profit margins and willing to bet on another ballot initiative failure in 1992, these companies continued to insist on business as usual.²³¹

One of the clearest examples of the drastic divisions and shifts taking place amidst the uproar over the Sierra Accord and the new Grand Accord, however, was, in fact, the Sierra Club. The growing dissension among environmentalists at large was mirrored within the organization as well, with a growing faction sharing broader environmentalist perceptions that Gail Lucas had unnecessarily conceded too much in her negotiations—especially with the further concessions forced onto the agreement by the state legislature and Governor Wilson. Indeed, some even saw Lucas as having “sold out her environmentalist principles to make a political deal.”²³² Responding to this internal crisis, Sierra Club leaders sought to reconstitute the state forestry practices committee towards a more grassroots, “activist” model in the vein of other Northern California environmental groups. They argued in an internal memo that a “strong and broadly representative committee membership” that had the “expertise to evaluate the issues and the credibility to promote consensus within the Club and support outside” could have helped the group to avoid or temper the “divisiveness” and “internal and external controversy” that surrounded its role in the Sierra Accord and its aftermath.²³³ Attempting to mitigate the fallout from its role in the spiraling agreement, the Sierra Club tried to return to its grassroots.

²³⁰ Rose, “New Battle Lines: Vote Looms on Logging Pact.”

²³¹ Rose, “New Battle Lines: Vote Looms on Logging Pact.”

²³² Arrandale, “Branching of Their Philosophies Divide Environmentalist Factions.”

²³³ Memo, Bob Schneider and Genji Schmeder to Delegates and Forestry Activists of NC/N, October 4, 1991, Box 18, Folder 47, Sierra Club California Legislative Office Records, BANC MSS 91/1 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

It is fitting, therefore, that the Sierra Club, faced with growing criticism from within and without as well as the substantial compromises to the bill, finally had enough and withdrew its support for the agreement it had helped to craft shortly before Governor Wilson vetoed it—a fact that California Secretary of Natural Resources and former Sierra Club executive director Douglas Wheeler highlighted as justification for killing the bill. This, however, did not stop the Sierra Club from attacking Wilson in a press release for his “late involvement and confusing direction in the negotiations” as well as his further weakening of the bill with over eighty amendments proposed months after the legislation was introduced. Even as the administration drove changes that forced the Sierra Club, Wilderness Society, and the Natural Resources Defense Council to drop support for the legislation and brought the support of 65 percent of California timber landowners, the Sierra Club noted, Wilson *still* vetoed the legislation.²³⁴

The divisions within Sierra Club remained, however, as Governor Wilson introduced his Grand Accord. Immediately, Darryl Young of Sierra Club California attacked the agreement as “a half-baked draft proposal” and predicted that it “would be weakened by industry amendments” much in the same manner as the Sierra Accord.²³⁵ More specifically, Sierra Club attacked the deal’s serious defects including allowing cuts in the Headwaters Forest fought over since Redwood Summer and weakening the authority of the Department of Fish and Game and Regional Water Quality Control Boards to enforce wildlife protection and water quality. Meanwhile, the deal’s reception among Sierra Club’s grassroots activists in Northern California was hardly better. Bebek McGhee, chair of the Northern California-based Redwood Chapter of the Sierra Club characterized the agreement as “bureaucratic complicity with timber interests, a shortsighted deal and a cynical denial of... the destruction of California’s forests.”²³⁶ For an

²³⁴ Wheeler, “Timber Bill Demands Veto”; “Governor Vetoes Landmark Timber Compromise Bill,” *Ukiah Daily Journal* (Ukiah, CA), October 13, 1991; Rose, “New Battle Lines: Vote Looms on Logging Pact,” Sierra Club California News Release, “Governor to Blame for Forest Reform Failure,” October 11, 1991, Box 18, Folder 47, Sierra Club California Legislative Office Records, BANC MSS 91/1 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

²³⁵ Ellis, “Wilson Offers New Plan for Logging Restrictions”; Grubb, “‘Grand Accord:’ Wilson Unveils His Timber Bill.”

²³⁶ Bebek McGhee, “Don’t Mourn the Cynical ‘Grand Accord,’” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), February 10, 1992; Kathleen Grubb, “Wilson Backs New Compromise on Logging Methods,” *Sacramento Bee* (Sacramento, CA), November 7, 1991.

organization widely known for its mainstream approach to environmental politics including the art of compromise, the Sierra Club now found itself fed up with negotiation.²³⁷

Furthermore, this growing indignation also extended to the Grand Accord's environmentalist supporters, including its former ally and benefactor Hal Arbit. After Arbit dropped the renewed initiative campaign and discarded its 750,000 signatures, Sierra Club officials were furious, with Darryl Young remarking that they were "outraged that one individual has taken it upon himself to determine the forest policy for all of California."²³⁸ Indeed, Sierra Club leaders' patience with Arbit's domineering attitude had been thinning for months now. Dan Sullivan, chair of Sierra Club California, had expressed frustration with Lucas's deference to Arbit around another initiative even as far back as May 1991 and chastised her in an internal memo for allowing Arbit to "make major strategic decisions for the Sierra Club" regarding endorsement of a new initiative. Sullivan also expressed concern with Lucas's seeming willingness to let Arbit negotiate an agreement with Frank Wells, President of the Disney Company, on behalf of the Sierra Club to get Wells's support for an initiative. Now on the other side of the debate, Sierra Club officials were not as certain about the good of basing environmentalist strategy on the whims of elite financial benefactors.²³⁹

However, not everyone in Sierra Club's orbit was opposed to the Grand Accord. Notable among the key negotiators and proponents of the new agreement was Gail Lucas who had bitterly resigned from the Sierra Club after it had withdrawn its support for the Sierra Accord—a break that she later framed as stemming from "problems of ego and power."²⁴⁰ Characterizing the new agreement as a "quantum advance over current law," and the "strongest protection yet" of watersheds, Lucas was blunt in her

²³⁷ See also: News Advisory: Governor's Forestry Reform Proposal Allows Half of Ancient Forests to be Cut, December 13, 1991, Box 18, Folder 46, Sierra Club California Legislative Office Records, BANC MSS 91/1 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

²³⁸ Chris Bowman, "Forest Protection Initiative's Key Backers Call Off Drive," *Sacramento Bee* (Sacramento, CA), December 10, 1991.

²³⁹ Memo, Dan Sullivan to Mike Paparian, May 14, 1991, Box 18, Folder 39, Sierra Club California Legislative Office Records, BANC MSS 91/1 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

²⁴⁰ Bleys W. Rose and Mike Geniella, "Experts: Timber Reform Dead," *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), September 21, 1992.

appraisal of the situation.²⁴¹ Given the continued resistance of major timber companies like Louisiana-Pacific and Simpson Timber, she argued, further compromise was unlikely and environmentalists should take a limited victory. As she explained, “what happens if this doesn’t pass? We all end up with nothing.”²⁴² Indeed, she had harsh words for her former employers in the Sierra Club leadership whom she now attacked as not understanding the “political reality” of the situation.²⁴³ In particular, she argued that the Sierra Club’s opposition to the Grand Accord had been turned into a “tool” by state leaders such as Assembly Speaker Willie Brown who sought to continue his political fight with Governor Wilson.²⁴⁴

Other environmentalists such as the Natural Resources Defense Council, the National Audubon Society, and the Wilderness Society, however, remained committed to the deal to varying degrees. While some, such as the Wilderness Society supported the agreement as an improvement on existing law despite its flaws, they also supported another ballot initiative for 1992, arguing that California voters “deserved a chance to vote for enactment of stronger forest practices legislation.”²⁴⁵ However, others were not so sure. Indeed, Hal Arbit, who had again been financing the proposed ballot initiative, decided along with the Forests and Water Protection Committee—the organizers of the initiative—that the Grand Accord was satisfactory and called off the initiative campaign, discarding the over 750,000 signatures it had gathered—outraging organizers from the grassroots and radical environmentalists as well as the Sierra Club. Indeed, even Jennifer Jennings, a lobbyist and spokesperson for the Forests and Water Protection

²⁴¹ Gail Lucas, “Praising Forest ‘Reform,’” *San Francisco Examiner* (San Francisco), February 21, 1992; “Timber Truce At Last?,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), December 5, 1991.

²⁴² Bley W. Rose and Mike Geniella, “Timber Package Lives--For Now: Supporters Still Not Optimistic,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), January 31, 1992.

²⁴³ Arrandale, “Branching of Their Philosophies Divide Environmentalist Factions.”

²⁴⁴ As early as October 13, 1991, Michael B. Endicott of the Sierra Club California Legislative Committee emphatically chastised journalist Bley W. Rose in a letter for referring to Lucas as representing the Sierra Club on the issue of the forestry reform. Letter, Michael B. Endicott to Bley W. Rose, Oct. 13, 1991, Carton 18, Folder 46, Sierra Club Legislative Office Records, BANC MSS 91/1 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. See also: Rose and Geniella, “Experts: Timber Reform Dead”; “Brown vs. Wilson,” *San Francisco Examiner* (San Francisco), February 12, 1992; Response to Chart “Impacts of Governor Wilson’s Grand Accord,” Gail Lucas, December 19, 1991, Box 18, Folder 46, Sierra Club California Legislative Office Records, BANC MSS 91/1 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

²⁴⁵ Wilderness Society Statement on the Withdrawal of the Forestry Initiative, Dec. 9, 1991, Carton 18, Folder 46, Sierra Club California Legislative Office Records, BANC MSS 91/1 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Committee, noted that the case “may mark the first time in California history that an initiative campaign has withdrawn after collecting enough signatures to qualify a measure for the ballot.”²⁴⁶

These supporters of the Grand Accord offered their own interpretation of Sierra Club’s opposition. Sen. Barry Keene argued that the Sierra Club was being used as pawns by opponents of timber reform, noting that there were “well-intended groups within the Sierra Club who don’t realize they are being used by (timber interests) that are against this accord for economic reasons.”²⁴⁷ Whether or not this was true, the melodrama of the situation was clear to many, including seasoned California political commentator Dan Walters who remarked upon the pragmatic alliance of Sierra Club and “the more recalcitrant elements of the [timber] industry]” in his *Sacramento Bee* column, noting that “a stranger group of bedfellows could not be imagined.” The same whispers by timber activists the previous year that Hal Arbit had been using the fight to expand regulations to support his investments in out-of-state timber firms, Walters argued, were now “voiced by environmentalists who oppose the latest compromise, suggesting that other environmental groups have been bought off with private promises of financial and political aid.” Likening the entire “Grand Accord” to “grand theater,” Walters captured the heady moment of mutual recrimination as environmentalists attacked not only each other’s strategies but also, indeed, their commitment to environmental protection.²⁴⁸

Ultimately, the Grand Accord proved little better than the Sierra Accord in attracting support and its life was, therefore, similarly short. Despite some success in the California Assembly, the bills faced long odds in the California Senate. And over the spring and summer of 1992, despite strong efforts by proponents like Lucas, the package of bills remained mired in gridlock. By the fall, insiders reported, Wilson was “so fed up with the infighting” that he had begun to back off action by the state

²⁴⁶ Kathleen Grubb, “Activists Support Timber Bill,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), December 10, 1991; Rose, “New Battle Lines: Vote Looms on Logging Pact”; Arrandale, “Branching of Their Philosophies Divide Environmentalist Factions;” Forest and Water Protection Committee Press Release on June Forestry Initiative Not Being Filed, Dec. 9, 1991, Carton 18, Folder 46, Sierra Club California Legislative Office Records, BANC MSS 91/1 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

²⁴⁷ Rose, “New Battle Lines: Vote Looms on Logging Pact.”

²⁴⁸ Dan Walters, “Grand Accord, Grand Theater,” *Sacramento Bee* (Sacramento, CA), January 16, 1992.

government—even coming full circle to consider the idea of a ballot proposition. Lucas, meanwhile, felt “helpless and hopeless,” expecting, “at best,” the Board of Forestry coming up with “watered-down versions of what’s needed.”²⁴⁹

Thus, the result of these shifting positions was a complicated battlefield that—at least temporarily—saw old alliances split and new alliances born. While radical and grassroots organizations in Northern California remained opposed to the compromises, they were now joined by former mainstream rivals like the Sierra Club whom, in turn, found themselves working in opposition to fellow mainstream organizations like the Audubon Society and Wilderness Society. The division of timber companies between the two camps only complicated matters further.

The Wise Use Movement

But the battle over the meaning of environmentalism unfolding in the California North Coast wasn’t simply between mainstream and radical environmentalists. Conservative activists—both from the region and beyond—saw the emerging fight over the old growth forests of Northern California as a new arena to advance their own vision of a “New Environmentalism”—an “environmentalism as if people mattered” in the words of one activist.²⁵⁰ Regrouping from their setbacks in the early 1980s, conservative activists in the late 1980s once again began to advance their political agenda of rolling back not only the specific environmental protections and regulations of the 1970s but also the broader social and cultural sympathies of the American public for mainstream environmentalism. In many ways, this effort was epitomized by the Wise Use Movement. Formed out of the same milieu of Western populist resentment and corporate backing that had fashioned the Sagebrush Rebellion of the 1970s and early 80s, the Wise Use Movement emerged as the predominant form of anti-environmentalist organizing of the 1990s. But

²⁴⁹ Rose and Geniella, “Experts: Timber Reform Dead”; Rose and Geniella, “Timber Package Lives--For Now: Supporters Still Not Optimistic”; “Choice on Timber: Something or Nothing,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), August 27, 1992; McGhee, “Don’t Mourn the Cynical ‘Grand Accord.’”

²⁵⁰ Alan M. Gottlieb, ed., *The Wise Use Agenda: The Citizen’s Policy Guide to Environmental Resource Issues* (Free Enterprise Press, 1989), x; Arnold, *Ecology Wars*.

this time, the movement would not be limited to the ranches and mining companies of the arid Great Basin or northwestern interior.²⁵¹

Both at the time and in scholarly writing since, the Wise Use Movement has been a central character in the story of anti-environmentalist organizing in the early 1990s. These narratives relate notable successes: the successful 1991 blocking of the Yellowstone “Vision” plan, an attempt to institute a cross-agency coordination around the protection of the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem; unsuccessful efforts over the late 80s and early 90s to block the passage of the California Desert Protection Act; and their intervention in the Timber Wars of the Pacific Northwest. In these stories, a few key leaders of the Wise Use Movement feature prominently as effective figureheads—Ron Arnold, Alan Gottlieb, and Charles Cushman—leading a renewed charge against the environmental movement, alarming environmentalist leaders about what this new development meant. Effectively, Wise Use became the bogeyman of environmentalism in the 1990s.²⁵²

But popular characterizations of the Wise Use Movement oversimplified it. Wise Users were far from the monolith it was often framed as. What contemporaries and later historians have labeled the “Wise Use Movement” was really a national amalgamation of various distinct anti-environmentalist organizations and campaigns. While figures like Arnold and Cushman tried to use shared language to frame the fight against environmentalists as national, the grassroots remained focused on specifically local issues, with few rank and file members of the organizations paying more than cursory attention to the specifics of other environmental conflicts around the country. Importantly, as the Cosgrove Report—a 1993 investigation of Wise Users commissioned by the Wilderness Society—found, many of these “grassroots” activists affiliated themselves more with their local struggle than the national Wise Use Movement. The claim pushed by Wise Use leaders like Arnold themselves at its inception at Reno

²⁵¹ For more general work on the Wise Use Movement, see: Skillen, *This Land Is My Land*, 119–24; Turner, “The Specter of Environmentalism,” 137–46; Switzer, *Green Backlash*, 191–225; Helvarg, *War Against the Greens*.

²⁵² See: Helvarg, *War Against the Greens*; Turner, “The Specter of Environmentalism”; Switzer, *Green Backlash*, 191–225.

conference in 1988 that they represented over ten million Americans and Canadians came, the Cosgrove Report argued, from “adding together all the members of the organizations” that aligned themselves with Wise Use leaders. Indeed, the Report concludes that “national Wise Use leaders are not creating a movement, they are attempting to assert some control over it and fundamentally broaden the issue focus of local groups.”²⁵³ The tendency at the time, therefore, to treat Wise Use as an organized counter-movement to environmentalists overstates its real state of organization.

Instead, the influence and centrality of Wise Use perceived by environmentalists at the time came more from its effective role as a mouthpiece for anti-environmentalist sentiments than any imagined command over armies of anti-environmentalist activists. Wise Use—particularly its intellectual leader, Ron Arnold—was able to develop a rhetoric around environmentalism and environmental protection that appealed to the many distinct anti-environmentalist movements organizing around the country. Coalescing around a shared antipathy for “environmental extremists” and love for the free market, the Wise Use Movement was able to support local organizations organizing regionally on various specific issues such as access to public lands in the West and environmental regulations of private property in the Midwest and Northeast. These Wise Users nationwide shared similar talking points and ideological and political framing devised by Wise Use leaders: all environmentalists were radicals beyond the pale for everyday Americans and their policies needed to be moderated with a new “balanced” approach that encouraged economic development of natural resources not simply as a necessary sacrifice but rather a net good. For Wise Users, they—not the “environmental extremists” of both mainstream and radical environmental organizations—were practicing responsible environmentalism.

Indeed, this self-description of themselves as the “real” environmentalists can be even seen in the name they selected for their movement. Referring to Gifford Pinchot’s 1947 definition of conservation as the “wise use of the earth and its resources for the lasting good of men,” Wise Users framed themselves as

²⁵³ MacWilliams Cosgrove Snider, “The Wise Use Movement: Strategic Analysis & Fifty State Review,” Jan. 1993, 6-9. Found in “Cosgrove Report,” Jan. 1993, Box 364, Folder 7, Sierra Club Records, BANC MSS 71/103 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

living out the principles of Pinchotian conservation.²⁵⁴ Instead of “locking away” natural resources, as they claimed preservation-oriented environmentalists desired, they would “wisely” use them to fuel and lubricate the gears of the national economy, ensuring prosperity and security for the American public.²⁵⁵

This historical framing of Wise Users as carrying on the “true” legacy of conservationist ideals was largely the work of the intellectual figurehead of the movement, Ron Arnold, accompanied by his more logistics and fundraising-oriented partner Alan Gottlieb. Arnold had a complicated relationship with environmentalism, having been a one-time member of the local Sierra Club chapter in Washington state before, he claimed, leaving in disgust at the increasingly “anti-growth” stance of the environmental movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Brock Evans, the Northwest lobbyist for Sierra Club at the time, however, disputed Arnold's characterization of his time at Sierra Club, arguing that Arnold was a loner and only briefly involved with the local chapter until they refused to buy a slide show he was selling due to lack of funds, upon which he quit the organization.²⁵⁶ This personal connection to the Sierra Club gave Arnold personal credibility, allowing him to claim an environmental ethos while severely critiquing environmentalist policies and ideas.

Arnold would, indeed, soon make a name for himself in conservative circles by drawing upon his “insider” attacks on environmentalism. His career particularly took off when he joined the conservative think tank founded by Alan Gottlieb, the Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise. A conservative activist particularly focused on Second Amendment issues, Gottlieb had his own record, having been arrested earlier in the 1980s for tax evasion—a record he noted with pride as an anti-tax activist. For Gottlieb, Arnold’s emphasis on environmentalist tyranny in the federal government fit perfectly with his

²⁵⁴ Switzer, *Green Backlash*, 191.

²⁵⁵ Dean Kuipers, “Setting the Woods on Fire: Dan Quayle’s Favorite Environmentalists,” *LA Weekly*, July 9, 1992.

²⁵⁶ Arnold claimed to even be a leader of the Washington state chapter. Helvarg, *War Against the Greens*, 94–96.

own emphases on other forms of federal tyranny. Together, they would begin to work over the course of the 1980s in supporting the Reagan Administration's efforts to stem and rollback the tide of liberalism.²⁵⁷

In fact, much of Arnold's thinking about environmentalism and the foundations of his later Wise Use theorizing can be traced to his defenses of the Reagan Administration's environmental policy in the early 1980s—particularly his defense of Secretary James Watt. In 1982, the Free Congress Research and Education Foundation—a conservative think tank associated with activist Paul Weyrich—hired Arnold to write a book about the increasingly besieged Watt. Part partisan hagiography and part discussion of Watt's ideology and policies—and the outraged responses to them from environmentalists—the book worked to defend Watt against claims of “anti-environmentalism,” notably by claiming an ongoing shift in how we should understand environmentalism. Watt, Arnold concluded, represented a paradigm shift in environmental ideology. He noted the work of economist Walter Isard, who drew upon Input-Output economics to argue that humans were not only part of the environment, but that they related to nature through their economic development of resources. “An economy,” Arnold explains, “is human ecology.”²⁵⁸ Watt's policies of rejecting mainstream environmentalism and advocating development, Arnold therefore argued, represented a new paradigm of ecological thought that rightfully centered humanity and its needs. His talk of “great abundance” and moving beyond “a system of sharing scarcity,” is not “the old, pre-ecology paradigm of rape, ruin, and run,” but rather “the paradigm of a new beginning.”²⁵⁹ Thus, according to Arnold “reasonable” human exploitation of natural resources—or “stewardship” like Watt might have called it—was not *anti-environmentalist*, it was very definition of *environmentalist*.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁷ For more environmental activist biography of Arnold and Gottlieb, see: Helvarg, *War Against the Greens*, 88–101; For a more sympathetic biography, see: William Perry Pendley, *It Takes a Hero: The Grassroots Battle Against Environmental Oppression* (Free Enterprise Press, 1994), 267–69; More balanced take on biography can be found in: Switzer, *Green Backlash*, 196–98.

²⁵⁸ Arnold, *At the Eye of the Storm*, 258.

²⁵⁹ Arnold, *At the Eye of the Storm*, 259.

²⁶⁰ Arnold, *At the Eye of the Storm*, 254–61.

Nevertheless, even as Arnold and other anti-environmentalist activists praised the efforts of James Watt and the Reagan Administration to effect this paradigm shift in environmental thought, there remained lingering dissatisfaction with the actual achievements of Reagan's eight years in office. Historian Nicole Hemmer has written about the growing resentment of conservatives—particularly the so-called “paleoconservatives”—who felt that Reagan's actual policies in office did not live up to the promises he had made in 1980. The conservative “revolution” that was promised had seemingly fizzled out into a merely reformist policy agenda that had sacrificed social conservative goals in the name of rolling back restrictive regulations on business and pursuing a reenergized Cold War. But by the middle of Reagan's second term, even the business conservatives and ardent anti-communists were restless—David Stockman, director of the Office of Management and Budget, resigned in the summer of 1985 and Reagan's growing rapprochement with Gorbachev dismayed some of the more committed Cold Warriors. Thus, by the time of the 1988 Republican Convention, conservatives slowly rallied around Vice President George H.W. Bush only after he faced off strong initial challenges from Kansas Senator Bob Dole and televangelist Pat Robertson.²⁶¹

It was in this context that Arnold and Gottlieb began to work to fashion together a new era of anti-environmentalist organizing. Recognizing the political—and, more importantly, rhetorical—promise of Watt's antagonistic approach to mainstream environmentalism and the inability of the Reagan Administration to fully recognize or pursue it, Arnold and Gottlieb organized what they hoped would be a more energetic campaign of not only defending against environmentalist attacks but taking the battle to them. These efforts would culminate in August 1988 at the Multiple Use Strategy Conference held in Reno, NV. Bringing together nearly 300 activists and representatives from trade groups and industrial firms, state and local governments, and citizen groups, the conference discussed the political situation and fashioned the broad strokes of the Wise Use Movement. In the resulting report on the conference, *The*

²⁶¹ See: Nicole Hemmer, *Partisans: The Conservative Revolutionaries Who Remade American Politics in the 1990s* (Basic Books, 2022).

Wise Use Agenda—establishing the effective manifesto for the emergent Wise Users—Arnold described the attendees as fitting into this new ground, carrying on the intellectual stream of Watt’s “environmentalism”:

They were not single-minded preservationists and they were not single-minded apologists for industrial development. They were representatives of a new balance, of a middle way between extreme environmentalism and extreme industrialism.²⁶²

This “New Environmentalism” as Arnold referred to it, would allegedly add “depth and character to the ‘business-as-usual’ outlook of industry and the ‘only nature is pure’ outlook of contemporary environmentalism,” bridging the growing divide in America over environmentalism.²⁶³

More broad stroke details on New Environmentalism can be found in Arnold’s book *Ecology Wars*—appropriately subtitled *Environmentalism As If People Mattered*. Here, Arnold began with the observation that “everybody is an environmentalist of one kind or another,” before detailing why in his view the “environmental movement” had gone so far outside the mainstream that it was now “a clear and present danger to the survival and well-being of our national economy and our open society.”²⁶⁴ Over the course of the book, Arnold went to great lengths to try to support this claim, arguing for instance that mainstream environmentalism effectively acted as the “vanguard” for socialist revolution, and conveyed his more central argument: that industry and its free-market-loving supporters need to move past defense and take the fight to the environmentalists.²⁶⁵ This does not simply mean “press agency and public relations flackery making broadside attacks on environmentalism”—a move that he argued would fail due to the public at the moment being unable to “tell the difference between the environment and environmentalists.”²⁶⁶ Instead, an aggressive effort to educate Americans on the value of the free market, showing “that the private sector, the profit motive, private property and the rest of the free enterprise

²⁶² Gottlieb, *The Wise Use Agenda*, ix.

²⁶³ Gottlieb, *The Wise Use Agenda*, x.

²⁶⁴ Arnold, *Ecology Wars*, 9–11.

²⁶⁵ Arnold, *Ecology Wars*, 25.

²⁶⁶ Arnold, *Ecology Wars*, 49–50.

catechism are what built America,” much in the same way that Justice Lewis Powell had encouraged in his infamous 1971 memorandum calling on business to come to the defense of free enterprise.²⁶⁷

This all led to Arnold’s conclusion that the best strategy for achieving this defense of free enterprise was the reframing of environmental advocacy to be “more benevolent, more mature,” and most importantly, “not based upon increased government coercion.” Arnold attempted to refute environmentalist attacks on him by insisting that his goal was the defeat of environmentalist ideology, not encouraging environmental devastation: “I’m **NOT** suggesting that we defeat the *environment*. Defeating **environmentalism** will not defeat the environment.”²⁶⁸ In this sense, he claimed the title “anti-environmentalist,” but pushed back against the title “anti-environmental.” To support this self-characterization, he developed the idea of what he calls an “ecosystem,” combining economics and ecology to claim that “humans and our disequilibria are as much a part of the biological construction we call the biosphere as the birds and the whales.”²⁶⁹ Just as other animals changed and impacted their environments, humans did so as well through industry. And, Arnold claimed, just as humans did not hold such actions by other animals as evil, they should not hold such actions by humans as evil or immoral. Effectively building upon the older arguments of Secretary James Watt as representing a paradigm shift in environmentalist thought, he now began to elaborate this “New Environmentalism.” Equipped with this new formulation of environmentalism, he argued, industry and its supporters would be able to more easily respond to environmentalist attacks or critiques.²⁷⁰

More concretely, Arnold and Gottlieb offered several specific policy recommendations for Republican candidate George H.W. Bush in *The Wise Use Agenda* that exemplified the “New Environmentalism”: the amendment of the Endangered Species Act to restrict protections for “non-adaptive species such as the California Condor, and endemic species lacking the biological vigor to

²⁶⁷ Arnold, *Ecology Wars*, 51; For more on the Powell Memorandum, see: Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*.

²⁶⁸ Arnold, *Ecology Wars*, 113 Emphasis in original.

²⁶⁹ Arnold, *Ecology Wars*, 116.

²⁷⁰ Arnold, *Ecology Wars*, 113–35.

spread in range”; the opening of “all public lands including wilderness and national parks” to “mineral and energy production”; and the systematic cutting of “decaying and oxygen-using” old-growth forest and replanting with “oxygen-producing, carbon dioxide-absorbing trees to help ameliorate the rate of global warming.”²⁷¹ Often mixing longstanding anti-environmentalist goals with environmentalist language, such as in their claims to address global warming, Wise Users offered a surreal explanation of the “New Environmentalism” they envisioned.

Alongside Arnold were a number of other conservative activists speaking up against the environmentalists. William Perry Pendley, former deputy secretary of the interior for energy and minerals under James Watt, had taken Watt’s old job as president at the Mountain States Legal Foundation. There he continued the old work of the “public-interest right” in litigating against environmental and land use regulations as well as writing a series of books in the 1990s decrying the “war on the west” waged by environmentalists and liberals and detailing the efforts of “local” and “grassroots” activists to stop them.²⁷² Former Washington governor Dixy Lee Ray brought her own past scientific credentials to bear to warn against environmental “alarmists” who were “anti-technology” and “anti-progress.” Using language similar to Arnold, she denied the moniker of “anti-environmentalist,” insisting that “each of us is an environmentalist at heart because we care about the planet to one degree or another.”²⁷³ Nevertheless, it is the “extreme view of environmentalism” she argued, “that drives public policy.” According to these environmental extremists, she explained:

It is necessary not only to be good stewards of the Earth and its resources, but it is essential also to reduce human impact upon the air, water, and land, and to do it immediately by any and all means possible—no matter how drastic, no matter how costly.²⁷⁴

²⁷¹ Gottlieb, *The Wise Use Agenda*, 5–18. The framing of clearcutting of old-growth as an environmentalist measure would, as discussed previously, be used later in 1990 by the California timber industry to title its forestry initiative competing with Forests Forever.

²⁷² William Perry Pendley, *War on the West: Government Tyranny on America’s Great Frontier* (Regnery Publishing, 1995), xvii–xx, 187–209; See also: Pendley, *It Takes a Hero*.

²⁷³ Dixy Lee Ray, *Environmental Overkill: Whatever Happened to Common Sense?*, with Louis R. Guzzo (Regnery Gateway, 1993), ix, 182.

²⁷⁴ Ray, *Environmental Overkill*, 201.

Thus, in contrast to the “common sense” environmentalism and “wise use” of nature of Dixy Lee Ray, William Perry Pendley, and Ron Arnold, the environmental “extremists” represented threats to American progress.²⁷⁵

The threat posed by environmentalist became even significant when viewed from the perspective of Charles Cushman. Based out of Sonoma County in Northern California, Cushman had a long history of opposing environmentalist influence in government land management. In 1977, he founded the National Inholders Association, representing private property owners in and around National Parks. He used the organization as a platform to attack National Park Service policies that he saw as threatening the rights of National Park inholders and conspiring to force them out, arguing that “they don’t consider people as part of the environment.”²⁷⁶ Despite or, perhaps, because of these criticism, James Watt appointed Cushman to serve on the National Park System Advisory Board in 1981. Cushman responded by praising Watt, remarking that he was “great,” and that he was “interested in the national parks and cares deeply about the environment.”²⁷⁷ Cushman had clearly begun ingratiating himself with the anti-environmentalists in the Reagan Administration.

Indeed, Cushman’s activism continued well after Watt left office. By 1989, in addition to the National Inholders Association which now had a newsletter circulation of 80,000, Cushman had also founded a new organization. The Multiple-Use Land Alliance expanded the scope of representation beyond the neighbors of National Parks to include people with any economic interests around any federally-owned land—including private property, claims, and leases. Through these two groups,

²⁷⁵ Prior to her election as governor of Washington in 1976, Dixy Lee Ray had been a marine biologist before turning towards a more political career: first as an enthusiastically pro-nuclear chair of the Atomic Energy Commission, then as an environmental policymaker in the State Department. For more on Ray’s views on environmental policy, see: Dixy Lee Ray, *Trashing the Planet: How Science Can Help Us Deal With Acid Rain, Depletion of the Ozone, and Nuclear Waste (Among Other Things)*, with Louis R. Guzzo (Washington, D.C., 1990); See also: Helvarg, *War Against the Greens*, 181–82.

²⁷⁶ Bob Phillip, “Inholders Official Lobbies Against Park Service,” *Record Searchlight* (Redding, CA), October 16, 1981.

²⁷⁷ Phillip, “Inholders Official Lobbies Against Park Service”; Paul Ingalls, “Guerrilla Warrior: Park Adviser Is Ready to Fight,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), September 20, 1981.

Cushman organized loggers, ranchers, and other users of public lands to advocate for their own particularly extractive sense of “multiple use.” In cases ranging from a proposed ski area near Mt. Shasta to gold mining in Klamath National Forest to protecting grazing on public land in eastern Oregon from environmentalist proposals for desert protections, Cushman and his followers attacked government restrictions on people working on the land. In fact, Cushman went as far as to liken regulations by the federal government and the environmentalists behind it to warfare on rural Americans, arguing that environmentalists had destroyed “hundreds of timber-dependent communities, turning them into ghost towns. And now they are starting on ranching communities. This is a systematic, cultural genocide of rural America.”²⁷⁸ If Ron Arnold and Dixy Lee Ray were careful to couch their positions in moderate language, Cushman was willing to be blunt in how these anti-environmentalist rural Westerners felt.²⁷⁹

As this intellectual framework of Wise Use as the new, “true” environmentalism was translated to the ground level environmental conflicts across the country, the contours of Wise Use activism in the late 1980s and early 1990s began to become clear. If the “environmentalists” were radicals bent on setting the foundations for a socialist takeover through ever-increasing regulations and restrictions on rural Americans’ livelihoods and property rights, then it was imperative for those rural Americans—from all regions of the country—to take action to stop them. Figures like Arnold and Cushman were able to give these rural Westerners a language to understand themselves as living out a legitimate (indeed, in their view, the only legitimate) formulation of environmentalism in their day-to-day lives. In doing so, they could understand their resistance to environmentalist attacks as a resistance to tyranny and destruction of their moral and productive work as farmers, ranchers, and, indeed, loggers. In their view, Charles Cushman’s repeated claims that environmentalist efforts to restrict logging or ranchers’ access to public

²⁷⁸ Richard Cockle, “Cattle-Grazing Advocates Picket Environmentalists’ Conference,” *Oregonian* (Portland, OR), April 27, 1992.

²⁷⁹ Ken Payton, “Ski Buffs Tell State to Back Off: Shasta Groups Want Permit Appeal Dropped,” *Sacramento Bee* (Sacramento, CA), December 9, 1988; Ken Payton, “Klamath Miners: US Out to Bury Way of Life,” *Sacramento Bee* (Sacramento, CA), March 17, 1988; Bob Klose, “Whales Caught in Protection Act Battle,” *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), January 21, 1992; Cockle, “Cattle-Grazing Advocates Picket Environmentalists’ Conference”; See also: Helvarg, *War Against the Greens*.

lands or water rights constituted “cultural genocide” had an air of truth to it—environmentalists were outsiders. They seemingly were working to destroy rural Americans’ lives and communities.

Indeed, given loggers in the Pacific Northwest and Northern California’s own “labor environmentalism,” discussed by historians like Steven Beda, it wasn’t too much of a leap to accept Wise Use ideas. If loggers were already embracing the idea of multiple use and the special obligatory connection between productive laborers and the land, Wise Use ideas of a “New Environmentalism” was not a radical deviation. Thus, it’s no surprise to see several timber organizations—reflecting management, loggers, and their families—taking part in the very first Wise Use conference in 1988; Arnold and Gottlieb’s *Wise Use Agenda* notes several organizations from California as attending or supporting the 1988 conference including (among others) California Women in Timber, the Shasta and Klamath Alliances for Resources and Environment (SHARE and KARE), the Pacific Lumber Company, and the Timber Association of California.²⁸⁰

Not only were these organizations cited as supporters of the *Wise Use Agenda*, many also offered their own letters to Republican candidate George H.W. Bush in support of Wise Use ideas and policy recommendations. The Timber Association of California, the California timber trade association, urged the expansion of commercial logging on public and private land in the US to reverse the trend of the U.S. primarily importing wood products instead of exporting them. The West Coast Alliance for Resources and Environment (WE CARE), part of the national Alliance for Environment and Resources which also included other friendly-sounding associated organizations like I CARE, SHARE and KARE, agreed. Urging the management of national forests under the principle of multiple use, WE CARE reiterated the position that “people are a part of nature. Those who utilize the land need not be thought of as detracting from its beauty or value,” noting that “a reasonable balance between productive lands and non-productive lands must be maintained if we are to preserve the rural culture that makes the ‘country’ a nice place to

²⁸⁰ Gottlieb, *The Wise Use Agenda*, 158–60.

visit. The human habitat in rural America is as fragile (and economically tenuous) as that of any endangered species.”²⁸¹ The California Women in Timber, an association especially dominated by wives and family members of loggers, also concurred, urging both multiple use and the maintenance of existing national parks and wilderness areas “with no more new acreage set aside.”²⁸² All of these groups on the frontlines of California’s Timber Wars expressed their support for a vigorous timber policy of expanded cuts according to principles of multiple use—advancing Arnold’s ideology of New Environmentalism.

And these ideas were continually expressed by pro-logger activists in the run-up to Redwood Summer in 1989 and 1990. In fall 1989, Bruce Vincent of the Montana-based Communities for a Great Northwest—an attendee at the 1988 Wise Use conference—spoke at an association of timber country women in Northern California about the need for a “middle ground” on timber harvesting, arguing along the lines of New Environmentalism that “most environmental groups [are no longer] environmental groups” and that it was up to the people in the timber industry “to be environmentalist” in order to “protect resources for future generations of loggers.”²⁸³ The next summer as Redwood Summer was underway, David Kaupanger of I CARE—who also wrote a letter in *The Wise Use Agenda* as owner of Kaupanger Logging, Inc.—argued in a Redding *Record Searchlight* forum on conflict and compromise on forest issues that environmentalists had made compromise impossible out of reneging on deals and abusing the public land appeals process, necessitating reform of laws allowing appeals of action taken on public lands. He concluded by calling on members of “obstructionist organizations such as the Sierra Club and Audubon Society” to “weed out your leadership dependent upon controversy and bring solutions to the table.”²⁸⁴ And, of course, Wise Use language about the environmental benefits of old-

²⁸¹ Gottlieb, *The Wise Use Agenda*, 60–68.

²⁸² Gottlieb, *The Wise Use Agenda*, 32–33.

²⁸³ Keith Michaud, “Montana Logger Urges Middle Ground in Timber Harvesting,” *Ukiah Daily Journal*, Oct. 8, 1989.

²⁸⁴ David Kaupanger, “When Lumber Industry Has Tried Compromise, It’s Been Kicked in the Teeth,” *Record Searchlight*, June 10, 1990.

growth logging were widespread—even making up the formal title of the industry initiative countering Forests Forever. Loggers employed Wise Use ideas in force around Redwood Summer and beyond.

The Timber Wars would continue through the decade nearly into the new millennium with seemingly intractable divisions and debates preventing any easy solution to the problem. Loggers and conservative activists continued their fight against environmentalists who, in turn, continued their efforts to preserve and protect old-growth forests. Increasingly, the federal government came to emerge as a central player in forcing deals and compromises on the issue across the Pacific Northwest. In 1994, newly elected President Bill Clinton would enact his Northwest Forest Plan devised out of a series of summits on the topic. The plan worked out a compromise that sought to protect old-growth forests and spotted owl habitat in national forests across the region. In 1996, a deal was finally reached with Pacific Lumber and the Department of the Interior, buying the Headwaters Grove in Humboldt County—the spark of the 1990 Redwood Summer—for \$380 million. That grove has since become a Forest Reserve, part of the National Landscape Conservation System.

But even as the specific landscapes of the California Timber Wars were slowly preserved through compromises and deals reached between the different parties, the underlying debate over the very ideas of environmentalism continued. Wise Use Movement language that vilified mainstream and radical environmentalists alike while robing itself in the rhetoric of environmental protection would continue to spread throughout the country, infusing new rancor into environmental conflicts ranging from wetland development to climate change.

If everyone was an environmentalist in 1988 as Michael Dukakis and George H.W. Bush fought over the presidency, the situation by the mid-1990s felt far more complex. While the majority of the country may have still had broad environmental concerns and sympathies, the specific articulation of those concerns into policy and political action was increasingly diverse. Environmentalists now found themselves split over debates about strategy and tactics. And more significantly, an environmental

opposition had grown more secure, masking itself in the language of environmentalism but for very different ends.

Chapter 3 – The Friendly Takeover: Sierra Club and Environmental Justice

As mainstream environmentalists entered the 1990s, continuing their conflict with radicals and conservatives who advanced their own visions of environmental protection in the new decade, they also found themselves confronted by a new movement. The crystallization of an organized Environmental Justice movement had begun as far back as the 1970s, but the ongoing fracture of the environmental movement and the shifting attention of civil rights activists toward the realities of slow-acting environmental hazards primarily affecting communities of color—“slow violence” in the words of scholar Rob Nixon—meant that a new battle was emerging.²⁸⁵ Different from the archetypal conflicts between “environmentalists” and “anti-environmentalists,” the compromising “mainstream” and the principled “ecocentrists,” the new confrontation that began to emerge in the 1990s was fundamentally shaped by Environmental Justice activists’ realization that everyone else was ignoring them. While fights continued over the preservation of “wilderness” and the regulation of polluters, people of color began to point out that they were not the intended beneficiaries. They did not have the disposable income to appreciate these wilderness spaces. Regulations on polluting industries, symbolized in their minds by the infamous fight in Warren County, North Carolina, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, actually meant that pollution impacted communities of color more than wealthier white communities.²⁸⁶ The frustration with the apparent indifference of mainstream (and radical) environmentalists eventually reached its boiling point by the beginning of the 1990s—at the same moment that other environmental conflicts were reaching their own apex. In what became known as the Letter to the Group of Ten, Environmental Justice activists attempted to grab the attention of mainstream environmentalists long enough to reveal the realities of environmental injustice—and the mainstream organizations’ own complicity in that injustice. Furthermore, the momentum that emerged from the collaboration of Environmental Justice activists speaking against mainstream inaction would help to lead to the First People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991 where the central principles of the movement were drafted.

²⁸⁵ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

²⁸⁶ See especially: McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism*.

While much has been written about this critical moment in the formation of the Environmental Justice Movement, what has remained less studied is the response of mainstream environmentalists to this period of transition. Scholars readily recognize the formation of a clear alliance between mainstream activists and the Environmental Justice movement by the beginning of the twenty-first century. Yet, the evolution of that progressive alliance in the 1990s is less understood. It is important to grasp the motivations of Environmental Justice activists in organizing themselves and voicing the injustices they faced from society—as many, like Eileen McGurty, have explained—but it is equally vital to comprehend the reaction of mainstream environmentalism to these allegations of racism and classism. Mainstream environmentalist leaders’ insistence that they meant no harm and would do their best to rectify past mistakes through cooperation with Environmental Justice campaigns was not a foregone conclusion. Indeed, the initial reactions of many mainstream activists to criticisms from the Environmental Justice Movement were far from positive, and developments throughout the 1990s critically tested the commitment of the mainstream movement to cooperate with Environmental Justice activists.²⁸⁷

Throughout the 1990s the Sierra Club struggled with how, precisely, to respond to the critiques of the Environmental Justice Movement while retaining the energy and interest of wealthy white activists. The result was a tumultuous period for the Club as it eventually settled on a path towards reconciliation and cooperation with Environmental Justice activists in an alliance that cherished progressive causes—

²⁸⁷ Tracy E. Perkins, *Evolution of a Movement: Four Decades of California Environmental Justice Activism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2022); Eileen Maura McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism: Warren County, PCBs, and the Origins of Environmental Justice* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Ronald Sandler and Phaedra C. Pezzullo, eds., *Environmental Justice and Environmentalism: The Social Justice Challenge to the Environmental Movement* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster, *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); David Schlosberg, *Environmental Justice and the New Pluralism: The Challenge of Difference for Environmentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Early works recognizing the growing alliance between mainstream environmentalists and Environmental Justice include: Mark Dowie, *Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995); Jim Schwab, *Deeper Shades of Green: The Rise of Blue-Collar and Minority Environmentalism in America* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1994); Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington, D.C., 1993). A foundational study of the (then) emerging Environmental Justice Movement is Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1990).

including social liberalism and an energetic federal role in the American society and economy. This path presumably involved dropping once key issues that now risked destabilizing the nascent alliance, such as immigration restriction. Many environmentalists in the early 1990s identified immigration as the chief cause of continued U.S. population growth and therefore regarded immigration restriction as essential not only to stabilizing that growth, but also serving as a model for the rest of the world. Yet, in the polarized politics of the 1990s, with fights like California Proposition 187, immigration was not easily defined in purely environmental terms. At a moment when conservative immigration hawks like the Federation for American Immigration Reform, paleoconservatives like Pat Buchanan, and even avowed racists like David Duke all fixated on opposing immigration for racist reasons, environmentalists' interest in immigration restriction appeared highly suspicious to people of color and Environmental Justice activists committed to a progressive vision for society. As a result, the Sierra Club spent much of the mid-to-late 1990s embroiled in civil war over the issue of immigration. Club leadership, seeking to demonstrate their commitment to working with the Environmental Justice Movement, struggled to find a compromise on immigration before finally deciding that a position of neutrality was the only way forward. Population activists in the Club viewed such a retreat on what they perceived as an environmental issue as anathema to the Club's environmental agenda and reacted furiously. In a fight that culminated in an unsuccessful Club referendum to adopt a stance advocating for immigration restriction, the true commitment of the Sierra Club to a progressive alliance was tested and ultimately held. Signifying a key moment of reformation of the environmental movement towards a clearly progressive position, the Club entered the new millennium looking very different than it had at the start of the 1990s.

Sierra Club and Race Before 1990

Since the first Earth Day in 1970, mainstream environmentalists have had a complicated relationship with people of color. Environmentalism—bipartisan, widely popular, and overwhelmingly white—appeared to many civil rights activists as an intentional distraction from the real problems of ongoing racial discrimination and prejudice in the country. More specifically, many people of color

viewed major environmental organizations like the Sierra Club with a significant degree of suspicion.²⁸⁸

This suspicion, in many ways, stemmed from the Club's problematic history with race. Central figures in its history like John Muir had a questionable and ambiguous record of racial prejudices and friendships with outright eugenicists and white supremacists like Joseph LeConte and Henry Fairfield Osborn. For much of its early history, the Club was little more than an exclusive hiking club for wealthy whites that, until the 1960s, required sponsorship from an existing member to join—a process that was often used to maintain its white character.²⁸⁹

More broadly, however, people of color were dubious about the merits of specific parts of the environmentalist agenda. The age-old debates of environmentalism had, to a large extent, focused on issues of land use—particularly the different uses of public lands. Both conservationists and preservationists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had debated the varying degrees of government protection of public lands and their resources, often ignoring urban spaces—read as human spaces—and viewing them as, at best, a low priority given the imminent destruction of “natural” landscapes “untouched by human hands,” or, at worst, a lost cause. The national organizations that survived the transition from the era of “conservation” advocacy to “environmental” advocacy such as the Sierra Club or Wilderness Society only belatedly took up the issue of environmental health or urban environments. Instead, the emphasis remained on a separation between cities and the areas where people lived and “nature,” where humans decidedly did not live—a separation that these organizations sought to maintain.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁸ McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism*, 11–15; Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie*, 1–5.

²⁸⁹ Powell, *Vanishing America*, 74–77, 190–91; Justin Nobel, “The Miseducation of John Muir,” *Atlas Obscura*, July 26, 2016, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/the-miseducation-of-john-muir>; Michael Brune, “Pulling Down Our Monuments,” *Sierra Club*, July 22, 2020, <https://www.sierraclub.org/michael-brune/2020/07/john-muir-early-history-sierra-club>.

²⁹⁰ For a summary of 20th century environmentalism and conservation's focus on land-use issues, particularly wilderness, see: William Cronon, “The Trouble With Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (Norton, 1995).

Even as organizations such as the Sierra Club began to turn their attention to urban environments, the socially-constructed barrier between “nature” and “culture” remained. “Nature” was the space that environmentalists and humans in general could escape to in order to get away from “culture”—the supposed pollution and corruption of modern civilization. Sierra Club maintained its extensive array of outings throughout the period and to the extent that they began to pay attention to urban spaces, they emphasized providing outlets for urban residents to experience that same “escape” that the white middle- and upper-class environmentalists had long been able to enjoy. Termed “Inner-City Outings” or ICO, the Sierra Club organized these field trips for children living in urban spaces to experience nature away from the city. Comprising 31 local committees, over 450 outings were organized for inner city children each year, with over 5,000 children estimated to have taken part in 1990. Over half of these 5,000 children were from communities of color. The stated goal of many of these excursions was to expose these children and teenagers to the “wild” and thereby inculcate environmentalist principles and ideals into children from an early age—essentially creating future environmental activists.²⁹¹

By the late 1970s, however, many environmentalists had also begun to recognize the lily-white nature of their movement and voiced the need to reach larger audiences, particularly in urban spaces. As early as 1979, the Sierra Club had helped to sponsor City Care, a national conference on the issue of urban environments held in Detroit, Michigan. It was in 1987, however, that the Sierra Club began to seriously recognize the changing demographics of the country in its planning for the future, including a report of a Department Head’s Planning Retreat in the late fall. The report found that in a nation where “minorities” were increasingly becoming a “large and vital part of society,” with more and more “political and social empowerment,” these minorities were also “critical to the Club’s future.”²⁹² Soon, Club leadership had begun to articulate motivations and goals for reaching larger and more diverse audiences,

²⁹¹ Sierra Club Ethnic and Cultural Diversity Initiative Summary, May 2, 1991, Carton 33, Folder 5, Sierra Club Office of the Executive Director Records, BANC MSS 2002/230 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Sierra Club Office of the Executive Director Records henceforth referred to as SCOEDR

²⁹² Draft Summary Report of the Sierra Club Department Head’s Planning Retreat, Dec. 1987, Carton 32, Folder 25, SCOEDR.

highlighting an increased ethnic diversity of the Club and its audience as part of discussions of the Club's "Big Picture" for the future in an August 1988 Board Retreat. Michael Fischer, executive director of the Sierra Club and former employee at the California Coastal Commission, quickly emerged as one of the key figures in the Club trying to raise the alarm about the issue. After receiving a letter from Margaret Rosenberry, executive director of the Human Environment Center, Michael Fischer pledged \$1,000 towards the establishment of a minority internship program, agreeing with Rosenberry's belief in the importance of bringing people of color into the environmental movement. As he explained, environmental organizations "have an absolute responsibility, both to themselves and to the world community, to become more ethnically diverse" in the composition of their staff, membership, and audiences. Noting that "the community of policy makers," including the "community of city councilpersons, the community of judges and the community of members of Congress will become more ethnically diverse," Fischer explains that if environmentalists "expect to retain credibility and influence over the thoughts and decisions of policy makers in coming years, we ourselves must become more ethnically diverse."²⁹³

Fischer, however, was not the only one noticing the overly white tint of the Club. Cathy Hendrickson, a new member of the Club, wrote to Fischer in September of 1988 with great concern. Reading the Sierra Club's "Guide for New Members," she "noted almost immediately that of all the photographs in the brochure... none of them depicted any people of color." Chastising the Club leadership, Hendrickson expressed consternation that:

An organization with such high national visibility would make such an oversight. As a public interest group, it should be important to you to represent equally all members of the public. It is up to organizations such as yours to set a positive example not only in your positions on environmental issues and off-shore drilling, but in the every-day treatment of and attitudes towards all segments of the population.²⁹⁴

²⁹³ Vivien Li, "Vivien Li: Environmental Justice and Urban Waterfronts with the Sierra Club and The Boston Harbor Association" conducted by Roger Eardley-Pryor in 2021, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2024; Letter, Michael Fischer to Margaret Rosenberry, July 19, 1988, Carton 26, Folder 13, SCOEDR; Letter, Margaret Rosenberry to J. Michael McCloskey, June 15, 1988, Carton 33, Folder 25, SCOEDR; Letter, Margaret Rosenberry to Michael Fischer, July 27, 1988, Carton 33, Folder 25, SCOEDR; "Big Picture" Discussion, Aug. 1, 1988, Carton 32, Folder 25, SCOEDR.

²⁹⁴ Letter, Cathy Hendrickson, ca. Sept. 1988, Carton 26, Folder 17, SCOEDR.

If the Club presented itself as part of a progressive bloc in American society, it had to uphold that image in all respects.

These growing critiques pushed Fischer to make a more concerted effort to pull together a comprehensive initiative to increase the ethnic diversity of the Sierra Club. The following summer of 1989, Fischer alerted the Sierra Club Board of Directors that he had asked Dave Baker, a Black environmentalist and former political director on the staff of Friends of the Earth, to assist Fischer in designing a grant-funded project for Club ethnic diversity. Explaining his vision for the program, Fischer noted how it would “be very different from a ‘minority membership outreach’ project.” Instead, it would look at “substantive changes” to the “program of the Club and other organizations in the environmental movement in order to seek and secure greater ethnic diversity in the audience, the beneficiaries, the environmentally-responsive citizenry, the membership, the leadership, the donors and the staff of the Club and other organizations.”²⁹⁵ While Baker’s consulting position—for which he was paid \$250 a month—was initially focused on developing foundation grants to secure these goals, Fischer planned more ethnic diversity efforts in the future, especially with that grant support.²⁹⁶

Fischer’s expansive vision of reshaping the Club and the wider environmental movement, however, raised some concerns among other senior Sierra Club leaders. Notably, Club Director Denny Shaffer expressed serious reservations about Fischer’s program. First, Shaffer explained, “there is a risk in all of this that we are, out front, pointing out to anyone that knows of this that we do not have... ethnic diversity, and fear that we do not appeal to a large sector of the population that is not like us.” Furthermore, Shaffer continued, “there is a possibility that we could come off looking racist” by being “seen to be chasing blacks, etc. to reach ‘our own’ political goals.” If the Club set out to reshape itself—let alone the entire environmental movement—Shaffer argued, “there is the risk that the plan may destroy much that is good to accomplish something that is good, but of less value.” In particular, Shaffer

²⁹⁵ May/June Report to Directors, Michael Fischer, June 5, 1989, Carton 27, Folder 8, SCOEDR.

²⁹⁶ Memo, Michael Fischer, to Andrea Bonnette, June 27, 1989, Carton 27, Folder 8, SCOEDR.

expressed concern that the project—pushed top-down from the Executive leadership—could destroy the democratic character of the Sierra Club. Noting that Dave Baker’s comments that “challenges can be overcome” and that the Sierra Club “is based on democracy—change is usually evolutionary rather than revolutionary,” Shaffer concluded that Baker seemed to be “suggesting that one of the ‘challenges’” that the Club had to overcome to achieve ethnic diversity “is ‘Democracy.’” Finally, Shaffer raised questions about the entire project in general, attacking many of Baker’s assumptions guiding the initiative: “Many good activists lie untapped in urban and low income communities. Proof? ‘Congressional Black Caucus has best voting record...’ Compared to?”²⁹⁷ If Fischer hoped to get resounding support for his project, he was sorely mistaken—a fact that perhaps fueled Fischer’s handwritten letter to Baker attempting “to try to keep [Baker] in our corner.”²⁹⁸ Overcoming resistance from Club leadership would be more difficult than just announcing a new initiative.

Not everyone in the Sierra Club leadership, however, was as opposed to the principles of the program—to a degree. Longtime Sierra Club activist Glenn Meagher urged Fischer to continue: writing that “the integration of the Environmental Community is an implacable eventuality; de facto as well as de jure... Seize Time by the forelock.”²⁹⁹ Indeed, Meagher even offered his own analysis of the program, including suggested language—“Sierra for All” was “comprehensive” and “simple,” “Diversification” was descriptive but also “long, mechanical, clumsy, trite”—and consideration of the possible difficulties, including inertia and latent racism within the club.³⁰⁰ Others, particularly on the Board of Directors, were more careful in their support. While Director Jim Dougherty supported finding grant money and recruiting minorities, he was less enthusiastic about intensive self-reflection by the Club. Referencing Denny Shaffer’s clear resistance to the program, Dougherty expressed his belief that “lots of internal debate with the likes of Denny Shaffer will ultimately prove less productive and more draining.”

²⁹⁷ Email, Denny Shaffer to Michael Fischer, July 26, 1989, Carton 27, Folder 9, SCOEDR.

²⁹⁸ Letter, Michael Fischer to Dave Baker, July 26, 1989, Carton 27, Folder 9, SCOEDR.

²⁹⁹ Letter, Glenn Meagher to Michael Fischer, Aug. 17, 1989, Carton 34, Folder 3, SCOEDR. Emphasis in original.

³⁰⁰ “What’s In a Name?” and “Notes on Sierra Club Diversification,” Glenn Meagher, Carton 34, Folder 3, SCOEDR.

Likewise, while he agreed that the Club was racist, “perhaps as much so as society at large,” Dougherty rejected the idea of there being “discrimination within the Club.” As he explained:

We have to handle this project carefully. This is a volunteer organization and our members will not pay \$33 to have us identify and correct flaws in their personalities. Nor will they pay to enjoy diversification “shock” and “dislocation.”³⁰¹

Thus, while Fischer might have the support of the Board of Directors, the parameters of that support were tightly controlled. If “ethnic diversity” meant attracting minorities to Club membership and hiring, then that was acceptable. More substantive reform of the overall Club, however, would face more pushback.³⁰²

In spite of this mixed reception, as the summer of 1989 turned into the fall, Fischer continued to move forward with plans for an ethnic diversity program in the Club, including drawing upon existing programs such as the inner-city outings. Beginning in July 1989, Fischer planned to use funds donated by Glenn Meagher in honor of his deceased son to expand the inner-city outings to expand opportunities to reach “ethnic and other minorities and low-income people all of whom relate to the inner cities.”³⁰³ This expanded ICO program, which could include fifteen more communities by 1993, would “provide special training and resources to recruit outing leaders and committee leaders from communities of color” and “increase the links between the Inner City Outings and the ongoing issue campaigns of the local [Sierra Club] groups,” creating a pipeline for people of color to get involved in local environmental issues.³⁰⁴

At the same time, ethnic diversity was a key issue for the participants at the September 1989 meeting of the so-called Group of Ten, a regular gathering of the chief executive officers of the ten major national environmental organizations.³⁰⁵ At this meeting, Dave Baker spoke about the issue of homogeneity and the lack of substantial diversity—racial, ethnic, and economic—in the environmental

³⁰¹ Email, Jim Dougherty to Michael Fischer, July 31, 1989, Carton 34, Folder 3, SCOEDR.

³⁰² See also: Letter, Glenn Meagher to Fellow Sierran, June 11, 1989, Carton 34, Folder 3, SCOEDR.

³⁰³ Letter, Glenn Meagher to Gayle Eads, July 23, 1989, Carton 27, Folder 10, SCOEDR.

³⁰⁴ Sierra Club Ethnic and Cultural Diversity Initiative Summary, May 2, 1991, Carton 33, Folder 5, SCOEDR.

³⁰⁵ The Group of Ten included the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Environmental Defense Fund, the National Wildlife Federation, the Izaak Walton League, the National Audubon Society, the Wilderness Society, the Environmental Policy Center, Friends of the Earth, and the National Parks and Conservation Association.

movement. The Group of Ten responded by mandating a meeting of the organizations' human resources personnel to coordinate the hiring of more people of color for staff positions. However, they quickly realized that such efforts be seen as tokenism, and could fail in the long-term without substantial "broadening" of the "scope of issues addressed by our organizations to touch minority and low-income environmental concerns and without an educational effort to expose more minorities to our organizations' efforts on behalf of the planet and all humanity." Achieving a diverse environmental movement would require more than hiring a handful of people of color.³⁰⁶

These growing pressures eventually coalesced into a comprehensive plan to increase ethnic diversity in late September 1989 when Michael Fischer and Dave Baker presented their rough draft for a grant proposal. In his report to the Sierra Club Board of Directors, Fischer framed the issue as a matter of developing the "ability to understand and work with many different cultures" amidst the Club's growing emphasis on international issues. However, the need to "understand and work" with other cultures also extended to the domestic sphere where:

Changing demographics... provide us with a cross-cultural challenge. Minority populations are growing at a rapid pace in this country and are bound to be reflected increasingly in our political structure. As minorities continue to achieve equality in our society they will also assume their rightful place as elected representatives, government appointees and functioning bureaucrats. They will help determine our broad social and environmental policies.

If the Club—and wider environmental movement—wished to protect its relevance and "credibility in the eyes of a judicial community, a local legislative community and a Congressional community which is destined to become much more ethnically diverse by the turn of the century," Fischer argued, it had to appeal to these groups.³⁰⁷

In many ways recognizing the emergence of the new Environmental Justice movement, Fischer wanted the Sierra Club to reach—and absorb—these activists. Noting that it is often "minority or low-

³⁰⁶ Working Draft Grant Proposal, Dave Baker and Catherine Fox, Sept. 14, 1989, Carton 27, Folder 13, SCOEDR.

³⁰⁷ Emphasis in Original. Memo on Ethnic Diversity Grant Proposal, Michael Fischer, Sept. 13, 1989, Carton 27, Folder 13, SCOEDR.

income populations that are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation,” forcing many citizens “to become environmental activists as a means of survival,” Fischer argued that these activists could play an essential role in the Club and environmental movement’s future. For two years now, Sierra Club leaders had recognized not only the growing reality of demographic change but also the need to adapt the Club to meet that demographic change. As Fischer explained:

The question is not, can we afford to reach out to non-traditional environmentalists. It is not, can we afford to spend some of our time on something we haven’t done well. The question is given the importance of our mission, given the immensity of our task, given our own beliefs in a wholistic view of the interconnections between all species, and all beings, can we afford not to reach out.³⁰⁸

If the Club was going to survive, and, indeed, thrive in the new decade and millennium, it had to recognize the nation’s demographic changes.

Fischer and Baker’s proposal included a comprehensive study of the Sierra Club and its organizational infrastructure, costing an estimated \$10,000 and taking place over a period of 6 months. The report of this study would be written by Fischer and Baker and a new volunteer task force including Board members such as Vivien Li. Externally, the Club would commit itself to “learn from and educate two audiences, the minority and low-income community and our own community,” not “offering a fixed plan of action or offering a quid pro quo deal.” Any work with people of color needed to be on the basis of a “full and equal partnership” given the “unempowered” nature of many communities the Sierra Club sought to approach. Fundamentally, Club leaders argued, “at least in regards to the environment, in the long run our goals are the same, though there are clear economic differences in the beginning.” Substantively, this would mean meetings between the Sierra Club and the leadership of “traditional minority and low-income leadership” such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), American Indian Movement (AIM), United Farm Workers (UFW), and the Urban League where the Club would “present possible

³⁰⁸ Emphasis in Original. Memo on Ethnic Diversity Grant Proposal, Michael Fischer, Sept. 13, 1989, Carton 27, Folder 13, SCOEDR.

options for joint activity but... not have a plan set in stone.” The Club would coordinate environmental campaigns with activists in the “minority community who have worked on environmental issues affecting their communities” and study minorities’ views and opinions on environmental issues through survey focus groups organized by Dave Baker.³⁰⁹

Yet, in spite of the professed commitment to collaboration, there were clear paternalistic and exploitative tones to these efforts by the Sierra Club at ethnic diversity. As noted, there was an explicit assumption in these discussions of a need to “educate” people of color on the realities of environmental destruction. At the same time that Fischer said the Club needed to bring more people of color into the environmentalist camp, he also spoke in terms of bringing people of color to the level of environmental consciousness of white environmentalists. Thus, Fischer agreed with a correspondent on the need for “educating the Latino population on the importance of environmental protection.”³¹⁰ Indeed, Sierra Club officials continued to ignore the actual perspective of people of color even as they touched on environmental issues that hit the very heart of communities of color. For instance, in a letter to George H.W. Bush’s Environmental Protection Agency Administrator William K. Reilly, Michael Fischer discussed the Club’s concerns regarding the Navajo Generating Station in Northern Arizona and Reilly’s upcoming decision on air quality and visibility standards to enforce around the plant and the nearby Grand Canyon National Park. Speaking broadly on the importance of reducing toxic emissions and the sanctity of the National Parks, Fischer made no mention of the Diné people (Navajo Nation) or their opinions on the matter—which was in the middle of intense debate and division over whether the reservation should assist energy extraction or “return” to “traditional” environmental stewardship. Even

³⁰⁹ Working Draft Grant Proposal, Dave Baker and Catherine Fox, Sept. 14, 1989, Carton 27, Folder 13, SCOEDR; Memo on Ethnic Diversity Grant Proposal, Michael Fischer, Sept. 13, 1989, Carton 27, Folder 13, SCOEDR.

³¹⁰ Letter, Michael Fischer to Thomas N. Neff III, August 10, 1988, Carton 26, Folder 13, SCOEDR.

as environmentalists sought to bring people of color into the fold, they retained a sense of superiority and indifference to the issues that people of color actually cared about.³¹¹

Indeed, by the end of 1989, the Club's program of ethnic diversity faced many challenges. Fischer and Dave Hahn-Baker finished their grant proposal to the Gerbode Foundation in the late fall, finally submitting what they termed "The First Steps Project: A Project to Seek Partnership with Minority and Economically Disadvantaged Communities." Maintaining their original dedication to developing close relationships with people of color, the final proposal, nevertheless, remained cognizant of its internal resistance: "Internally, we also have the need to proceed carefully, conscientiously and honestly. We do not propose any change in the mission of the Sierra Club. However, we foresee a significant though logical change in how we accomplish this mission."³¹² Even this less ambitious version of the project had failed to overcome the resistance from the Club's senior leadership. In a memo to the board of directors, Fischer announced that he was dropping of the matter: "After considering the comments made by Directors on the draft proposal, and seeing that there are few, if any, volunteer or staff leaders prepared to play an enthusiastic role in this project, I have concluded that now is not the time." They would withdraw the grant proposal to the Gerbode Foundation. Dave Hahn-Baker would discuss the project with Club leaders and prepare a file memo for the future moment when the Club might pick the issue up again. Fischer concluded with an admonition, remarking that he remained "convinced that this issue is of great importance to the future of the environmental movement. You will continue to hear me speak out on the topic, and to continue spend time meeting with others on the subject, seeking opportunities to achieve

³¹¹ Letter, Michael Fischer to William K. Reilly, June 28, 1989, Carton 27, Folder 8, SCOEDR; See also: Andrew Curley, *Carbon Sovereignty: Coal, Development, and Energy Transition in the Navajo Nation* (University of Arizona Press, 2023).

³¹² Letter, Michael Fischer to Thomas C. Layton, November 22, 1989, and attached "The First Steps Project," Carton 27, Folder 15, SCOEDR.

progress.”³¹³ If the Club’s momentary flirtation with ethnic diversity at this moment was seemingly over, it certainly wouldn’t disappear entirely.³¹⁴

Environmental Justice and the Letter to the Group of Ten

The return of the ethnic diversity issue to prominence came sooner than many expected. Just over a month later, Fischer and the Sierra Club, along with other major environmental organizations, received a letter from civil rights organizer and head of the Gulf Coast Tenant Organization (GCTO), Pat Bryant. Speaking from the perspective of several “Third World and other environmental leaders,” and including the signatures of prominent activists in the region and future environmental justice movement like Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, Dr. Benjamin Chavis, and Richard Moor, the letter went to the heart of the growing debate within the Sierra Club and larger environmental movement. “Racism and the ‘whiteness’ of the environmental movement” argued Bryant, “is our Achilles heel.” But, it would take much more than just outreach and hiring of people of color to overcome this:

We raise this issue at this point because we are at a moment in time when it is possible to build a movement that can basically change our environmental policy. But you must know as well as we do that white organizations isolated from our Third World communities can never build that movement.

Flipping the frame of reference for the mainstream environmental organizations, Bryant argued that it was the organizing of people of color with the support of white environmentalists—not the other way around—that would achieve the aims everyone sought. To this end, Bryant made a series of requests, including that the Sierra Club “cease operations in communities of color within 60 days” until people of color made up between 35 to 40 percent of its entire staff. Furthermore, the Sierra Club should provide a list of people of color on its staff, including names, tenure, salary ranges, and classification as well as list

³¹³ Memo, Michael Fischer to Board of Directors and Others Interested, December 8, 1989, Carton 27, Folder 16, SCOEDR.

³¹⁴ Note that during this period, references to Dave Baker change to Dave Hahn-Baker.

of operations within communities of color. Only after meeting these requests would the Club be invited to participate in a new, multicultural environmental movement.³¹⁵

Michael Fischer's response to Bryant and the GCTO was conciliatory and worked to calm the rising tensions. He agreed with Bryant's assertion that the "environmental movement must better address the needs of Third World peoples, in all aspects of our work: our programs, our staffing, our membership and the communities we serve." Furthermore, Fischer continued, Bryant was "correct in noting that the environmental movement will not succeed unless it draws on the strength and leadership of grassroots activists from many ethnic backgrounds." To this end, Fischer explained the ongoing efforts to increase the ethnic diversity of the Club's audience, membership, and staff. Closing with acknowledgment of Bryant's "sincerity and urgency" in the letter, Fischer looked "forward to our work together." Taking great pains to voice the Sierra Club's broad agreement with Bryant and the opportunity for collaboration, Fischer now had his chance to once again raise the issue of ethnic diversity in the Club. Indeed, in the months that followed, Pat Bryant and the GCTO became frequent collaborators of the Sierra Club in the Southeast. By mid-March, Fischer was able to report to the Board that "dialogue" with Bryant and the GCTO was continuing with plans for a meeting with the different respondents to their January 19 letter in the near future.³¹⁶

Not everyone, however, responded with such tact, requiring intervention by intermediaries like Michael Fischer. In a March 15 letter to Mike Clark, Chief Executive Officer of the Friends of the Earth and Environmental Policy Institute, Pat Bryant complained that while seven organizations had responded to the Jan. 19 letter, they were "not fully satisfied with all responses and non-responses" to their requests for information. Furthermore, Bryant expressed his disappointment with a sense of not being taken seriously. "We are very disturbed that as of this writing three of the Group of Ten have not responded to our letter." Bryant, in turn, asked Clark to use his "influence with the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund,

³¹⁵ Letter, Pat Bryant to Michael Fischer, January 16, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 5, SCOEDR.

³¹⁶ Letter, Michael Fischer to Pat Bryant, February 23, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 5, SCOEDR; March Report to the Directors, Michael Fischer, March 15, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 9, SCOEDR.

National Parks and Conservation Association, and the Environmental Defense Fund” to get them to respond to the letter—leading to Clark forwarding the letter to Fischer and the Sierra Club for a gentle push on the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund (SCLDF). Indeed, Fischer explained in his own reply to Bryant, Fischer had spoken with Rick Sutherland, Executive Director of the SCLDF “to urge him to respond to your initial letter,” which was mailed soon afterwards. Thus, Fischer and other sympathetic figures in the environmental movement became drafted in pushing for cooperation and collaboration with the emerging environmental justice movement.³¹⁷

Pushing the matter further just a few weeks later was the now famous “Letter to the Group of Ten.” Written by head of the Albuquerque-based Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP), Richard Moore, and signed by over a hundred grassroots activists including Pat Bryant, the letter was blunt in its criticism of the mainstream environmental movement. Arguing that “racism is the root cause of [mainstream environmentalists’] inaction around addressing environmental problems” in communities of color, Moore systematically rejected the Group of Ten’s claims to “represent our interests” by noting their “equal role in the disruption of our communities.” Moore’s evidence covered everything from the Sierra Club and Wilderness Society’s support for annexing ancestral holdings of the Acoma Pueblo into El Malpais National Monument without their input to “the lack of people of color in decision-making positions” in the organizations to the shutting down of economic activities that employ people of color in the name of environmental protection without those communities’ input. Unifying all of these themes was, again, the clear idea that people of color lacked the ability to influence the decisions that affected them.

Furthermore, Moore took umbrage with the mainstream environmental movement’s characterization of

³¹⁷ Founded in 1971 as a legal arm of the Sierra Club and environmental movement, the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund (SCLDF) was totally independent from the Sierra Club itself, with its own Board of Trustees. This allowed it to pursue its own operations and fundraising at will. Notably, through this period of the early 1990s, the Sierra Club and SCLDF were in dispute over the SCLDF’s independent usage of the Sierra Club name and after failing to come to an agreement on licensing, the SCLDF changed its name to Earthjustice in 1998. Letter, Pat Bryant to Mike Clark, March 15, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 5, SCOEDR; Letter, Michael Fischer to Pat Bryant, April 17, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 11, SCOEDR; Letter, Frederic Sutherland to Michael Fischer, April 6, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 12, SCOEDR; For more on the SCLDF, see: Tom Turner, *Wild by Law: The Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund and the Places It Has Saved* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund in association with Sierra Club Books, 1990); Tom Turner, *Justice on Earth: Earthjustice and the People It Has Served* (Oakland, CA: Earthjustice, 2002).

the emerging environmental justice movement as a “recent” achievement of environmental consciousness among people of color. As Moore explained, “we have been involved in environmental struggles for many years and we have not needed the Group of Ten environmental organizations to tell us that these problems have existed.” In other words, environmental justice activists did not need the paternalistic blessing of mainstream environmentalism. In fact, they were seeing themselves as crafting their own movement.³¹⁸

In developing their critiques, Richard Moore and the signatories of the Letter to the Group of Ten articulated their own unique vision of environmental protection that explicitly focused attention on the problems facing communities of color. This can be seen in the articulation of the Letter’s specific demands. Similar to those made by Pat Bryant back in January 1990, Moore called upon the mainstream organizations to “cease operations in communities of color within 60 days until you have hired leaders from those communities to the extent that they make up between 35-40 percent of your entire staff.” Gesturing towards the inadequate response to the Bryant letter, Moore noted that the “general information on people of color within their staffs and Boards of Directors... has been insufficient,” instead asking for “comprehensive and specific” listings of people of color staff. Similarly, the mainstream organizations were to “cease fundraising operations in communities of color within 60 days until a meeting is held with you including representatives of our choice.” The mainstream environmental movement was put on notice to cease engagement with communities of color until they had satisfactorily reoriented themselves to adequately listen and deal with them—namely by significantly increasing the percentage of people of color in their staff.³¹⁹

This articulation of an environmental movement that involved dialogue both between and about people of color represented a new formulation of environmental thought. In explicit terms, future collaboration or cooperation between environmental organizations and communities of color would not be

³¹⁸ Letter, Richard Moore et al. to Michael Fischer, March 16, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 9, SCOEDR.

³¹⁹ Letter, Richard Moore et al. to Michael Fischer, March 16, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 9, SCOEDR.

in a paternalistic sense of major organizations occasionally condescending to environmental justice activists to aid when they felt like it. Rather, they would approach each other as equals and partners in conferring “with other national leaders on the poisoning of United States Third World communities.”³²⁰ With expansive hiring of people of color, Moore and the other signatories anticipated a reorientation of the major organizations towards recognizing the perspectives of communities of color that not only changed the power balance between the environmental mainstream and the marginalized grassroots, but also changed the nature of the environmental movement as a whole. As historian Eileen McGurty explains:

Environmental justice activists wanted to dismantle the environmentalism of the mainstreamers and build one that had a community-based multiracial constituency, addressed issues of concern to people’s daily lives in those communities, and used direct action strategies led by community members, not paternalistic Washington-based groups.³²¹

Environmental justice activists like Richard Moore and Pat Bryant did not just want to reform the environmental movement. They wanted a revolution.

Building on the pressure of Pat Bryant’s previous letter earlier that winter and with now over a hundred activists around the country signing onto a letter that effectively called the Sierra Club and the larger mainstream environmental movement racist, many in the Sierra Club leadership felt shaken and saw the need to respond quickly. Vivien Li wrote to Fischer complaining about the lack of information on the ongoing ethnic diversity program given to her when she was supposed to be the program’s liaison to the Board of Directors. Given the program’s new significance in light of the SWOP letter, Li provided her own advice on the situation, including asking staff members for their own suggestions and, more importantly, speaking specifically to “volunteers and staff of color to talk about what can be done.” Given the charges of paternalism and condescension, Li noted that “rather than us trying to dictate our pre-conceived notions about what should be done, we should try to solicit as many suggestions as possible from people active in the club,” particularly people of color. If the Sierra Club was going to be able to

³²⁰ Letter, Richard Moore et al. to Michael Fischer, March 16, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 9, SCOEDR.

³²¹ McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism*, 127.

reframe itself, it would need to do so through collaboration and consultation with people of color, not unilaterally deciding what they wanted to hear.³²²

Others on the Board of Directors agreed as well. In an email to the other directors about his thoughts on draft responses to the SWOP letter, Roy Hengerson expressed concern regarding the Board's plodding action on ethnic diversity over the previous months and whether it signified the Club "becoming a stodgy bureaucratic organization that can not react positively to timely imperatives toward progressive change." Indeed, he warned that the Club had to respond to the SWOP letter in a positive, active manner. Citing his own experience as an "author of many a 'kiss-off' bureaucratic response to citizen letters," he anticipated any response the Club could give as being met with skepticism. "The proof of our sincerity in addressing the legitimate concerns expressed," he argued, "will come with our actions over the coming months and years, not with any finely crafted response to the SWOP letter." Thus, the Club needed to actively reflect on the criticism and change as opposed to simply responding to Moore and the environmental justice activists and letting the matter drop.³²³

Others in the Club, however, were much less gracious in their response. Neil Fernbaugh, chair of the Sierra Club Council and a central figure in Sierra Club discussions of ethnic diversity, argued in an email to Fischer that the Club was being intimidated and "Mau-mau'd."³²⁴ Noting the previous letter from Pat Bryant, Fernbaugh repeatedly spoke of the letters and their signers in conspiratorial terms, questioning "where this 'movement' came from" and what they really stood for: "There seems to be a pattern between the two letters, and I'd like to know who's behind it. Who funds these organizations? How did they meet? Who empowers them to speak for their interest groups?" To answer his own questions, Fernbaugh noted

³²² Letter, Vivien Li to Michael Fischer, Received March 23, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 9, SCOEDR.

³²³ Email, Roy Hengerson to Sierra Club leadership, April 10, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 13, SCOEDR.

³²⁴ Notably, this term meaning "to use menacing or intimidating tactics against; to intimidate, harass, or terrorize," refers to the Mau Mau, a militant nationalist group in late-colonial Kenya known for advocating violent resistance against British colonialism. Used against people of color, this term carries significant and offensive connotations of anti-white prejudice and violence. See: Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "mau-mau (v.)," July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1377575436>; "Mau-mau." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mau-mau>. Accessed 8 Feb. 2025.

his own belief that “these groups could be in collusion with timber and other extractive industries” given that “attacking environmental groups on economic and employment issues is precisely the way that corporate America has attacked us.” Ultimately, Fernbaugh argued, the Club needed to “keep our distance, but not discourage ethnic diversity,” stressing in any response the efforts made to expand minority membership and seeking their suggestions on how they could pursue such efforts. But Fernbaugh was far from the only senior Sierra Club leader to express skepticism and anger at the letter. Richard Cellarius, outgoing President of the Club, offered his own terse remarks to Fischer and his request for feedback on draft responses, noting that “given the nature of their claims and demands, I would tend to be less accommodating than I suspect Michael is [in the response], if I even were to bother to answer.” Nevertheless, Cellarius gave his approval to go ahead and send a response.³²⁵

The Sierra Club response followed the line set by Michael Fischer in actively seeking collaboration and cooperation with the environmental justice activists—even if some in the Club remained annoyed at the SWOP letter’s tone. Immediately after the Club received the SWOP letter, Rich Hayes, Director of Volunteer Development, wrote to the chairs and offices of several Sierra Club chapters across the South and West. Hayes informed the chapters of the SWOP letter and warned them that they may receive contact from the press, asking them to forward any calls from reporters to the Club’s central office in San Francisco. More notably, however, Hayes emphasized the chapter leadership’s cooperation with the environmental justice movement despite negative reactions:

The important thing to keep in mind is that the signers of these letters are, on balance, to be considered allies, or potential allies, rather than adversaries. There will be a natural tendency for many of us to react strongly to what we might consider to be unfounded charges. It is important that we conduct ourselves in a way which does not further widen the misunderstandings which some of the statements in these letters reflect.³²⁶

³²⁵ Email, Neil Fernbaugh to Michael Fischer, April 15, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 13, SCOEDR; Email, Richard Cellarius to Michael Fischer, April 4, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 13, SCOEDR.

³²⁶ Memo, Rich Hayes to Chapter Chairs and Offices, Regarding Recent Communications, March 23, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 9, SCOEDR.

It was in the interest of the Club to work with the environmental justice movement as opposed to driving further divides between them with an overly defensive response that dismissed their charges and concerns.

In fact, many in the Sierra Club did take personal offense to the growing critiques of environmental justice activists. Letters and emails to Michael Fischer in the weeks and months that followed were full of thinly veiled irritation at the accusations of the Southwest Organizing Project and Gulf Coast Tenant Organization. Yet, they also consistently reiterated praise for Fischer's calm reaction that set the stage for future collaboration. Richard Genser, President of the Rincon Group of the Grand Canyon (Arizona) Chapter, praised Fischer's response to Richard Moore, characterizing it as "professional and mature" while rejecting the idea of the Club practicing discrimination on any level. While acknowledging that people of color often live near and work in polluting factories and facilities, Genser also refused to apologize for destroying these jobs. "Plant closing cause hardships, but the prevention of unabated pollution transcends job loss." Even Fischer, in response to Genser, was self-congratulatory in contrasting Moore's drafting of his letter "with a lot of anger and static" with his own "focus on the 'good news,' that there are people of color actually engaging us in dialogue." Arguing that environmentalists had long "been knocking on their door and receiving much disinterest in return," they now had their attention. Furthermore, Fischer was happy to share rumors of dissatisfaction among Moore's community for his "unreasonable demands and the aggressive tone," noting that Moore had apparently been called "words such as 'Nazi' and 'racist.'" If Fischer's outward tone was one of placation, internally he was clearly frustrated with some of the more pointed critiques by environmental justice activists.³²⁷

Yet, the Sierra Club leadership remained willing to work with the environmental justice activists. Anne Woiwode of the Mackinac (Michigan) Chapter, for instance, contrasted Richard Cellarius and

³²⁷ Letter, Richard Genser to Michael Fischer, May 15, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 17, SCOEDR; Letter, Michael Fischer to Richard Genser, June 28, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 17, SCOEDR.

Fischer's "helpful, positive and informative response," with the "vicious and potentially destructive" tone of the Southwest Organizing Project, but also expressed her interest in initiating discussions with Black environmentalists in Michigan to get their perspective. As she explained, "I have no doubt I could stand to learn from others." While many members were upset at the charges and privately expressed their frustration with the environmental justice activists, many still nevertheless saw the moment as an opportunity to pause and consider the situation.³²⁸

Ethnic Diversity and Environmental Justice in the Sierra Club

Thus, in the months that followed, many in the Sierra Club leadership committed themselves to serious efforts to improve the ethnic diversity of the organization. Most consequential was the decision to finally establish an Ethnic Diversity Task Force headed by Board member Vivien Li, which first met in mid-September 1990. In the first months of its existence, the Task Force worked to find a role for itself in the Club, finally establishing itself as a liaison between the Club and environmental justice activists and an advocate for ethnic diversity issues within the Club. The Task Force sent out questionnaires to the leadership of the different chapters about their engagement with people of color and began face-to-face conversations with environmental justice activists, organizations and other leaders in communities of color such as Pat Bryant, Richard Moore, and the Congressional Black Caucus and Congressional Hispanic Caucus.³²⁹

The Task Force completed its formal report to the Board of Directors on improving ethnic diversity in the Club by late October. In the report, the Task Force attempted to explain why the Sierra Club needed to address ethnic diversity, highlighting not only the arguments long made by Michael

³²⁸ Email, Anne Woiwode to Richard Cellarius and Michael Fischer, May 8, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 16, SCOEDR.

³²⁹ Memo, Micheal Fischer to Janet Maughan, Aug. 30, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 23, SCOEDR; Memo, Neil Fernbaugh and Vivien Li to Council Delegates, Aug. 10, 1990, Carton 336, Folder 15, Sierra Club Records, BANC MSS 71/103 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Summary of Response to Ethnic Diversity Questionnaire, Sept. 1990, Carton 336, Folder 15, Sierra Club Records, BANC MSS 71/103 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Sierra Club Records is henceforth referred to as SCR.

Fischer about the “rapidly changing” demographics of the country but also the language of the new environmental justice movement:

Environmental issues impact all peoples, but in many instances those most heavily impacted by the environmentally destructive practices of our society are the economically disadvantaged and people of color. We need to work closely with all community groups, including minority groups, if we are to be successful in the pursuit of environmental goals.³³⁰

Thus, borrowing the language and rhetoric of the environmental justice movement, the Task Force urged the larger Sierra Club to begin to reenvision its definition of environmentalism to include the environmental tribulations of people of color as not just important, but rather central to the mission of environmental protection. To accomplish this mission, the Task Force set out a series of objectives for the Club in the coming months and years. Many dealt fundamentally with increasing the diversity of the Club: including its base membership, active volunteers and leadership, and staff and independent contractors. But they also argued that other actions needed to be pursued in the meantime. The Club needed to educate its membership on the need for ethnic diversity as well as increasing its interaction and, indeed, collaboration with “ethnically diverse groups.” This was not a simple matter of just hiring a few more people of color onto the staff. The Task Force argued that major changes in the Club had to be considered.³³¹

The public commitment of the Sierra Club to these principles only became more pronounced over the next couple of years as Michael Fischer, Vivien Li, and other Sierra Club leaders continued to work to improve the ethnic diversity of the Club. They met and corresponded with environmental justice leaders such as Pat Bryant and broader civil rights leaders like Jesse Jackson. They also continued to substantively increase the number of people of color members and staffers in the organization, including the specific goal to double the number of members from “ethnic minorities” over the next five years. In addition, the Board of Directors unanimously passed a resolution committing to the hiring of a “larger

³³⁰ Sierra Club Task Force on Ethnic Diversity Report to the Board of Directors, Oct. 1990, Carton 336, Folder 15, SCR.

³³¹ Sierra Club Task Force on Ethnic Diversity Report to the Board of Directors, Oct. 1990, Carton 336, Folder 15, SCR.

number of non-white employees in lobbying and other professional positions.”³³² The hiring diversity initiative, however, focused less on the central office in San Francisco or the lobbying office in Washington, D.C., but rather Sierra Club field offices across the country where they would work not simply as lobbyists, but also act as liaisons with environmental justice activists and organizations in the region. For example, the Club hired Scott Douglas as the first Grassroots Organizer for a new Gulf Coast Environmental Justice Grassroots Organizing Initiative. Based out of the Sierra Club Southeast Office in Birmingham, Alabama, Douglas was responsible for not only leading Sierra Club environmental justice efforts in the region but also coordinating with local people of color-led organizations such as Pat Bryant’s Gulf Coast Tenant Organization and the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice to provide logistical and political support to their campaigns.³³³

The clearest example of the growing collaboration between Sierra Club and the Environmental Justice movement, however, was the involvement of Michael Fischer and the Sierra Club in the 1991 First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit.³³⁴ Much has been written on this moment that is nearly universally recognized by scholars as the moment the Environmental Justice movement firmly established itself on the stage of American environmental politics. Coming out of the organizing that had produced the Letter to the Group of Ten, Rev. Benjamin Chavis, Jr., of the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice helped to organize the national summit that would come to produce the movement’s foundational Principles of Environmental Justice. The Summit and its

³³² Sierra Club Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, March 16-17, 1991, Sierra Club Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, BANC FILM 2945, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Email, Denny Shaffer to Board of Directors, March 11, 1991, Carton 29, Folder 4, SCOEDR; Memo, Michael McCloskey to Michael Fischer, on Proposed Reformulation of Goals for the Sierra Club for Next 3-5 Years, Dec. 21, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 32, SCOEDR.

³³³ Letter, Pat Bryant to Michael Fischer, April 18, 1991, Carton 336, Folder 17, SCR; Letter, Michael Fischer to Jesse L. Jackson, Dec. 4, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 31, SCOEDR; Memo, Sue De La Rosa to Michael Fischer and Vivien Li, on Sierra Club Ethnic Diversity Hiring Practices, Nov. 30, 1990, Carton 29, Folder 4, SCOEDR; Memo, Sue Merrow and Michael Fischer to Board of Directors, on Status of Current Projects, May 5, 1991, Carton 29, Folder 7, SCOEDR; Letter, Jim Price to Bruce Hamilton and Rich Hayes, Jan. 22, 1991, Carton 336, Folder 17, SCR; Memo, Bill Smith to Ethnic Diversity Task Force, June 18, 1991, Carton 336, Folder 17, SCR; Memo, Michael Fischer to Board of Directors, July 7, 1992, Carton 336, Folder 18, SCR.

³³⁴ Hereafter referred to as the Summit

resulting Principles inextricably linked the traditions and missions of environmentalism and social justice in a new movement that radically dismissed the tradeoffs and choices between economic security and environmental health especially as they were faced by communities of color stuck between polluting industries and mainstream environmentalists. This vision of a new movement explicitly contrasted itself from what attendees viewed as the “top-down” nature of the “traditional mainstream environmental and social justice organizations.” Instead, delegates articulated a vision to “reshape and redefine the environmental movement.”³³⁵ Rather than merely joining the environmental mainstream, they would work to establish themselves as a new force in the world of environmental organizing.³³⁶

This did not mean, however, that Benjamin Chavis, Charles Lee, and the other organizers of the Summit did not see a role for the mainstream environmental organizations in their vision of a new environmentalism. The expansive logistical power of the mainstream organizations like Sierra Club meant that they were valuable for any environmental justice effort. Their armies of volunteers, networks of connections to political and bureaucratic leadership, and financial resources dwarfed those of grassroots environmental justice groups who now asked that the mainstream groups’ resources be put to work for the benefit of communities of color instead of only helping white communities. The caveat to this partnership, however, was that both parties had to approach each other as equals. Even if—and, perhaps, expressly because—mainstream groups brought their vast resources to bear on environmental injustices in communities of color, environmental justice groups remained concerned about the potential for those mainstream groups to take control of the decision making away from people of color, thereby replicating what many saw as the problem of the previous decades of environmental organizing. Thus, while mainstream organizations were welcome to collaborate with environmental justice groups, there

³³⁵ United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, “The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit” (Washington, D.C.: United Church of Christ, 1992), v, xvii-xviii.

³³⁶ McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism*, 127–30; Sandler and Pezzullo, *Environmental Justice and Environmentalism*, 4–7; Cole and Foster, *From the Ground Up*, 31–33; Schlosberg, *Environmental Justice and the New Pluralism*, 154–60; Schwab, *Deeper Shades of Green*, 383–93.

remained a heavy suspicion of their actions and motivations that translated into limitations on their involvement in environmental justice spaces.

This suspicion can be clearly seen in the Sierra Club's participation in the Summit and its organization over the course of 1991. Benjamin Chavis's invitation to Michael Fischer in January 1991 urged Sierra Club's involvement in the Summit, arguing that it "will be a mainstream effort... [meaning] that all major communities – minority, grassroots, civil rights, environmental, industry, academia, and government – must and will be involved." Chavis, however, also emphasized Sierra Club's "support" for the Summit rather than its central role in Summit discussions, arguing that given the Club's "stature in the environmental movement, and [its] recent efforts to increase the role of minorities in your organization – and in the movement as a whole... your support of this major initiative is necessary and important."³³⁷ This request for "support" initially took the form of a donation of \$25,000, which the Club ultimately reduced to \$5,000 in addition to paying for travel expenses for its attendees. Despite this support, and the participation of Vivien Li in planning for the Summit, however, the ultimate role of the Sierra Club in the Summit proved to be rather minimal. Fundraising guidelines for the Summit made it clear that while the Commission for Racial Justice organizing the Summit was "open to suggestions and input from funding sources" like the Sierra Club, the Commission maintained "full control over Summit decision-making and conclusions."³³⁸ Furthermore, the Summit organizers limited active participation and discussion by creating a 3-tiered arrangement of delegates (full participation and voting powers), participants (restricted from first day of Summit and unable to vote), and observers (restricted from first day and unable to participate in discussions or votes). While fourteen Sierra Club representatives attended the Summit including Michael Fischer, Vivien Li, and future Sierra Club President Robbie Cox, none were invited as delegates; all served as participants or observers. Indeed, Sierra Club leadership quickly perceived that their main work at the Summit was not active participation in the actual proceedings, but rather "to meet

³³⁷ Letter, Benjamin Chavis, Jr., to Michael Fischer, Jan. 10, 1991, Carton 336, Folder 17, SCR.

³³⁸ Proposal for First National Minority Environmental Leadership Summit, Oct. 1991, Carton 336, Folder 18, SCR.

and talk with as many activists as possible about the issues and projects they are concerned about, and which we are concerned about, and how we and they might work together.”³³⁹ Thus, planning for Sierra Club attendees largely focused on preparation of talking points that would aid in these informal conversations that could then, potentially, lead to future collaboration.³⁴⁰

The most consequential formal participation of the Sierra Club in the Summit was Michael Fischer’s presence on a panel during a plenary session on “Our Vision of the Future: A Redefinition of Environmentalism.” Here, following remarks from figures like Benjamin Chavis and Pat Bryant, Fischer and fellow mainstream environmentalist leader John H. Adams of the Natural Resources Defense Council spoke about their perspective on collaboration between mainstream environmentalists and the Environmental Justice Movement. Fischer highlighted his belief that while the Sierra Club had “been conspicuously missing from the battles for environmental justice all too often... national environmental organizations are not the enemy” of the Summit’s attendees. Noting that it was in the mainstream organizations’ interest to be “fully involved in seeking environmental justice” lest they “risk becoming irrelevant,” Fischer urged environmental justice activists to help mainstream groups “focus” their energies and resources “in common cause” and listed the recent efforts that the Club had taken to move in the direction of that collaboration. Adams agreed, urging partnership between environmental justice activists and mainstream organizations—suggesting the integration of environmental justice into the environmental movement as part of an effort to diversify it.³⁴¹

But Environmental Justice activists remained skeptical. Dana Alston, Senior Program Officer of the Panos Institute, a progressive organization focused on advocacy for marginalized groups in developing nations, was selected to respond to Fischer and Adams and immediately noted that the

³³⁹ Memo, Rich Hayes to Michael Fischer, Vivien Li, and Carl Pope, Oct. 21, 1991, Carton 336, Folder 18, SCR.

³⁴⁰ Sierra Club Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, March 16-17, 1991, Sierra Club Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, BANC FILM 2945, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Letter, Michael Fischer to Charles Lee, May 6, 1991, Carton 336, Folder 17, SCR; Letter, Charles Lee to Michael Fischer, May 15, 1991, Carton 336, Folder 17, SCR; Memo, Rich Hayes to Chapters, Oct. 20, 1991, Carton 336, Folder 18, SCR;

³⁴¹ United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, “The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit” (Washington, D.C.: United Church of Christ, 1992), 83-102.

Environmental Justice Movement “was not a reaction to the environmental movement. We have come here to define for ourselves the issues of the ecology and the environment.” They did not intend to integrate, but rather redefine, the movement. They were not mainstream activists and, in fact, they held much power in defining for themselves their relationship with the mainstream. As Alston explained, “We realize that the environmental movement is restructuring, floundering, and in some sense searching for a new vision at this time... So there is an attempt to merge several movements with the environmental movement.” Citing the letters to the Group of Ten written by Pat Bryant and Richard Moore, Alston rejected the notion of diversification as the priority that environmental justice activists cared about. They did not seek diversification of mainstream groups as a prelude to the integration of their energies and efforts into the mainstream environmental movement. Rather, Alston continued:

What we seek is a relationship based on equity, mutual respect, mutual interest, and justice. We refuse narrow definitions. It is not just ancient forests; it is not just saving the whales or saving other endangered species. These are all very important. We understand the life cycle and the interconnectedness of life. But our communities and our people are endangered species, too. We refuse a paternalistic relationship. We are not interested in a parent-child relationship. Your organizations may be or may not be older than ours. Your organizations definitely have more money than ours. But if you are to form a partnership with us, it will be as equals and nothing else but equals.³⁴²

Environmental justice activists wanted to ensure that their interests would not be subsumed under the interests of mainstream organizations—precisely what they had faced in the previous decades of environmental activism.³⁴³

Environmental Justice activists also remained skeptical of the intentions and goals of the mainstream movement. While Sierra Club leaders like Michael Fischer sincerely spoke about the need for ethnic diversity and their desire to collaborate with environmental justice groups in an effective progressive alliance, environmental justice activists detected what they saw as an implication of mainstream domination that replicated the very problems they had seen over previous years. Even when

³⁴² United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, “The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit” (Washington, D.C.: United Church of Christ, 1992), 105-6.

³⁴³ United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, “The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit” (Washington, D.C.: United Church of Christ, 1992), 103-6.

Fischer spoke of his desire for a “friendly takeover of the Sierra Club by people of color” at the Sierra Club’s centennial celebration the following spring, he implied that people of color, not mainstream environmentalists, needed to change. While Fischer insisted that “people of color must adopt the environmental agenda to survive” while the “Sierra Club must embrace multiculturalism” to preserve its moral and ethical integrity, it was, nevertheless, people of color who had to meet mainstream environmentalism where it was at. People of color had to join one of the 425 local chapters and groups where they would be drafted into existing environmental campaigns and, only through their own effort, do the slow, hard work of reorienting the Club to meet their needs and agendas through organizational elections and referenda—all while overcoming the possible resistance of white members who resented this “takeover.” What Fischer and the Sierra Club proposed was integration of environmental justice activists into their existing movement, upholding a hierarchy that risked diluting the particular goals and perspectives of people of color into the same mainstream movement—now simply “multicultural.”³⁴⁴

Environmental Justice activists felt a deep ambivalence about their expected integration into the “environmental movement” which many, necessarily, saw as integration into the *mainstream* environmental movement. Dana Alston’s skeptical response to Fischer and Adams at the Summit clearly reflected this concern. She spoke of “partnership” as “equals,” not integration. It was the mainstream organizations that needed to adapt, not people of color:

...The only thing I have to say is, it is up to you who have come here today... to challenge your brothers and sisters on this. It cannot continue to be our role alone to keep raising this issue and keep going through a lot of changes about it. We will continue our challenge from the outside. You must confront the situation within yourselves and your colleagues.³⁴⁵

Delegates and participants at the Summit voiced their own perspectives following Alston’s comments, reiterating many of the points she made. Lutrece Rutland of the Alabama New South Coalition spoke of her concerns about wealthier mainstream organizations “recruiting our youth away from the grassroots,”

³⁴⁴ Centennial Address, Michael Fischer, May 28, 1992, Carton 336, Folder 18, SCR.

³⁴⁵ United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, “The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit” (Washington, D.C.: United Church of Christ, 1992), 106.

eventually turning them into those communities' "environmental adversaries." Meanwhile, Louis Elisa of the Boston Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) argued that "so-called environmental movements" needed to work to redefine their own movement to not only "work with grassroots organizations" but also "look at the urban areas of this nation... as being a very integral part of the environment." Environmental justice activists, therefore, repeatedly viewed arguments about the necessity of "takeovers" or integration of environmental justice into the mainstream environmental movement with deep suspicion, concerned about the new distraction of soothing the fears and concerns of white environmentalists.³⁴⁶

The underlying tensions regarding the relationship between mainstream environmentalism and environmental justice can also be found in a roundtable organized by the Sierra Club's *Sierra* magazine for its May/June 1993 edition—the headline of which questioned "Are Greens Lily-White?" The gathering, moderated by Earth Island Institute president Carl Anthony, included major figures in the evolving coalition such as Benjamin Chavis, Richard Moore, Vivien Li, recently hired Sierra Club community organizer Scott Douglas, and Native American environmental activist Winona LaDuke. The roundtable itself was friendly and most of the participants agreed that the Sierra Club's efforts represented a move in the right direction. Chavis immediately noted that despite years of interactions with mainstream environmental organizations, this was the first time one of the Group of Ten had actually invited him or other members of the environmental justice movement to their national headquarters. Moore agreed, noting further that this was the first meeting of this kind with mainstream organizations that he had been invited to—which was exactly "what the letters and all that was about in the first place."³⁴⁷ Yet, beneath the general agreement that the Club was on the right track, there remained significant points of disagreement, particularly about the idea of integration into the mainstream movement. When Anthony

³⁴⁶ United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, "The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit" (Washington, D.C.: United Church of Christ, 1992), 109.

³⁴⁷ "A Place at the Table: A *Sierra* Roundtable on Race, Justice, and the Environment," *Sierra Magazine*, May/June 1993, 52.

asked LaDuke whether Native Americans were “ready to be part of the ‘mainstream,’” her response was unequivocally no. “We are not part of and do not wish to be part of the mainstream of America. We are different. America has to come to terms with our difference, and to recognize our need for territorial integrity and self-determination.”³⁴⁸ Moore was similarly resistant to the expectations of conformity to the establishment, reiterating that the Sierra Club had been a “co-conspirator in attempting to take away resources from our communities” when they pursued environmental cleanup and preservation projects that put the burden “on the backs of working people, and people of color in particular.”³⁴⁹ While polluting plants in poor communities may have needed to be—and, Moore admitted, probably should have been—shut down, the workers and community should have been driving the decision, not outside groups.³⁵⁰

While Vivien Li did her best to steer the conversation back towards reconciliation and areas of agreement, there remained an uncomfortable air of disagreement in the conversation. Li responded to Moore’s critiques by insisting that the Sierra Club agreed with the points that Moore was making and warned against people of color being “pitted against each other” and “divided and conquered” by—ironically—“mainstream America” over small disagreements and, particularly, Moore’s belief that discussions of jobs could be held separately from discussions of the environment. However, Li agreed that partnership, not domination, was the key to the evolving alliance between the Sierra Club and the Environmental Justice Movement. “It’s very important that the environmental agenda we develop is one that is developed *with* communities of color. Not imposed on them, but rather forged together in the spirit of mutual respect and trust.” Yet, she also admitted this was easier said than done. “That’s a very hard thing to do, be it in this room or anyplace else. It’s hard not to try to dominate, hard not to tell people ‘this

³⁴⁸ “A Place at the Table: A *Sierra* Roundtable on Race, Justice, and the Environment,” *Sierra Magazine*, May/June 1993, 55.

³⁴⁹ “A Place at the Table: A *Sierra* Roundtable on Race, Justice, and the Environment,” *Sierra Magazine*, May/June 1993, 58.

³⁵⁰ “A Place at the Table: A *Sierra* Roundtable on Race, Justice, and the Environment,” *Sierra Magazine*, May/June 1993, 51-58

is how it should be done.” The Sierra Club may have sincerely wanted to work with environmental justice activists, but the path to cooperation would not be easy.³⁵¹

Obstacles to Environmental Justice and Ethnic Diversity in the Club

Indeed, the Sierra Club faced tremendous difficulty pursuing this progressive alliance—whether with ethnic diversity or environmental justice programs—in the years that followed, testing the Club and its leaders’ actual commitment to the question of multiculturalism. The changes to the Club and mainstream environmentalism at large would not occur overnight. Vivien Li even acknowledged this in her comments at the roundtable, noting that “the type of changes we’re talking about is very fundamental, and it will not happen in one or two or even five years. The Sierra Club is a hundred years old, and some of the baggage that we carry, frankly, goes back a long time. I think we’ve made significant progress, but clearly we’re not totally there yet.”³⁵² Li clearly understood the difficulties of these deep structural changes in a longstanding organization like the Sierra Club.

Li voiced these worries internally within the Club. As early as late June 1991, before the Summit had even taken place, Vi wrote an email to Michael Fischer expressing her concern that Sierra Club’s efforts on ethnic diversity programs and hiring at the national level were “not impressive and certainly [did] not reflect the sentiments of the Board” as detailed in its March 1991 resolutions to pursue ethnic diversity programs. Specifically, Li complained about the Club’s lack of an “on-going effort at outreach,” calling the current setup a “start (when we have a job) and stop effort at recruitment.”³⁵³ While Fischer demurred in a handwritten note a couple of weeks later, citing several people of color hired or promoted across the country, he admitted that the Club was looking into performing a “disparate impact” analysis to assure a “lack of bias, even unintended.”³⁵⁴ Yet, earlier reports from late November 1990 did, in fact, find

³⁵¹ “A Place at the Table: A *Sierra* Roundtable on Race, Justice, and the Environment,” *Sierra Magazine*, May/June 1993, 58, 90-91. Emphasis in original.

³⁵² “A Place at the Table: A *Sierra* Roundtable on Race, Justice, and the Environment,” *Sierra Magazine*, May/June 1993, 54.

³⁵³ Email, Vivien Li to Michael Fischer, June 27, 1991, Carton 29, Folder 10, SCOEDR.

³⁵⁴ Letter, Michael Fischer to Vivien Li, July 5, 1991, Carton 29, Folder 11, SCOEDR.

cases of bias in hiring. In a memo from Sue De La Rosa, head of the Sierra Club's Human Resources Department, to Fischer and Li, De La Rosa noted that the total number of non-white employees was only 11.5 percent, and that decreased further to four percent when looking specifically at professional and managerial positions. While De La Rosa reported that the recruiting objective for 1991 was to "increase the number of qualified minority job applicants," she also expressed doubt about the actual efficacy of this effort. As she explained, in her observation "our managers are making hiring decisions based on which candidates have the most years of experience, the best skills for the job, and the most similar backgrounds to the Sierra Club. In many cases, the minority candidates for the job, while well qualified, do not meet this criteria."³⁵⁵ Thus, while the Club might find people of color who would do well in the job, the tendency of the hiring managers to look for candidates who appeared to match the existing office culture and backgrounds—usually white—meant that people of color often found themselves overlooked.

Moreover, the staff ethnic diversity program was slow to get off the ground. Pat Bryant wrote to Michael Fischer in the spring of 1991 thanking him for his efforts thus far but also asking whether he was satisfied with the Sierra Club's hiring efforts to date. Fischer replied that he was not and, while reiterating the points made by Sue De La Rosa about the difficulty in pushing hiring managers beyond the "most superficial definition of the 'best qualified candidate,'" he also noted the refusal of some people of color to take positions in the Club. After approaching several attorneys of color for a legal position coordinating environmental litigation, he noted that each of them, "with asperity, turned us down saying that they did not wish to be the first token representatives of color on our staff." The Club was quickly learning that there were no easy answers on how to diversify itself.³⁵⁶

This, however, placed the Sierra Club in a bind. With their public pronouncements on the need for ethnic diversity, expectations were now high that the talk turned into action. And that pressure particularly remained high on Vivien Li and the Ethnic Diversity Task Force who were tasked with

³⁵⁵ Memo, Sue De La Rosa to Michael Fischer and Vivien Li, Nov. 30, 1990, Carton 29, Folder 4, SCOEDR.

³⁵⁶ Letter, Pat Bryant to Michael Fischer, April 18, 1991, Carton 336, Folder 17, SCR; Letter, Michael Fischer to Pat Bryant, May 13, 1991, SCR.

accomplishing this. Thus, in late July 1992, Li again wrote to Michael Fischer expressing her concern “with the lack of progress in hiring people of color for management positions at the Sierra Club,” particularly pointing out the lack of hiring of people of color to leadership positions in the Sierra Club’s centennial fundraising campaign given Fischer’s prominent emphasis on the issue during the Club’s centennial celebration.³⁵⁷ Furthermore, there remained questions about how much efforts actually changed the culture of the Club. In reflection upon her time as chair of the Ethnic Diversity Task Force, Li would later argue that the nature of the Task Force led to a situation where it effectively became responsible for the entirety of efforts to improve diversity in the Club. Others in Club leadership or the Board of Directors would be willing to unload all of the work for these efforts onto the Task Force instead of spreading the work out to all departments. This lack of meaningful engagement by all Sierra Club leaders only increased after Michael Fischer’s departure from the Sierra Club in late 1992 following disputes with the Board of Directors. While the new executive director, Carl Pope, remained broadly supportive of the idea of ethnic diversity and environmental justice, he did not prioritize these issues at the same level Fischer did. As Li later explained, “Michael Fischer really dug into [ethnic diversity and environmental justice]. He really understood and was very proactive. Carl [Pope] was juggling a lot of different things, so he was certainly not opposed to what we were talking about. I mean, in his own way, intellectually very supportive, but probably didn’t push as hard as Michael Fischer...”³⁵⁸ Without the clear leadership of Fischer on this issue, the Club’s commitment to ethnic diversity was now uncertain.

This lack of clear connection to the issue of environmental justice was noticed by figures outside the organization as well. A June 1993 meeting between Sierra Club representatives from the Southeast and Jesus People Against Pollution (JPAP), an environmental justice group in Columbia, Mississippi, to

³⁵⁷ Letter, Vivien Li to Michael Fischer, July 21, 1992, Carton 336, Folder 18, SCR; Vivien Li, “Vivien Li: Environmental Justice and Urban Waterfronts with the Sierra Club and The Boston Harbor Association” conducted by Roger Eardley-Pryor in 2021, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2024, 149-61.

³⁵⁸ Vivien Li, “Vivien Li: Environmental Justice and Urban Waterfronts with the Sierra Club and The Boston Harbor Association” conducted by Roger Eardley-Pryor in 2021, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2024, 149-61.

tour and discuss a Superfund site near Black neighborhoods was covered by press including the *Wall Street Journal*. Reporter Timothy Noah's coverage of the meeting highlighted what he saw as the clear cultural differences between the two groups. An almost entirely affluent, white Sierra Club delegation led by Board member Robbie Cox and Black organizer for the Club John McCown contrasted with the abject poverty of Columbia residents in Noah's telling of the meeting—highlighting, in one case, the faux pas of one Club representative challenging residents' stories by "playing devil's advocate" and noting that "a high-fat diet" can also cause the medical symptoms described. In another example, he noted the response of JPAP representatives to a question from the Sierra Club about how much financial support they might need for their efforts: "Let's start with a zillion dollars." While Charlotte Keys, president of JPAP, and Nick Aumen, Gulf Coast Regional Vice President in the Sierra Club, would later write a letter to the editor complaining about the story's reliance on stereotypes and demeaning characterizations, the halting uncertainty of Sierra Club representatives was later recalled by Robbie Cox himself. Before the sweltering, August meeting:

John [McCown] took us aside and counseled us in the dynamics of meeting with this community and the power imbalances and issues of racial sensibilities. He said, 'Listen, you're there to listen to this community and its grievances. You're not there to tell them what the solution is. You're there to listen to them propose how you might help. But they're going to tell stories, and they're going to be angry because the national environmental organizations have neglected them. They've not been here. We're the first to come in... you've got to get over feeling defensive and remain silent. You're to listen.'³⁵⁹

As Cox recalled, many did not remain silent and attempted to argue back despite McCown and Cox's efforts to calm them. The white delegation of the Sierra Club struggled—albeit eventually successfully—to connect with the grassroots JPAP.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁹ Robert Cox, "Robert Cox: Sierra Club President 1994-96, 2000-01, and 2007-08, on Environmental Communications and Strategy" conducted by Roger Eardley-Pryor in 2020, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2023, 78.

³⁶⁰ Timothy Noah, "Sierra Club Takes An Edifying Tour of Black America: Its Hired Guide John McCown Shows Environmentalists A Polluted Rural Landfill," *Wall Street Journal*, June 24, 1993; Charlotte Keys and Nick Aumen, "Letter to the Editor: Blacks and Whites Join To Aid the Environment," *Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 3, 1993; Robert Cox, "Robert Cox: Sierra Club President 1994-96, 2000-01, and 2007-08, on Environmental Communications and Strategy" conducted by Roger Eardley-Pryor in 2020, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2023, 77-82.

The Sierra Club Immigration Wars

If minor squabbles threatened to complicate Sierra Club efforts to support environmental justice activists, the Club's infamous debates over immigration and population in the mid-1990s threatened to undo them entirely. The Sierra Club has a long and complicated relationship with the issue of population control, dating back to the publication of *The Population Bomb* by Paul and Anne Ehrlich with Sierra Club Press, at the encouragement of Sierra Club executive director David Brower. In the years that followed, the Sierra Club committed itself to supporting efforts to control population growth—what was often referred to as the central environmental issue above all others due to its effect as a multiplier on other environmental problems like wilderness and habitat loss, pollution output, and natural resource exhaustion. Increasingly, the Club supported international population control measures in countries with high rates of population growth like China, India, and others in the Global South. These efforts were challenged during the Reagan Administration as funding by non-governmental organizations internationally for abortion or other population control measures were limited under the so-called Mexico City Policy begun in 1985. As the 1980s progressed, however, more environmentalists grew interested in population control as the planet's population continued to skyrocket. The problem, however, was that much of the U.S. population growth by the late 1980s was not due to the population fertility rate, but rather immigration.³⁶¹

As a result, the Sierra Club's population policy began to focus on the issue of immigration as a means of controlling U.S. population growth. Policy discussions on this issue culminated in the Sierra Club Population Program completed in December 1989. While the proposed program reiterated again the Club's international commitment to population control including the reversal of the Mexico City Policy, it also sought the "passage of a cap on total immigration levels consistent with domestic stabilization" of population levels. The program further noted the influence of the Club in convincing Congressman

³⁶¹ A good summary of population activism is: Thomas Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment: Global Population Growth and the Birth of American Environmentalism* (Rutgers University Press, 2012); See also: Woodhouse, *The Ecocentrists*, 54–94.

Mervyn Dymally (D-California) to hold hearings on legislation seeking U.S. population stabilization in 1988. Arguing that the Club “can provide its wisdom on the maximum immigration consistent with the eventual achievement of population stabilization” while “remaining apart from the details of ‘who,’” the Population Program articulated a central role for the Sierra Club in the population control debate. However, the Program noted the potential complications from this new approach. “Dealing with the issue will require much sensitivity both in terms of the general public and the Club’s internal leadership, to ensure that Club involvement is seen as focusing on the strictly environmental (i.e. population) components of immigration.” Thus, the Club needed to be careful to avoid the image that it was supporting immigration restriction for any other reason but environmental protection.³⁶²

This caveat grew in importance as the realities of the immigration restriction coalition became clear. Immigration was quickly becoming not only a cause célèbre of the environmental issue, but also right-wing politics. In many ways, this right-wing fixation on immigration was nothing new. As historians like Mae Ngai and Erika Lee have explained, anti-immigrant sentiments had long held sway over American politics—from the anti-Eastern and Southern European and anti-Irish politics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the fanatical movement against Asian immigration until the mid-twentieth century. But in the years since the passage of the Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965, the issue of immigration restriction had slowly crept back into the political mainstream. This was most clearly articulated in the work of the right-wing Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) and presidential campaign of notorious “paleoconservative” Patrick Buchanan in 1992 against President George H.W. Bush in the Republican primary. Rejecting the amnesty policies of the Reagan Administration, FAIR and Buchanan represented a new era of conservative activism that sought to

³⁶² Sierra Club Population Program, Michael Fischer, Judith Kunofsky, and Carl Pope, Dec. 1989, Carton 34, Folder 14, SCOEDR.

reinvigorate the movement with populist stances—including the restriction of immigration to the US, often along racist lines.³⁶³

It was in this context, that the Sierra Club policy of supporting immigration restriction began to become intensely controversial—especially as it sought to continue its pursuit of a progressive alliance with environmental justice activists. On the one hand, as a *San Francisco Chronicle* article on the conflict pointed out, population control activists saw an opportunity “to capitalize on rising public concern about immigration” and bring the “credibility of the 500,000-member, 102-year-old organization to their cause.” On the other hand, these efforts came at a moment “when the environmental movement, composed largely of whites, is being taken to task for failing to address the needs of people of color.”³⁶⁴ The conflict between these two factions remained largely civil through the early 1990s, consisting mostly of regular letters written to Michael Fischer and Carl Pope encouraging more action to be done on population issues—and the executive director politely directing their attention towards Club efforts on international population control issues.

This rough truce, however, began to fall apart with the statewide controversy surrounding California Proposition 187. Crafted in 1994, supporters of Proposition 187 quickly gave it the moniker “Save Our State” or “SOS.” Designed by a highly secretive group of anti-immigration consultants and former officers in the INS, the initiative threatened to ban the access of undocumented immigrants from state-funded services including education and non-emergency healthcare. Furthermore, it required all education, healthcare, and legal authorities in the state to report any suspected undocumented immigrants to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). The ban on education for undocumented immigrants, however, pointed to the real purpose of the initiative: inspiring a legal challenge. Supporters

³⁶³ For more on the history of anti-immigrant sentiments, see: Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton University Press, 2004); Erika Lee, *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States* (Basic Books, 2019); For more on the 1990s “paleoconservatives,” see: Hemmer, *Partisans*; John Ganz, *When the Clock Broke: Con Men, Conspiracists, and How America Cracked Up in the Early 1990s* (Macmillan, 2024).

³⁶⁴ Pamela Burdman, “The ‘I-Word’ Creates Tense Environment at Sierra Club,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 30, 1994.

acknowledged that the key goal of the initiative was to draw out a legal challenge that could lead to the Supreme Court overturning its 1982 decision in *Plyler v. Doe* ruling that undocumented immigrant children were entitled to public education. Opponents to Proposition 187, on the other hand, argued that the law was clearly targeting Latino Californians and threatened to result in what one *Los Angeles Times* reporter called an “ill-educated, disease-prone underclass.” Many specifically pointed to the mandated reporter clause as necessarily reliant upon vague suspicions that could be weaponized against people of color, particularly those from Latino communities. Indeed, many opponents saw the proposition as being fueled not simply by a general concern about illegal immigration, but rather more specifically by anti-Latino prejudices.³⁶⁵

This growing controversy over Proposition 187 amplified the already-existing tensions within the Sierra Club over immigration, but only indirectly. Notably, the Club came out almost unanimously against the initiative. While those opposed to immigration restrictions on social justice grounds obviously opposed the initiative for the same reasons as other opponents, even those who favored immigration restrictions viewed it with suspicion. A memo from Sherman Lewis, a proponent of population stabilization and immigration restriction, to leadership in Sierra Club of California argued that the proposition was disproportionate and inefficient in actually responding to the issue of undocumented immigration. Furthermore, he even acknowledged the likelihood of its being used for “immigrant bashing” and racist harassment of citizens and legal immigrants. Indeed, the Sierra Club of California formally came out against the initiative by mid-October 1994. Granting the Sierra Club of California the authorization to oppose the measure, the Board’s unanimous resolution argued that the initiative was “damaging to the environment and health of all Californians.”³⁶⁶

³⁶⁵ Patrick J. McDonnell, “Prop. 187 Turns Up Heat in U.S. Immigration Debate,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 10, 1994.

³⁶⁶ Memo, Sherman Lewis to California Conservation Committee and California Executive Committee, Sept. 5, 1994, Carton 40, Folder 4, Sierra Club Office of the Executive Director Records, BANC MSS 2002/230 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California; Sierra Club Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, Sept. 24-25, 1994, Sierra Club Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, BANC FILM 2945, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Samuel R. Cacas, “Prop. 187 Opponents Expand Their Ranks,” *Asianweek*, Oct. 14, 1994.

However, even though the Sierra Club found temporary unity in opposing Proposition 187, the intense controversy surrounding the issue only heightened the tensions within the Club over the broader issue of immigration. During debate on the resolution to allow Sierra Club California to oppose the initiative, Director Joe Fontaine emphasized that the Club needed to make clear that this was “not a statement on immigration.” Carl Pope even argued initially during the debate that action be deferred until the “Board had time to consider the resolution because of the sensitive nature of the issue.”³⁶⁷ Indeed, the Club was quickly losing any ability to safely navigate the issue of immigration restriction, leading to the Club deferring any action at all. In an unfortunate coincidence, the Board of Directors was supposed to reach a decision on the Club’s policy regarding population stabilization and immigration at its September 1994 meeting—the very meeting where it voted to allow Sierra Club California to oppose the Proposition 187. Yet Vivien Li and Frank Orem, Chair of the Population Committee and one of the key immigration restriction activists in the Club, continued to disagree starkly on a draft policy statement that the Board could debate. Indeed, they could only agree to defer any discussion or vote on a Club policy about immigration for a future meeting after the uproar over Proposition 187 had calmed down. Furthermore, they sought the help of chairman and former executive director Michael McCloskey in developing a compromise draft that attempted to respond to the concerns of both factions within the Club. Thus, while the fight over Proposition 187 did not lead directly to the fights taking place within the Club, the political environment helped to fuel suspicion and resentment around the ongoing internal debates. Opponents of immigration restrictions could now reasonably suspect any effort by proponents as stemming from the same racist and anti-immigrant motivations that they saw behind Proposition 187.³⁶⁸

Indeed, the debate over the Sierra Club’s immigration policy only heated up in the months after the passage of Proposition 187 in November 1994. The initiative itself would not last long, as its implementation and enforcement was quickly blocked by judicial injunction pending trial—a trial that

³⁶⁷ Sierra Club Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, Sept. 24-25, 1994, Sierra Club Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, BANC FILM 2945, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

³⁶⁸ Memo, Vivien Li to Robbie Cox and Joni Bosh, Aug. 8, 1994, Carton 40, Folder 4, SCOEDR.

would eventually see the measure's defeat in 1999. The shadow of Proposition 187, however, continued to hang over Sierra Club's debate around immigration in the months and years that followed. Letters began to fly into Executive Director Carl Pope's office, urging him and the Board to take a variety of positions. Some from immigration rights activists urged the Club to meet with them and overcome their reputation of being "anti-immigrant and anti-people of color." Another by Alan Weeden, one of the more prominent anti-immigration activists in the Club, wrote to Pope complaining that the Board of Directors "put a much higher value on social issues than they do on environmental issues," and attaching a Sierra Club brochure from March 1984 expressing the Club's support for population stabilization and highlighting the role of immigration in U.S. population increase. As Weeden explained, "to me it represents a clear and persuasive articulation of a concept that is so logical that it is virtually irrefutable. What a shame that we have lost so much time in pressing the issue." And yet other letters from many chapter leaders argued that the Club shouldn't take a position on the issue at all, arguing that "continued advocacy of immigration restrictions and a numbers-oriented population policy will wreak enormous collateral damage on the long-term viability of the population campaign and on other Club programs."³⁶⁹

Meanwhile, Michael McCloskey struggled to find a balance between the two positions, writing a series of draft policy statements that attempted to strike an acceptable compromise. A recurring theme of McCloskey's efforts in these drafts was to shift the focus of the proposed policy away from controversial domestic actions to control immigration towards what he considered to be the more critical international situation. As he explained in a draft from the fall of 1994, "because the world is now over-populated, success cannot be achieved by dividing up all of the world into control units and positing that none of them can have populations exceeding carrying capacities. Some are bound to have excess numbers because there are already too many people and everybody now born must live somewhere on this planet." Furthermore, McCloskey argued, "the increasing globalization of economies is moving us toward a

³⁶⁹ Memo, Kathryn Flewellen to Robbie Cox, Joni Bosh, Carolyn Carr, and John Lamb, Feb. 17, 1995, Carton 40, Folder 2, SCOEDR; Letter, Alan Weeden to Carl Pope, Jan. 11, 1995, Carton 40, Folder 2, SCOEDR; Letter, Sally Reid and Other Chapter Leaders to Robbie Cox and Joni Bosh, Circa Feb. 1995, Carton 40, Folder 2, SCOEDR.

multiplicity of open systems, as far as nation-state are concerned... One must take a more systemic approach keyed to the one closed system that operates, which is at the global level.” Thus, population control advocates needed to address international migration in general, not immigration to the United States specifically.³⁷⁰

Yet, by February 1995 when the Sierra Club Board of Directors began to approach the issue again, the different parties and factions in the Club seemed no closer to agreement. The latest draft policy authored by Michael McCloskey along with Director Carolyn Carr continued the attempt to shift attention to the international picture of migration, proposing that the Club push for all nations interested in accepting migrants perform assessments of their environmental and social situations to find an allowable number of immigrants for a particular region. Thus, while allowing for the potential of eventual immigration restrictions, they would be determined from a national debate in conjunction with other countries holding similar assessments of their migration, responding to the complexity of the world’s migrations instead of arbitrarily “picking a number from doing the arithmetic about reaching a population of a given size.” But division remained, especially when the Board of Directors discussed the proposal at its February meeting. McCloskey attempted to defend the proposal as a “middle ground that may not resonate well politically” but “might be of help in educating the public.” Others disagreed. One participant in the debate at the Board of Directors meeting complained that the proposal was inadequate in making “proactive” statements on migration and overconsumption. Another contended that the policy would impact her activism because “it provides no direction.” Meanwhile, representatives from the Angeles Chapter were adamant that not even a middle ground would be appropriate. Only by maintaining strict neutrality would the Club be able to save itself from a “bloody battle” over immigration that would destroy the Club’s resources.³⁷¹

³⁷⁰ Proposed Policy on Migration to Supplement Other Policy Statements on Population, Michael McCloskey, Aug. 8, 1994, Carton 40, Folder 3, SCOEDR.

³⁷¹ Background Statement on Migration Policy Draft, Carolyn Carr and Michael McCloskey, Feb. 10, 1995, Carton 40, Folder 2, SCOEDR; Sierra Club Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, Feb. 18-19, 1995, Sierra Club Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, BANC FILM 2945, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

However, it was not until early 1996, nearly a year later, that the Board would finally come to the same conclusion. Voting that the Sierra Club and all of its chapters, groups, and committees would “take no position on immigration levels or on policies governing immigration into the United States,” the Board attempted to forestall the growing divides within the Club. In a memo prepared by Michael McCloskey ahead of the Board Meeting, he emphasized that the policy needed to specifically focus on the United States, not proclaim neutrality on international migration in other countries. Furthermore, the policy needed to be vague in whether it was permanent or interim to avoid the appearance of making any promises about its future status. Finally, highlighting the need to control divisions over the issue, McCloskey urged the resolution take the language of saying they had “no position” rather than “neutrality.” Language of “neutrality,” McCloskey argued, “may embody negative overtones—disapproval of both sides.” Thus, to make it clear that this was an effort to defuse the conflict and “cast no aspersions on the arguments made by various parties,” the Club would simply take no position.³⁷²

The decision to take “no position” infuriated the population activists within the Club pushing for immigration restriction and laid the foundations for the future conflict to come. By late spring 1996, Sierra Club members and population committee chairs for the Loma Prieta and Ohio Chapters, Bill Hill and Alan Kuper, announced a petition campaign for a membership referendum on a Policy on Population, Consumption, and Sustainability committing the Club to “advocate efficient use of non-renewable resources, sustainable use of renewable resources and an end to U.S. population growth from natural increase and immigration.” Highlighting the Board’s February 1996 decision to take no position on immigration, the petitioners argued that the policy was “not defensible on environmental grounds” due to adverse impact of immigration in U.S. population growth. Noting that the Board’s “no position” policy “developed out of concern for ‘environmental justice,’” the petitioners instead attempted to flip the script, arguing that “those affected by climate change form the largest class of powerless victims of

³⁷² Memo on Possible Ingredients of a Position of Neutrality on Immigration, Michael McCloskey, Feb. 12, 1996, Carton 40, Folder 7, SCOEDR; Letter, Alan Kuper et. al. to Gene Coan for distribution to the Board, June 21, 1996, Carton 40, Folder 8, SCOEDR.

environmental injustice, and the policy advocated in our Petition would,” in fact, “significantly slow infliction of such injustice.”³⁷³

This petition effort unleashed nearly two years of intense conflict as the Club went through the petition and subsequent referendum on the issue. After the announcement of the petition, Dave Foreman, now a member of the Sierra Club Board of Directors, surprised nearly everyone when he wrote a letter to Alan Kuper announcing his opposition to the petition. While he remained personally committed to immigration restriction as a means of controlling population growth in the U.S. and acknowledged that he had joined the Board with the intention of pursuing support for immigration control, he had soon dropped the issue after learning about the growing divide in the Club. As he explained:

The Sierra Club today is deeply divided on the question of immigration restrictions. I am sorry and disappointed that this is the case, but it is the case. Any push, one way or the other, to get the Club to take a strong stand on immigration will create bitter divisiveness... We can't allow the Club to be torn apart on immigration when we have [so many] critical battles to fight—battles on which Sierra Club members are united.³⁷⁴

Summarizing much of the growing consensus of the Club leadership in the mid-1990s, Foreman therefore opposed the Sierra Club taking a position on immigration, not because he disagreed with the idea, but rather because the issue simply proved too difficult to handle without angering large sections of the Club. For their part, the petitioners responded to Foreman's defection by arguing that the majority of the country—and therefore the Club—supported immigration restrictions and that therefore the policy would be far less divisive than Foreman and “self-appointed spokespersons for certain special interest groups” would have the Club believe.³⁷⁵

Ultimately, the petitioners' efforts at this stage failed. By the October 26 deadline for petitions for questions to be placed on the April ballot the following year, Kuper and his fellow population activists fell short of the required 1,266 valid signatures by only 125. Yet, they saw this failure ultimately as

³⁷³ Letter, Bill Hill & Alan Kuper to Potential Petitioners, May 24, 1996, Carton 40, Folder 8, SCOEDR; Letter, Alan Kuper et. al. to Gene Coan for distribution to the Board, June 21, 1996, Carton 40, Folder 8, SCOEDR.

³⁷⁴ Letter, Dave Foreman to Alan Kuper, Aug. 29, 1996, Carton 40, Folder 8, SCOEDR.

³⁷⁵ Letter, David F. Durham to Dave Foreman, Sept. 23, 1996, Carton 40 Folder 8, SCOEDR.

stemming from alleged interference from the Board of Directors. On September 26, a mailing had been sent out from an unclear source urging members to support the Board's position on immigration, which, Kuper argued in a complaint to the Club's election inspector, had a "chilling effect" on their signature collections as new signatures dropped off soon after the mailing. While Sandy Tepfer, the election inspector, reported that she was unable to find the source of the mailing, she also acknowledged that a violation would have only occurred if Club resources were used to send it. Yet, the entire situation underscored for the petitioners the perception that Club leadership was against them. Not only had the Board voted to pursue a strict policy of neutrality, but many activists also now saw the Board as scheming to prevent the issue from coming to a vote before the membership.³⁷⁶

By the next year, the population activists had launched another, more successful effort to get their immigration restriction policy on the Club election ballot. However, the Sierra Club Board now made the decision to offer their own ballot question alongside the petitioners' one. Now, instead of a simple yes/no decision for membership, they would vote for Alternative A—reversing the Club's neutrality on immigration and committing the Club to advocate for ending U.S. population growth through natural increase and immigration—or Alternative B—reaffirming an international focus on "causes" of migration and maintaining the Club's neutrality on the question of immigration into the United States. The petitioners were outraged at the adjustment of the ballot, complaining in both a letter to the Board of Directors as a whole and in a personal letter written by petitioner Alan Weeden to Sierra Club President Adam Werbach that, while acknowledging that the Board is "perhaps... entitled to do this by the Club's bylaws," also argued that it was "obviously designed to confuse the voter." More personally, Weeden complained about "being termed a racist or a Nazi" and subtly threatened Werbach's reputation, noting that he would "be judged as a person by your conduct of this matter [as president] long after people have gotten over their emotions as to its outcome."³⁷⁷ More substantially, the petitioners attempted

³⁷⁶ Fax, Alan Kuper to Sandy Tepfer, Oct. 9, 1996, Carton 40, Folder 7, SCOEDR; Emails, Alan Kuper and Sandy Tepfer, Oct. 1996, Carton 40, Folder 7, SCOEDR.

³⁷⁷ Letter, Alan Weeden, to Adam Werbach, Oct. 21, 1997, Carton 40, Folder 5, SCOEDR.

unsuccessfully to challenge the ballot's framing of the questions on legal grounds and threatened a lawsuit over the issue after the election if their concerns were not met—a position that the Club's own legal counsel firmly rejected.³⁷⁸

Yet, even as Board of Directors and petitioners battled behind the scenes to control the narrative of the referendum, the debate over immigration continued to escalate and even drew the attention of those outside the Club. While Julie Beezley of the National Population Steering Committee wrote along with others in the Club to express their support for the Board's question framing and Alternative B, others were less supportive. Ric Oberlink, one of the petitioners and co-coordinator of a new group that styled itself Sierrans for U.S. Population Stabilization, wrote to Carl Pope attacking the Board's opposition to the ballot initiative and threatened to continue the fight in even more petitions to make sure the question remained on the ballot for years to come. Even Dave Foreman, who had now resolved his personal uncertainty about the Sierra Club taking a stance on immigration by backing Alternative A, wrote to Adam Werbach and Carl Pope to express his frustration with being labeled anti-immigrant and racist by Club leadership. But importantly, the issue was quickly escaping the orbit of Sierra Club news and attracting national attention. Longstanding organizations dedicated to stopping—or even reversing—population growth such as Negative Population Growth (NPG) began to speak out and send emails and mailers to Sierra Club members attacking the arguments of the Board and urging a vote for Alternative A. Representatives from even larger anti-immigration groups began to voice their support like Richard Lamb, former governor of Colorado, past president of Zero Population Growth (ZPG), and a co-founder of the right-wing Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) who voiced his support for the Alternative A on National Public Radio (NPR). On the other side, pro-immigrant environmental groups like the Political Ecology Group used these outside associations to accuse those advocating immigration

³⁷⁸ “Sierra Club Bulletin – Immigration Debate,” *Sierra*, Jan./Feb. 1998, 105; Letter, Petitioners to Sierra Club Board of Directors, Sept. 21, 1997, Carton 40, Folder 5, SCOEDR; Memo, Affirmative Steering Committee to Sierra Club Board of Directors, Nov. 15-16, 1997, Carton 40, Folder 5, SCOEDR; Letter, William H. Orrick, III to Adam Werbach, Nov. 14, 1997, Carton 40, Folder 5, SCOEDR; Letter, Roger Beers to Carl Pope, Nov. 14, 1997, Carton 40, Folder 5, SCOEDR; Letter, Roger Beers to William H. Orrick, III, Jan. 6, 1998, Carton 40, Folder 5, SCOEDR.

restriction within the Club as being funded by racist far-right groups supporting eugenics like the Pioneer Fund, with one estimate of conservative groups spending between \$700,000 and \$1 million to influence the Sierra Club election. Even politicians became involved such as Congressman Xavier Becerra of California who cautioned in an open letter to Sierra Club members against demolishing the Club's national reputation by wading into the immigration issue.³⁷⁹

The growing national din over the Sierra Club's vote finally reached its climax in April 1998 as the votes were counted. With over 84,000 votes cast in a membership of roughly 550,000, over 60 percent voted for Alternative B, maintaining the Club's position of neutrality on the issue of immigration. While supporters of Alternative A like Alan Kuper and Ric Oberlink attacked the results as unfair and misleading given what they argued to be the Board's muddying of the question with the ballot format, Club leadership was ecstatic. Adam Werbach expressed relief in a press conference announcing the results, noting that "The Sierra Club is not an organization that cares about hiking trails and not people... The membership has said the Sierra Club should not be blaming immigrants for environmental problems." And Club leaders were not the only ones happy. Erin Mar, associate director of the Northern California Coalition for Immigration Rights, remarked her belief that it was "an historic day" but also looked to the future. "We want to work with the Sierra Club to bring justice to minority communities that bear the brunt of toxic exposure." The Club had not just voted to maintain its neutrality on immigration; it had also implicitly voted to maintain its commitment to a progressive alliance.³⁸⁰

Indeed, at least for the moment, the Sierra Club continued to look towards a future where its activism necessarily entailed a commitment to environmental justice, not just environmental protection.

³⁷⁹ Letter, Julie Beezley to Sierra Club Board of Directors, Nov. 15, 1997, Carton 40, Folder 5, SCOEDR; Letter, Ric Oberlink to Carl Pope, Dec. 31, 1997, Carton 40, Folder 5, SCOEDR; Dave Foreman, "A Last Word on the Sierra Club Immigration Controversy," *Wild Earth*, Summer 1998; Memo on Chris Connor Email to Cascade Chapter, c. Jan. 1998, Carton 40, Folder 5, SCOEDR; Letter, Xavier Becerra to Sierra Club Members, Dec. 30, 1997, Carton 40, Folder 5, SCOEDR; "Sierra Club Survey," Richard Gonzales, *NPR All Things Considered*, Oct. 15, 1997; John H. Cushman, Jr., "An Uncomfortable Debate Fuels a Sierra Club Election: 2 Views on Immigration Divide the Group," *New York Times*, Apr. 5, 1998; Jane Kay, "Sierra Club: Sidestep on Immigration," *San Francisco Examiner*, April 26, 1998.

³⁸⁰ Jane Kay, "Sierra Club: Sidestep on Immigration," *San Francisco Examiner*, April 26, 1998

This was expressed in no uncertain terms by Carl Pope in a column in the next issue of *Sierra* magazine aptly titled “Moving On.” In it, he characterized the sixty percent vote as the Sierra Club choosing to “embrace the concept of global—not merely national—stewardship” and shunning “an attempt to reduce environmental stress in the United States by increasing it elsewhere.” Ultimately, he argued, “they refused to blame newcomers to our country for our own overconsumption.” Borrowing the language of environmental philosophers like Garrett Hardin and R. Buckminster Fuller, Pope argued that the Club had rejected the idea of treating the United States as an environmental “lifeboat” where the suffering of people in other countries could be ignored and instead pursued the vision of “Spaceship Earth” where environmental problems required global and humanitarian solutions.³⁸¹

Mainstream environmentalism in the 1990s, represented by the Sierra Club, had faced a difficult situation of responding to critiques by environmental justice activists but they took them to heart. Rather than reacting defensively, leaders within the Sierra Club such as Michael Fischer, Vivien Li, and Carl Pope pushed the Club to adapt and integrate environmental justice into their mission. Working increasingly with outside groups as part of a progressive alliance rather than simply an environmental alliance, the Sierra Club fended off challenges from its own members who saw the political commitments of that progressive alliance as contrary to their own visions of environmentalism. The victory of Club leadership in these disputes placed the Sierra Club on the path of continuing its commitment to environmental justice but also paved that pathway with bitterness and division that would last well into the new millennium.

³⁸¹ Carl Pope, “Moving On: Lessons of the Immigration Debate,” *Sierra*, July/Aug. 1998, 14-15; For the original references, see: Garrett Hardin, “Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor,” *Psychology Today*, Sept. 1974, 800-812; R. Buckminster Fuller, *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1969).

Chapter 4 – Ecoterror and Reaction: Violence and the Threat of Violence in 1990s Environmental Conflict

In the frantic hours and days after the Oklahoma City Bombing on April 19, 1995—what would come to be the deadliest act of domestic terrorism in U.S. history—a key question rested on nearly everyone’s minds: Who could have done this and why? Early reports after the bombing built upon existing stereotypes to argue that the perpetrators were obviously Islamic terrorists, with news coverage of “two men of ‘Middle Eastern’ appearance” being sought for questioning. When the investigation by the FBI had finally settled upon a connection to white U.S. citizens, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, the world of the far-right was dramatically brought into the national focus. Many correctly noted parallels in the attack with other hallmarks of far-right rhetoric and culture. The bombing had taken place on the second anniversary of the Waco Standoff that had infuriated conservatives who believed a tyrannical federal government was around the corner. The design of the bombing was nearly identical to one described in the white supremacist novel, *The Turner Diaries*. Investigations, meanwhile, would eventually find McVeigh to be obsessed with both.³⁸²

Yet, as the bombing forced Americans to confront the terrible reality of far-right violence, questions continued to swirl. Investigators and journalists looking into the depths of the American right wondered just how deep the rabbit hole went. In addition to looking at the so-called “Militia Movement,” ostensibly made up of numerous paramilitaries across the country, many came to examine another movement built upon anti-government sentiments: anti-environmentalists. Journalists questioned the similarity of rhetoric between violent right-wing activists and anti-environmentalists and noted the significant overlaps in speakers and audiences. Environmentalists, eager to find new ways to attack their opponents, also seized upon the issue, using the newfound suspicion of the Militia Movement to cast the anti-environmental movement in starkly violent terms. Meanwhile, the far-right, themselves, worked to

³⁸² Larry B. Stammer and Carla Hall, “American Muslims Feel Sting of Accusations in Bombing’s Wake,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 1995; John Kifner, “Oklahoma Bombing Suspect: Unraveling of a Frayed Life,” *New York Times*, Dec. 31, 1995; Dale Russakoff and Serge F. Kovalski, “An Ordinary Boy’s Extraordinary Range: After a Long Search for Order, Timothy McVeigh Finally Found a World He Could Fit Into,” *Washington Post*, July 2, 1995.

rebuild and prepare for what they perceived to be an inevitable confrontation with the federal government and the New World Order it represented.³⁸³

Yet, the story of violence in 1990s environmental politics goes far deeper than mere similarities between anti-government and anti-environmentalist activism. The context around the Oklahoma City Bombing included many more bombings in places like Oakland, Reno, and Sacramento by unknown assailants or well-known ones like the Unabomber, as well as threatened acts of violence against environmentalists and federal officials. Together, this context reveals the growing polarization of political debate in the period broadly, but especially in environmental politics. As the rhetorical skirmishes over environmental policy continued into the 1990s, the tone of the debate began to change—becoming more urgent as Americans grew increasingly polarized. Environmental conflicts that might have once taken the form of tense government hearings or, at most, inflammatory rhetoric in articles, speeches, or mailers, now began to feel very different. There was anger behind the rhetoric now, and it was not simply of a partisan variety geared towards “beating” the other side in the next election year. Conflicts over environmental policy now took a decidedly violent tone.

Central in this story of environmental violence—including all the various terms that one side of the divide or both deemed part of it: physical violence, intimidation, destruction of property, and violent rhetoric—was the interplay between threat and fear. Radicals on both sides expressed a willingness to move beyond mainstream politics and even, in some cases, nonviolent direct action or civil disobedience to strike a blow against their enemy or draw national attention to their cause. While this more radical confrontational stance did not necessarily entail harm to other people—some radical environmentalists, for example, only saw sabotage (or ecotage) of symbols of environmental destruction as acceptable—in other cases, violence against people was contemplated or even threatened. Whether or not this violence

³⁸³ Keith Schneider, “The Far Right: Bomb Echoes Extremists’ Tactics,” *New York Times*, April 26, 1995; Vince Bielski, “Armed and Dangerous,” *Sierra* 80, No. 5 (Sept. 1995); David Helvarg, *The War Against the Greens: The ‘Wise-Use’ Movement, the New Right, and Anti-Environmental Violence* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1994); David Helvarg, “The Anti-Enviro Connection,” *Nation*, May 22, 1995.

actually took place, the fear of violence perceived to be imminent was palpable and justified distrust and tension in environmental discourse, as well as fueling a growing conspiratorial mindset across the political spectrum. Contrary to many historical accounts that attempt to draw a line between “fringe” and “mainstream” conservatives, it was not just the fringe that took these imagined threats to heart; they were just as compelling to mainstream audiences, allowing for essential bridges between the radical and mainstream, like Rep. Helen Chenoweth. This “mainstreaming” of radical ideas and theories emboldened and made more visible violent variations such as those trafficked by the Militia of Montana.³⁸⁴ Furthermore, this story of violence in 1990s environmental politics reveals the shaky foundations of our modern understanding of environmental violence based upon contemporaneous polemics cleverly disguised as objective research. Thus, as the nation neared the new millennium with an environmental politics increasingly defined by the fear of violence, a common ground seemed distressingly out of reach.³⁸⁵

Ecoterrorism or Ecotage?

By the beginning of the 1990s, environmental conflict had a new, more aggressive tone. In the spring of 1989, Dave Foreman, leader of the radical Earth First!, was arrested by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) on charges of conspiring to destroy electrical towers in Arizona. Foreman, himself, was not personally involved in the plot that included Michael Fain, an FBI agent infiltrating the group and

³⁸⁴ Skillen, *This Land Is My Land*; Daniel Levitas, *The Terrorist Next Door: The Militia Movement and the Radical Right* (Thomas Dunne Books, 2002); Kenneth Saul Stern, *A Force Upon the Plain: The American Militia Movement and the Politics of Hate* (Simon & Schuster, 1996); Many historians of conservatism have begun to respond to Kim Phillips-Fein’s imperative to reevaluate their tendency to normalize conservatism as a reaction to consensus historians like Hofstadter and examine the connection of the conservative movement to its extremists in: Kim Phillips-Fein, “Conservatism: A State of the Field,” *Journal of American History* 98, no. 3 (2011): 736, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jar430>; Some examples of these historians noting the connections between the “fringe” and “mainstream” of conservatism whom influence my thinking include: David Austin Walsh, *Taking America Back: The Conservative Movement and the Far Right* (Yale University Press, 2024); John S. Huntington, *Far-Right Vanguard: The Radical Roots of Modern Conservatism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021); Edward H. Miller, *Nut Country: Right-Wing Dallas and the Birth of the Southern Strategy* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

³⁸⁵ Examples of the early activist studies that set the foundation for our thinking of “anti-environmentalism” and “ecoterrorism” include: David Helvarg, *The War Against the Greens: The “Wise-Use” Movement, the New Right, and Anti-Environmental Violence* (Sierra Club Books, 1994); Ron Arnold, *Ecoterror: The Violent Agenda to Save Nature* (Free Enterprise Press, 1997).

goad—generally unsuccessfully—into acts of sabotage. What put Foreman into the FBI’s crosshairs was largely his political status as leader of Earth First!, the most visible radical environmental organization in the country.³⁸⁶

Founded by Foreman and a few friends in 1980 after resigning from the Wilderness Society in frustration with what he saw as an unduly compromising attitude, Earth First! had quickly established itself in the national limelight as the quintessential radical environmentalists. Found increasingly across the country at environmental conflicts seeking to protect natural spaces from destruction by the Federal Government or private companies, Foreman and the group quite literally wrote the book on environmental direct action: *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching*. Earth First! was generally not interested in intentional harm to people, instead favoring sabotage of equipment and objects symbolic of environmental destruction—what they called “monkeywrenching.” At most, Earth First!ers spoke supportively of acts like treespiking not as a weapon against loggers themselves, but rather as a deterrent for logging in a specific area. In *Ecodefense*, Foreman argued that monkeywrenching was actually a form of nonviolent protest against environmental destruction. “It is never directed against human beings or other forms of life. It is aimed at inanimate machines and tools that are destroying life. Care is always taken to minimize any possible threat to people, including the monkeywrenchers themselves.”³⁸⁷ Yet, even as Earth First!ers insisted that their actions were nonviolent, there remained at least the inherent threat of violence. Treespiking, as seen in the case of George Alexander described in Chapter Two, was still dangerous and potentially lethal to any workers involved in the felling or milling of a spiked tree. What made it nonviolent in the eyes of Earth First!ers was the anonymous notice given to the local Forest Service office or marked by some conspicuous message left for loggers warning them that trees in the general area were spiked. With knowledge that trees were spiked, many loggers or mill owners would

³⁸⁶ Zakin, *Coyotes and Town Dogs*, 316–41.

³⁸⁷ Dave Foreman, *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching* (Earth First! Books, 1985; 3rd ed., Abbzug Press, 1993), 9.

simply refuse to work on them. This system of deterrence necessarily required the threat of violence against loggers or mill workers to work.³⁸⁸

However, this indirect violence without clear intent made a simple equation of eco-saboteurs as violent terrorists difficult to justify. The fact was that most Earth First!ers were not engaging in clear acts of violence that would land them in trouble beyond simple misdemeanors in environmental protests. When Michael Fain and the FBI were able to convince some members to try to destroy the power lines in Arizona, they were, again, not targeting people. And Foreman's involvement was minimal beyond moral support. Yet, these complications to the FBI's simple narrative of monkeywrenchers as terrorists did not ultimately matter. What mattered was the intimidation against radical environmentalism, much as COINTELPRO had done against radical groups in the 1960s and 1970s. In a tellingly incompetent moment, Agent Fain even admitted as such in a conversation with fellow FBI agents that he mistakenly taped: Dave Foreman was not "the guy we need to pop, I mean, in terms of an actual perpetrator... This is the guy we need to pop to send a message... Ohh, we don't need that on tape! Hoo boy."³⁸⁹ Thus, as FBI agents arrested Foreman early in the morning in May 1989, the stage had been firmly set for what seemed to be a cut-and-dried narrative: environmentalists gone extreme.

But as the 1980s turned into the 1990s, the growing environmental conflicts across the country quickly undermined such simple characterizations. While environmentalist direct action by groups like Earth First! continued amidst highly visible campaigns such as the Redwood Summer, discussed in chapter two, Northern California Earth First! consciously distanced itself from the more violent forms of direct action proposed by Foreman and other radical environmentalists. Indeed, Northern California Earth First! leader Judi Bari explicitly disavowed treespiking as counterproductive when she was actively trying to recruit loggers to join environmentalists' ranks in opposing what she argued was their common foe:

³⁸⁸ For a recent discussion of the ethical distinctions between different forms of environmental protest and direct action, see: Andreas Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire* (Verso Books, 2021).

³⁸⁹ Zakin, *Coyotes and Town Dogs*, 335.

corporate leadership who were willing to destroy a region's natural resources before moving out, leaving their former workers without jobs. Thus, even in a highly tense confrontation like Redwood Summer, where environmentalists did engage in direct actions that entailed violations of private property like tree sit-ins and obstructing logging operations, they saw themselves as committed to nonviolence. Bari and other Redwood Summer protestors insisted they only engaged in nonviolent protest, even as they faced violence and abuse from loggers and counter-protestors.³⁹⁰

Indeed, environmentalists were not the only ones being accused of engaging in violence during the course of the Northern California timber wars. Bari repeatedly shared stories of violence directed against her, her family, or other environmentalists, including cases where logging trucks tried to push her car off the road while her children were inside, or when loggers pointed firearms at protestors, or when a protestor was punched during a heated county commission meeting. Beyond the direct back-and-forth of environmentalists and loggers in Northern California, others also threatened violence against environmentalists. The so-called "Sahara Club" of Southern California desert off-roading enthusiasts, opposed to the efforts of environmentalists to restrict their access to the Mojave Desert, saw common cause with Northern California loggers opposed to environmentalist restrictions on logging redwoods.³⁹¹

Many environmentalists pointed to the Sahara Club as being behind a series of intimidation campaigns directed against activists in Northern California. Sahara Club founder Rick Siemans was repeatedly invited to give workshops on "dirty tricks" to pro-logging groups such as Mothers Watch, a group of women family members of timber workers. While Siemans was careful to avoid publicly sharing what "dirty tricks" exactly entailed aside from implications of sabotage of environmentalists' car license plates, environmentalists in Northern California widely saw the Sahara Club and Mothers Watch as being

³⁹⁰ Mike Geniella, "Redwood Summer's Plea for Peace: Activist Extols Non-Violence," *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), May 18, 1990; Mark A. Stein, "'Redwood Summer': It Was Guerrilla Warfare," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), September 2, 1990; Bari, "The Secret History of Tree-Spiking--Part 1"; Bari, "The Secret History of Tree-Spiking--Part 2."

³⁹¹ Judi Bari, "How to Create a Climate of Violence," *Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, CA), November 20, 1992; Bari and Riest, "KPFA Interview."

behind a series of disinformation campaigns designed to paint Bari, Earth First!, and environmentalists in general as violent terrorists. For instance, Sahara Club sold and advertised within its newsletter a purported Earth First! manual on how to construct traps to harm or kill off-road vehicle users—a manual that Earth First!ers fiercely disavowed.³⁹² More threatening, however, was the publication of contact information for Earth First!ers in the Sahara Club newsletter with directions to readers to “‘reason’ with them about the error of their ways.”³⁹³ Soon afterwards, Earth First!ers not only from Northern California but across the country began to receive anonymous letters accusing them of being gay or lesbian and threatening that their contact information had been shared with hate groups. Susan Zakin, in her history of Earth First! quotes extensively from one variation sent to women Earth First!ers:

No longer can sleazy dikes like you operate with impunity through the guise of anonymity. We know who you are, where you live, and continue to home in on you... but you don't know who we are... Rest assured... that we shall not be indiscriminate in our actions against the spineless, invertebrate members of Earth First! To the contrary, we will specifically hunt down each and every member like the lesbians you really are.³⁹⁴

Blending environmentalists with other perceived enemies in the Culture Wars, like gay and lesbian people, the Sahara Club was able to also inject a threat of gendered violence that went well beyond the physical violence surrounding environmental protest and counterprotest. With such threats of violence continually deployed against environmental activists, many remained frustrated with the recurring narrative during the Northern California Timber Wars that they were the terrorists.³⁹⁵

The bombing of Judi Bari and Darryl Cherney on May 24, 1990, only heightened the suspicion and paranoia of the moment, with nearly all sides—including the police and FBI—being accused of causing the bombing. Returning to Northern California from trips to college campuses promoting the upcoming Redwood Summer campaign, Bari and Cherney’s car exploded in Oakland, leaving Cherney

³⁹² Sahara Club Newsletter #13, Folder 25, Carton 364, Sierra Club Records, BANC MSS 71/103c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

³⁹³ Zakin, *Coyotes and Town Dogs*, 369.

³⁹⁴ Zakin, *Coyotes and Town Dogs*, 370.

³⁹⁵ Michael Connelly, “The Greens Have Them Seeing Red: Members of the Sahara Club Use Aggressive Tactics to Battle Groups They Say Have Overstated Threats to the Environment,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), December 12, 1990; Zakin, *Coyotes and Town Dogs*, 366–72.

with only minor injuries but shattering Bari's pelvis and tailbone. Despite these injuries, the Oakland Police Department, with assistance from the FBI, immediately placed Bari and Cherney under arrest on suspicion of the bomb being their own. Arguing that the purported location of the bomb indicated that the occupants would have known it was there and that nails found in Bari's home seemed to match nails that had been taped to the bomb, police investigators and the FBI were quickly satisfied to see the situation as a bomb accidentally exploding during transport to the Redwood Summer campaign. For their part, Earth First!ers and environmentalists were outraged that Bari and Cherney were assumed to be responsible. Many quickly pointed out their belief that pro-logging elements were behind the bombing—including Bari herself, who, according to police records, responded to police questions on the way to the hospital that "timber" was responsible.³⁹⁶

However, the concern in the environmentalist community extended beyond grassroots and radical activists. Even mainstream organizations such as the Sierra Club publicly expressed apprehension at the official response. In a series of letters written to state and federal officials including California Attorney General, John van DeKamp, and Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman, Joseph Biden, Michael Clark of the Friends of the Earth and Michael Fischer of the Sierra Club expressed alarm at what they argued to be "premature" conclusions drawn by the FBI and Oakland Police Department that Bari and Cherney were involved. Indeed, their letter to Senator Biden urged him to launch a congressional investigation of the bombing that also explored whether the rights of Bari and Cherney had been violated. However, not all mainstream environmentalists were happy with the explicit support given to Earth First!ers. Dan Sullivan, chairman of Sierra Club California, expressed indignation in an email to national Sierra Club leadership about Fischer's signature on the letter to Senator Biden, arguing that the Club needed to be distancing itself from the radicalism of Earth First!, not aligning itself even closer. A Senate investigation, Sullivan

³⁹⁶ For a detailed account of the bombing, its prelude, and its aftermath by Bari herself, refer to: "Who Bombed Judi Bari?", *The New Settler Interview*, Feb./Mid-March 1995. Found in Box 2, Folder 18, Dave Foreman Earth First! Collection (MSS 1102 BC), Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections, University of New Mexico Libraries.

argued, would only give timber companies and conservatives a platform to equate the Sierra Club and Earth First. Indeed, such an undercurrent of concern about the letters rose that Sierra Club President Sue Merrow had to reiterate in a memorandum to fellow Directors that the letter had been signed by Fischer with her concurrence and focused on civil rights issues, having been carefully worded to avoid association with Earth First! itself. In a world where association with radical groups like Earth First! was interpreted by some as necessarily associated with terrorism, mainstream groups struggled to balance environmentalist solidarity with organizational interests.³⁹⁷

As mainstream groups debated their reaction, however, radical and grassroots activists became increasingly paranoid of an organized plot by authorities against them. Indeed, Bari and others began to vocally push the idea of a conspiracy by the FBI to actively undermine and discredit Earth First!, much in the way that they had done against radical groups in the 1960s and 1970s under counterintelligence programs or COINTELPROs. Historian Daniel Chard has written extensively on the formation of these programs by the FBI in the late 1960s and 1970s. Amidst an effort by states around the world to “describe, delegitimize, and destroy their insurgent adversaries” through the formulation of a new classification of violence as “terrorism,” American police and intelligence agencies sought to apply these principles to domestic insurgencies. Under FBI COINTELPROs, special agents sought to “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize” radical groups like the Black Panther Party and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) through actions ranging from anonymous letters designed to divide groups to efforts to discredit the group in the local community.³⁹⁸ While these domestic

³⁹⁷ Letter to John van DeKamp, July 16, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 21, Sierra Club Office of the Executive Director Records, BANC MSS 2002/230c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Letter to Sen. Joseph Biden, July 16, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 21, Sierra Club Office of the Executive Director Records, BANC MSS 2002/230c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Email, Dan Sullivan to Michael Fischer, July 17, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 21, Sierra Club Office of the Executive Director Records, BANC MSS 2002/230c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Email, Sue Merrow to Fellow Directors, July 30, 1990, Carton 28, Folder 21, Sierra Club Office of the Executive Director Records, BANC MSS 2002/230c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

³⁹⁸ FBI airtel, Director to SAC Albany, “Counterintelligence Program, Black Nationalist—Hate Groups, Internal Security,” August 25, 1967. As cited in Daniel S. Chard, *Nixon’s War at Home: The FBI, Leftist Guerrillas, and the Origins of Counterterrorism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 1-14.

counterintelligence programs were briefly suspended in the mid-to-late 1970s in the aftermath of the Watergate Scandal during the Nixon Administration and subsequent Church Committee Investigations, they had begun to return under other names in the early 1980s during the Reagan Administration.³⁹⁹

Thus, with such a legacy of FBI domestic surveillance and targeting of groups “deemed prone to revolutionary violence,” activists like Bari and Foreman saw their arrests as evidence of a tightening grip by conspiratorial federal agents seeking to destroy their movement. As one Earth First! leader noted, if the bomb hadn’t been “planted by some psychotic logger mercenaries,” then attention needed to be paid to the FBI itself.⁴⁰⁰ Given the existing charges against Dave Foreman and the Earth First!ers in Arizona, Foreman and many others in the organization began to look at the immediate accusations against Bari and Cherney as evidence that they were all being framed or, at least, caught in an entrapment scheme.⁴⁰¹ For her part, Bari spent years aggressively pursuing lawsuits against the FBI, deposing agents, and attaining access to FBI files even after the FBI and Oakland Police Department quietly dropped the charges against the two due to lack of evidence. Ultimately, Bari came to believe in a conspiracy between the FBI and timber companies to discredit Bari and Earth First! by painting them as bombers and terrorists. Bari particularly focused on the emergence of the fact that Frank Doyle, the FBI special agent who had initially investigated the scene and concluded that the bomb was Bari’s, had, in fact, served as an instructor in a bomb school conducted for local police and FBI agents less than a month earlier. Even further, this bomb school had taken place on land owned by the Louisiana-Pacific timber company, bringing even more twists in the growing conspiracy theory. Writing on the issue for years afterwards,

³⁹⁹ Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Challenging the Secret Government: The Post-Watergate Investigations of the CIA and FBI* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Daniel S. Chard, *Nixon’s War at Home: The FBI, Leftist Guerrillas, and the Origins of Counterterrorism* (University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 261–63.

⁴⁰⁰ Email on “Cherney & Bari Arrested?”, May 27, 1990, Box 2, Folder 18, Dave Foreman Earth First! Collection (MSS 1102 BC), Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections, University of New Mexico Libraries.

⁴⁰¹ Mike Geniella, “First! Founder Warns of Plot,” *Press Democrat*, May 27, 1990.

Bari remained convinced of FBI complicity in the bombing and her arrest as part of a modern-day COINTELPRO targeting the radical environmental movement.⁴⁰²

In the years that followed, investigations into the bombing went nowhere, even as strange letters to local journalists from a so-called “Lord’s Avenger” claimed responsibility for the car bombing as well as an earlier bombing at a sawmill in Cloverdale, CA, that only resulted in minor damage. Despite the long efforts of activists and investigators and the insistence of Bari and others that the authorities were actually behind it, the bombing remains officially unsolved. Yet, in the simmering cauldron of environmental politics in both the California North Coast and the larger national scene, the growing paranoia and theories surrounding the bombing only further fueled antagonism and distrust.

In particular, conservatives highlighted Foreman and Bari’s legal troubles—as well as the broader tactics and strategies of Earth First!—in the late 1980s and early 1990s as evidence of violence and, indeed, terrorism committed by radical environmentalists. Seizing upon stories like the maiming of George Alexander as a result of tree-spiking, conservatives gained rhetorical ammunition in their efforts to portray Earth First! as violent terrorists long before Foreman or Bari were arrested. Glenys Simmons, a spokesperson for Louisiana-Pacific, who owned the forest from which the tree that injured Alexander came, was blunt in her characterization of who was at fault. Arguing that it was “time that these criminals that commit acts of violence like spiking trees should no longer be protected under the guise of trying to save the environment,” Simmons directly tied Alexander’s injuries to environmentalist direct action. Even mainstream environmentalists, like *San Francisco Examiner* columnist Harold Gilliam, responded to the incident with trepidation at the idea of environmental activism moving beyond nonviolence into violent direct action, even if the action was intended as a deterrent. Even as questions began to be raised that

⁴⁰² “Who Bombed Judi Bari?”, *The New Settler Interview*, Feb./Mid-March 1995. Found in Box 2, Folder 18, Dave Foreman Earth First! Collection (MSS 1102 BC), Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections, University of New Mexico Libraries. See also numerous articles and essays anthologized in *Timber Wars*, Judi Bari’s 1994 collection of her writing. Relevant articles include “KPFA Interview,” “For F.B.I., Back to Political Sabotage?”, “Exposing the FBI,” “FBI Still Covering Up Bombing Case,” “The Earth First! Car Bombing.” Judi Bari, *Timber Wars* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1994)

pointed to the unlikelihood of Earth First! being behind the incident, the narrative of Earth First! as potentially violent continued to spread.⁴⁰³

The action and rhetoric of Foreman, Bari, and Cherney only accentuated this narrative. Even as Bari and the Northern California Earth First! renounced tree-spiking as a part of a strategy to build potential inroads with working-class loggers, conservatives and environmentalist opponents continued to use the idea of Earth First!-as-terrorist to attack them and the larger environmental movement. This was particularly the case after their arrests in 1989 and 1990. For Bari and Cherney, the very association of the two with Earth First! protests in Northern California—especially the upcoming Redwood Summer—was enough to lead many to accept the police narrative of the bomb being theirs. However, their penchant for shocking images and rhetoric was also employed. A photo that Bari had taken, jokingly posing with a Uzi submachine gun after a protest in 1988, in parody of the famous Patty Hearst photograph, was subsequently released by the Ukiah, CA, Police Department after her arrest for the car bombing, fueling the accusations against her.⁴⁰⁴

Meanwhile, Cherney also faced increased scrutiny for his past comments that painted him as a terrorist. Using even the mere idea of Earth First! endorsement of the 1990 Forests Forever ballot initiative, industry groups attempted to insert language into ballot arguments directly tying the initiative to Cherney, himself, arguing that he had urged “terminally ill people” to “strap bombs to themselves and blow up dams, power plants and other structures they believe harm the environment.”⁴⁰⁵ This was in reference to actual comments that Cherney had made in an interview on “60 Minutes” in 1990, saying that “if he was dying of a terminal disease, he’d strap some dynamite on his body and take out the Glen Canyon dam or the offices of Maxxam Corporation” at night.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰³ Stammer, “Environment Radicals Target of Probe Into Lumber Mill Accident”; Gilliam, “Violence Begets Violence”; Conner, “Fighting Fire With Fire.”

⁴⁰⁴ Tobias Young, “Armed Bari a Joke Photo, Friends Say,” *Press Democrat*, June 9, 1990; Judi Bari, “The Bombing Story Part 1: The Set-Up,” *Earth First!*, Feb. 2, 1994.

⁴⁰⁵ Geniella, “Timber Ballot Wording Hits Nerve: Forest Forever Backers Threaten Suit.”

⁴⁰⁶ Hank Sims, “Cherney Turns On the Charm,” *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, May 8, 2002.

Yet, while both Bari and Cherney were able to eventually repudiate some of the accusations after criminal charges against them were dropped, Foreman faced a more difficult situation that led to his becoming a public face of radical environmentalist violence in conservative circles. His plea deal and subsequent conviction, combined with his outspoken support for ecotage—even to the extent of dismissing victims such as George Alexander as a distraction from environmental destruction—throughout his career, made him an easy target for conservative writers.⁴⁰⁷

But while conservatives might have looked at Bari, Cherney, and Foreman—along with most other Earth First!ers and radical environmentalists—with suspicion, the fact remained that their radical activism clearly targeted property first and foremost, preventing an easy characterization of the organization and its members as terrorists. Practices like tree-spiking might have offered a deterrent by threatening human life, but the intention of the act was not to take the life of the logger or sawmill operator. Indeed, historian Bron Taylor has argued that the structure and ethical framework of radical environmental groups, particularly Earth First!, have made them resistant to violence against humans. While incorporating revolutionary language that appears to bring their direct action to the brink of violence, Taylor points to various factors, including its relative egalitarianism, emphasis on the sacredness of life generally, and lack of social isolation, to argue that “most radical environmentalists refuse to deploy sabotage that risks injuries to humans.”⁴⁰⁸ Thus, conservatives necessarily had to rely upon an understanding of violence that equated the destruction of individuals’ livelihoods with the destruction of the individual in order to justify their claims that radical environmentalists were terrorists.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁷ Stammer, “Environment Radicals Target of Probe Into Lumber Mill Accident.”

⁴⁰⁸ Bron Taylor, “Religion, Violence and Radical Environmentalism: From Earth First! To the Unabomber to the Earth Liberation Front,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 10, no. 4 (2007): 9–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546559808427480>.

⁴⁰⁹ Along these lines, political scientist Sean Fleming analyzes what he calls the “Peaceful Environmentalist Thesis” advanced in recent years, which is substantially similar to the arguments of Bron Taylor. As Fleming explains, “The absence of lethal attacks by environmental activists is striking, no matter how terrorism is defined. Even if politically motivated sabotage does constitute terrorism, it is nonetheless remarkable that environmental activists have limited themselves to ‘terrorism’ against property. The generalization that environmentalists do not use lethal violence... looks to be one of the strongest generalizations that contemporary political science has to offer.” Sean Fleming, “Searching for Ecoterrorism: The Crucial Case of the Unabomber,” *American Political Science Review*

The clearest counterexample to the trend that Taylor describes, however, must be Ted Kaczynski, the so-called “Unabomber.” Infamous for his string of mail bombings stretching from 1978 to 1995, Kaczynski posed an interesting challenge to the idea that radical environmentalists posed little threat of lethal violence. A Harvard-educated mathematics professor at UC Berkeley, Kaczynski suddenly resigned and moved to the Montana backcountry, where he sought to live self-sufficiently and autonomously. It was also in this moment that he was radicalized to begin his bombing campaign against modern technological society, which he blamed for the deterioration of the human condition and psyche. Beginning with his first bombing in 1978, Kaczynski almost entirely targeted symbols of technological development, such as university professors, airline companies, and computer store owners. Indeed, the title of the then-anonymous bomber taken up by the news media, Unabomber, came from the FBI’s own designation for him: University and Airline Bomber.⁴¹⁰

It wasn’t until 1995, however, that the specifics of Kaczynski’s motivations behind the bombings became clear. After killing three and injuring twenty-three others since 1978, Kaczynski now mailed both the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* his personally-written manifesto, *Industrial Society and Its Future*. His instructions in an accompanying letter were clear. If the newspapers were to publish his manifesto in full, he would end his bombing campaign. After some reluctance, the newspapers finally agreed to publish excerpts, which ended up being Kaczynski’s undoing. His brother, recognizing the

118, no. 4 (2024): 1986–99, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305542300148X>; Some citations that Fleming references to build his “Peaceful Environmentalist Theory” include: David Thomas Sumner and Lisa M. Weidman, “Eco-Terrorism or Eco-Tage: An Argument for the Proper Frame,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 20, no. 4 (2013): 855–76, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/ist086>; Michael Loadenthal, “‘Eco-Terrorism’: An Incident-Driven History of Attack (1973-2010),” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 11, no. 2 (2017): 1–33.

⁴¹⁰ Some works going into Kaczynski and his background include: Alston Chase, *Harvard and the Unabomber: The Education of an American Terrorist* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2003); Brett A. Barnett, “20 Years Later: A Look Back at the Unabomber Manifesto,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 6 (2015): 60–71; Kirkpatrick Sale, “Unabomber’s Secret Treatise: Is There Method in His Madness,” *Nation*, September 25, 1995.

language and tone of the published manifesto as similar to letters he had received, alerted the FBI, leading to Kaczynski's arrest at his Montana cabin in 1996.⁴¹¹

Kaczynski's manifesto and arrest offered a puzzling contrast to the nonviolent image that mainstream—and radical—environmentalists had worked to build for themselves over the previous years. Kaczynski's explicit targeting of humans as part of his bombing campaign seemed to confirm conservative attacks on environmentalists as being driven by radical and potentially violent ideologies. Indeed, in many ways, Kaczynski's manifesto easily fit the bill of an environmental extremist, radicalized into violent direct action. His ideology was explicitly anti-technology and urged the return—violently if necessary—of human society to pre-modernity. Furthermore, in noting the need of the anti-technology movement to offer a positive counterexample to technological growth, Kaczynski proposed the model of nature. Abstract nature, separate from the corruption of human technology, offered a compelling alternative that the anti-technology movement could rally around and present to the general public.⁴¹²

This use of nature as an instrumental organizational tool, however, highlights the difficulty of easily categorizing Kaczynski's extremism as environmentalist. While his anti-technology and anti-growth mentality certainly fit alongside environmentalism, they worked ultimately towards different ends. Political scientist Sean Fleming particularly notes the lack of a clear environmental motivation in his bombing campaign. He sought the end of technological advance for human ends, not environmental ends; the primary beneficiary was humanity, not nature. Indeed, Kaczynski's singular mention of nature in his manifesto was an effective rhetorical tool to advance human interests. This leads Fleming to consider Kaczynski as primarily an anti-technology activist rather than an environmental activist—a position he shares with other scholars like Bron Taylor.⁴¹³

⁴¹¹ Robert D. McFadden, "Times and the Washington Post Grant Mail Bomber's Demand: Share Cost of Printing His Manifesto in Capital," *New York Times*, Sept. 19, 1995; David Johnston, "Long and Twisting Trail Led to Unabom Suspect's Arrest," *New York Times*, April 5, 1996.

⁴¹² A copy of Kaczynski's manifesto can be found in his collected writings: Theodore John Kaczynski, *Technological Slavery: The Collected Writings of Theodore J. Kaczynski, a.k.a. "The Unabomber"* (Feral House, 2010).

⁴¹³ Fleming, "Searching for Ecoterrorism."

As Kaczynski's manifesto was published and he was arrested, the implications of this debate on the ongoing issue of violence in the environmental politics of the 1990s were clear to nearly all parties involved. While some environmental writers like Kirkpatrick Sale dismissed Kaczynski as an anti-technology activist only tangentially related to environmental activism in a vein similar to later scholars, others were more vocal about a connection between Kaczynski's ideas and those of the environmental movement, particularly its radical edges.⁴¹⁴ Indeed, many conservatives and Wise Use activists began to play up the connection of Kaczynski to Earth First!. Barry Clausen, a conservative private investigator hired by timber companies to infiltrate Earth First!, argued that Kaczynski was a member of Earth First! and had taken part in the organization's meetings and protests—points amplified by Wise Use leader Ron Arnold and conservative activist Linda Chavez. Thus, for conservative activists stymied by the lack of a clear violent impulse in radical environmentalist direct action, the case of the Unabomber offered seemingly compelling proof that radical environmentalists posed a danger not only to private property but also to the general public.⁴¹⁵

Fear, Anxiety, and Conspiracy Theories in Environmental Politics

Importantly, the actual violence taking place in environmental debates was less significant than the fear and paranoia surrounding that violence. The reaction by conservatives—especially in the rural West—to the perceived threat of radical environmentalism led to growing fears of violence, fostering heightened anxieties and paranoia that would eventually develop into complex conspiracy theories that, in turn, helped to contribute to the actual violence of the moment. These rural Westerners increasingly fixated on their longstanding distrust of environmentalists to argue that they were not simply misguided in

⁴¹⁴ Sale, "Is There Method in His Madness."

⁴¹⁵ Arnold, *Ecoterror*; Linda Chavez, "Media Ignoring Unabomber's Environmentalist Connection," *The Californian* (Salinas, CA), April 11, 1996; See also: Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair, "Beat the Devil: Earth First!, The Press and the Unabomber," *Nation*, May 6, 1996.

their pursuit of federal environmental protections, but maliciously seeking the end of rural Western livelihoods, if not their outright removal from the land.⁴¹⁶

In many ways, these emergent conspiracy theories of the late 1980s and 1990s shared important connections and continuities with earlier attacks on the environmental movement. Environmentalists were, from the very beginning in the 1970s, often perceived as “anti-growth” and a threat to rural Western communities that relied on the extraction or intensive use of Western natural resources on both public and private land. Castigated as the “outsider” and the “elite” in populist framings of the issue, environmentalism became a bogeyman for rural, Western conservatives seeking to explain the growing regulation of their land use decisions. In language pioneered by the conservatives, such as James Watt, environmentalists had been attacked for over a decade for their perceived commitment to an ideology that seemed diametrically opposed to the interests of those rural, Western conservatives, if not the entire country. For instance, conservative business leaders helped to fashion the a celebration of a so-called “Growth Day” on April 17, 1980, implicitly countering the tenth anniversary of Earth Day on April 22 as being anti-growth.⁴¹⁷ Later, Watt’s 1981 charge that environmentalists were “elite groups” seeking to “lock away” public lands for their own use necessarily relied upon an implication of nefarious intent.⁴¹⁸ It wasn’t just a bad idea to “lock away” these lands; it was also part of a conscious conspiracy by urban Eastern elites against the interests of the rural Western People. Likewise, Watt’s joke that the real division in the United States wasn’t between “Republicans and Democrats” but rather “liberals and Americans” again highlighted the otherness and outsider status of environmentalism and liberalism.⁴¹⁹ Thus, for years,

⁴¹⁶ Good summary of Western anxieties and anger during this period is: Skillen, *This Land Is My Land*.

⁴¹⁷ Merrill Brown, “Coalition Attacks Big Business,” *New York Times* (New York), April 18, 1980; “Growth Day” was contextualized as part of an emergent anti-environmentalism of the 1970s in Alex J. Boynton, “Enemies of Society and Prophets of Doom: Growth and the 1970s Origins of Conservative Anti Environmentalism,” Conference Paper, Annual Meeting of the American Society for Environmental History, Denver, CO, April 6, 2024; For more on the origins of a conservative anti-environmentalism in the 1970s, see: Boynton, “Confronting the Environmental Crisis?”

⁴¹⁸ Stall, “Watt Raps ‘Elite Groups’ in Environment Movement.”

⁴¹⁹ Johnson and Gray, “Watt Pledges Aid For San Luis Dam.”

anti-environmentalism had built up a language to describe the environmental movement in implicit conspiratorial terms.⁴²⁰

But in the late 1980s and 1990s, the pitch of anti-environmentalist rhetoric had begun to reach new, more violent levels that explicitly attacked not only the merits of environmentalist policies but also the motivations and national loyalty of environmentalists themselves. Building on the older populist rhetorical structures of “environmentalist as elitist” and “environmentalist as outsider,” much of the anti-environmentalist rhetoric began to add the explicit framing of “environmentalist as conspirator.” Environmentalists were not simply pursuing bad policies innocently or naively, but with conscious ill intent. Environmental restrictions on logging, for instance, were not simply seeking the protection of old-growth forests or the spotted owl, but rather the outright destruction of the timber industry. Regulations on public land grazing were not simply the conservation of soil or water resources or the protection of endangered species, but rather a conscious effort to destroy the livelihoods of ranchers and force them off the land. Thus, Wise Use leader Charles Cushman was not speaking metaphorically when he said that environmentalists were seeking “cultural genocide” of rural Westerners.⁴²¹ For Cushman and many in his audience, environmental and land use regulations clearly appeared to be directed towards the destruction of their culture and livelihoods.⁴²²

The proliferation of these conspiracy theories in rural Western circles, however, also led to their blending and merging. Activists perceived similarities between the ill intent they saw behind the attacks on both logging and ranching, for instance, and therefore attributed both to the same source. Even further, conspiracy theories began to incorporate evidence and topics that extended beyond strictly environmental issues. The result was conspiracy theories that became increasingly complex in both breadth and depth. It

⁴²⁰ For more on earlier attacks on environmentalism in the 1970s and early 1980s, see: Decker, *The Other Rights Revolution*; Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness*.

⁴²¹ Cockle, “Cattle-Grazing Advocates Picket Environmentalists’ Conference.”

⁴²² Skillen, *This Land Is My Land*.

was now no longer enough to say that “elite” environmentalists sought to “lock away” natural resources as James Watt had once argued. One needed to explain why and to what end.

In a decade suffused by conspiratorial thinking—reflected by the popularity of cultural media like the TV show *X-Files*—the answer to these questions increasingly emphasized not simply environmentalism, but rather a broader enemy centered in the federal government. Given the now decades-long trend of declining trust in the American government noted by historians like Kathryn Olmsted, the idea of a nefarious government conspiring with environmentalists against the interests of the American public was not a difficult leap for rural conservatives sensing a long shadow behind the environmental movement. Yet here, environmentalism figures not as an end in and of itself, but rather as a means to an end. In these conspiracy theories, environmentalists remained an enemy but also worked as pawns or a front for a much more abstract or shadowy evil. Given the central role of federal land use and environmental regulations, that evil often took the form of ambiguously defined groups seeking the establishment of a more authoritarian or totalitarian federal government that necessarily threatened the freedoms of enterprise, speech, and religion cherished by conservatives. The goal of the conspiratorial enemy, in this sense, was seen not simply as environmental protection or sustainable development, but rather as an all-encompassing power that threatened the lives, liberties, and livelihoods of the American people.⁴²³

These conspiracy theories about the corruption of the American political project, however, risked the delegitimization of concepts central to conservative ideological identity—including among the far-

⁴²³ See broadly: Ganz, *When the Clock Broke*; Jesse Walker, *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory* (HarperCollins, 2013); Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Historian Jesse Robertson has written many public-facing articles capturing much of the conspiratorial mindset of the 1990s, see: Jesse Robertson, “Give Us This Doomsday: Climate Conspiracies Anticipated Both Right-Wing Denialism and the New End Times,” *The Baffler*, July 9, 2024, <https://thebaffler.com/latest/give-us-this-doomsday-robertson>; Jesse Robertson, “Close Encounters: The U.S. Government’s Long History of Stoking UFO Conspiracies,” *The Baffler*, February 23, 2023, <https://thebaffler.com/latest/close-encounters-robertson>; Jesse Robertson, “The Truth Was Out There: On the Legacy of Art Bell,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 22, 2022, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-truth-was-out-there-on-the-legacy-of-art-bell/>.

right—requiring an even more complicated enemy from the outside. A wide range of conservatives had long maintained claims of connection to the ideology of the American founding and early republic, presenting themselves as working to conserve the social, intellectual, and political heritage of American republicanism against crude majoritarian democracy and destructive modernism. For these nationalistic conservatives who maintained an intense affinity for the U.S. Constitution, at least the original document and the first ten amendments, the idea of corruption in American politics leading towards totalitarianism implied the imperfection of American political structures set out by that Constitution.

The solution to this dilemma was to find the root of the conspiracy outside the American republic, undermining it only through deceitful infiltration and manipulation of the American people. Historians ranging from Richard Hofstadter to Erika Lee have noted the intense fixation of American political paranoia on outsiders—whether they took the form of Catholics, Jews, or immigrants writ large. For most of the twentieth century, however, suspicion of outside undermining of American political and social institutions remained focused on Communism and the United Nations. Seen by many on the political right as, respectively, existential threats to American republicanism and sovereignty, the two became repeatedly targeted as the bogeyman of American conservatism in the mid-to-late twentieth century. Fears regarding the threat of communism reached widespread mainstream appeal in the context of Cold War anti-communism. Some conservatives collectively regarded liberals and the non-communist left as secret supporters of the Soviet Union infiltrating the U.S. Government, fueling hunts for spies and secret communists across American political, social, and cultural institutions under the so-called Red Scare of McCarthyism in the late 1940s and 1950s.⁴²⁴

Fears about outside threats, however, increasingly turned to focus not just on the Soviet Union and the threat of communist infiltration. The United Nations quickly came to be regarded with suspicion as well. Many conservatives, including the infamous John Birch Society, argued that U.S. participation in

⁴²⁴ For more on the history of these conspiracy theories targeting the “outside,” see: Lee, *America for Americans*; Walker, *The United States of Paranoia*; Olmsted, *Real Enemies*, 83–110; Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Harvard University Press, 1996).

the United Nations and its various organizations, programs, and treaties represented a surrender of American national sovereignty. Furthermore, many conservatives saw the same threat of communism behind the United Nations' goals of internationalism, believing that the loss of sovereignty was an intentional plan by the Soviet Union and its American infiltrators to weaken the United States ahead of a communist takeover. Indeed, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s and early 1990s, conservatives continued to warn that the United Nations represented a threat, arguing that the collapse of the Soviet bloc in no way ended the danger of giving up national sovereignty to an organization that they saw as seeking the establishment of a world government that threatened American freedoms.⁴²⁵

Indeed, the shifts occurring in the 1990s as the Cold War ended and the United States uneasily shifted into its new role as the sole global superpower helped to amplify conservative conspiracy theories into an even grander form that many referred to as the "New World Order." Taken from comments made by President George H.W. Bush in a 1990 address, speaking about the possibilities afforded by the end of the Cold War, many took the comments as proof of a conspiracy by the U.S. government with international forces to subvert the existing republican order of American constitutional government.⁴²⁶

Here, the merging of conspiracy theories allowed for increasingly complex and systemic explanations of seemingly distinct policy issues. Debates over environmental and land use regulations in the West—loaded with rural Westerners' self-perception as victims of a conspiracy against their livelihoods—now joined with debates over topics ranging from gun control to the growing militarization of police agencies like the FBI and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF). To conservative

⁴²⁵ Olmsted, *Real Enemies*, 103, 115; Huntington, *Far-Right Vanguard*, 148; Walsh, *Taking America Back*; For a brief summation of mainstream conservative fears regarding the United Nations throughout the mid-to-late twentieth century, see: Barry Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative* (Victor Publishing Co., Inc., 1960).

⁴²⁶ Hemmer, *Partisans*; Ganz, *When the Clock Broke*, 11–12.

conspiracy theorists trying to follow the thread of their particular bogeyman, these different issues merged into a simple story of a totalitarian plot against them.⁴²⁷

For many conservatives, the threat of this perceived plot encouraged organizing that challenged the political establishment but nevertheless worked within existing political institutions. The insurgent candidacy of paleoconservative Patrick Buchanan traded heavily in the conspiratorial mindset that attacked not only liberal policies but also the “moderate” Republican establishment that acquiesced to them. This included major domestic social issues like gay rights and abortion, but a defining feature of the paleoconservative position was, in fact, centered on foreign policy. Targeting the varied policies and institutions of internationalism and globalism, paleoconservatives like Buchanan castigated international free trade, military commitments, and immigration. Recycling old conservative language like the focus on “America First,” paleoconservatives and the far-right raised serious objections against longstanding assumptions of American foreign policy, such as the bipartisan commitment to the post-Second World War international order.⁴²⁸

A centerpiece of these attacks was the perceived threat of the United Nations. As discussed above, conservative fears about the dismantling of American sovereignty through participation in the United Nations had existed for decades, but the end of the Cold War brought new urgency to the issue. Threats to American sovereignty from the United Nations were seen everywhere. U.S. participation in international treaties like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights or the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights was argued by some to codify the destruction of American freedoms in the name of UN-defined substitutes. Indeed, the Aryan Nations explicitly argued that the two treaties would “allow the government to seize all privately owned property.”⁴²⁹ Meanwhile,

⁴²⁷ Stern, *A Force Upon the Plain*.

⁴²⁸ For strong coverage of the Buchanan Ganz, *When the Clock Broke*; Hemmer, *Partisans*; Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, 197–99.

⁴²⁹ James Wickstrom, “The American Farmer 20th Century Slave,” *Aryan Nations Calling our Nation*, No. 43 (Undated, c. 1980s), Found in Box 1, Folder 18, White Supremacy Research Collection, Coll 450, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

American military involvement in UN peacekeeping operations brought concerns about the specter of American troops serving in UN uniforms, under foreign military leadership, outside the rights and responsibilities of American military codes of conduct. The case of Specialist Michael New, an American soldier court martialed for refusing orders to serve in a UN uniform, became a cause célèbre among paleoconservatives and militias looking for proof of UN subversion of American sovereignty. Indeed, even Patrick Buchanan raised the issue during his 1996 campaign, using the incident to point to the need to “restore” the “Constitutional Republic.”⁴³⁰

But among these conspiracy theories targeting the United Nations, concern about the impact of specifically international environmental and land use treaties became a common rallying point. Beginning in the 1970s, the United Nations played a key role in organizing international responses to environmental problems. This included the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment, which initiated significant international cooperation on environmental issues, and the 1987 Montreal Protocol, which regulated chemicals contributing to the degradation of the ozone layer. By the beginning of the 1990s, the United Nations remained at the center of international environmental policymaking, with the most significant international summit on the issue held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Including the participation of most UN members, the Rio Earth Summit articulated the multivariate environmental crises coming into focus as the world approached the twenty-first century, including pollution, deforestation, declining natural resources, and climate change. While failing to come to any formal agreement on new international treaties, the conference did agree on broad goals and guidelines for planned growth that participating nations could practice to alleviate the most pressing environmental threats. Broadly termed “sustainable development,”

⁴³⁰ “Michael New Court-Martialed and Receives ‘Bad-Conduct Discharge,’” *Taking Aim*, Vol. 2, No. 10 (Jan. 1996), Box 3, Folder 31, White Supremacy Research Collection, Coll 450, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon; “Buchanan on the Stump: ‘Victory for a Cause,’” *New York Times*, Feb. 22, 1996; A fairly comprehensive primary account of New World Order conspiracies about the UN can be found in the John Birch Society’s *The New American* “Conspiracy” Issue, 1997, Found in Box 127, Folder 10, Dave Foreman Papers, CONS223, Conservation Collection, The Denver Public Library; A good summary of broader GOP concerns about the United Nations in the mid-1990s (including more moderate complaints) can be found in Barbara Crossette, “G.O.P. Makes an Issue of Replacing U.N. Chief,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1996.

the Rio Conference laid out the effective framework for ongoing efforts by the international community to respond to and eventually overcome international environmental problems.⁴³¹

In the paranoid atmosphere of the early 1990s, however, the seemingly innocuous international agreement to pursue sustainable development sparked intense controversy. International agreements coming out of the 1992 Earth Summit—such as the Convention on Biological Diversity or the so-called Agenda 21, calling for stakeholder participation in land use policymaking and decisions—became reframed in conservative media as a Trojan horse for international destruction of American sovereignty. Voluntary American commitment to the Rio Conference guidelines and goals now became a surrender of American freedoms and sovereignty to international forces seeking the subjugation of American communities.

Two key figures in popularizing these ideas among conservative audiences include conspiracy theorists Tom DeWeese and Henry Lamb. DeWeese, the conservative activist behind the American Policy Center, which published the eponymous *DeWeese Report*, focused much of his attention and articles on the issues of environmental overregulation and the threat of UN subversion of American freedoms.⁴³² Indeed, most of the issues of the *DeWeese Report* from 1995 to 2000 included at least one article attacking environmentalists or predicting a UN takeover through avenues like Agenda 21.⁴³³ Furthermore, DeWeese was a key figure in spreading these conspiracy theories to a wider audience, regularly taking part in the annual Conservative Political Action Conference, where he raised alarm over attacks on private property rights. Indeed, in one 1993 panel, DeWeese reiterated his belief that “the real

⁴³¹ For more on the history of international cooperation on environmental issues, see: Joyeeta Gupta, *The History of Global Climate Governance* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁴³² Thomas A. DeWeese Biographical Sketch, Box 126, Folder 10, Dave Foreman Papers, CONS223, Conservation Collection, The Denver Public Library.

⁴³³ A brief sampling of articles detailing the conspiracy theory include “‘Sustainable Development’ – Codeword for ‘This is a Stick-Up—Give Me Your Property’” (1996), “Real Threat of United Nations Not Being Debated” (1997), and “Is the Environmental Movement Based on Communism” (1999). See: Heartland Institute Collection, Box 63, Folders 1-3, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

goal of environmental zealots is the abolition of private property altogether.”⁴³⁴ Much more central to the propagation of conspiracy theories surrounding Agenda 21 and the Rio Conference, however, was Henry Lamb, head of the overlapping organizations Sovereignty International, Inc., and the environmentalist-sounding Environmental Conservation Organization (ECO).⁴³⁵ Lamb was a former construction company owner in Tennessee who blamed the United Nations and its treaties on biodiversity for forcing his company to lose swamp-draining jobs.⁴³⁶ Using this experience as a springboard, Lamb quickly emerged as a prolific writer and speaker on the threat he saw behind global governance by the United Nations, quickly establishing himself as an expert on the topic on speaking tours that included the Wise Use Movement’s Western States Coalition.⁴³⁷

Using ECO’s newsletter *ECO-Logic* and a variety of articles published everywhere from the *DeWeese Report* to the National Mining Association’s newsletter *Mining Voice* to even the Militia of Montana’s *Taking Aim*, Lamb attempted to draw attention to the threat of international environmental commitments.⁴³⁸ Again, these articles—especially those in *ECO-Logic*—emphasized conspiracy theories about UN environmental agreements. Summarizing the UN Conspiracy, Lamb argues in one article that

⁴³⁴ “CPAC ’93 Marked By Great Optimism,” *Human Events* 53, No. 10 (March 6, 1993), 15; “Special: Complete Coverage of the 1996 Conservative Political Action Conference,” *Human Events* 52, No. 9 (March 8, 1996), 17.

⁴³⁵ Henry Lamb defended his use of environmentalist-sounding names as part of a conscious effort to reclaim the language of “conservation.” As he explained in a *Wall Street Journal* article on the issue in 1995, it was the environmentalists who were “deliberately trying to co-opt words like ‘conservation,’ when what they really [sought was] ‘preservation.’” Building upon the idea of conservative environmentalism developed by Watt and the Wise Use Movement, Lamb argued that conservationists like himself “believe in responsible stewardship and wise use of resources” while preservationists “want to lock everything away.” See: Timothy Aeppel, “Easy Being Green: Pick a Name Bearing the Sounds of Nature,” *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 4, 1995.

⁴³⁶ John J. Fialka, “A Curious Assortment of Adversaries Assemble in Kyoto for Talks on Global Warming Treaty,” *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 5, 1997.

⁴³⁷ Heather Abel, “Wise-Users Try to Whip Up a Recipe for Their Own Salvation,” *High Country News*, October 14, 1996.

⁴³⁸ For articles published outside *ECO-Logic*, see for example: Henry Lamb, “Spotlight on the Left: Global Forum on the Reinvention of Government,” *DeWeese Report* 5, No. 3 (March 1999), Found in Heartland Institute Collection, Box 63, Folder 1, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Henry Lamb, “Be Careful What You Wish For,” *Mining Voice* 6, No. 3 (May/June 2000), 18; Henry Lamb, “Stealing Our Children’s Birthright,” *Taking Aim* 6, No. 5 (Nov. 1999), Found in Box 3, Folder 33, White Supremacy Research Collection, Coll 450, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon; Henry Lamb, “Sustainable Development,” *Taking Aim* 7, No. 8 (c. 2000), Found in Box 3, Folder 35, White Supremacy Research Collection, Coll 450, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

the “bland” language of the accords reached at the 1992 Earth Summit—the Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the broader Agenda 21—masks the more nefarious danger of the resulting Conference of Parties (COP) which were empowered to develop protocols to achieve the objectives set out at the Earth Summit.⁴³⁹ Pointing, for instance, to the COP-developed Global Biodiversity Assessment (GBA) in 1995, Lamb attempts to lump together the wide array of UN bureaucrats, environmental lobbyists, and scholars into a single conspiracy seeking extreme environmental ends. The GBA’s simple citation of one wilderness proposal by Dave Foreman’s Wildlands Project—explicitly acknowledged by the GBA to be “controversial” and “perhaps over-ambitious”—is instead portrayed as the UN seeking to set aside over fifty percent of land as wilderness, with the rest facing significant restrictions on use. A complex interplay of different institutions and interest groups is, thus, reduced to a conspiracy that threatens Americans’ homes and livelihoods and “is being implemented in America without legislative authorization, without Congressional debate, and without public awareness of the consequences.”⁴⁴⁰ Indeed, even when one acknowledged that the U.S. had not, in fact, ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity, the urgency remained. Kent Howard, President of the National Federal Lands Conference, argued in 1994 that while conservatives had succeeded in helping to stop ratification of the agreement, further vigilance was needed because Clinton

⁴³⁹ Continuing the trend of conservatives attempting to establish their own variation of environmentalism, Lamb contrasts the “anthropocentrists,” who rightfully see themselves as the most significant life forms on the planet and therefore “have a special responsibility, as stewards of the planet, to care for and nurture all of nature,” from “biocentrists” who believe humans have no greater value than other species. Furthermore, Lamb argues, it is the influence of biocentrists—what he calls the “green view”—over the United Nations’ environmental programs that make them dangerous. “The Debate: An Overview,” *ECO-Logic*, No. 26 (May 1995), Found in Heartland Institute Collection, Box 65, Folder 5, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

⁴⁴⁰ Later in the same edition of *ECO-Logic*, a separate article details the particular threat of the Wildlands Project as the source of these biocentric wilderness proposals supposedly dominating discourse at the UN. See: “The Wildlands Project,” *ECO-Logic*, No. 26 (May 1995), Found in Heartland Institute Collection, Box 65, Folder 5, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; “The Debate: An Overview,” *ECO-Logic*, No. 26 (May 1995), Found in Heartland Institute Collection, Box 65, Folder 5, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; For the GBA, see: United Nations Environment Programme, commissioning body, V.H. Heywood and R.T. Watson, *Global Biodiversity Assessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 993; The Wildlands Project proposal by R.F. Noss can be found at: R.F. Noss, “The Wildlands Project Land Conservation Strategy,” *Wild Earth* (special issue), 10-25.

would inevitably seek its ratification again, given the "goal of establishing the New World Order through the United Nations by 1995" with the result of "no election in the United States in 1996."⁴⁴¹

Looking specifically at Agenda 21—what Lamb refers to as the “soft law” version of the biocentric vision spelled out in the international treaties and COPs—Lamb used a similar approach. Putting a conspiratorial spin on UN reports about American implementation of standards on population distribution, education, agriculture, and biodiversity, Lamb concluded that “the ultimate objective of Agenda 21 [was the establishment of] ‘international norms’ of personal behavior that are dictated by a handful of the world’s enlightened elite who believe they know best how people ought to live”—without any oversight by Congress or the public.⁴⁴² More illustratively, Lamb argued that if one wanted to understand what sustainable development prescribed by Agenda 21 looked like, one should look at Sweden:

Government essentially dictates which businesses are allowed to operate, and which are not; what children are taught in schools, and what products are available for consumption... gasoline prices, now at a historic low in the United States, are still \$5 per gallon... due to taxes imposed to subsidize inefficient, non-viable ‘sustainable’ alternative energy sources.⁴⁴³

Thus, Agenda 21 and sustainable development, for Lamb, were ultimately the pathway to the longstanding conservative bogeyman of socialism.

Another conspiracy theory about international environmental commitments influenced an even broader segment of the conservative coalition. Situated alongside well-known programs like the World Heritage Sites, the Man and the Biosphere Program (MAB) was established under the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization in 1970 to provide an integrated approach towards “solving management problems arising from the interactions between human activities and natural

⁴⁴¹ Form Letter, Kent Howard to Members of NFLC, Dec. 27, 1994, Box 127, Folder 10, Dave Foreman Papers, CONS223, Conservation Collection, The Denver Public Library.

⁴⁴² “Agenda 21 Implementation,” *ECO-Logic*, No. 44 (May/June 1998), Found in Heartland Institute Collection, Box 65, Folder 1, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

⁴⁴³ “What is a Sustainable Community?,” *ECO-Logic*, No. 46 (Spring 1999), Found in Heartland Institute Collection, Box 65, Folder 2, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

systems.”⁴⁴⁴ Encompassing hundreds of “biosphere reserves” across the United States, the MAB Program helped to foster collaboration between officials and researchers around the globe. Most clearly signified by signage at National Parks designating them as “international biosphere reserves,” the casual observer might not think much of it. Yet, the notion of celebrated sites of American natural beauty like national parks being part of international programs that theoretically gave international actors authority over them proved too much for those already looking at the international community with nationalistic suspicion. For paleoconservatives and environmental opponents, national parks often—but not always—served as a rare area of bipartisan support. Often termed the United States’ “crown jewels,” the National Park System, even among conservatives, became a valuable rhetorical symbol of American exceptionalism. Thus, when national parks in the early 1990s began to receive new signs noting their status as “international biosphere reserves,” many began to react with alarm.⁴⁴⁵

“Fringe” versus “Mainstream”?

Indeed, the case of the reaction against the International Biosphere Reserve Program only highlights the receptivity of the broader conservative movement to anti-environmentalist conspiracy theories about the United Nations. While more radical conservative activists like Lamb and even the Militia of Montana’s *Taking Aim* obviously attacked the program as an assault on American sovereignty and territorial integrity—arguing that they were another step alongside Agenda 21 or the Convention on Biological Diversity towards “physical restructuring of society” or an “open invitation” by federal bureaucrats to the international community “to interfere in U.S. domestic land use decisions”—the idea of international control of the National Park System also drew significant mainstream reactions.⁴⁴⁶ Rep.

⁴⁴⁴ *The United States Man and the Biosphere Program* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. MAB Secretariat & U.S. Dept. of State, 1996).

⁴⁴⁵ For more on the nationalistic nature of national parks, see: Mary E. Stuckey, *For the Enjoyment of the People: The Creation of National Identity in American Public Lands* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2023).

⁴⁴⁶ “The U.S. Biosphere Reserve Program,” *ECO-Logic*, No. 27 (July/Aug. 1995), Found in Heartland Institute Collection, Box 65, Folder 5, Hoover Institution Library & Archives; Doug Fiedor, “The Biosphere Farce Again,” *Taking Aim: The Militiaman’s Newsletter* 5, No. 10 (April 1999), Found in Coll. 450, Box 3, Folder 32, White Supremacy Research Collection, University of Oregon Special Collection, Eugene, OR.

Donald Young (R-Alaska) sponsored legislation entitled the American Land Sovereignty Protection Act with twenty-six cosponsors in 1996, requiring Congressional approval for any designations of American land as part of an international program. While the bill failed to pass the House of Representatives in 1996, he tried again the following year—this time securing 174 cosponsors and passing the House with a vote of 236 to 191. During debate on the bill, Young spoke strongly on the need for Congress to reassert its authority against international forces, even arguing that those not supporting the bill were “against the Constitution of America.”⁴⁴⁷ The Senate, however, failed to act on the bill, leaving it floundering in committee. Similar legislation would be introduced by Young again in 1999 with 183 cosponsors, with the bill again passing the House on a voice vote. But again, the Senate would fail to move the bill out of committee. Yet, even with the failure of the bill to become law, the clear interest of mainstream Republicans in acting on the issue showed the widespread appeal of concerns about UN incursion on American sovereignty.⁴⁴⁸

The lines between the conservative political fringe and establishment only became further blurred when considering the role of far-right politicians like Nye County, Nevada, Commissioner Richard Carver and Idaho Congressional Representative Helen Chenoweth. These frankly radical conservative politicians functioned as an important bridge between the conservative radicals and mainstream, allowing for ideas that might have otherwise been dismissed as fringe to gain some credence and legitimacy.

Regularly carrying a battered copy of the U.S. Constitution in his shirt pocket, “Dick” Carver quickly established himself as one of the few Western politicians to unequivocally support efforts to roll back federal power in the West—with force if necessary. Commissioner in the isolated and rural Nye County, Nevada, Carver was a key force behind the county’s participation in what was known as the “County Movement.” Though varying in specifics, all locations that embraced the County Movement—

⁴⁴⁷ Rep. Don Young, speaking on HR 901, 105th Cong., 1st Session., *Congressional Record* 143 (Oct. 7, 1997): H 8538.

⁴⁴⁸ See also: Matthew Machado, “Mounting Opposition to Biosphere Reserves and World Heritage Sites in the United States Sparked by Claims of Interference with National Sovereignty,” *Colorado Environmental Law Journal* 9, No. 3 (1997), 120-29.

including Catron County, New Mexico, and Boundary County, Idaho, in addition to Nye County—argued that the county was the supreme level of government, with total authority over the land and activities taking place within its jurisdiction. Substantively, this took the form of the counties passing ordinances that mandated county approval for federal law enforcement activities and land management decisions. In the case of Carver’s Nye County, the county continued longstanding Sagebrush Rebellion arguments to assert that not only did the county maintain authority over its land, but it also owned the land. To support his position, Carver even took physical action himself, bulldozing open a road closed by the Forest Service in Toiyabe National Forest in Nye County on July 4, 1994, in front of an armed crowd. While Carver was primarily interested in using the incident to spark a lawsuit that he believed would result in the Supreme Court ruling in the county’s favor—a legal case that he ultimately lost—he was later flippant about the potential for violence in the situation. Reportedly, Carver was known to brag on a later national speaking tour about the incident, noting that if either of the two Forest Service officials who had briefly attempted to stop him had drawn a weapon, “fifty people with sidearms would have drilled him.” Clearly, elected office was no barrier to radical or violent language.⁴⁴⁹

Meanwhile, Helen Chenoweth quickly became recognized as among the most radical conservative politicians in 1990s federal politics. A longtime Republican activist in Idaho, Chenoweth served as executive director of the Idaho Republican Party from 1975 to 1977 before serving as a consultant or campaign worker for various Idaho Republicans. When she ran for the House of Representatives in 1994, she proudly held up her connections and support among the right and far right, ranging from Wise Use leaders like Charles Cushman to the John Birch Society. However, she also got support and volunteers during the campaign from militia leaders in Idaho, including Samuel Sherwood, founder of the United States Militia Association. In office, Chenoweth reiterated all of the key points of

⁴⁴⁹ Michael Anderson, “County Movement Stumbles,” *Wilderness Society New Voices*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (April 4, 1996), Found in Box 126, Folder 17, Dave Foreman Papers, CONS223, Conservation Collection, The Denver Public Library; Letter, Rep. George Miller to Don Young, on violence against federal officers, May 8, 1995, Box 126, Folder 7, Dave Foreman Papers, CONS223, Conservation Collection, The Denver Public Library.

the Wise Use Movement, including the idea that there could be an environmental policy that—in the words of one speech—promoted “the wise use of America’s natural resources” while avoiding the environmental movement’s “emotional spiritualism that threatens the very foundation of our society, by eroding basic principles of our Constitution.”⁴⁵⁰

More substantively, however, Chenoweth was skilled in using Wise Use talking points to incite her base and thereby draw public attention to Western issues—especially those opposing the environmental movement. Appointed to chair the newly created House Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health, Chenoweth was able to use the position not only to push for increased logging on public lands—even threatening to slash the Forest Service budget unless they increased timber production—but also to target environmental protestors. In 1998, she demanded that the Forest Service complete a report on “eco-terrorism in the national forests,” and lambasted the one-page response as “an insult to this subcommittee,” illustrating “how [un]seriously the Forest Service is combating eco-terrorism.”⁴⁵¹ Elsewhere, Chenoweth effectively used Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich’s “task force” organizational structure in Congress by scheduling task force meetings around the country, inviting overwhelmingly friendly witnesses and audiences—thereby intimidating environmentalists into not coming—and using the “hearing” as a platform to praise local industries and attack environmentalist policies.⁴⁵²

Violence and the Militia Movement

But beyond these relatively mainstream or “bridge” figures like Lamb, DeWeese, Carver, and Chenoweth, there also existed a much broader world of conspiratorial thinking about the United Nations,

⁴⁵⁰ Chenoweth Congressional Speech, Jan. 31, 1996, Box 125, Folder 27, Dave Foreman Papers, CONS223, Conservation Collection, The Denver Public Library; Daniel Coyle, “Are You Trying to Seduce Me, Mrs. Chenoweth?,” *Outside*, Nov. 1998; Katherine Mangu-Ward and Mike Lynch, “Exit Interviews: Do Term Limits Matter? Just Ask Congress’ Quitters,” *Reason*, Oct. 2000.

⁴⁵¹ Steve Holmer, “McCarthy Meets Warner Creek,” *Earth First!* 19, No. 6 (July 31, 1999).

⁴⁵² Brad Knickerbocker, “Green Debate Turning Democrats Red,” *Christian Science Monitor*, Nov. 7, 1995; Scott Allen, “Speaking in Wildlife’s Behalf: Gingrich Intervenes in Debate Over Endangered Species,” *Boston Globe*, May 28, 1995; For more on the “Task Force” System under Speaker Gingrich, see: U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *The Use of Task Forces in the House*, by Walter J. Oleszek, RS20421 (1999).

the U.S. Government, and environmentalism in general. Reflected in far-right ideas spread by the exploding militia and patriot movements, here conspiracy theories often lost the grounding of plausibility in ever more extreme and disorienting accusations of shadowy threats from all directions. While diverse in their particular forms and ideas, the far-right militia and patriot movements often shared a common intellectual connection to earlier far-right developments in at least implicitly emphasizing racialized threats represented by liberals, urban people of color, and especially immigrants. Many scholars have noted the importance of the white supremacist Aryan Nations as an early organizing center for the eventual militia movement, including the alleged involvement of Militia of Montana founder John Trochmann and militia cause célèbre Randy Weaver in the organization. Furthermore, the influence of white supremacists like Louis Beam in far-right circles cannot be overstated, with his encouragement of a guerrilla cell organization at the so-called Rocky Mountain Rendezvous of far-right leaders held in Estes Park, Colorado, in reaction to the BATF siege of Randy Weaver at Ruby Ridge—likewise attended by John Trochmann.⁴⁵³

But equally important to understanding the motivating ideology of the militia movement is anti-government sentiment. By the time of the militia movement's rise to prominence in the mid-1990s, the central organizing principle of the movement appeared to be more focused on the totalitarian threat of the federal government than on outright white supremacy. Scholars like D. J. Mulloy have, for instance, noted the ability of the Militia of Montana and other militia groups to at least mask the more white supremacist ideas of their organizations behind a more generally palatable anti-government and anti-gun control activism.⁴⁵⁴

Furthermore, by pointing to the conspiracy theories of federal tyranny and collaboration with totalitarian international actors, these radical groups were able to exploit the common paranoia and

⁴⁵³ See broadly: Stern, *A Force Upon the Plain*; Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Harvard University Press, 2018).

⁴⁵⁴ D. J. Mulloy, *American Extremism: History, Politics, and the Militia Movement* (Routledge, 2004), 8.

anxiety of the 1990s into effective organizing that went beyond the political goals and institutions of the mainstream right and even “bridge” figures. For the far-right represented by the militia movement, there was an explicit impulse to react not with simple political organizing, but outright military organizing. The solution to federal tyranny and surrender of national sovereignty in the militia movement’s eyes was to prepare and organize for violent resistance.

Indeed, the effective symbol of the militia movement in the 1990s became not simply the camouflage-clad militia training, but the central act of domestic political violence of the decade: the Oklahoma City Bombing. As word spread of perpetrator Timothy McVeigh’s arrest soon after the explosion of a truck bomb outside the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City, debate raged about the involvement of the broader militia movement. While most militia organizations strenuously disavowed any connection to perpetrator Timothy McVeigh or the bombing—even insisting as such in front of a Congressional hearing held on the militia movement—the facts of the case showed more than a coincidental connection of McVeigh to the broader cultural milieu surrounding the militia movement.⁴⁵⁵ McVeigh was a voracious reader of radical right literature. This included far-right newsletters such as *Spotlight* and the *Patriot Report*, as well as the conspiratorial document entitled Operation Vampire Killer 2000, written by Jack McLamb, a former Phoenix police officer, urging police and military to organize to stop the globalist takeover of the United States. Even more significant was his reportedly favorite book, *The Turner Diaries*, depicting white supremacist paramilitaries working to overthrow the U.S. government—notably at one point detonating a truck bomb outside the FBI Headquarters in an attack very similar to McVeigh’s bombing in Oklahoma City. McVeigh’s selection of April 19, 1995, for the bombing also had special significance to the broader far-right as the second anniversary of the BATF siege of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas. Indeed, later reports would soon

⁴⁵⁵ *The Militia Movement in the United States: Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology, and Government Information*, 104th Cong. 83-114 (1995) (Panel Consisting of John Trochmann, John DeCamp, Robert Fletcher, Ken Adams, James Johnson, and Norman Olson)

emerge that, while not formal members, McVeigh and accomplice Terry Nichols—as well as Nichols’s brother, James—had attended Michigan Militia meetings.⁴⁵⁶

While many politicians used these connections to attack the Militia Movement, others walked a much finer line of defending the principles behind the militias while condemning the actual Oklahoma City bombing. Part of this was simply political. When Chenoweth was confronted with her past association with Idaho militias, for instance, she now went to great efforts to distance herself from the appearance of active participation in the Militia Movement. Reports of the Militia of Montana’s sales of a videotaped speech she had given prior to her election, titled *America in Crisis*, were met with insistence by Chenoweth’s office that it was unauthorized and that she had no idea that they were using it. Yet, for all her efforts to distance herself from the militias themselves, she was still willing to accept limited association with militia leaders. Responding to critiques of militia support for her in the past, she responded that she appreciated “all people who worked for me and that includes [U.S. Militia Association founder] Sam Sherwood.”⁴⁵⁷ Moreover, even when talking about the Oklahoma City bombing itself, she equivocated that “while we can never condone [violence like the Oklahoma City bombing], we still must begin to look at the public policies that may be pushing people too far.”⁴⁵⁸

Indeed, while the Oklahoma City Bombing itself had nothing to do with environmental or land use policy, many joined Chenoweth in noting the similar anti-government impulses between McVeigh and the Militia Movement and the Wise Use Movement. By all accounts, McVeigh was primarily motivated by a fixation on guns and anger at increasing efforts by the federal government to regulate them. But soon after the bombing, some began to question the connection of militias to explicitly anti-environmentalist politics. David Helvarg, author of the recently published activist history of anti-

⁴⁵⁶ Robert D. McFadden, “One Man’s Complex Path to Extremism,” *New York Times*, April 23, 1995.

⁴⁵⁷ Dan Morgan, “Militias Flexing More Muscle in the Political Process,” *Washington Post*, May 1, 1995.

⁴⁵⁸ Joe Butler, “Chenoweth: Is Bombing Sign Feds Push People Too Far,” *Coeur d’Alene Press*, April 24, 1995; Sidney Blumenthal, “Her Own Private Idaho,” *New Yorker*, July 10, 1995; “Chenoweth Speech in Militia Catalog,” *Coeur d’Alene Press*, April 29, 1995.

environmentalism, *The War Against the Greens*, quickly spoke out in a *Nation* magazine article about the overlapping sets of activists and audiences of the Militia and Wise Use movements. As noted, the Nichols brothers had been involved with the Michigan Militia to varying degrees. More significantly, however, Helvarg and other environmental activists pointed to the National Federal Lands Conference, a significant early supporter of the Wise Use Movement, which at one point included Ron Arnold on its advisory board. The cover story of its November 1994 issue, Helvarg noted, had argued that martial law was imminent with FEMA poised to lead a tyrannical government that stripped the rights of the American people.⁴⁵⁹ While Arnold and others dismissed Helvarg's accusations of guilt by association, the similarities of rural Western anger directed towards both the federal government and environmentalism were notable enough that national journalists linked the two quite quickly after the bombing. Bridge figures like Dick Carver, who spoke and associated with both the Militia and Wise Use movements, were able to legitimize militias among Wise Use audiences, offering them a more militant alternative to their mainstream political organizing.⁴⁶⁰

Furthermore, when one zooms out from the specific violence of the Oklahoma City Bombing itself, and considers the lead-up to the bombing, one can begin to see the implications of Militia Movement violence and threat of violence in understanding environmental politics in the 1990s. Kenneth Stern, author of the landmark study of the Militia Movement, *A Force Upon the Plains*, notes that the Oklahoma City Bombing was not a sudden burst of violence. Militia paranoia and militancy had been

⁴⁵⁹ David Helvarg, "The Anti-Enviro Connection," *Nation*, May 22, 1995; Arnold dismissed the connection between militias and the Wise Use Movement as part of a concerted smear campaign by environmentalists. Notably, leftist columnist Alexander Cockburn, mentioned in Arnold's book as a "radical" but not an ecoterror "criminal," also dismissed Helvarg's attempts to connect the Wise Use and Militia movements as baseless and would later characterize the efforts of Ron Arnold, Linda Chavez, and Barry Clausen to connect the Unabomber to Earth First! as working along similar lines. Indeed, he goes so far as to characterize Ron Arnold's efforts as "revenge" for Helvarg's reaction to the 1995 bombing. See: Arnold, *Ecoterror*; Alexander Cockburn, "Beat the Devil: Who's Left? Who's Right?," *Nation*, June 12, 1995; Cockburn and St. Clair, "Beat the Devil: Earth First!, The Press and the Unabomber."

⁴⁶⁰ Keith Schneider, "Terror in Oklahoma: The Far Right," *New York Times*, April 26, 1995; For more on connections between the Wise Use and Militia movements, see: Tarso Ramos, "Extremists and the Anti-Environmental Lobby: Activities Since Oklahoma City," Box 124, Folder 13, Dave Foreman Papers, CONS223, Conservation Collection, The Denver Public Library; Email, Jonathan Stoke to Dave Foreman, on Militias, Box 126, Folder 37, Dave Foreman Papers, CONS223, Conservation Collection, The Denver Public Library.

growing for months previously, with more and more acts of violence being committed. Stern argues that in the months prior to the Oklahoma City Bombing, there was an explosion of rumors that the anticipated declaration of martial law was imminent, fueling a string of attacks on federal employees and property. Many of these attacks targeted land use agencies specifically, highlighting the specific anger by many perpetrators against federal environmental policies. In a letter to Rep. Don Young, chair of the House of Representatives Committee on Resources, ranking Democrat Rep. George Miller pleaded with Young to convene hearings to investigate these attacks. In one instance, Miller noted, the manager of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge had been threatened and his family harassed. In another case, a Fish and Wildlife Service employee in Reserve, New Mexico, “was told his head would be blown off for doing his job.”⁴⁶¹ These sorts of threats, Miller explained, led the U.S. Forest Service to release guidelines “urging employees to travel in pairs and stay in radio contact” as well as suggesting that employees “might not want to wear their uniforms or travel in official Forest Service vehicles.”⁴⁶² With the threat of violence against federal employees growing, even the federal government was preparing for the worst.⁴⁶³

Indeed, threats against federal land management employees did escalate into physical violence. On March 30, 1995—less than a month before the Oklahoma City Bombing—a district office of the Forest Service in Carson City, Nevada, was bombed along with a Forest Service campground outhouse in Toiyabe National Forest. The following morning, the Toiyabe National Forest Headquarters in Sparks, Nevada, was evacuated following a phone call threatening “you’re next.” While the bombings took place

⁴⁶¹ Letter, Rep. George Miller to Don Young, on violence against federal officers, May 8, 1995, Box 126, Folder 7, Dave Foreman Papers, CONS223, Conservation Collection, The Denver Public Library. A similar incident occurred near Las Vegas when BLM rangers attempted to stop Cliven Bundy (of recent infamy) from mining gravel on public lands. See: James Ridgeway and Jeffrey St. Clair, “Alone on the Firing Line: Federal Workers Hit by Wise Use Backlash,” *Wild Forest Review*, July/August 1995., July/August 1995.

⁴⁶² Letter, Rep. George Miller to Don Young, on violence against federal officers, May 8, 1995, Box 126, Folder 7, Dave Foreman Papers, CONS223, Conservation Collection, The Denver Public Library. Similar guidelines were issued by the Bureau of Land Management in Feb. 1995: Nevada Bureau of Land Management Employee Guide to Ownership of the Public Lands, Feb. 1995, Box 126, Folder 7, Dave Foreman Papers, CONS223, Conservation Collection, The Denver Public Library. See also: Timothy Noah, “Angry Threats Targeting Federal Employees Aren’t Limited to the Gun-Toting Law Enforcers,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 3, 1995.

⁴⁶³ Stern, *A Force Upon the Plain*; See also: Susan Schock, “Praise the Lord & Pass the Ammunition: Fear & Intimidation in Catron County,” *Wild Forest Review*, 1994.

in the evening after all employees had left and resulted in no injuries, the clear targeting of federal employees—with no claims of responsibility—set off a wave of controversy and mutual recrimination. Many initially looked at radicalized ranchers as responsible, with some pointing out the location of Toiyabe National Forest in Nye County, Nevada, where Dick Carver served as county commissioner. Carver, however, denied any involvement in the bombing and actually suggested the Forest Service itself might have been behind the bombing in order to gain sympathy. Others—facetiously—intimated Earth First! involvement. However, only a few months later, on August 4, 1995, the same Forest Service district ranger whose office was blown up in Carson City faced another bombing—this time targeting his van while it was parked in his home driveway. Again, no one was killed as he was away on a trip at the time, but his wife and children were in the house when the bomb exploded. And again, there were no claims of responsibility but plenty of accusations of involvement. The bombing of the Forest Service office and its aftermath, less than a month before Oklahoma City, highlighted the intensely paranoid nature of environmental politics that would only grow in the years that followed.⁴⁶⁴

In the aftermath of the Oklahoma City Bombing, the conditions that had fueled the increasingly paranoid and violent atmosphere surrounding the American West—especially surrounding environmental and land use policy—did not dissipate. Historians like D.J. Mulloy have noted the short-term growth of the Militia Movement after the bombing, even if that growth faltered after the new millennium. The Clinton Administration’s environmental and land use policies did not drastically change in the years following the violent chaos of 1995, and far-right conspiracy theories about the impending takeover of the

⁴⁶⁴ Early Alert Memos, BLM Deputy State Director for Nevada External Affairs to Washington Office BLM Officials, March 31, 1995, Box 126, Folder 7, Dave Foreman Papers, CONS223, Conservation Collection, The Denver Public Library; Jon Christensen, “Forest Service Bombed in Nevada,” *High Country News*, April 17, 1995; “Feds Offer \$25,000 for Forest Service Bomber,” *Ely Daily Times*, April 4, 1995; “2 Forest Service Sites Bombed Amid ‘Sagebrush Rebel’ Tensions,” *Arizona Republic*, April 3, 1995; “Not to Speculate, But Where Was Earth First!,” *Elko Daily Free Press*, April 5, 1995; “Forest Service Ranger’s Van Bombed,” *Sacramento Bee*, Aug. 6, 1995.

United States continued to develop with more and more fantastic elements that implicated environmentalism as a ploy to give power to the forces of the New World Order.⁴⁶⁵

The Militia of Montana (MoM), arguably one of the most influential militia organizations, was a major source for many of the conspiracy theories moving through the movement. Its newsletter, *Taking Aim*, included numerous articles over the second half of the 1990s that implied environmentalist participation in a New World Order plot against the American people. Some were, on their face, unbelievable unless you were inculcated into the idea of conspiracies everywhere around you. A letter published in the December 1996 issue of *Taking Aim* relates an anonymous woman's claim that while working as a volunteer at her local Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), she had been required to take part in a seminar meant to help volunteers deal with the emotional burden of euthanizing animals. In her letter, the woman claims that after the seminar during a dinner, the regional head of SPCA observing the seminar, a woman "who looked more like a man than a woman" began to break down before revealing that the seminar was actually part of training program to create "angels of death" who would be emotionally capable of killing humans amidst imminent famine and disease.⁴⁶⁶

This article exhibits many of the classic signs of Militia Movement conspiracies. The letter was published with the acknowledgement that the editors did "not have the power of verifying this woman's claims." "However, because of the content and seeming sincerity," they felt it was "only appropriate" to publish it "in hopes that others might find away (sic) to verify or discount the claims."⁴⁶⁷ Leaving this ambiguity allowed the Militia of Montana plausible deniability to share conspiratorial thinking without being accused of spreading clear falsehoods. It was left to audiences to decide whether the story was real or not. Furthermore, the story combines the various "enemies" of the militia movement into an

⁴⁶⁵ Mulloy, *American Extremism*, 4–6; Stern, *A Force Upon the Plain*, 11.

⁴⁶⁶ "Society for the Prevent of Cruelty to Animals Training 'Angels of Death?'" , *Taking Aim: The Militiaman's Newsletter*, Vol. 3, No. 9 (Dec. 1996). Found in Coll. 450, Box 3, Folder 32, White Supremacy Research Collection, University of Oregon Special Collection, Eugene, OR.

⁴⁶⁷ "Society for the Prevent of Cruelty to Animals Training 'Angels of Death?'" , *Taking Aim: The Militiaman's Newsletter*, Vol. 3, No. 9 (Dec. 1996). Found in Coll. 450, Box 3, Folder 32, White Supremacy Research Collection, University of Oregon Special Collection, Eugene, OR. Emphasis in Original.

amorphous conspiracy that permeated respected institutions in American life. In this case, masculine-appearing young women—clearly a subtext for queer people—are portrayed as training naïve local volunteers for an animal rights organization to be foot soldiers in the coming New World Order.

Other MoM conspiratorial articles, however, simply took existing conspiracy theories long spread by bridge figures like Henry Lamb or Helen Chenoweth and accentuated them, particularly through the medium of VHS tapes. *Taking Aim* newsletters included long catalogs of books, pamphlets, and VHS tapes for sale that shared, at least to an extent, the conspiratorial thinking of the MoM leaders like John Trochmann. A 1995 VHS documentary promoted in the catalog, *Behind the Green Curtain*, included numerous stories of people supposedly targeted by federal agencies for actions taken on their private property, along with commentary by well-known anti-environmentalists like Ron Arnold and Wayne Hage. The implication (and sometimes explicit lesson) of these stories was that the government's reaction was rooted in the goal of forcing people off their lands and circumventing private property protections to take ownership and control of the land for their own purposes.⁴⁶⁸

A similar VHS tape published and sold by the MoM was a videotaped speech of Helen Chenoweth from before her election to the House of Representatives in 1994. Talking about the threat of environmentalism to private property, Chenoweth touched on many of the same anecdotes and stories that had been covered in *Behind the Green Curtain*, but also attributed these actions to communist influence in the federal government that threatened Americans' freedoms and American sovereignty. As she explained in the example of the listing of the spotted owl as an endangered species, the interstate nature of the habitat meant the breaking down of "the sovereignty of states." Likewise, "acid rain is no respecter of the national boundaries between Canada and America. And that's part of the way we began to globalize and break down the sovereignty of this great nation."⁴⁶⁹ Sharing a more controlled form of the globalist

⁴⁶⁸ *Behind the Green Curtain: The Most Important Constitutional Confrontation in U.S. History*, Documentary (Video Free America, 1995), VHS, 39 minutes.

⁴⁶⁹ *America in Crisis*, Documentary, with Helen Chenoweth-Hage (Militia of Montana, n.d.), VHS, 58 minutes.

conspiracy theories, she reiterated the danger of losing national sovereignty on a political and spiritual level:

The bottom line is that if we are forced to place our world's resources in the hands of a few who are controlling a world government, that isn't what God planned for us, but that certainly is not in our best interest, we will certainly lose our liberties. And it begins with a breakdown of our state boundaries.⁴⁷⁰

Thus, Chenoweth argues, even seemingly small actions like the listing of the spotted owl as an endangered species can—in the hands of conspiratorial forces in the government—eventually lead to more significant threats.

However, in addition to these two other VHS tapes sold, the Militia of Montana also produced and sold its own tapes that spread its own variations on these stories that amplified the danger and scale of the New World Order. In their 1997 document, *America's Judgments: What Lies Ahead?*, MoM leader John Trochmann lays out a rough sketch of his vision of what the New World Order will look like and how it comes about. This includes many things common in Militia discourse, such as concerns about gun control and the militarization and federalization of police. But it also includes hallmarks of anti-environmentalist conspiracy theories that, nevertheless, go beyond the narratives presented by people like Chenoweth, Lamb, and Arnold. Conspiracy theories about Agenda 21, for instance, are repeated and Trochmann uses an unattributed map in the documentary produced by Dave Foreman's Wildlands Project to argue that under environmentalist policies, Western people would be concentrated in small, isolated, and easily controlled spaces with limited water resources that, in the rhetoric of militiamen, would be reminiscent of concentration camps. With Westerners kept in what are effectively inhospitable areas, Trochmann argued that the people would be at the mercy of the federal government and its globalist overlords. Elsewhere in the documentary, Trochmann shares even more elaborate conspiracy theories

⁴⁷⁰ *America in Crisis*.

such as the belief that the UN Security Council would begin to institute population control measures that necessarily involved the loss of freedom (in this case, bodily autonomy and the right to have a family on one's own terms).⁴⁷¹

“Green is the New Red”

What did change was the attention paid to that violence and who was blamed for it. If the period of 1994 to 1996 saw intense scrutiny of anti-environmentalist violence, the end of the decade saw a return to concerns about ecoterrorism that have, in many ways, defined our understanding of violence in environmental politics in the first years of the twenty-first century.⁴⁷²

The release of the Unabomber's manifesto in 1995 and his subsequent arrest in 1996, discussed above, gave conservatives and opponents of the environmental movement the room to shift the national conversation away from anti-environmentalist violence to again center on environmentalist violence. Conservative activists wrote extensively about the alleged connection between the Unabomber and Earth First! Former Reagan Administration official and conservative columnist Linda Chavez urged those wanting to understand the Unabomber to look at Earth First! and even the Sierra Club as his inspiration and explicitly called out the media reaction to the Oklahoma City Bombing.⁴⁷³ “Unlike the media's intense focus on the militia movement when Oklahoma City bombing suspects Terry and James Nichols were reported to have attended militia meetings in Michigan, so far most of the media have shown little interest in pursuing the radical environmentalist lead in the Unabomber case.”⁴⁷⁴ Even televangelist Pat Robertson spoke out, condemning deep ecology as the philosophy behind Kaczynski's actions and

⁴⁷¹ *America's Judgments: What Lies Ahead?*, Documentary, directed by John Trochmann (Militia of Montana, 1997), VHS.

⁴⁷² Mulloy, *American Extremism*, 5; Stern, *A Force Upon the Plain*.

⁴⁷³ Chavez connected the Unabomber to Sierra Club via the innuendo of Foreman's serving as director—a connection that she implies liberal news media would be unwilling to investigate: “After all, if the media started poking around after David Foreman, they'd find him at the Sierra Club, where he now sits on the board of directors. And the media aren't interested in barking up that tree.” Linda Chavez, “Want Motive for Unabomber?”, *USA Today*, April 10, 1996.

⁴⁷⁴ Linda Chavez, “Want Motive for Unabomber?”, *USA Today*, April 10, 1996.

arguing that “extreme environmentalists worship the wilderness and nature” and therefore are willing to do anything necessary “to defend their god.”⁴⁷⁵

But by far, the most significant conservative activists behind the discursive shift around domestic terrorism towards eco-terrorism were Barry Clausen and Ron Arnold. Barry Clausen had gained a small degree of fame in conservative circles after publishing his memoir of infiltrating Earth First!, *Walking on the Edge*, in 1994. In the memoir, Clausen described his work as a private investigator hired by Montana loggers to infiltrate Earth First! Clausen used his experiences to paint the organization and its members as ecoterrorists who narrowly escaped justice.⁴⁷⁶ By 1996, Clausen had begun to highlight the supposed connection between Kaczynski and Earth First!, particularly by arguing that Kaczynski had attended an Earth First! meeting at the University of Montana in November 1994 that had purportedly discussed Burson-Marsteller, a month before Kaczynski had mailed a bomb to a Burson-Marsteller executive, Thomas J. Mosser, for their public relations work for Exxon following the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill. Clausen’s story was more widely spread when ABC News reported on these supposed links between Kaczynski and Earth First! in a story that included an interview with Clausen, identified as a “private investigator.” While many dismissed Clausen’s legitimacy as a source—columnist Alexander Cockburn bluntly identified him as a “self-confessed drug-runner” based on earlier experiences as an informant on a drug-smuggling ring he relates in his memoir—his story quickly spread.⁴⁷⁷

Ron Arnold, however, was the real force in cementing the narrative of eco-terrorism by the end of the 1990s. Indeed, some scholars attribute an eponymous *Reason* article he wrote in 1983 to popularizing

⁴⁷⁵ 700 Club Fact Sheet – Eco-Terrorism in America: The Truth Behind the Unabomber, c. June 3, 1996, Box 127, Folder 9, Dave Foreman Papers, CONS223, Conservation Collection, The Denver Public Library.

⁴⁷⁶ Barry Clausen, *Walking on the Edge: How I Infiltrated Earth First!* (Olympia, WA: Washington Contract Loggers Association, 1994); A valuable summary of Clausen’s career can be found in: Bruce Barcott, “Snoop: The Secret Life and Prying Times of Barry Clausen,” *Outside*, Oct. 1, 2000.

⁴⁷⁷ Transcript of ABC News story, “Unabomber Had Links to Radical Environmental Groups,” April 5, 1996, Box 127, Folder 9, Dave Foreman Papers, CONS223, Conservation Collection, The Denver Public Library; Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair, “Beat the Devil: Earth First!, the Press and the Unabomber,” *Nation*, May 6, 1996; Clausen, *Walking on the Edge*.

the term.⁴⁷⁸ Yet, it is his 1997 book, *Ecoterror: The Violent Agenda to Save Nature*, that quickly became a central book in the early study of ecoterrorism. Arnold framed the book around Kaczynski's final bombing on April 24, 1995, killing Gilbert Murray, President of the California Forestry Association. While the mailbomb had been addressed to retired president William Dennison, Murray had opened the package himself. Dramatically retelling the bomb's lead-up and aftermath, as well as the efforts of federal authorities to uncover the Unabomber's identity as he began to leak his manifesto, Arnold works to argue that radical environmentalists, particularly Earth First!, influenced Kaczynski. Arnold pays particularly close attention to a brief article in *Live Wild or Die*, which the Rachel Carson Center's Earth First archival project refers to as "the most radical of the publications to derive from—even reject—the Earth First! movement."⁴⁷⁹ In the second edition of the zine, published around 1989 or 1990, an article titled "Eco-Fucker Hit List!" listed the names of sponsors of the 1989 Wise Use Movement's National Wilderness Conference in Reno, Nevada, including the Timber Association of California (the earlier name of the California Forestry Association). Accompanied by artwork of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill and the poem "They anointed our waters with oil/Our cup runneth over," Arnold argued the zine to be an actual hit list that inspired Kaczynski to target Dennison.⁴⁸⁰

More broadly, Arnold argues in the book that the deep ecology philosophy behind radical environmentalism leads towards a more violent outlook towards the world. Characterizing it in a way that clearly brings Kaczynski's manifesto to mind, Arnold argues that deep ecology, influenced by primitivism, was "an ultimate expression of hate for the industrial system" where "industrial civilization is completely rejected because it is anthropocentric." The logical end of this mindset, Arnold concludes, is

⁴⁷⁸ Ron Arnold, "Eco-Terrorism," *Reason*, February 1983; Some scholars attributing the term to Arnold's article include: Sumner and Weidman, "Eco-Terrorism or Eco-Tage"; Rebecca K. Smith, "Ecoterrorism?: A Critical Analysis of the Vilification of Radical Environmental Activists as Terrorists," *Environmental Law* 38, no. 2 (2008): 537–76.

⁴⁷⁹ Daniel, ed., *Live Wild or Die!* No. 2 (1989/1990). Profiled by the Environment & Society Portal, Multimedia Library. <http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/7122>.

⁴⁸⁰ Arnold, *Ecoterror*.

that “nature is to be saved for its own sake, even if that means ‘voluntary human extinction.’”⁴⁸¹

However, in discussing what he sees as the emergence of ecoterrorism as an issue of central concern at the end of the twentieth century, Arnold looks beyond the mere philosophy of deep ecology to focus on the direct action conducted to advance these ideas. As he explains, “Deep ecology was a turning point in that it implicitly asserted that Technology Is Bad and advocated the dismantling of industrial civilization. Radical environmental groups emerged to ‘implement the necessary changes’ by direct action.”⁴⁸² Here, Arnold elides the diverse set of environmental activists to effectively reduce the issue to a dichotomy of those for or against “industrial civilization.” Deep ecologists, radical environmentalists like Dave Foreman, animal liberation activists, and—of course—Kaczynski are pitted against those like Arnold who believe in the benefits of industrialization and anthropocentrism. Arnold does acknowledge the difference between “radicals” like David Brower and Alexander Cockburn, who may be against industrial civilization but not engaging in ecoterrorism, and “criminals” like Foreman and Kaczynski. As he explained in his qualification of these particular environmentalists, “this is a book about criminals. They are not criminals.”⁴⁸³ Indeed, Arnold goes to great lengths to describe the “ecotage” committed in the name of nature, including a 36-page list of acts of environmental violence. Explicitly including acts of sabotage as well as obstruction of industry in his definition of terrorists, Arnold provided conservative activists the evidence needed to ostensibly prove the existence of ecoterrorism as a problem that had to be confronted by authorities.⁴⁸⁴

Arnold—and to a lesser extent Clausen—were able to convert their works into legitimacy for themselves as self-styled experts on the issue of ecoterrorism by the end of the decade. Indeed, both served as expert witnesses in a hearing conducted by the House Judiciary Committee on “Acts of Terrorism by Radical Environmental Organizations.” Reiterating many of the points they had previously

⁴⁸¹ Arnold, *Ecoterror*, 7–8, 299.

⁴⁸² Arnold, *Ecoterror*, 288.

⁴⁸³ Arnold, *Ecoterror*, 189.

⁴⁸⁴ Arnold, *Ecoterror*, 12, 120–59.

made in their respective books and articles published over the course of the 1990s, the idea of Arnold as an expert on the topic was not questioned by anyone in the hearing. Arnold's solutions were clear. Given the difficulty of responding to the problem of ecoterrorism, the federal government should amend the existing Animal Enterprise Protection Act of 1992—which federalized crimes that resulted in disruption or injury against any commercial or academic enterprises using animals—to cover all resource industries. Even as late as 2006, Arnold was included in a Department of Justice-funded report by the Terrorism Research Center at the University of Arkansas as a “subject matter expert” on environmental extremism—a citation that Arnold's Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise was quick to trumpet in a special announcement on its website. The growing acceptance of the idea—and even the very language—of “ecoterrorism” was in no small part connected to the intellectual groundwork that Arnold had laid, dating back to the 1980s.⁴⁸⁵

The conspiratorial thinking that had exploded in the 1990s as a result of the escalating violence and threat of violence served to delegitimize critical institutions necessary to respond to emerging environmental threats like climate change. Even as environmental hazards increasingly took on an international character that required international cooperation and coordination, the international institutions that could provide those services were now viewed with intense hostility and suspicion.

In 2011, journalist Will Potter wrote *Green is the New Red*, describing the extensive targeting of environmentalists and animal rights activists in the 2000s under the George W. Bush Administration. Characterizing the wave of investigations and surveillance of these groups as analogous to the Red Scares of the twentieth century, Potter saw the post-9/11 fears of terrorism as mingling with political interests in targeting ostensibly left-wing opposition. Yet, the reality was that the groundwork for government

⁴⁸⁵ *Acts of Ecoterrorism by Radical Environmental Organizations*, 105th Cong. 24-36, (1998) (Testimony of Barry Clausen and Ron Arnold); Brent L. Smith, Kelly R. Damphousse, and Roberts Paxton, “Pre-Incident Indicators of Terrorist Incidents: The Identification of Behavioral, Geographic, and Temporal Patterns of Preparatory Conduct,” 2006; “Ron Arnold Named as Ecoterrorism Expert in Major Study,” *Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise: The Center View*, c 2003, <https://www.cdfc.org/about-us/the-center-view/ron-arnold/ron-arnold-named-as-ecoterrorism-expert-in-major-study/>.

targeting of radical environmentalism as violent and terroristic had a much longer history that is intimately tied to the environmental debates and conflict of the 1980s and 1990s. The back and forth of environmentalist and anti-environmentalist “violence”—and, more importantly, the fear and paranoia that violence bred—helped to further splinter any remnants of an environmental consensus and delegitimize the idea of a common cause and interest in protecting our environment. If, by the twenty-first century, environmentalism had been caught up in the Culture Wars, some of its most significant physical battles were fought in the trenches of the 1980s and 1990s.⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸⁶ Will Potter, *Green Is the New Red: An Insider's Account of a Social Movement Under Siege* (City Lights Publishers, 2011).

Chapter 5 – Becoming Green: Radical Environmentalisms and Division in the Green Party

The 2000 Presidential Election has a prominent position in our national consciousness for widely recognized reasons. The extremely close election of George W. Bush after intense controversy surrounding the Florida voting procedures, subsequent recount, and infamous Supreme Court decision ending the recount has indelibly marked it as one of the clearest signs of the growing problem of partisanship and polarization in American politics. But even when we step away from the implications of the 2000 election on the stability of American democracy and view it through the lens of environmental politics, it retains a great degree of significance. Vice President Al Gore, longtime champion of environmentalism in the Clinton Administration, now ran for his own shot at the presidency against George W. Bush, a former oilman and son of President George H.W. Bush. Even the Supreme Court's ultimate decision pithily summarized the chaotic affair as *Bush v. Gore*.⁴⁸⁷

Complicating any easy characterization of this race as a two-way contest, however, was longtime consumer advocate Ralph Nader, running on the upstart Green Party ticket—a perspective that has not received adequate attention in the historiography of the 2000 election despite widespread repetition of the charge, especially among journalists, that Nader's presence on the ballot cost Gore the election.⁴⁸⁸ Challenging the record of Gore and the Clinton Administration, Nader and the Greens presented an ostensible alternative that combined environmentalism with progressive social and economic policies. Inspired by the various parties that emerged out of the so-called Green Movement in Europe, the Green Party sought to disrupt the longstanding duopoly of the Republican and Democratic parties. Indeed, Nader

⁴⁸⁷ A concise summary of the controversies surrounding the 2000 Election can be found in: Kevin Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 238–42; A rash of books emerged in the two to three years after the election. A couple of examples anticipating the long term significance of the election include: Jack N. Rakove, ed., *The Unfinished Election of 2000* (Basic Books, 2001); Howard Gillman, *The Votes That Counted: How the Court Decided the 2000 Presidential Election* (University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁴⁸⁸ Some journalistic coverage of the “spoiler” narrative includes: James Dao, “Angry Democrats, Fearing Nader Cost Them Presidential Race, Threaten to Retaliate,” *New York Times* (New York), November 9, 2000; Peter Slevin, “Green Party’s Nader Is Unlikely to Hit 5% Vote; But Independents May Have Hurt Gore,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), November 8, 2000; “The Green Party: Some Nader Supporters Seem Shaken, Not Stirred, by Result,” *New York Times* (New York), November 10, 2000; For academic framing of the spoiler narrative, see, for instance: Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, 417, 419; For a response to the spoiler narrative from a Green activist, see: Charlene Spretnak, “A Green Perspective,” *Tikkun*, February 2001.

and the Green Party ran not only on their progressive and environmentalist policies but also on a characterization of their campaign as a reinvigoration of American politics out of a stagnant status quo. Both parties, Nader argued, were fundamentally the same, offering little substantive differences in policy aside from cosmetic changes from administration to administration. The Green Party would be different, offering truly progressive solutions to national issues that would, at the very least, force the other parties to respond to them.⁴⁸⁹

But, upon closer inspection, the Green Party was a flawed vessel for a progressive and environmentalist reorientation of American politics. Significant divisions existed within the party, stemming from the long, complicated history of its founding. Indeed, at the time of the 2000 election, there was no single “Green Party.” Instead, the Nader campaign and the broader Green Party he ostensibly represented were a rough collection of groups, each claiming the mantle of the American Green Movement. While this division was hardly the only force in the failure of Nader to reach his stated goal of securing federal funds in the next general election by reaching five percent of the 2000 national popular vote—let alone winning the election—the divisions of the Green Party remain significant for understanding the limited influence of a progressive or radical environmentalist challenge to the political (and environmental) mainstream.⁴⁹⁰

Indeed, the reality was that the “Green Movement” was critically divided—just as the larger environmental movement was—at the turn of the century. At the center of this tension was the question of the Green Party’s identity. Were the Greens meant to be an environmentalist party with progressive

⁴⁸⁹ Besides analyses of the European Green Movement (discussed and cited in greater detail later in the chapter), there has been a surprising lack of substantial historiographical engagement with the Green Party in American politics. Most discussions have come in the form of chapters of larger studies of third parties in American politics; examples of which include: Steve Lem, “The Green Party of the United States,” in *Beyond Donkeys and Elephants: Minor Political Parties in Contemporary American Politics*, ed. Richard Davis (University Press of Kansas, 2020), 64–81; J. David Gillespie, *Challengers to Duopoly: Why Third Parties Matter in American Two-Party Politics* (University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 80–84; Donald L. Green, *Third-Party Matters: Politics, Presidents, and Third Parties in American History* (Praeger, 2010); Micah L. Sifry, *Spoiling for a Fight: Third-Party Politics in America* (Routledge, 2002), 230–89.

⁴⁹⁰ James Dao, “Democrats Ask Nader to Back Gore in Swing States,” *New York Times* (New York), October 31, 2000.

tendencies, or a progressive party with environmentalist tendencies? How did this party relate to environmentalists who were not necessarily progressive? Was an environmentalist in the world of the 1990s correctly assumed to be a progressive or even a leftist? Was a progressive correctly assumed to be an environmentalist?

As valuable as the 2000 election is in interrogating these questions that hung over the nascent Green Party and radical environmentalism at the turn of the century, equally valuable is examining the divergent paths that radical environmentalism faced in the 1980s and 1990s. The reality was that, by 2000, not all radical environmentalists were progressive, and many viewed the left-leaning perspectives of the Green Party with as much suspicion as they viewed mainstream environmentalists. Yet, this was not always the case. At what can, in many ways, be called the birth of the radical environmental movement, with the founding of Earth First! in 1980, it was not a foregone conclusion that radical environmentalism was necessarily opposed to radical progressivism. The course of the next two decades, however, saw a series of contingent choices by individuals and organizations that increasingly placed radical environmentalists on divergent paths.

This chapter, therefore, is less interested in providing a journalistic recounting of the Greens leading up to and during the 2000 election; it is certainly not interested in rehashing the claims of Greens spoiling the election. Rather, it examines how the inability of different factions of radical environmentalists in the 1980s and 1990s found themselves unable—or unwilling—to reach an acceptable synthesis of their various programs worked to undermine the historical possibility of a unified and radical environmentalist political party. At the center of this divergence was the fundamentally philosophical question of what environmentalism was, and what it was obligated to protect. While biocentric or ecocentric environmentalists, represented to a great degree by the Deep Ecology movement, saw their role as respecting and protecting the inherent value and dignity of other species—rejecting any ideas of human preeminence as gross anthropocentrism—others were not willing to go that far. Progressive environmentalists, like the leftist Social Ecologists associated with Murray Bookchin, saw environmental

protection and protection of wilderness as a small part of a much larger policy agenda that sought to alleviate human suffering and systems of oppression. Both movements were clearly radical—rejecting the existing status quo and its institutions in favor of a fundamentally changed human existence—but they were also clearly different in ways that led to conflict.

Deep Ecology

Deep Ecology was fundamentally the legacy of Norwegian environmental philosopher Arne Naess. Stemming from a series of points articulated in a 1973 *Inquiry* article entitled “The Shallow and the Deep,” Naess articulated a “deep” environmental ethos that contrasted with the “shallow” beliefs and practices of mainstream environmentalism and the general public. In calling themselves “deep ecologists,” Naess and his followers—particularly Northern Californian scholars Bill Devall and George Sessions who spread Naess’s work to American audiences—emphasized their “deep” examination and questioning of basic principles of Western society, politics, and culture such as the dedication to economic and population growth, the ubiquitous consumerism and materialism, and the inherent belief in the superiority of humanity over other living beings. Rejecting these assumptions, deep ecologists emphasized equality of all life and thereby articulated an environmentalism that explicitly rejected anthropocentrism. Forming the foundations of what historian Keith Makoto Woodhouse describes as “ecocentrism,” deep ecological principles ran under many of the currents of radical environmentalism in the 1980s and 1990s.⁴⁹¹

This was especially the case after the publication of Bill Devall and George Sessions’s 1985 book, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*. In the book’s preface, Devall and Sessions attempted to articulate a deep ecological response to the “continuing environmental crisis” that was, they argued, better “understood as a crisis of character and of culture.” Writing in a self-consciously spiritual manner that accepted “the invitation to the dance—the dance of unity of humans, plants, animals, the Earth,” they

⁴⁹¹ Naess, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary”; Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology*; Woodhouse, *The Ecocentrists*, 1–9, 101–2.

saw the book as part of an effort to “cultivate an ecological consciousness” that they believed was the “way out” of the environmental crisis.⁴⁹² Thus, in the following chapters, Devall and Sessions worked through poetry, essays, and widespread quotation of environmental writers to not only define Deep Ecology for American audiences, but to also use its principles as a foundation for developing “ecological resistance,” a Deep Ecological activist agenda that combined “outward direct action” with “inward direct action.” Thus, rather than seeking “narrow technical solutions to narrowly defined social problems (such as air pollution),” they instead saw such problems as “symptoms of the larger issues” of human spiritual disconnection from nature and anthropocentrism and therefore additionally sought to challenge that underlying spiritual disorder.⁴⁹³

These influences on radical environmentalists can be especially seen in the development of what might be considered the quintessential radical environmentalist group: Earth First! While often regarded by its members as a movement as opposed to a centralized organization, Earth First! in the 1980s was deeply connected to the personal career of one of its major founders and spokesmen, Dave Foreman. Foreman had worked for much of the 1970s as a mainstream environmentalist lobbyist for the Wilderness Society until his resignation in 1980 after the takeover of the organization by new executive director William Turnage, who, in the eyes of Foreman, intended to take the organization on a much more compromising path. After his resignation, Foreman instead worked with like-minded environmentalists to found a new organization that would emphasize eco-centrist principles—as seen in the name Earth First! Any decision or issue would be approached with the interests of nature considered first—not humanity. This approach, drawing from the philosophical legacies of Deep Ecology and similarly-minded writers like Edward Abbey, contrasted with what Foreman and his fellow Earth First!ers saw as the compromising stances of mainstream environmentalists like the Sierra Club and—especially—the

⁴⁹² Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology*, ix.

⁴⁹³ Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology*, 194–96.

Turnage-led Wilderness Society that emphasized political access rather than “true” environmental protection.⁴⁹⁴

Social Ecology

But neither Deep Ecology nor Earth First! represented the whole of radical environmentalism in the early 1980s. Alongside them was another, equally passionate group of radical environmentalists known as social ecologists. In many ways, social ecology was largely focused on the work and writings of longtime radical leftist philosopher Murray Bookchin. In a career stretching from radical labor organizing in the 1930s and 1940s, through attempts to reorient left radicalism towards a post-Marxist and, indeed, anarchist analysis in the 1950s and 1960s, to a dedication to political ecology until his death in 2006, Bookchin figures prominently in the history of leftist environmental activism in the second half of the twentieth century. Often writing under his pseudonym Lewis Herber earlier in his career, Bookchin foreshadowed many of the major developments in political ecological thought. His 1952 article, “The Problem of Chemicals in Food,” highlighted the dangerous expansion of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and antibiotics in American agriculture and food industries ahead of the growing calls for regulation in the late 1950s and 1960s. This analysis was further expanded in his 1962 book, *Our Synthetic Environment*, examining the negative impact of broader industrial society. The publication of *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson—an actual scientist—around the same time, however, proved to overshadow Bookchin’s work in public memory. Yet, as historian Roderick Nash notes, while Carson’s book would prove to be more enduring, it was Bookchin’s book that “most clearly advanced the thesis that ‘the domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human.’”⁴⁹⁵ Thus, for

⁴⁹⁴ Woodhouse, *The Ecocentrists*, 114–28; Zakin, *Coyotes and Town Dogs*, 244–45; Indeed, Earth First!’s signature form of direct action, “monkeywrenching,” takes its name directly from Edward Abbey’s novel describing a band of misfits engaging in acts of environmental sabotage across the American Southwest. Edward Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (Lippincott, 1975); Another key influence on both Earth First! specifically, and Deep Ecology broadly, is Aldo Leopold’s writing, particularly his essay “The Land Ethic” Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* (Oxford University Press, 1949).

⁴⁹⁵ Roderick Frazier Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 164–66.

Bookchin, environmental degradation was simply part of a much larger problem facing industrial America.⁴⁹⁶

It was this fundamentally social analysis of environmental degradation that was the hallmark of what would come to be referred to by Bookchin as “social ecology.” Technically borrowing the term from the 1950s work of an earlier left decentralist, E.A. Gutkind, who had similarly sought to bring together ecology and social theory, Bookchin was, nevertheless, the one who developed the ideas into a more comprehensive vision of a humanity free from hierarchy and, thereby, living sustainably with nature.⁴⁹⁷ While this work would be advanced over the course of roughly two decades of writing, the key work laying out Bookchin’s philosophy is his 1982 book, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*. As Damian F. White, a scholar of Bookchin’s thought explains, “the great value of *The Ecology of Freedom* is that it argues in a powerful fashion that any credible modern critical social theory needs to address the links between the domination of humans and the domination of nature.”⁴⁹⁸ Arguing historically that the “human domination of human gave rise to the very *idea* of dominating nature,” Bookchin contends that human society—organized according to centralized, hierarchical states that descend from this domination—possesses a “legacy of domination,” that “permeates our thinking,

⁴⁹⁶ Lewis Herber [Murray Bookchin], “The Problem of Chemicals in Food,” *Contemporary Issues* 3, no. 12 (1952); Lewis Herber [Murray Bookchin], *Our Synthetic Environment* (Knopf, 1962); For focused analysis of Bookchin’s early career through the mid-1960s, see: Maximilian Fenner, “Murray Bookchin and the Postwar Environmental Moment: The Early Bookchin and the Politicization of Ecology, 1948-1964,” *Modern Intellectual History*, ahead of print, January 28, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000349>; A strong overview of Bookchin’s career and intellectual contributions can be found in: Damian F. White, *Bookchin: A Critical Appraisal* (Pluto Press, 2008); A more personal and admiring biography written by his long-time partner, Janet Biehl, can be found in: Janet Biehl, *Ecology or Catastrophe: The Life of Murray Bookchin* (Oxford University Press, 2015); For more on the history of postwar environmental activism around pesticides, see: Chad Montrie, *The Myth of Silent Spring: Rethinking the Origins of American Environmentalism* (University of California Press, 2018); Christopher Bosso, *Pesticides and Politics: The Life Cycle of a Public Issue* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987); Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985*.

⁴⁹⁷ Biehl notes the subtitle of Gutkind’s 1954 book, “A Discourse on Social Ecology,” to argue that Bookchin borrowed the term from there. See: Janet Biehl, *Mumford Gutkind Bookchin: The Emergence of Eco-Decentralism* (New Compass Press, 2011), 33, 46n49; E. A. Gutkind, *Community and Environment: A Discourse on Social Ecology* (Philosophical Library, 1954); For broader intellectual influences, see also: White, *Bookchin: A Critical Appraisal*, 26–28.

⁴⁹⁸ White, *Bookchin: A Critical Appraisal*, 50.

values, emotions, indeed our very musculature.”⁴⁹⁹ Thus, according to Bookchin, the environmental degradation faced by modern society is simply the logical extension of that legacy of domination.⁵⁰⁰

However, Bookchin offers, as an alternative, what he refers to as a “legacy of freedom”—residual resistance to the legacy of domination throughout history that could provide the model for a new society free of human domination of both fellow humans and nature. Here, Bookchin looks specifically to the historical legacies of civic republicanism, confederal association, and the municipality as an alternative way of organizing human society without the dominating centralized hierarchy that has characterized the mainstream of human political history. By reorienting our politics and society around these decentralized forms and rejecting the legacies of domination, such as capitalism and inequality, Bookchin contends that we can achieve an “ecological society” that recovers “the archaic customs of usufruct, complementarity, and the equality of unequals.”⁵⁰¹ Thus, by embracing a new vision of a free and egalitarian humanity, the tendency towards environmental destruction could be overcome.⁵⁰²

To achieve this, Bookchin insists on a fundamentally political project of reorienting the public’s conception of politics toward their local community rather than larger, centralized states. To this end, Bookchin emphasizes the idea of what he calls libertarian municipalism. Noting on one hand that “the city has commonly been the principal countervailing force to imperial and National-States from ancient times to the recent present,” Bookchin also points to the historical role of cities in fostering an egalitarian identity: “It raised the limits to human development imposed by the kinship tie, the parochialism of the folk world, and the suffocating effects of custom.”⁵⁰³ Thus, in Bookchin’s view, the city offers the most

⁴⁹⁹ Murray Bookchin, *Remaking Society* (Black Rose Books, 1989), 44, Emphasis in original; Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Cheshire Books, 1982), 41–42.

⁵⁰⁰ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*; For detailed analysis of Bookchin’s theory, see: White, *Bookchin: A Critical Appraisal*, 31–61.

⁵⁰¹ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 319.

⁵⁰² Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*; Again, for detailed analysis of Bookchin’s theory, see: White, *Bookchin: A Critical Appraisal*.

⁵⁰³ Murray Bookchin, “Theses on Libertarian Municipalism,” *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed*, no. 13 (Fall/Winter 1986).

appropriate place to center a decentralizing revolution seeking to overturn the legacy of domination. As he explains:

A major feature of a libertarian municipalist approach is that it can evoke lived traditions to legitimate its claims, traditions which, however fragmentary and tattered, still offer the potential for a participatory politics of challenging dimensions to the State. The Commune still lies buried in the city council; the sections still lie buried in the neighborhood; the town meeting still lies buried in the township; confederal forms of municipal association still lie buried in regional networks of towns and cities.⁵⁰⁴

The city, therefore, still holds revolutionary potential through Bookchin's legacy of freedom.⁵⁰⁵

Importantly, the emphasis upon the town or city, in Bookchin's view, does not imply the neglect or exploitation of the countryside. Rather, Bookchin's vision of an ecological society fits closely with that advanced by supporters of contemporaneous bioregionalism. Indeed, Bookchin is explicit in framing the survival of not only the city, but also of human society in general, as requiring close cooperation between the city and its surrounding region: "If we are to survive ecological catastrophe, we must decentralize, restore bioregional forms of production and food cultivation, diversify our technologies, scale them to human dimensions, and establish face-to-face forms of democracy."⁵⁰⁶ Bookchin uses the example of the New England township, where the "urban entity is the nucleus of its agricultural and village environs," not opposed to them.⁵⁰⁷ Thus, fitting into bioregional conceptions of ecological living as intrinsically tied to a sense of place in a particular ecosystem and bioregion, Bookchin's concept of libertarian municipalism held, in his view, revolutionary potential not only for the abolition of the state but also for more closely integrating people into the natural whole of their environments.⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁴ Bookchin, "Theses on Libertarian Municipalism."

⁵⁰⁵ See also: White, *Bookchin: A Critical Appraisal*, 155–78.

⁵⁰⁶ Murray Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society* (1980; Black Rose Books, 1980), 27; To achieve these ends, Bookchin highlights the value of the contemporaneous movement of "appropriate technology." More on the appropriate technology movement can be found in: Andrew Kirk, *Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism* (University Press of Kansas, 2007).

⁵⁰⁷ Murray Bookchin, "Municipalization: Community Ownership of the Economy," *Green Perspectives: Newsletter of the Green Program Project*, no. 2 (February 1986).

⁵⁰⁸ Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 33–34; Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 179–85; See also: Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Ramparts Press, 1971; 2nd ed., Black Rose Books, 1986); For discussion of Bookchin's thoughts on urbanism and the environment, see: White, *Bookchin: A Critical Appraisal*, 134–52; For more on

Bookchin, therefore, occupied a distinct leftist position in the environmental politics of the 1980s and 1990s. While, as will be discussed below, many were quick to dismiss radical leftist perspectives in the political context of the Cold War—and, indeed, even more so in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union—Bookchin’s long legacy of environmental thought ensured the consideration of leftist analysis of environmental problems at a crucial historical moment where radical alternatives to the mainstream environmental movement were being seriously discussed. However, despite this success in bringing leftist perspectives to the growing discourse of radical environmentalism, Bookchin’s insistence maintaining intellectual consistency and, frankly, ideological purity helped contribute to a growing divide among radical environmentalists that proved difficult to reconcile.

The Deep Ecology vs. Social Ecology Debate

In the early to mid-1980s, however, there was no immediate perception that these two traditions of radical “ecology,” deep or social, were necessarily opposed to each other. For one, they shared an intense distrust of mainstream environmental thought. Arne Naess’s disdain for “shallow” mainstream environmentalism was analogous to Bookchin’s radical opposition to bourgeois and—for him—hierarchical liberalism. Indeed, Bookchin even eschewed the very title of “environmentalist” in favor of “ecologist” due to his belief that environmentalism was a form of “biological engineering,” that saw nature “not as an organic whole, but as a habitat” and viewing the natural world “merely as a repository of resources.”⁵⁰⁹ Thus, in his view, environmentalism, like broader liberal society, maintained hierarchical attitudes towards nature that actually encouraged environmental exploitation and degradation despite their surface-level reforms. The shared suspicion of mainstream environmentalism, therefore, clearly placed deep and social ecologists together in the radical camp of the environmental movement, Bookchin’s protests notwithstanding.

bioregionalism, see: Robert L. Thayer, *LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice* (University of California Press, 2003).

⁵⁰⁹ Murray Bookchin and Eugene Eccli, “Environmentalists Versus Ecologists: An Interview with Murray Bookchin,” *Undercurrents*, Spring 1973.

In fact, Devall and Sessions drew upon Murray Bookchin in their 1985 book, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, citing and quoting at length from his writings. In fact, one passage from Bookchin's *The Ecology of Freedom* is even included as one of the epigraphs for *Deep Ecology*'s second chapter. In their annotated bibliography at the end of the book, Devall and Sessions describes Bookchin's 1982 book, *The Ecology of Freedom*, as:

The most extensive statement by this seminal thinker on communalism and hierarchy. He contrasts the outlook of organic society with that of mechanical societies... Bookchin's style of writing is sometimes turgid, but his analysis of communal traditions in the West shows some cultural roots to which we can turn for cultural forms necessary for bioregional living.⁵¹⁰

Thus, while distancing themselves from the very academic—and perhaps stuffy—tone of Bookchin's work, Devall and Sessions saw his thought as holding clear analytical value to Deep Ecological thought.

For his part, Bookchin engaged little with the substantive work of Deep Ecologists through the early 1980s. While, for instance, he critiques “neo-Malthusian” arguments in his 1980 *Toward an Ecological Society*—criticizing such political ecologists for treating “human beings as though they were fruit flies”—central figures in Deep Ecological thought, such as Naess, Devall, and Sessions, are not mentioned. Indeed, in arguably Bookchin's most notable work of the period, the 1982 *The Ecology of Freedom*, there is neither mention of neo-Malthusianism as a major concern nor citation of any major Deep Ecological texts. As Damian White explains, “while neo-Malthusian, ‘scarcity-oriented’ ecologists and thinkers influenced by socio-biology are criticized by Bookchin throughout the 1970s, until the mid 1980s primary critical attention had been paid to the limits of Marxism/neo-Marxism and of reformist and technocratic forms of environmentalism.”⁵¹¹ Indeed, one commentator went so far to describe this moment of the late 1970s to early 1980s as a moment where, given their broad efforts to “radically reconstruct human society along ecological lines... social ecologists, eco-feminists, bioregionalists, radical greens, Earth First!ers, Native American traditionalists, many academic eco-philosophers, and

⁵¹⁰ For mentions of Bookchin, see: Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology*, 3–4, 17, 259.

⁵¹¹ Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society*; Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*; White, *Bookchin: A Critical Appraisal*, 25–26.

some animal liberationists can all fairly be called ‘deep ecologists.’”⁵¹² The overlaps between these different groups in their radical ecological visions of society were clear. Thus, at the moment that radical green politics was beginning to emerge in organized form, the fault lines that would come to mark the movement were not necessarily seen yet. This can explain some of the shock and anger that emerged as the first shots were fired in what became known across the radical environmental world as the “Deep Ecology vs. Social Ecology debate.”

The first indications of a break between these two movements occurred in the context of the nascent Green Party. Nominally formed in 1984 as the Committees of Correspondence—soon to be known as the Green Committees of Correspondence, or the “Greens”—the Green Movement in the United States has a convoluted history that reflects the complex politics that shaped it. In many ways, American Greens were inspired by the contemporaneous German Greens (*Die Grünen*). Evolving from a rough coalition of environmental, progressive, and leftist movements across West Germany, the establishment of the German Greens as a formal political party—distinct, nevertheless, from mainstream parties in their self-appellation as an “antiparty party”—represented an attempt by these various activists to legitimate themselves and their movements through formal political achievement—especially election to political office.⁵¹³ Thus, beginning around 1977, activists began to work towards the unification of their various electoral efforts at the local or state level. However, it was not until 1980 that an organized political party was agreed upon, and not until 1983 that the German Greens narrowly crossed the five-percent threshold in the federal parliamentary popular vote, securing 27 seats in the Bundestag.⁵¹⁴

⁵¹² Murray Bookchin and Dave Foreman, *Defending the Earth: A Dialogue Between Murray Bookchin and Dave Foreman*, ed. Steve Chase (South End Press, 1991), 8–9.

⁵¹³ Fritjof Capra and Charlene Spretnak, *Green Politics*, with Rudiger Lutz (E.P. Dutton, Inc., 1984), xiv.

⁵¹⁴ For more on the history of the German Greens, see especially Horst Mewes, “History of the German Green Party,” and Roland Roth and Detlef Murphy, “From Competing Factions to the Rise of the Realos,” in: Margit Mayer and John Ely, eds., *The German Greens: Paradox Between Movement and Party*, trans. Michael Schatzschneider (Temple University Press, 1998); A contemporaneous analysis of the German Greens can be found in: Capra and Spretnak, *Green Politics*; The electoral success of the German Greens led to their becoming the effective example of Green politics in the period, but the 1980s and 1990s also saw an explosion of green parties across Europe, including Belgium, Sweden, France, and the United Kingdom. For more on the broader (primarily European) history of green politics, see: Herbert Kitschelt, *The Logics of Party Formation: Ecological Politics in*

It was in this context of the seemingly imminent establishment of a working environmental political bloc—anticipated in the U.S. as early as Nixon’s erstwhile pursuit of environmental reforms—that the American Green Movement emerged. American scholars Fritjof Capra and Charlene Spretnak published *Green Politics*, an in-depth analysis and discussion of German Green politics and their applicability to the particular situation of the United States. Interviewing German Greens at all levels—from the grassroots to the Bundestag—they concluded that “while no one country can serve as a fixed model for others,” the success of green politics in Germany offered lessons for a similar disruption of the “liberal/conservative stalemate” in the United States.⁵¹⁵ Green politics—in both Europe and the United States—was envisioned as confronting the particular circumstances of the 1980s, representing an equally postmodern world and politics. The German Greens, for instance, articulated their politics as being “postmaterialist,” transcending the modern political debates surrounding class. This was etched in sharp relief in the slogan that dominated Green politics in Germany and the United States in the early-to-mid 1980s: “Neither Left nor Right, but Forward.”⁵¹⁶ This explicit rejection of the “left” and “right” political dichotomy highlighted Greens’ belief that they represented not simply an alternative politics that could move beyond the political inertia of the mainstream left and right parties, but also a fundamentally new politics that recognized the changed social, economic, and political circumstances of the world in the late twentieth century. With the world on the verge of a new environmental crisis, Greens argued, they—

Belgium and West Germany (Cornell University Press, 2019); Jon Burchell, *The Evolution of Green Politics: Development and Change Within European Green Parties* (Earthscan Publications, 2002); Gayil Talshir, *The Political Ideology of Green Parties: From the Politics of Nature to Redefining the Nature of Politics* (Palgrave, 2002).

⁵¹⁵ Capra and Spretnak, *Green Politics*, xx–xxi.

⁵¹⁶ Other variations included “Neither Left nor Right, but in Front” and “Neither Left nor Right, but Green.” All forms, nevertheless, retained their implicit critique of conventional left-right political binaries. Indeed, in the words of Ynestra King, an Ecofeminist associated with the Social Ecologists, the slogan “is based on the idea that both capitalism and state socialism have failed, that neither has delivered on its promises, and that there are certain assumptions about technology, power, and progress that are problematic from an ecological standpoint.” See: Ynestra King, “Coming of Age with the Greens,” *Z Magazine*, Feb. 1988. Found in Box 1, Folder 35, Dave Foreman Earth First! Collection (MSS 1102 BC), Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections, University of New Mexico Libraries.

unlike liberal or socialist politics—were able to articulate appropriate policies and transformations in society that wouldn't become mired in allegedly antiquated debates over class warfare.⁵¹⁷

However, despite this optimistic portrait of the emergence of a new ecological-political consciousness transcending mainstream political categories, the popular perception of this politics remained firmly leftist. Many commentators noted the tendency of the German public to read Greens in the wider spectrum of German politics as to the left of the center-left Social Democratic Party (Sozialdemokratische Partei or SPD). This reading was, perhaps, motivated by the Germans Greens' successful eviction of right-wing Greens from the nascent party during its formation, enshrining some form of left-wing orientation—whether that be formally socialist or simply progressive.⁵¹⁸

However, despite this broadly leftist orientation and self-image as uniting people across lines of class, race, and ethnicity, the reality of the Green Movement was intense division. The nature of Green politics, uniting widely disparate political and social movements, was that, even as many agreed on the broad strokes of applying new, ecologically-sound solutions to contemporary problems, the method of how that was to be achieved was fiercely contested. Indeed, some commentators pointed to the uniformly left-wing orientation of the German Greens as leading to the party's fundamental debates being centered around questions of political strategy rather than ideology. This debate was commonly illustrated by the consistent intra-party fight of the 1980s between the German Greens' political factions of so-called *Fundis* (Fundamentalists dedicated to radical political solutions that dismissed participation in the German federal and state parliaments as simply supporting the Greens' more important grassroots reorientation of society) and *Realos* (Realists interested in deepening the party's commitment to

⁵¹⁷ Capra and Spretnak, *Green Politics*, 193–225; Mayer and Ely, *The German Greens*.

⁵¹⁸ Horst Mewes, "A Brief History of the German Green Party," in *The German Greens: Paradox Between Movement and Party*, ed. Margit Mayer and John Ely, trans. Michael Schatzschneider (Temple University Press, 1998).

mainstream politics, including active participation in political coalitions with the SPD—an idea anathema to *Fundis*).⁵¹⁹

American Greens found themselves similarly divided over questions of strategy and the proper orientation of the party towards either the social and cultural reformation of society or formal politics. Some envisioned American Greens following the example of German Greens in eventually unifying the various social and political movements interested in environmental protection into a single, actively political party that could challenge the ossified state of American politics at all levels of government in the late twentieth century. Others, however, saw such an approach as betraying the radical nature of Green politics by willingly accepting the basic assumptions of liberal democracy and giving up grassroots organizing that could transcend such assumptions. These questions came to the forefront of the very first meeting of the American Greens in August 1984 at the Green Organizing Planning Meeting in St. Paul, Minnesota. Convened by several activists, including the author of *Green Politics*, Charlene Spretnak, the attendees of the meeting—including numerous participants in the later Deep Ecology-Social Ecology debates such as Ynestra King and Gary Snyder—chose to name the new national organization the Committee of Correspondence (CoC) to recall “grassroots democrats” from the American Revolution. Indeed, the tension between the goals of achieving an “independent political process” at the national level and grassroots organizing to “[redefine and deepen] the very understanding of ‘politics’ and ‘public life’” was readily apparent. Nevertheless, these “differences... about issues of strategy and politics,” one report noted, “seemed to run less deeply than the German Greens,” and agreement was reached on the “Ten Key Values” that would define American Green politics in the years to come.⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁹ One should be careful, however, to avoid oversimplification of German Green factions to only the Fundi/Realo divide. See: Roland Roth and Detlef Murphy, “From Competing Factions to the Rise of the Realos,” in *The German Greens: Paradox Between Movement and Party*, ed. Margit Mayer and John Ely, trans. Michael Schatzschneider (Temple University Press, 1998); See also the Introduction to: Mayer and Ely, *The German Greens*.

⁵²⁰ Proceedings of the Green Organizing Planning Meeting, Aug. 1984, Box 2, Folder 4, Dave Foreman Earth First! Collection (MSS 1102 BC), Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections, University of New Mexico Libraries; Complicating these debates were contemporaneous efforts outside the formal Committee of Correspondence to establish formal political parties representing the “Green Movement,” including Barry Commoner’s Citizens Party and the smaller U.S.A. Green Party (also referred to as the “International Green Party”

However, even as American Greens found common cause in rejecting the pro-growth philosophy and policies of American liberalism and conservatism, an undercurrent of tension would continue to grow over the course of the mid-1980s as the Committee of Correspondence organized itself into a more cohesive force. An August 1984 review of Capra and Spretnak's book published in the Green newsletter, *Synthesis*, for instance, began by praising their detailed "presentation of the petty jealousy and maneuvering for position and prestige by the Green parliamentarians in the Bundestag." That said, however, the reviewers expressed worry about Spretnak and Capra's seeming reduction of the Green Movement to formal politics, arguing that the "whole concept of leaders must be abandoned."⁵²¹ Thus, there were clear differences of opinion in how to orient the Green Movement—along both ideological and political axes.

These tensions would finally come to a head at the First National Green Gathering in Amherst, Massachusetts, over the summer of 1987. With attendance reported to be between 1,000 and 1,500, ten plenary sessions, and 120 workshops, the meeting seemed poised to accomplish the goal it set for itself in its official title: "Building the Green Movement—A National Conference for a New Politics." The growing divisions within the movement, however, now began to become apparent. In many ways, the first shots in the conflict were fired by Bookchin in a scathing speech delivered at the conference and subsequently reprinted in Green and leftist publications over the following months.⁵²²

and "Green Alliance") founded by Randy Toler—deemed by CoC members as "charlatan" who was, nevertheless, successful in convincing media that he represented the broader Green Movement. See: "The Green Movement in the USA" and "More on the USA Green Party," *Synthesis: A Newsletter and Journal for Social Ecology*, No. 16, April 1984. Found in Box 2, Folder 4, Dave Foreman Earth First! Collection (MSS 1102 BC), Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections, University of New Mexico Libraries; Green Party?", *Green Alliance Memorandum*, July 15, 1984. Found in Box 2, Folder 4, Dave Foreman Earth First! Collection (MSS 1102 BC), Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections, University of New Mexico Libraries; Maggie Jackson "West German-Born Green Movement Takes Root in the U.S.," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 16, 1983; Jeffrey A. Perlman, "Green Party Chief to Run for Congress," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 28, 1983.

⁵²¹ "A Perspective on *Green Politics - The Global Promise*," *Synthesis: A Newsletter and Journal for Social Ecology*, No. 17, Aug. 1984. Found in Box 2, Folder 4, Dave Foreman Earth First! Collection (MSS 1102 BC), Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections, University of New Mexico Libraries.

⁵²² "The July Green Gathering at Amherst," *Synthesis*, December 1987. Note that *Synthesis* would change its name to *Green Synthesis* the following year.

Acknowledging that people had finally begun to move beyond mainstream environmentalism to strive for meaningful change, Bookchin nevertheless insisted that serious divisions within the new “ecology movement” existed between “barely disguised racists, survivalists, macho Daniel Boones, and outright social reactionaries” and “deeply concerned naturalists, communitarians, social radicals, and feminists.”⁵²³ Furthermore, Bookchin argued, these differences went beyond simple questions of “theory, sensibility, and ethics,” to the fundamental ends and means of what ecology was trying to achieve. Characterizing Deep Ecology as having “parachuted into our midst quite recently from the Sunbelt’s bizarre mix of Hollywood and Disneyland, spiced with homilies from Taoism, Buddhism, spiritualism, reborn Christianity, and, in some cases, eco-fascism,” Bookchin not only questioned its philosophical basis but also criticized its seeming lack of awareness of the social roots of ecological problems.⁵²⁴ Taking exception to its generalized condemnation of humanity for environmental problems, Bookchin noted that Deep Ecology “preaches a gospel of a kind of ‘original sin’ that accuses a vague species called ‘Humanity’—as though people of color are equitable with whites, women with men, the Third World with the First, the poor with the rich, the exploited with their exploiters.”⁵²⁵ This “Eco-la-la” as Bookchin referred to it, not only disregarded the social differences in blame for the state of the world, but also reduced the diverse individuality of people around the world into an “ideological category, as vague, faceless, and depersonalized as the very patriarchal image of ‘Man’ that dissolves our uniqueness and rationality into a deadening abstraction.”⁵²⁶

Citing a litany of examples of what he saw as Deep Ecology’s moral bankruptcy, Bookchin was unsubtle in his prognosis of the movement: Deep Ecology risked descent into “eco-brutalism,” if not outright eco-fascism. Dave Foreman found himself particularly in Bookchin’s firing line, being described as a “patently antihumanist and macho mountain [man]” who preached that humanity was “some kind of

⁵²³ Murray Bookchin, “Social Ecology Versus ‘Deep Ecology’: A Challenge for the Ecology Movement,” *Green Perspectives: Newsletter of the Green Program Project*, Summer 1987. Found in Green Party of California Records, Box 2, Folder 10, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

⁵²⁴ Bookchin, “Social Ecology Versus ‘Deep Ecology.’”

⁵²⁵ Bookchin, “Social Ecology Versus ‘Deep Ecology.’”

⁵²⁶ Bookchin, “Social Ecology Versus ‘Deep Ecology.’”

cancer in the world of life.”⁵²⁷ Bookchin pointed to remarks Foreman had made during a 1986 interview with Bill Devall in the Australian Deep Ecology periodical, *Simply Living*, where he not only expressed opposition to food aid to famine-stricken Ethiopia as delaying the inevitable—“the best thing would be to just let nature seek its own balance, to let the people there just starve”—he also expressed opposition to significant immigration into the United States from Latin America, arguing that it was “just putting more pressure on the resources we have in the USA.”⁵²⁸ While Foreman would later disavow these comments (see below), Bookchin noted the incident—and notably Devall’s seeming lack of reaction to the comments—as indicative of a wider trend within Deep Ecology towards this line of thinking. Indeed, Bookchin pointed to articles such as *Earth First! Journal*’s “Population and AIDS,” written by Earth First!er and Deep Ecologist, Christopher Manes, under the pseudonym “Miss Ann Thropy” which, Bookchin argued, was not a spoof and earnestly argued that AIDS was “desirable as a means of population control.”⁵²⁹

Underlying all of this, Deep Ecology’s ready acceptance of “neo-Malthusian” arguments by population control advocates like William F. Vogt and Paul Ehrlich indicated to Bookchin a deeper rot within the movement that edged towards eco-fascism. Explicitly comparing Foreman’s *Simple Living* remarks and blasé response by his fellow Deep Ecologists to Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, Bookchin argued that “it was out of this kind of crude eco-brutalism that a Hitler, in the name of ‘population control’ with a racial orientation, fashioned theories of blood and soil that led to the transport of millions of people to murder camps like Auschwitz.”⁵³⁰ Speaking of Miss Ann Thropy’s apparent embrace of AIDS as a solution to human overpopulation and dominance of the planet, Bookchin is equally blunt: “These people feed on human disasters, suffering, and misery, preferably in Third World countries where

⁵²⁷ Bookchin, “Social Ecology Versus ‘Deep Ecology.’”

⁵²⁸ Bookchin, “Social Ecology Versus ‘Deep Ecology.’”

⁵²⁹ Bookchin, “Social Ecology Versus ‘Deep Ecology.’”; Woodhouse, *The Ecocentrists*, 195–97, 333n30; For Foreman’s own interpretation of his *Simple Living* comments, see: Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 107–12.

⁵³⁰ Bookchin, “Social Ecology Versus ‘Deep Ecology.’”

AIDS is by far a more monstrous problem than elsewhere.”⁵³¹ Even if these beliefs and remarks did not reflect their actual beliefs, the inability of Deep Ecologists to control such sentiments within their movement by way of accepting practically any ideological stance as long as it decentered “humanity” presaged future radicalization towards eco-fascism. As Bookchin explains:

The seeming ideological ‘tolerance’ which ‘deep ecology’ celebrates has a sinister function of its own. It not only reduces richly nuanced ideas and conflicting traditions to their lowest common denominator; it legitimates extremely regressive, primitivistic, and even highly reactionary notions that gain respectability because they are buried in the company of authentically radical contexts and traditions.⁵³²

Thus, Deep Ecologists’ willingness to overlook, in Bookchin’s view, deeply troubling views within their movement—like Devall in the *Simple Living* interview with Foreman—risked the future of radical environmentalism and the Green Movement.⁵³³

Caught in the crossfire of Bookchin’s broadside against Deep Ecology were members of another emerging faction of the Green Movement: spiritual ecofeminists. Ecofeminism had emerged from critical feminist thought beginning in the 1970s, first in 1974 with French feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne coining the term “ecofeminisme,” calling for an “ecological revolution” led by women that would not only save the environment, but also, in the words of historian Carolyn Merchant, “entail new gender relations between women and men and between humans and nature.”⁵³⁴ Soon picked up by American feminists like

⁵³¹ Bookchin, “Social Ecology Versus ‘Deep Ecology.’”

⁵³² Bookchin, “Social Ecology Versus ‘Deep Ecology.’”

⁵³³ A strong literature has started to develop on ecofascism in recent years. However, a key problem noted by this literature is the rather vague application of the label “ecofascism” to a wide variety of environmental political tendencies ranging from the historical Blood and Soil politics of Nazism to hypernationalist and racist takes on population growth to broad far-right environmental sentiments. For a good summary of the literature and discussion of ecofascism’s various facets, see: Alexander Menrisky, *Everyday Ecofascism: Crisis and Consumption in American Literature* (University of Minnesota Press, 2025), 1–40; See also: Sam Moore and Alex Roberts, *The Rise of Ecofascism: Climate Change and the Far Right* (Polity Press, 2022); Peter Staudenmaier, *Ecology Contested: Environmental Politics Between Left and Right* (New Compass, 2021); Lubarda Balša, “Beyond Ecofascism? Far-Right Ecologism (FRE) as a Framework for Future Inquiries,” *Environmental Values* 29, no. 6 (2020): 713–32; Bernhard Forchtner, ed., *The Far Right and the Environment: Politics, Discourse and Communication* (Routledge, 2020); Janet Biehl and Peter Staudenmaier, *Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience* (AK Press, 1995); For more on the violent application of ecofascist ideas, see especially the work of Joshua Molloy, such as: Joshua Molloy, “Understanding Eco-Fascism: A Thematic Analysis of the Eco-Fascist Subculture on Telegram,” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, November 22, 2022, <https://gnet-research.org/2022/11/02/understanding-eco-fascism-a-thematic-analysis-of-the-eco-fascist-subculture-on-telegram/>.

⁵³⁴ Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (Routledge, 1996), 5.

Ynestra King—notably affiliated with Bookchin’s Institute for Social Ecology—who used the term in teaching at the Institute beginning in 1976, the term’s popularity exploded with the publication of foundational texts in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This included Susan Griffin’s *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (1978), but a major influence was Carolyn Merchant’s *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980), which argued that “the domination of women and the domination of nature are structurally linked.”⁵³⁵ The developing rationalism of the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment, Merchant argued, worked to objectify both women and nature as chaotic forces requiring domination and regulation by “‘scientific’ authority.”⁵³⁶ Inspired by these texts and dissatisfied with the gender politics in the radical environmental movement, scholars Charis Thompson and Sherilyn MacGregor argue, ecologically-inclined feminists began to organize separately, emphasizing “the celebration of women’s putative life-giving and holistic reproductive and spiritual capacities,” or “ways of being and thinking” that “were seen as gendered qualities that gave women a unique ability to care for and protect the earth.”⁵³⁷ While criticism of these arguments for gender essentialism would emerge later in the 1990s, Ecofeminists at the time were largely divided over the proper analysis of patriarchy and the aims of the movement along liberal, cultural, social, and socialist lines.⁵³⁸

Indeed, the divisions among Ecofeminists at the time, along ideological and analytical lines, closely resembled the emerging factions within the American Green Movement. While “social” and “socialist” Ecofeminists grounded their thought on critiques of capitalist patriarchy, “cultural” Ecofeminists emphasized the supposed “woman-nature connection” that placed women culturally and

⁵³⁵ Charis Thompson and Sherilyn MacGregor, “The Death of Nature: Foundations of Ecological Feminist Thought,” in *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Environment*, ed. Sherilyn MacGregor (Routledge, 2017), 44.

⁵³⁶ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (Harper & Row, 1980), 163; Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (Harper & Row, 1978).

⁵³⁷ Thompson and MacGregor, “The Death of Nature: Foundations of Ecological Feminist Thought,” 46–47.

⁵³⁸ A good introduction to Ecofeminism can be found broadly in the *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Environment*, but especially in: Thompson and MacGregor, “The Death of Nature: Foundations of Ecological Feminist Thought”; See also: Greta Gaard, “Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism,” *Feminist Formations* 23, no. 2 (2011): 26–53, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2011.0017>; Noël Sturgeon, *Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory, and Political Action* (Routledge, 1997); Merchant, *Earthcare*. Thompson and MacGregor also provide good coverage of the major anti-essentialism critiques of Ecofeminism.

spiritually closer to nature. These revolutionary feminist-ecological perspectives all differed from the mainstream thinking of “liberal” Ecofeminism, which accepted the basic assumptions of reform environmentalism. Indeed, cultural Ecofeminists, such as scholar Charlene Spretnak, highlighted the fundamental differences among Ecofeminists, even elevating their particular cultural analysis as the effective center of the movement. Speaking at the major 1987 “Ecofeminist Perspectives: Culture, Nature, Theory” conference at the University of Southern California, Spretnak not only rejected liberal feminism as a “Band-Aid” for ecological crises, but also traced the Ecofeminist movement as a whole back to critical feminists of the 1970s who, in her view, explicitly rejected Marxist interpretations of dominance “based on money and class,” instead emphasizing a cultural patriarchy grounded in “fear and resentment” that drove both domination of women and nature.⁵³⁹

A subset of this cultural Ecofeminism, particularly associated with Spretnak, further emphasized the spiritual dimensions of the cultural analysis of the subjugation of women and nature. In the face of the patriarchal separation of humans from nature, these spiritual Ecofeminists urged women and men alike to reconnect and “commune” with the natural world. This pursuit of spiritual transcendence through nature—only partially effective through other spiritual and religious means—could, therefore, help to reshape human society and culture towards a more ecological ethos.⁵⁴⁰ To aid in this effort, Spretnak stressed ancient and, indeed, prehistoric examples of supposed gender-egalitarian and nature-oriented societies of late Neolithic Europe centered around worship of nature goddesses before their collapse in the face of Indo-European invasion bringing patriarchal social, political, and cultural practices.⁵⁴¹ Drawing upon her work on this so-called Goddess worship, Spretnak worked to fashion together a modern

⁵³⁹ On their difference from liberal Ecofeminism, Spretnak explicitly highlights the separation of Ecofeminism as understood by her fellow radicals from the legacy of Earth Day 1970, arguing that the “Movement came out of our own experiential exploration.” See: Charlene Spretnak and Pacifica Radio Archive, “Interview with Charlene Spretnak on Ecofeminism and the Green Party,” c. 200-, Audio Disc, Found at the University of California, Riverside, Rivera Library; Merchant, *Earthcare*, 3-26.

⁵⁴⁰ Charlene Spretnak and Pacifica Radio Archive, “Interview with Charlene Spretnak on Ecofeminism and the Green Party,” c. 200-, Audio Disc, Found at the University of California, Riverside, Rivera Library

⁵⁴¹ See especially: Charlene Spretnak, *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece: A Collection of Pre-Hellenic Mythology* (Moon Books, 1978).

variation that could take root within the developing Ecofeminist Movement. Highlighting particular Greek mythologies surrounding Gaia as a source for inspiration—notably then in vogue for the Gaia Hypothesis, arguing that the Earth constituted a superorganism, popularized by James Lovelock around the same time—Spretnak encouraged the development of an effectively modern form of Goddess worship that could help overturn longstanding patriarchal and ecologically destructive practices.⁵⁴²

This emphasis upon the spiritual, however, appeared to Social Ecologists like Murray Bookchin, Janet Biehl, and Ynestra King, as a dangerous retreat from rationalism and replacement of the satisfactory natural with the irrelevant supernatural in providing cultural justifications for environmental protection. Setting off the debate was Bookchin's comments at the 1987 Amherst Meeting and its aftermath, where disagreement arose not only about Spretnak's eco-spiritualism but also her support for transforming the Green Party into a formal political party. Concerned by the growing rancor, the conference organizers forced the two to hold a mediation session where a "reconciliation" was achieved by both Bookchin and Spretnak reluctantly agreeing to symbolically seal and bury their disagreements with a mimed performance. This show temporarily muted the debate. Bookchin and Spretnak awkwardly appeared together at the closing ceremony while audiences simultaneously applauded their highly divergent visions for the Greens and Bookchin later summarized the conference as reflecting "a very healthy creativity that comes through the tension, clash, and development of ideas."⁵⁴³ But the divisions were only becoming clearer.

Indeed, the veneer of reconciliation soon crumbled as the larger debates between Deep Ecology and Social Ecology unfolded. Reflecting, perhaps, concerns about the political image of the debate given

⁵⁴² Charlene Spretnak, *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power Within the Feminist Movement* (Anchor Books, 1982); Merchant, *Earthcare*, 3–5.

⁵⁴³ "First National Green Gathering," *Green Letter*, Vol. 3, No. 6, c. Fall 1987. Found in Gale American Radicalism Collection, Part 4: Twentieth-Century Social, Economic, and Environmental Movements, Green Politics: Periodicals. Reel 211. Michigan State University. link.gale.com/apps/doc/BAQNJU539676845/PLEX?u=ucdavis&sid=bookmark-PLEX&xid=2ae42567&pg=10. Accessed 17 Apr. 2026; A detailed account of Bookchin's conflict with Spretnak at the 1987 Amherst conference from Bookchin and Biehl's perspective can be found in: Biehl, *Ecology or Catastrophe*, 378–80.

its connection to the Ecofeminist Movement, many of the attacks by Social Ecologists came not from Bookchin, himself, but rather from women Social Ecologists: Janet Biehl and Ynestra King. In a June 1988 article in *Green Perspectives*, Biehl directly attacked Spretnak's eco-spiritualism as risking to turning the Green Movement into a "religious congregation," thereby "diluting its political orientation." As she explained, "A political movement, while it should certainly be concerned with the psychological well-being of its supporters, does not exist primarily to minister to their personal needs. Rather, its members voluntarily agree to work in behalf of a larger political ideal."⁵⁴⁴ Ynestra King, meanwhile, could safely critique the "pseudo-spiritual" nature of Deep Ecology that sought to "[capitalize] on the spiritual impoverishment of contemporary culture" while avoiding ecofeminist critique due to her own work within the Ecofeminist movement.⁵⁴⁵

King's elision of the varied debates of the Green Movement into the Deep Ecology-Social Ecology fight was no accident. Practically all debates in the movement were soon read through the political and ideological lens of Deep Ecology versus Social Ecology. Thus, the fight between Deep Ecologists and Social Ecologists—increasingly personified as a fight between Foreman and Bookchin due to Bookchin's blistering personal attacks at the Amherst meeting and subsequent articles—continued for roughly two years, overshadowing substantial progress within the Green Movement towards ever-more complex organizing structures. Back-and-forth broadsides from prominent personalities like Arne Naess, George Sessions, Charlene Spretnak, Ynestra King, and Bookchin himself became recurring features of Green newsletters and publications like *Green Synthesis*, maintaining a constant state of grievance among all parties. Deep Ecologists like Sessions and Devall disputed the blanket rejection of their program as racist, while Bookchin expressed his frustration with red-baiting attacks by Deep Ecology apologists who painted Bookchin's comments as a concerted "attack" by "anarchists-leftists-marxists" seeking to destroy

⁵⁴⁴ Janet Biehl, "The Politics of Myth," *Green Perspectives*, No. 7, June 1988. Found in Box 2, Folder 10, Green Party of California Records, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

⁵⁴⁵ Ynestra King, "Coming of Age with the Greens," *Z Magazine*, Feb. 1988. Found in Box 1, Folder 35, Dave Foreman Earth First! Collection (MSS 1102 BC), Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections, University of New Mexico Libraries.

the radical ecology movement.⁵⁴⁶ Indeed, figures like Spretnak did attack the leftist language seeking to “overthrow capitalism” prominent among some Greens, arguing that anti-capitalist language in the United States would be “almost universally assumed to mean state socialism with nationalization of all businesses.” Thus, while insisting that all could recognize the differences between the variations of socialism, “strategy,” Spretnak argued, compelled Greens to reject any Leftist analysis.⁵⁴⁷

Other Greens opposed to the Social Ecologists and the Left Green Network (LGN) that they organized under in the Green Movement were even more explicit in their red-baiting. Deep Ecologist Gary Snyder responded bitterly to Bookchin’s attacks in a 1989 *Los Angeles Times* article on the split, characterizing Bookchin’s attacks on Deep Ecology as “scandalous” misrepresentations. “Although he claims to be an anarchist,” Snyder complained, “he writes like a Stalinist thug.”⁵⁴⁸ Lorna Salzman, another prominent Green activist, questioned whether the Left Green Network was “really green.” The LGN’s “use of the fudged terms ‘bureaucratic’, ‘state managers’, and ‘bureaucratic statism’, rather than the upfront word ‘socialism,’” she argued, “smacks of apologism for either socialism itself or the ecological execrations committed by socialist (and democratic socialist) economies and states of both the east and west blocs.”⁵⁴⁹

For his part, Foreman used his own publications in *Earth First!* to continue the attack, publishing multiple articles defending Deep Ecology and also not-so-subtly attacking Bookchin and the Social Ecologists as a leftist—indeed Marxist—cabal. Writing under the pseudonym Chim Blea, Foreman initially dismissed Bookchin’s attacks as “sour grapes”: jealousy that *Earth First!* and Deep Ecology were gaining prominence over his own ideas. But he also argued that Bookchin’s attacks “may have been part

⁵⁴⁶ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 124; Murray Bookchin, “A Reply to My Critics,” *Green Synthesis*, December 1988.

⁵⁴⁷ Pamela Benda et al., “Time For a Reality Check,” *Greener Times*, Fall 1988. Found in Green Party of California Records, Box 2, Folder 10, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

⁵⁴⁸ Bob Sipchen, “Ecology’s Family Feud: Murray Bookchin Turns Up Volume on a Noisy Debate,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 27, 1989.

⁵⁴⁹ Lorna Salzman, “Is the Left-Green Network Really Green?,” *Green Synthesis*, June 1989. Found in Box 121, Folder 39, Dave Foreman Collection, Denver Public Library.

of a coordinated attempt by American Redgreens to launch a preemptive strike... and engineer a coup in the emerging Green Party in the United States.” What motivated them, Foreman argued, was simply anthropocentrism.⁵⁵⁰ When combined with ongoing fights within Earth First! over the future and orientation of the movement—summarized by Foreman as a battle between so-called “Rednecks for Wilderness” and “pinkos” or “woo-woos”—Foreman’s understanding of himself as under siege becomes clear.⁵⁵¹

By the fall of 1989, however, the situation had begun to change. Foreman’s arrest by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) that spring, under charges of eco-terrorism, had fostered a sense of common cause between the two camps of radical ecologists. Thus, after a year of refusals by Foreman and Bookchin to participate in a face-to-face “dialogue” to work out their differences, organized by the Institute for Social Ecology-affiliated Learning Alliance, the two finally accepted. In front of an engaged audience in Brooklyn, New York, the two met and approached a degree of reconciliation.

Bookchin, opening the conversation, highlighted his support for Earth First!, and Foreman in particular, in the face of FBI investigations. Backing off the more personal attacks of his previous comments—including his charge of Foreman and certain Earth First!ers as “eco-fascists,” Bookchin now disavowed the idea that he ever “believed that people in Earth First! are fascists,” and expressed his willingness to “stand shoulder to shoulder with everyone in Earth First!.”⁵⁵² The direct action of Foreman

⁵⁵⁰ Chim Blea, “Why the Venom?,” *Earth First!* 8, no. 1 (Nov. 1, 1987); . Historian Bron Taylor notes that Foreman was behind the Chim Blea pseudonym in his obituary essay. See: Bron Taylor, “Dave Foreman: Wise Guy,” in Susan Morgan and John C. Miles (eds.), *Wildeor: The Wild Life and Living Legacy of Dave Foreman* (Essex Editions, 2023). See also: Dave Foreman, “Whither Earth First!,” *Earth First!* 8, no. 1 (Nov. 1, 1987); Bill Devall, “Deep Ecology and Its Critics,” *Earth First!* 8, no. 2 (Dec. 22, 1987);

⁵⁵¹ Foreman’s explicitly ideological reading of the Deep Ecology vs. Social Ecology debate can also be found in retrospect through his paper’s labeling of folders related to the controversy. His two collections at the University of New Mexico and Denver Public Library include nine folders labeled a variety of red-baiting names such as “Leftist Attacks on Earth First!,” “Anarchist Attacks on Earth First!,” etc. Notably, Foreman includes attacks on him from controversial communist *Nation* magazine columnist, Alexander Cockburn, in these folders along with ongoing fights with the seemingly left-leaning California Earth First!, painting a clear picture of Foreman’s perception of an organized leftist attack on him personally. See: Dave Foreman Collection, Denver Public Library; Dave Foreman Earth First! Collection (MSS 1102 BC), Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections, University of New Mexico Libraries.

⁵⁵² Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 29–30.

and Earth First! in protecting wilderness areas was, Bookchin insisted, perfectly consistent with his own legacy of writing and activism:

In many ways, I think they and Dave Foreman are doing a wonderful job. I feel a very keen sympathy for their many direct-action campaigns to protect wilderness. They are not terrorists as the FBI would have you believe. They are doing important work, work I strongly support.⁵⁵³

While Bookchin confessed his continued discomfort with some of the themes of Foreman, Earth First!, and the wider Deep Ecology community—explicitly contesting their “abuse” of the overpopulation issue and separation of humanity from nature—he framed these critiques as a potential danger of Deep Ecology’s logical conclusions. Rather than being explicit eco-fascists, “certain positions and statements” of Earth First! now simply reminded Bookchin “of things I heard fifty years ago when there was a world-wide fascist movement that used ‘naturalistic’ Malthusian arguments to justify racist population control policies.”⁵⁵⁴ Similarly, he warned, separating “human beings and society from nature by viewing humanity as an inherently unnatural force in the world” led either to “anti-nature ‘anthropocentrism’ or a misanthropic aversion to the human species.”⁵⁵⁵ Begging his fellow radical environmentalists to simply “be careful about the population problem” and to “understand that the human species is no less a product of natural evolution than blue-green algae, whales, and bears,” Bookchin now seemed to approach Deep Ecologists carefully as potential allies simply in need of minor reproof.⁵⁵⁶

Foreman, likewise, now seemed to express broad agreement with Bookchin’s points, to a degree. He framed his work with Earth First! as rising from an impulse to respond both to the escalating ecological catastrophe unfolding and the inability of a “compromised” mainstream environmental movement to respond to it. But more importantly, he argued, his approach seemed to be working. By creating “some space on the far end of the spectrum for a radical environmentalist perspective,” Earth First! had been able to “redefine the parameters of the national environmental debate.” Earth First!’s

⁵⁵³ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 28.

⁵⁵⁴ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 30.

⁵⁵⁵ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 32.

⁵⁵⁶ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 30–32.

embrace of radical positions on environmental issues allowed mainstream groups like the Sierra Club “to actually take stronger positions than they would have before and yet appear to be more moderate than ever.”⁵⁵⁷ Yet, Foreman maintained that this success stemmed from their specific emphasis on wilderness preservation and endangered species. Acknowledging that they “were not *the* radical environmental movement,” but rather only “one slice,” Foreman attempted to articulate a radical environmental movement made up of different groups pursuing their own particular interests that would, in sum, achieve the radical aims of all. Earth First! focusing on only their issues of wilderness and endangered species “doesn’t mean the other issues aren’t important; it just means that we mostly talk about what we know most about. We work on what moves us particularly.”⁵⁵⁸ People could, however, care about multiple issues even as they focused on one. Indeed, Foreman insisted, his work—especially his book, *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching*—had clear anti-capitalist values even as it focused on defending natural spaces.⁵⁵⁹

Bookchin and Foreman’s shared radicalism only became clearer when they were explicitly framed against mainstream environmentalists. Among the moderated discussions was a questioning prompt by Linda Davidoff, executive director of the New York City Park Council, who jokingly acknowledged that she must have been “sent from central casting to be the ‘mainstream’ activist in this important discussion.” Questioning their shared attacks on environmental reformism, she insisted that it was “possible to defend the Earth through the utilization of the available institutional machinery in our society and a willingness to compromise on some points.”⁵⁶⁰ Foreman and Bookchin did not hold back in their utter rejection of such an approach. Noting a shared belief with Bookchin “that this society is rotten to its core,” Foreman argued that modern America was “so fundamentally destructive that it’s ultimately unreformable in any conventional sense.”⁵⁶¹ Bookchin concurred, arguing that pragmatic politics led not

⁵⁵⁷ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 38–39.

⁵⁵⁸ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 39–40.

⁵⁵⁹ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 40.

⁵⁶⁰ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 65.

⁵⁶¹ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 75.

only to ineffectual policies incapable of averting environmental destruction, but they actually opened the door for increasingly destructive policies as the lack of clear environmental principles in the name of centrist compromise would allow for progressive drift towards radical anti-environmentalist politics.⁵⁶² Again, the emphasis of the discussion was on the areas of overlap between Bookchin and Foreman; as Bookchin explained, “No doubt there’re are still real differences between us. Yet, so far as these issues of vision and strategy are concerned, we seem to be in considerable agreement.”⁵⁶³

Foreman’s complaint, however, was that while he understood the human-focused components of radical environmentalism, his critics refused to reciprocate. As he explained:

One problem I’ve had in getting the fullness of my message out comes from my impatience at seeing eco-catastrophe going on all around me while so many of those on the left who are always talking about social justice don’t seem to even see the problem or care about other species.⁵⁶⁴

The overemphasis of radical environmental leftists on the troubles facing humans, and subsequent lack of regard for the “million other species on the planet who haven’t asked for this eco-catastrophe to happen to them,” led leftists to attack Foreman’s record—in his view—unfairly.⁵⁶⁵ Foreman’s frustration only became clearer as he responded to the first audience question directed to him, asking him to reconcile his new conciliatory tone with his past support for restrictive immigration policies. Complaining about misinterpretation of his past comments and conflation of his views with Edward Abbey’s simply due to their association, Foreman bluntly replied that he didn’t think the questioner had ever read anything he had written. Unlike Abbey, who had once written of using the U.S. military to “close” the “national borders to any further mass immigration, legal or illegal, from any source,” Foreman insisted that he never supported such extremes.⁵⁶⁶ However, he did agree with Abbey that the ultimate issue was beyond the border; the only thing keeping Latin American migrants from trying to travel to the U.S. was to stop

⁵⁶² Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 76–77.

⁵⁶³ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 75.

⁵⁶⁴ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 40.

⁵⁶⁵ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 40.

⁵⁶⁶ Edward Abbey, “Immigration and Liberal Taboos,” in *One Life at a Time, Please* (Henry Holt and Co., 1988), 43–44; Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 41.

interfering in their internal affairs.⁵⁶⁷ But again, the basic understanding here was that immigration posed a problem.

Indeed, a section of the debate dedicated to the issue of racism within the environmental movement only highlighted the underlying tension between Foreman's expressly ecocentric perspective and Bookchin's more ambiguous balance of natural and human interest. While Foreman readily admitted to the "residual racism" within environmental activism and the need for critiques by people of color as part of an alliance of movements, he also insisted on the ability to critique communities of color for their own environmentally destructive actions. As he explained, while activists should be concerned about social oppression, they "must also remember that members of other species are among the most oppressed beings on the planet."⁵⁶⁸ Pointing to what he saw as cases of Native environmental destruction, such as overgrazing of sheep by Diné people or support for energy development among Alaskan natives, Foreman maintained a position effectively arguing that histories of social oppression, such as colonialism and racism, did not stand above the oppression of nature. Furthermore, Foreman argued, ecocentric environmentalists could actually help poor communities of color, many of which had been "forcibly divested of their direct connections with the land and isolated in decaying urban environments," by helping to "restore and deepen" their "lost ecological awareness."⁵⁶⁹

However, the mutualism of alliance and thoughtful critique remained just that: carefully distinct movements that only strategically cooperated. Anything more was too much. Indeed, he argued, further cooperation was unlikely to succeed even if attempted:

It will likely take a few generations of hard work, at least, to thoroughly overcome the social wounds that divide us and inhibit our full cooperation. I don't think forming a large, all-encompassing movement organization that aims at effectively addressing all of our issues is practical or wise right now. I think any attempt along these lines will collapse of its own weight.⁵⁷⁰

⁵⁶⁷ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 42; Abbey, "Immigration and Liberal Taboos," 44.

⁵⁶⁸ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 92.

⁵⁶⁹ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 94.

⁵⁷⁰ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 95.

Thus, Foreman framed the larger debates between Social Ecology and Deep Ecology as between rough moral equals; both sides, in his view, holding moral blind spots that benefited from mutual critique. But he also threw into question the very premise of Green organizing: that environmental and social movements could be unified under a broad radical-progressive umbrella. This separated Foreman not only from his Social Ecologist opponents, but also from fellow Deep Ecologists like Charlene Spretnak, who did see the Green Movement as a way to blend these two movements.

These stances stood in obvious contrast to Bookchin's views, which remained firmly rooted in his Social Ecology analysis, emphasizing the primacy of social oppression in explaining oppression of nature and encouraging political efforts uniting social and environmental concerns. While Bookchin expressed appreciation for Foreman's forthright repudiation of racism within the environmental movement—welcoming him among the “humanistic naturalists in the tradition of Thoreau” instead of the “barely-disguised racists”—he remained suspicious of Deep Ecology's “tolerant” philosophical attitude towards such racists.⁵⁷¹ As he explained, Deep Ecology's lack of a clear social analysis of environmental problems meant it was “hardly more insightful... than the reformist environmental movement.”⁵⁷² Marginalized groups, he explained, were right “to be very wary of a philosophy which interprets vital questions of human solidarity, democracy, and liberation as optional and secondary concerns, at best, and evidence of ‘anti-ecological’ or ‘anthropocentric’ selfishness, at worst.”⁵⁷³ While Bookchin and Foreman may have been speaking on polite terms at the 1989 debate, the distinctions between the two—and thereby the branches of radical environmentalism they represented—seemed no closer to resolution.

Two reflective essays written by Bookchin and Foreman a year after the debate only confirmed the tense ceasefire that existed between the two. Acknowledging “failings” on his part in leaving “unstated, and sometimes unexamined, the social components of problems like overpopulation, poverty,

⁵⁷¹ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 95.

⁵⁷² Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 96.

⁵⁷³ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 97.

and famine while trying to discuss their biological nature,” Foreman admitted the “insensitive, albeit [unintentional]” nature of his remarks years prior.⁵⁷⁴

However, while apologizing for the flippant wording of these remarks, he remained equally committed to an interrogation of “liberal dogma” and “conventional ‘humanitarian’” responses. On the border, Foreman turned the issue to argue that “unlimited immigration” might have not only negative environmental impacts, but also weaken revolutionary or democratic movements in Latin America. As he explained, “A little troll in the back of my brain keeps whispering nagging questions. Who is really being helped by unlimited immigration? Is it sustainable? Does it actually exacerbate social and ecological problems here and in Latin America?”⁵⁷⁵ On famine in Ethiopia, he admitted that his “sloppy, off-the-cuff remarks” were unclear and he agreed that the comments, “out of context,” sounded “truly cold hearted.”⁵⁷⁶ But again, he sought to justify his remarks behind a critical lens of analysis, expressing a litany of “honest questions” about the “much-admired relief efforts during the Ethiopian famine” that “desperately need to be explored.”⁵⁷⁷ Beyond his skepticism about the long term efficacy of such relief efforts, he also a more pointed question whether “the principal beneficiaries of the Ethiopian relief effort... were the contributors to it in the West, who derived liberal, do-gooder satisfaction” without radical change or self-analysis.

Thus, Foreman again reframed criticism of his comments as effectively liberal and mainstream, not radical. As he explained, he was “unwilling to silence the heretical troll in [his] brain in order to be certified ‘politically correct’ by conventional leftists.”⁵⁷⁸ Dismissing the “dogmatic, blind rage” of his critics—of whom “Murray” was “an appreciated exception”—he reiterated his ecocentrist opposition to

⁵⁷⁴ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 107.

⁵⁷⁵ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 109.

⁵⁷⁶ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 109.

⁵⁷⁷ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 110.

⁵⁷⁸ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 111.

“the cornucopian myths of modern industrialism and the unending march of material progress” that he saw as inherent to the ideology of not only “liberals,” but also “leftists.”⁵⁷⁹ As he bluntly expressed:

The vast majority of the left, even the environmentally oriented left, has next to nothing to say about environmental ethics beyond an ultimately anthropocentric commitment to provide a sustainable, non-toxic, and aesthetically pleasing environment for all human beings.⁵⁸⁰

Expressing concern that “socially-oriented ecology” could eventually lose its “ecological” basis, Foreman, therefore, remained skeptical of the long-term potential for a synthesis of his position with that of Bookchin. Noting his contemporaneous decision to leave Earth First!, Foreman expressed his “need to work within a new organization explicitly committed to biocentrism.” In doing so, he implicitly rejected the idea of any centrally unified organization or movement, even as he expressed hope that the collaborative efforts of radical ecologists would lead to a “common, integrated perspective that overcomes the limitations of each radical ecological tendency while maintaining the vital insights of each.”⁵⁸¹

Bookchin, on the other hand, remained just as committed to his criticisms of Deep Ecology and biocentrism in his reflective essay, but also spoke to his continued faith in the potential organization of radical ecologists into a more cohesive force. Insisting that his critiques were matters of “politics,” not “ego” or “personalities,” Bookchin reiterated points he had, by now, been making for roughly three years. Attacking the misanthropic language of Deep Ecologists like Edward Abbey, Christopher Manes, and Gary Snyder, Bookchin raised pointed questions whether Deep Ecology was truly radical:

In contrast to Bill Devall’s contention that deep ecology is becoming a very embattled anti-establishmentarian body of ideas, I find that it has actually become very trendy and chic these days. It has not only swept into its fold a large number of well-situated academics but also a lot of journalists and even royalty, like Prince Philip of England, and other movers and shakers in the elite “ecology” establishment. My question is, have these recent converts to deep ecology become radical social critics or is deep ecology congenial to their conventional, and sometimes even reactionary, social views?⁵⁸²

⁵⁷⁹ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 112.

⁵⁸⁰ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 115.

⁵⁸¹ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 119.

⁵⁸² Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 122–23.

While letting Foreman off the hook somewhat for his connection to these ideas due to his “openness” and “integrity” in the debate and his having “pulled back from the precipice of the oppressive extremes that have been articulated from within the deep ecology movement,” he remained no less dismissive of the concept of biocentrism.⁵⁸³ These principles, he argued, led not only to Foreman’s remarks about immigration and famine, but also to the lack of awareness by fellow Deep Ecologists like Bill Devall, Arne Naess, and George Sessions of the questionable nature of those remarks. Thus, Bookchin envisioned a radical ecology movement that navigated away from misanthropy by offering dual programs “for removing the oppressions that people suffer even while some... are primarily focused on the damage this society is inflicting on wild areas and wildlife.”⁵⁸⁴ This embrace of an expansive definition of radical environmentalism as a political project targeting both social and ecological goals thus clearly separated from Foreman’s more limited conception of the movement.

Indeed, the rough truce that came out of the Bookchin-Foreman debate only papered over the very real divisions among radical environmentalists that continued to plague the wider Green Movement. If the virulence of the debate had lessened since the discord of the late 1980s, both remained firmly committed to their perspectives. Thus, while Bookchin apparently avoided overt attacks on Foreman in new articles going forward, he seemed to hold no qualms about republishing in fall 1990 his old “Social Ecology versus Deep Ecology” article—keeping the critiques of Foreman, himself—in a Northern California radical newspaper under the title “Beyond Environmentalism.” Indeed, even as the two figures became less overtly antagonistic, the fight they had set off—and, up to this point, largely personalized—was far from finished. The apparent readiness of Bookchin and Foreman to “agree to disagree” was not shared by all in their respective camps, and battles continued to be fought with or without their ostensible leaders. A January 1991 letter from Foreman to Bookchin highlighted how the debate had taken a life of its own. While noting that he considered the two to be “friends and allies in a common battle,” he

⁵⁸³ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 125.

⁵⁸⁴ Bookchin and Foreman, *Defending the Earth*, 131.

nevertheless complained about alleged “Bookchinite students” heckling him during a speech in Urbana, Illinois, chanting “Racist, go home!” Requesting Bookchin’s help, if he had “any influence with these people,” to encourage them to voice their disagreements in a less confrontational manner, Foreman spoke to the changing dynamics of the debates within the Green Movement.⁵⁸⁵ Bookchin’s response—if there was any—is unknown, but if there was ever a moment where Bookchin and Foreman could have effectively controlled their respective factions, it was long over.

Indeed, the wider world of Green politics was quickly moving away from the figures who had long personified it. As Foreman confronted regular opponents like the “Bookchinite students” in 1991, he had already faced growing opposition within his own organization. The oft-cited split within Earth First! between the more conventionally leftist Northern California chapter headed by Judi Bari and Foreman’s inner circle defined by ecocentrist principles—sometimes referred to as the “Rednecks for Wilderness”—had finally reached a head in 1990 with Foreman’s acrimonious “divorce” from the organization. Meanwhile, Bookchin was also facing his own troubles. Following his philosophical and political emphasis on the municipality as the necessary center for social ecological organizing, Bookchin dedicated his energy to local political organizing around his home of Burlington, VT, working to run a Green candidate to defeat not only the mainstream Democrats and Republicans, but also candidates of the leftist Vermont Progressive Coalition aligned with the then-former mayor of Burlington, Bernie Sanders. However, after a split with his fellow Burlington Greens over electoral strategy, Bookchin found himself increasingly alienated from his own fellow local Green activists and effectively sidelined in Green debates.⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸⁵ Letter, Dave Foreman to Murray Bookchin, Jan. 31, 1991, Box 1, Folder 35, Dave Foreman Earth First! Collection (MSS 1102 BC), Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections, University of New Mexico Libraries.

⁵⁸⁶ Biehl, *Ecology or Catastrophe*, 387–95.

Towards a Green Party

This increasing isolation of Bookchin's activism at the local level was only exacerbated by the national Green Movement's turn away from his ideas and strategies—even among the Left-Green Network that he had helped to found. This was most clearly represented by the evolution of the Green Movement into a formal Green Party in the early 1990s. Mirroring the historical debates within the German Greens, the American Green Movement had struggled through the mid-to-late 1980s in a tense standoff over its identity. Were the Greens a coalition of allied activist movements pursuing their own ends, only using the shared moniker of “Green” for its utility in pooling together political capital and external identification? Or was it destined to unseat mainstream politics as a formal political party united under a synthesis of its constituents' diverse agendas? Nestled within this fundamental question of identity was a host of smaller debates. Was the locus of Green organizing at the local level, where negotiation of the different agendas of Green activists could be more effectively handled, in line with Bookchin's theory? Or did the demands of formal political organizing require investment in state and, indeed, federal elections—with all the political compromises such investments entailed? These debates often fell unevenly upon the existing factions of the American Greens, bringing apparent rivals together and splitting ostensible allies apart.

American Greens had tried to resolve these questions through a complicated organizational structure that sought to appease both sides with mixed results. From the very beginning of the formal Green Movement at the St. Paul, Minnesota, Meeting in 1984, it had been clear that no agreement existed on what a Green Party would look like and that confusion was not resolved.⁵⁸⁷ The Committee of Correspondence maintained a commitment through 1980s to grassroots activism with the potential for a future foray into formal politics. But the timing and nature of this political turn was anything but clear. The inability to find an institutional consensus on the question contributed to the ultimately unsuccessful

⁵⁸⁷ Proceedings of the Green Organizing Planning Meeting, Aug. 1984, Box 2, Folder 4, Dave Foreman Earth First! Collection (MSS 1102 BC), Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections, University of New Mexico Libraries

series of identity changes and splits that the Green Movement went through in the late 1980s and early 1990s. First there was the growing qualification of the Committee of Correspondence as the Green Committee of Correspondence (GCoC), then the renaming of the GCoC as “The Greens” at an August 1991 meeting in Elkins, West Virginia. The continuing split within the Green Movement over the contours of what Green politics should look like, however, led to its split. Characterizing the election of a Left-Green majority to the Green Council as a “take-over,” Spretnak would later insist that this was the moment that the majority of Greens objected to efforts by the national Green Council to assert authority over the state and local Green chapters and subsequently left the national organization, opting to instead focus on building formal state Green parties. Labeling the moment as the end of a dream and the beginning of a “nightmare” for the Greens, Lorna Salzman was even angrier. Likewise blaming the collapse of the national Greens as the fault of Left Green “domination” of the party, she argued that many Green locals withdrew out of exhaustion at the Left Greens’ “endless argumentative adversary approach, ad hominem attacks, Machiavellian techniques, not-so-subtle perversions of the truth, and... endless late-night meetings.”⁵⁸⁸ Rejecting leftist politics increasingly dominant at the national level, many Green activists now turned to local and state organizing.

It was through these state-level organizing efforts that most formal political organizing would take place in subsequent years, with clear departures from a formally leftist politics. The Green Party of California, having begun organizing as early as February 1990 and achieving formal recognition from the California Secretary of State’s Office in January 1992, quickly rose to preeminence among state green parties. Claiming roughly 100,000 members by October 1992, the party worked initially to establish widespread appeal among both progressives concerned about the environment and more centrist voters. With one party founder, Dennis Bottum, characterizing their “major goal” as to “make people more self-sufficient, not dependent on ‘big daddy’ government,” California Greens made a clear effort to

⁵⁸⁸ Lorna Salzman, “The U.S. Greens: A Dream Ends, a Nightmare Begins,” Jan. 1992. Found in Box 121, Folder 39, Dave Foreman Collection, Denver Public Library.

distinguish themselves from the leftist national movement, belying the growing identity crisis for Greens as they struggled to apply a political philosophy built upon rejection of the “materialist” left-right ideological spectrum to formal political institutions built on that spectrum.⁵⁸⁹

Anxious to capture part of the momentum of the state green parties and remain relevant, the largely leftist national Greens attempted to follow their turn into formal politics. Renaming themselves the “Greens/Green Party USA” (G/GPUSA) to reflect their new dual focus on informal and formal political action, they even began to change some of their philosophical and strategic approaches to electoral politics. This included a rejection of the earlier Left Green emphasis on local political organizing to embrace dedicated political effort at the state and, indeed, federal level. This turn was driven primarily by longtime leftist activist, leader of the Left-Green Network, and one-time member of Bookchin’s orbit, Howard (Howie) Hawkins. In essays and statements from 1991 and 1992, Hawkins attempted to flip the issue to argue that a turn towards participation in formal politics—long considered among Left Greens a form of “selling out” to the political mainstream—was a way to “build the grassroots counterpower.” Justifying a Green presidential ticket for former director of Jesse Jackson’s National Rainbow Coalition, Ronald Daniels—in conjunction with other left-leaning parties like the Unity Party in New York—Howard argued that such a campaign could encourage “a democratization of government to give face-to-face neighborhood assemblies and town meetings legislative authority in their communities.”⁵⁹⁰ Such a stance horrified some longstanding Left Greens, most notably Murray Bookchin and Janet Biehl, who joined others in writing a public letter from the Social Ecology Project disavowing Hawkins and his views. Acknowledging that he had “been a highly visible spokesperson for our ideas on social ecology and libertarian municipalism,” they nevertheless saw his turn towards state and federal politics as a betrayal of social ecology principles. As they explained:

⁵⁸⁹ Amy Wallace, “Greens Groups Try to Grow Into New Party in California,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 6, 1990; Daniel M. Weintraub, “Environmental Green Party May Have Ballot Spot,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 3, 1992; Merry Ann Moore, “‘Green’ Politics Sprouting Across U.S.,” *Arizona Daily Star*, Oct. 13, 1992.

⁵⁹⁰ Social Ecology Project Letter to the Greens of North America, April 10, 1992, Box 2, Folder 10, Green Party of California Records, Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Stanford University.

Running for office in national, provincial, and state governments, even for purely ‘tactical’ reasons (such as to spread a message to a wide audience and to build coalitions) is fundamentally incompatible with a serious, responsible, and authentically antistatist politics intended to create a face-to-face participatory democracy.⁵⁹¹

Rejecting Hawkins’s strategic and tactical twisting of Social Ecological ideas, they effectively saw his turn as a betrayal, expressing “the greatest regret and a deep sense of loss for so talented and valuable a colleague.”⁵⁹²

Ralph Nader and the Greens

Yet, despite the efforts of the Green Party USA to co-opt the growing popularity of state green parties, it was, indeed, the state parties that finally made the effort to seriously pursue Green electoral ambitions at the federal level. Again, with the California Green Party leading the way, Greens would run in a number of political offices at the local, state, and federal level over the course of the early-to-mid 1990s. While most of their early campaigns saw success primarily at the local level—especially in nonpartisan elections for school boards, county commissioners, and city councils in states like Wisconsin, Massachusetts, and North Carolina—later campaigns for statewide office and federal election saw largely mixed results that, nevertheless, encouraged continued electoral efforts. While they almost uniformly lost elections for statewide and federal office, their performance in states like California and New Mexico was strong enough to ensure continued access to the ballot in subsequent elections, most notably the 1996 presidential election.⁵⁹³

While most attention to Ralph Nader and his Green Party candidacy has understandably focused on the 2000 election, that was actually the second time he had run under the Green banner. 1996 marked

⁵⁹¹ Social Ecology Project Letter to the Greens of North America, April 10, 1992, Box 2, Folder 10, Green Party of California Records, Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Stanford University.

⁵⁹² Social Ecology Project Letter to the Greens of North America, April 10, 1992, Box 2, Folder 10, Green Party of California Records, Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Stanford University; See also Charlene Spretnak, “Corrections to Current Claims Made by the G/GPUSA Leadership,” Sept. 25, 2000, Box 2, Folder 10, Green Party of California Records, Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Stanford University.

⁵⁹³ Some of the best existing literature on the historical Green Party, when they step away from the overriding emphasis on Ralph Nader’s 2000 campaign, has focused on their electoral campaigns in the 1980s and 1990s, as described here. See especially: Lem, “The Green Party of the United States”; Sifry, *Spoling for a Fight*, 202–29.

the actual beginning of Green presidential ambitions, but in true Green fashion, the path to the Nader/LaDuke 1996 ballot was anything but straightforward. A longtime progressive political activist and consumer advocate, Ralph Nader was, in many ways, the perfect candidate for a party aiming to upset the status quo. Gaining widespread influence for his 1965 expose on the automotive industry, *Unsafe at Any Speed*, Nader established himself over the subsequent years as a leading activist for consumer protection and other progressive causes. Thus, seeking nominees for their 1996 presidential primary, the California Green Party approached Nader. Quickly securing their nomination and that of twenty-one other state green parties cautiously coordinating through a new organization known as the Green Politics Network (GPN), Nader established a limited political campaign with running-mate Winona LaDuke, an Ojibwe environmental activist.⁵⁹⁴ Formally a political outsider with no electoral experience, yet possessing political connections from his decades of work and clear progressive credentials, Nader stood in marked contrast to what many progressives and leftists saw as the choice among varying flavors of right-wing politics.⁵⁹⁵

While the election ostensibly saw a battle between the conservative Kansas senator, Bob Dole, and liberal President Bill Clinton, many of the leftists and progressives who made up the Green movement saw little distinction. Years of limited follow-through on environmental priorities after campaign promises and the nomination of Al Gore, a Democratic Tennessee senator and environmentalist, as Vice President had led to growing resentment among some in the mainstream and radical environmental movements. Clearly representing the growing progressive dissension surrounding the 1996 election, David Brower, a longtime environmental activist then serving on the Sierra Club Board of Directors, offered harsh words for the Clinton Administration in a 1996 op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times*. Characterizing policies such as the passage of free trade deals like the North American Free Trade

⁵⁹⁴ For more on the recruitment, nomination, and campaigning of Nader in 1996, see: Lem, "The Green Party of the United States," 67–69.

⁵⁹⁵ Some biographies of Nader include: Patricia Cronin Marcello, *Ralph Nader: A Biography* (Greenwood Press, 2004); Justin Martin, *Nader: Crusader, Spoiler, Icon* (Perseus Publishing, 2002).

Agreement (NAFTA), the weakening of endangered species and clean water regulations, and the allowing of “salvage logging” of ancient forests as capitulations to environmental destruction, Brower went as far as to claim that “President Clinton [had] done more to harm the environment and to weaken environmental regulations in three years than Presidents Bush and Reagan did in 12 years.”⁵⁹⁶ But even here, there was some ambiguity in how these figures approached the politics surrounding the election. In an article attacking Clinton’s environmental record, leftist writers Jeffrey St. Clair and Alexander Cockburn noted Brower’s urging of the Sierra Club to offer a qualified endorsement for Clinton. It was Brower, they noted, that argued “that the Club, being a mainstream group, needed to maintain its political leverage by supporting Clinton/Gore.”⁵⁹⁷

It was this question of political influence and the broader relationship of Green politics with the mainstream Democratic Party that would, ultimately, dominate popular discourse around the Green Party in the years to come. 1990s electoral analyses repeatedly highlighted the overlap between Green and Democratic constituencies among progressive and leftist voters. While California Greens like Dennis Bottum quoted above may have continued to hope for a growing appeal to centrist voters, they also began to recognize their real constituency. Indeed, later 2002 California Green candidate for Governor, Peter Camejo, would often speak of his politics as intrinsically connected to leftist politics: comparing them to a watermelon, “green on the outside, red on the inside.”⁵⁹⁸ Thus, as the various state Green Parties actively pursued election in the mid-to-late 1990s, they began to turn towards earnestly progressive, if not leftist, candidates who appealed to their real ideological constituencies while also hoping for such a candidate to garner more widespread appeal out of growing dissatisfaction with the political mainstream. In this way, the Green Party began to function as a left flank check to the Democratic Party that, from the perspective of most commentators, threatened to split the abstracted “liberal vote” between a

⁵⁹⁶ David Brower, “Why I Won’t Vote for Clinton,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 22, 1996.

⁵⁹⁷ Jeffrey St. Clair and Alexander Cockburn, “Nature and Politics: Dave Foreman’s Dream and Bill Clinton’s Trail of Tears,” c. Sept. 24, 1996. Found in Box 51, Folder 75, Dave Foreman Collection, Denver Public Library.

⁵⁹⁸ Gillespie, *Challengers to Duopoly*, 81–82.

leftist/progressive Green Party and a centrist Democratic Party and ensure the election of a conservative Republican Party.

Indeed, this fear of vote splitting had some contemporary basis. A 1997 special election in New Mexico to fill the seat of Democratic Congressman Bill Richardson after his appointment as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations resulted in a Republican victory after the popular Green candidate, Carol Miller, arguably split liberal and progressive voters. While commentators had admitted that Miller represented the Green's "best hope yet" to defeat the Democrats in a federal election, they also noted the difficulty of Greens like Miller to attract endorsements from social action organizations against their Democratic opponents. Indeed, the Sierra Club's local chapter had endorsed Eric Serna, Miller's Democratic opponent, as a "rational adult decision" given the poor "political climate" in the state and nation at large. Angered by David Brower's endorsement of Miller despite the local chapter's preference, which they argued, "played an important role in securing [Serna's loss]," they implicitly relied upon a framing that saw third-party challenges to the major parties as effectively meaningless, if not harmful.⁵⁹⁹

These debates framed the approach of environmentalists—both mainstream and radical—to Nader's Green campaigns in 1996 and 2000. Green activists like Charlene Spretnak, anxious to finally break through to the wider public after years in the effective political wilderness, did not necessarily care about the ultimate results of the given election. Constantly looking forward to the next one, they emphasized getting the Green Party's name "out there" to show that there was an alternative to the mainstream parties they saw as representing shades of the same obsolete and regressive politics. Mainstream environmentalists, like the Sierra Club and, in a way, Dave Foreman, however, approached the election with the assumption of a political dichotomy and accepted the basic premise that vote-splitting existed. The responsible role of the politically active social organization, therefore, was to

⁵⁹⁹ Letter, John Buchser to David Brower, Aug. 10, 1997, Box 121, Folder 46, Dave Foreman Collection, Denver Public Library. See also: Michael Maiello, "Thunder on the Left: Candidate Carol Miller is the Green's Best Hope Yet to Stagger the Democrats," *Crosswinds*, May 1997. Found in Box 121, Folder 46, Dave Foreman Collection, Denver Public Library.

endorse a party that stood an actual chance of winning and thereby secure access to the levers of governmental power. And besides these groups stood the long-abandoned idealists like Bookchin, who argued against any concession to the assumptions of formal political institutions.

This explains the seeming concessions the Greens made in accepting Nader as their candidate. While securing Nader's political reputation and name-recognition as their standard-bearer, his actual performance as a "Green" candidate was rather mixed. As biographer Justin Martin described:

[Nader] approached this latest political flirtation with a whole set of hesitations, qualifications, and disclaimers. He did not register as a Green, nor did he adopt the party's platform. His campaign purchased no ads and took no contributions. He promised not to spend more than \$5,000 of his own money, thereby avoiding federal regulations regarding disclosure of his personal finances. And he traveled virtually nowhere. In Nader's parlance, he 'stood for president' in 1996 as opposed to actually running.⁶⁰⁰

This blasé attitude towards his Green candidacy was matched by the campaigning that did, in fact happen in his name. Campaign flyers supporting Nader's election focused almost exclusively on the issue of "democracy," even including a quotation from Nader admitting that "this is not going to be a platform where there's a position on every issue of concern to various people and groups. I want to focus strictly on how we build democracy in this country." In a list of eleven campaign goals on the flyer, "protecting environment" came ninth.⁶⁰¹ Clearly, environmental concerns were not a priority for Nader, even as he "stood" under the Green banner. But the results from the 1996 election offered room for positivity. He came in fourth place in the national popular vote, receiving 684,902 votes (0.71% of the electorate). This was far behind the votes for third place—Ross Perot of the Reform Party—who received 8,085,402 votes, let alone the tens of millions who voted for Clinton and Dole.⁶⁰² But, for Nader and the Greens, the question remained what the results would look like if he and the various state green parties actually put effort into the campaign?

⁶⁰⁰ Martin, *Nader*, 229.

⁶⁰¹ Committee to Draft Ralph Nader for President, "Ralph Nader for President" Campaign Flyer," c. 1996, Box 4, Folder 2, Green Party of California Records, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford University.

⁶⁰² Federal Election Commission, *Federal Elections 96: Election Results for the U.S. President, the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Election Commission, 1997), 11; Martin, *Nader*, 229-30

Advancing this goal, the state green parties worked to, once again, unify under a single organization while retaining the devolution of power that they had achieved with their separation from the national Greens back in 1991. Meeting only days after the 1996 election, the Green Politics Network reorganized itself into a new umbrella organization for its constituent members. Calling themselves the Association of State Green Parties (ASGP), they began to treat themselves as a serious national political party instead of separate state parties only indirectly working with each other. In the following four years, the reinvigorated party achieved the formal renomination of Nader as the party's candidate in the summer of 2000 and ratification of the Greens' first national platform. Encompassing four pillars they saw as derived from the Green Ten Key Values (Democracy, Social Justice and Equal Opportunity, Environmental Sustainability, and Economic Sustainability), the Greens put forward, for the first time, a comprehensive—and fundamentally progressive—vision of American governance.

But with this growing emphasis on broader progressive values, the specifically environmentalist nature of the Greens was still left as a singular part of a much larger party. Campaign materials from Nader's 2000 campaign expanded from the singular focus on "democracy" that had characterized his 1996 campaign, but environmentalism still remained deemphasized. A so-called "Nader Short List" detailing an "Agenda for a Working Democracy" only listed one explicit reference to environmental protections. Social issues like abortion or universal healthcare, meanwhile, were listed four times, political or governmental reforms like open debates were listed three times, and economic reforms like a living wage were listed twice.⁶⁰³ Again, Nader refused to register as a Green and, while he endorsed the Greens Platform—unlike in 1996—he chose to speak little about environmental issues, instead emphasizing his main talking point that both parties were practically interchangeable and that a new party was needed. In the announcement of his candidacy in Washington, D.C. on Feb. 21, 2000, he made only eight passing, single-line references to environmental issues or activism in a speech of roughly eleven

⁶⁰³ John Muir Greens, "Vote Green Party: Ralph Nader for President" Campaign Flyer, c. 2000, Box 4, Folder 2, Green Party of California Records, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford University.

pages. Indeed, in his speech, he attempts to reframe the very connotation of the Green Party's name away from explicit environmental emphases and instead to evoke “the regeneration of American politics.”⁶⁰⁴ In the words of biographer Justin Martin, “Often Nader and the Greens were like a Venn diagram, converging only at certain points.”⁶⁰⁵ While Greens would be able to justify their continued support for Nader by his occasional comments in support of environmental protection—or, in the case of Charlene Spretnak’s retrospective on the election emphasizing the party platform despite Nader—and the actual environmental credentials of repeated Vice Presidential candidate, Winona LaDuke, the specifically environmental concerns that had once dominated the Greens now seemed much more subdued.⁶⁰⁶

It was, perhaps, this lack of significant interest in environmental protection, along with the broader concerns about political access and vote splitting, that helps to explain the reticence towards Nader by mainstream activists and even some radical environmentalists like Dave Foreman. In the years since his battles with Murray Bookchin in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Foreman had gone through his own evolution. After reaching a plea agreement with the Department of Justice to resolve the lingering charges from his 1989 arrest, Foreman slowly withdrew from the intensive direct action of the 1980s. He was deeply discouraged by the changes taking place within Earth First! as leftist ideas seemed to grow in prominence and one-time friends like Mike Roselle—who had helped Foreman in founding Earth First! back in 1980—now fought viciously with him through letters. Foreman finally quit the organization in 1990 and instead founded a new organization dedicated to a more scientific advocacy for wilderness protection. But in a move that surprised many, Foreman also made the decision to run for the Sierra Club Board of Directors in 1995, promising to reform the organization to take stronger stances on issues.⁶⁰⁷

⁶⁰⁴ Ralph Nader, *Crashing the Party: Taking on the Corporate Government in an Age of Surrender* (Thomas Dunne Books, 2002), 326–37.

⁶⁰⁵ Martin, *Nader*, 237.

⁶⁰⁶ Spretnak, “A Green Perspective”; For more on Nader’s 2000 campaign, see: Nader, *Crashing the Party*; Martin, *Nader*, 230–69; Green, *Third-Party Matters*, 129–40.

⁶⁰⁷ B. J. Bergman, “Wild at Heart,” *Sierra*, Jan./Feb. 1998; Kimberly Dawn, “Brower and Foreman: Shakin’ Up the Club (We Hope...),” *Earth First! Journal* 15, no. 5 (May 1, 1995); “1995 Sierra Club National Election,” Box 55, Folder 2, Dave Foreman Papers, Denver Public Library. Foreman had also unsuccessfully run for the Sierra Club

In his new position, Foreman became involved in debates over the presidential endorsement in 1996: a question with clear stakes for the organization. While many, like David Brower, attacked Clinton's failures on the environment, they also remained concerned about maintaining access to the Administration—a privilege that would, in all likelihood, be removed if they failed to endorse the President. It was in this context that Jeffrey St. Clair and Alexander Cockburn, noted detractors of the Clinton Administration, relayed a bizarre anecdote about Foreman in a column. They claimed that Foreman—after months of opposition to a Clinton endorsement—had shared a dream he had the previous night of Edward Abbey encouraging him to support Clinton's endorsement after the proclamation of the Grand Staircase – Escalante National Monument in September 1996. "If it's good enough for Ed Abbey," he explained, "it's good enough for me."⁶⁰⁸ While no records appear available at this time to prove their anecdote, Sierra Club records do show both Foreman's opposition to the endorsement as late as September 18th and his subsequent decision to formally vote in favor of an endorsement.⁶⁰⁹ In his report after the election, Sierra Club President, Adam Werbach, would note that—from the perspective of senior Sierra Club leaders, the 1996 election was "not about being green, it is about being red, white and blue – about the Sierra Club being red, white, and blue. We need to project a clear message that we are an American movement, not a fringe movement; that we are a central patriotic movement of America, preserving the natural capital of the country."⁶¹⁰

Board of Directors in 1983 on a more radical stance. See Box 2, Folder 30, Dave Foreman Earth First! Collection (MSS 1102 BC), Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections, University of New Mexico Libraries.

⁶⁰⁸ The article in Dave Foreman's papers lacks a publication citation, but is labeled as part of "Nature and Politics," their regular *Anderson Valley Advertiser* column. Notably, Foreman includes the article in a folder titled "Alexander Cockburn Lies," reinforcing the need to read it as likely hyperbole, at least. See: Jeffrey St. Clair and Alexander Cockburn, "Nature and Politics: Dave Foreman's Dream and Bill Clinton's Trail of Tears," Box 51, Folder 75, Dave Foreman Papers, Denver Public Library.

⁶⁰⁹ Email, Denny Shaffer to Sierra Club Officials, on The Endorsement," Sept. 18, 1996, Box 54, Folder 21, Dave Foreman Papers, Denver Public Library; "Minutes of the Sierra Club Joint Annual Meeting and Board of Directors' Meeting," Sept. 21-22, Sierra Club Board of Directors Meeting Minutes. Available from the Sierra Club upon request.

⁶¹⁰ Adam Werbach, "President's Report," Nov. 16-17, 1996, Sierra Club Board of Directors Meeting Minutes. Available from the Sierra Club upon request. For his part, Murray Bookchin indirectly attacked Ralph Nader's candidacy in the 1996 election by critiquing fellow anarchist John Clark's "waxing effusively over Nader's virtues" instead of criticizing Nader's run with the "highly parliamentary U.S. Greens" and advancing a "libertarian alternative." Murray Bookchin, "Whither Anarchism: A Reply to Recent Anarchist Critics," Found in *Anarchism*,

By 2000, however, the question of the Sierra Club presidential endorsement proved increasingly divisive. For many Club officials, like Board President Robbie Cox, the basic assumptions surrounding Sierra Club endorsements had not significantly changed. Fears lingered about the possible loss of influence within a victorious Gore Administration if the Club failed to endorse him. Even more terrifying, however, was the idea of a split vote leading to the election of Texas Governor George W. Bush. But more broadly, the situation of Gore on the top line of the Democratic ticket posed new complications. Gore was, by nearly all popular accounts, considered a committed environmentalist, having published the environmentalist polemic, *Earth in the Balance*, in 1992 and, since then, serving as the primary environmental advocate in the Clinton Administration. The failure of the Club to endorse Clinton would, in Cox's mild words, "not do well for the Sierra Club's image."⁶¹¹ Others, however, were not so sure. David Brower, for one, continued his opposition to Gore as a continuation of Clinton Administration policies.⁶¹² But he was not the only one. In an internal email dating back to the 2000 Democratic Primaries leaked by the Republican National Committee in the conservative newspaper, the *Washington Times*, Sierra Club Director Michael Dorsey did not hold back in his criticism of the Vice President's "tawdry environmental record." Arguing that his support for Clinton Administration policies had made natural resources "hostage to the highest bidder," he concluded that "no real environmentalist could ever endorse Al Gore."⁶¹³ After an Associated Press article noting the email brought the issue up again in May, Dorsey and other Club officials sought to downplay the significance, arguing it was purely Dorsey's opinion and that it was discussing the primary race between Al Gore and former New Jersey Senator Bill

Marxism, and the Future of the Left: Interviews and Essays, 1993-1998 (Edinburgh, Scotland: A.K. Press, 1999), 233.

⁶¹¹ Robert Cox, "Robert Cox: Sierra Club President 1994-96, 2000-01, and 2007-08, on Environmental Communications and Strategy" conducted by Roger Eardley-Pryor in 2020, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2023, 148.

⁶¹² David Brower would resign from the Sierra Club Board of Directors in May 2000, in the midst of the debates over the 2000 Presidential Election endorsement. He would later attend the Green Party convention in June 2000 and cast an absentee ballot for Nader before passing away from cancer two days before the election. See: "Environmental Leader Quits Sierra Board," *New York Times*, May 20, 2000; Richard Severo, "David Brower, An Aggressive Champion of U.S. Environmentalism, Is Dead at 88," *New York Times*, Nov. 7, 2000; Ralph Nader, *Crashing the Party*, 97-98, 291-92.

⁶¹³ "Sierra Club Board Member Asked Organization Not to Endorse Gore," *Chicago Tribune*, May 31, 2000; Ben White, "Sierra Club Can't Take a Leak," *Grist*, Jan. 12, 2000.

Bradley and was, therefore, not applicable to a race between Gore and Bush. Yet, even here, Dorsey's disavowal of his email was half-hearted at best, emphasizing Bush's poor environmental record as "the kiss of ecological and planetary death."⁶¹⁴ He made no comment on the comparative virtues of Gore.

Indeed, by the time the Sierra Club Board of Directors met at its July Board Retreat to vote on an endorsement, Robbie Cox was not confident that the two-thirds majority required could be secured. He was able to convince one resistant board member by reaching a compromise to make a statement acknowledging Nader's efforts to promote electoral reform for third-party candidates. For Dorsey, on the other hand, Cox spoke with him over the night before the election, finally convincing him through the example of Jesse Jackson and Clinton in 1992 that Gore, while "not a perfect vehicle," was the "vessel at this moment through which we can work far better than through his opponent to advance our agenda."⁶¹⁵ The result was a vote of twelve directors supporting an endorsement of Gore with two opposed and one abstaining—Dorsey among those voting in favor.⁶¹⁶

Another supporter of Al Gore in the election was Dave Foreman. He had resigned from the Sierra Club Board of Directors in 1998 after disagreements over the handling of immigration issues, but he remained no less attuned to the implications of the election on environmentalists and their vision for the country. However, unlike vocal advocates for different sides in the election, such as Charlene Spretnak, Michael Dorsey, and Robbie Cox, Foreman had little to say about it. The only apparent sign of his stance was his participation in a Democratic event in Santa Fe, New Mexico, aimed at convincing environmentalists to vote for Gore two days before the election.⁶¹⁷

⁶¹⁴ Michael Dorsey, "Letter to the Editor: Ecology issues," *Chicago Tribune*, June 8, 2000.

⁶¹⁵ Robert Cox, "Robert Cox: Sierra Club President 1994-96, 2000-01, and 2007-08, on Environmental Communications and Strategy" conducted by Roger Eardley-Pryor in 2020, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2023, 148-450.

⁶¹⁶ For more on the Sierra Club involvement in the 2000 election, see: Robert Cox, "Robert Cox: Sierra Club President 1994-96, 2000-01, and 2007-08, on Environmental Communications and Strategy" conducted by Roger Eardley-Pryor in 2020, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2023, 146-53. The Nader Campaign would, notably, attempt to sway the Sierra Club in the midst of its decision, urging it to offer—in addition to other options—a dual endorsement of Gore and Nader. See: Nader, *Crashing the Party*, 351-54.

⁶¹⁷ Deborah Baker, "Green Swing Voters Face Big Decision," *Albuquerque Journal*, Nov. 5, 2000

Dave Foreman's decision to back Al Gore in the 2000 election rests upon motivations that, in the absence of significant writing about the topic in the period, remain difficult to decipher until we consider this longer history of radical environmentalism in the 1980s and 1990s. On the one hand, Foreman's decision to support a mainstream environmentalist politician who, as a representative of the Clinton Administration, remained, in the eyes of many radical environmentalists, a symbol of compromise and shallow reformism is hard to square with his past life in Earth First! But when we place the 2000 election in the context of the broader conflicts over radical environmental visions in previous years, we can perhaps see Foreman's refusal to accept Nader as one more shot in his longstanding battles with those he would repeatedly call "pinkos." Indeed, while Foreman wrote little about the election at the time, he did not hold back in retrospect. Noting the Greens' emphasis on social issues beyond the environment, he rejected the characterization of Greens as environmentalists or conservationists. Furthermore, he had explicit critiques of Nader's participation in the 2000 election:

Had it not been for the Green Party, Ralph Nader likely would not have taken enough votes from Al Gore in 2000 to let the Supreme Court hand the presidency to George Bush Junior. Think of that. Think what things might have been like without the nightmare administration of Bush-Cheney for eight long years.⁶¹⁸

Clearly still angry about the electoral impact of Nader on the 2000 election, one is left to ponder the continuing influence of his old fights with Bookchin and the Left Greens.

Regardless, the decision by Foreman to support Gore in the 2000 election highlights the complicated nature of radical environmentalism at the close of the century. Different groups could fall under the umbrella of "radicals" due to their insistence on fundamentally reshaping American attitudes and relationships with the environment, but this did not remove the often drastically different visions of what those new attitudes and relationships would look like. As the fights between Deep Ecology and Social Ecology reveal, many of these debates rested upon the inherent distrust of some radical groups

⁶¹⁸ Foreman, *Take Back Conservation*, 171–72.

towards others, leading to the repeated attacks that went beyond simple disagreement to question their very qualifications to call themselves “environmentalist” or “ecologist.”

Epilogue

At the same time that Ralph Nader was trying to elevate progressive issues in the fight for the presidency, the two major candidates, Democratic Vice President Al Gore and Republican Governor George W. Bush, continued their head-to-head contest. On its face, the matchup seemed to reflect the nation's growing polarization over the issue of the environment. Gore, a longtime champion of environmentalist causes in the Senate and White House, now ran against Bush, a former oil company executive who, as governor of Texas, oversaw what some environmentalists called the state with "the worst environment in the country."⁶¹⁹ The match seemed set for perhaps the clearest choice on the issue of the environment in years.

But throughout the campaign, glimpses of the past were evident. In many ways Bush certainly fit the anti-environmentalist stereotype. He supported the opening of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska to energy exploration and drilling—a longtime goal of conservative Republicans throughout the 1990s. He opposed the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, which was negotiated in part by Gore in 1997 but still awaiting Senate ratification, arguing that it granted too much leniency to developing countries while imposing costly economic restrictions on the United States. And, overall, his energy policy emphasized expanded exploration and production of domestic oil combined with encouraging oil-producing nations to maintain stable prices—all meant to satisfy the American public's demand for cheap energy. But in moments that seemed to echo the claims of his father, George H.W. Bush, to the label of environmentalist in the 1988 campaign, Bush also insisted on claiming credentials as an environmentalist. Early in the campaign, Bush spoke of the "duty to be good stewards" on environmental issues. "As we use nature's gifts," he explained, "we must do so wisely."⁶²⁰ While he rejected the proposed Kyoto agreement, he acknowledged that climate change could be a "potential problem" that required further research. And most significant of all, Bush went beyond mere rhetoric to join Gore in supporting EPA

⁶¹⁹ Irvin Molotsky, "To Sierra Club, 2 Republicans Are Unfriendly," *New York Times* (New York), March 4, 2000.

⁶²⁰ Bob Herbert, "Bush Goes Green," *New York Times* (New York), April 6, 2000.

regulation of carbon dioxide emissions from power plants—an important source of domestic greenhouse gases. Bush tried to present himself as a moderate on the environment.⁶²¹

And, for a while after his delayed victory, he continued to play up this moderate stance. Most notable was the selection of New Jersey Governor Christine Whitman as Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator. While New Jersey environmental groups remained bitter about her cuts to environmental regulation and enforcement during her first term as governor, there was broad excitement about her leadership of the EPA as a potential check on anti-environmentalist forces and sentiments within the administration. Since her first term, Whitman had taken stronger stances on environmental regulations, including setting a target for greenhouse gas emissions reductions and actively proposing new standards on water quality and watershed management. For one New Jersey environmentalist leader, Whitman had “gone from bad to better, and hopefully it’ll go to good” as EPA Administrator. For Fred Krupp, executive director of the major environmental organization, Environmental Defense, the sense was that Whitman was a “very positive” appointment. “Given the stature that she walks in with, and her record in New Jersey, we’re hopeful that she would not be afraid to be an independent voice to make the environmental case.”⁶²² Though perhaps reflecting implicit concerns about Whitman’s ability to independently run the EPA in a way that echoed the gendered arguments against Anne Gorsuch back in 1981, the broad consensus was that Whitman was a good nomination and could mean that the Bush administration may not be as destructive as some had feared.

Bush’s nomination of Gale Norton as Whitman’s counterpart at the Department of the Interior, however, signaled that the incoming administration might not be so moderate on the environment after all. The nomination of Norton, the former Colorado Attorney General and a former employee of James G.

⁶²¹ Richard W. Stevenson, “The Energy Issue: Supply vs. Demand Ideas Separate Gore and Bush,” *New York Times* (New York), September 29, 2000; Andrew C. Revkin, “Texas Takes Step on Warning; Some See Shift in Bush’s Position,” *New York Times* (New York), August 24, 2000; “The Warming Debate,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), October 30, 2000; Andrew C. Revkin, “U.S. Study Points Out Ways to Cut Emissions,” *New York Times* (New York), November 16, 2000.

⁶²² David M. Halbfinger and Andrew C. Revkin, “Whitman Seen as Strong Choice for E.P.A.,” *New York Times* (New York), December 21, 2000.

Watt during his time as president of the Mountain State Legal Foundation provoked fierce reactions from environmentalists, including one Sierra Club staffer who provided the gendered quip that she was “James Watt in a skirt.” And, indeed, it was this association with Watt that dogged her tenure as Secretary of the Interior until her resignation in 2006. She insisted that she was interested in a bipartisan style very different from Watt. “It’s been over 20 years since the last time I worked for him, and I don’t define myself in reference to him.”⁶²³ For his part, however, Watt saw the potential for legacy in Norton’s nomination. In the years since his resignation in 1983, Watt had finally retired from a career of lobbying that included a conviction in 1996 for withholding documents from a grand jury investigation into influence-peddling at the Department of Housing and Urban Development in the late 1980s.⁶²⁴ Tracking him down to a vacation home in Arizona, Weston Kosova, a journalist for *Outdoor Magazine*, asked him for his thoughts about Norton and the comparisons to him. “I hope she is James Watt in a skirt!” he exclaimed. “I felt it was a compliment. And I hope she felt it was a compliment. When she was nominated, I had several congressmen call me and say, Jim, is that true? And I said, Well, I hope so!” After calling himself “a big fan of Gale’s,” Kosova then noted that Watt “[seemed] to catch himself, as though he suddenly remember[ed] that, even now, his words of support may do more harm than good.” In the end, “his enthusiasm fading into a quiet fatigue,” Watt explained that he had “not talked to Gale for a long time. Years, in fact. I’ve tried to stay out of her way.”⁶²⁵

And despite some early actions that seemed to support a moderate reading of Bush’s policies, including support for Clinton’s declaration of new national monuments and Clinton administration plans for diesel emissions regulations, the Bush administration quickly established itself in opposition to environmentalist goals. By March 2001—less than two months after his inauguration—Bush began to announce plans for the United States to withdraw from the Kyoto Protocol, long anticipated due to his

⁶²³ Weston Kosova, “What’s Gale Norton Trying to Hide?,” *Outside*, January 6, 2002; Mike Soraghan, “Norton: I’m Not Watt,” *Denver Post* (Denver, CO), December 30, 2000.

⁶²⁴ “James Watt Draws a Fine But Not Jail,” *New York Times* (New York), March 13, 1996.

⁶²⁵ Kosova, “What’s Gale Norton Trying to Hide?”

opposition to the agreement during the campaign. But going further, he also reversed course on his campaign promise to regulate power plant carbon dioxide emissions. In both cases, the administration justified the actions as necessary given the ongoing energy crisis. In particular, the energy shortage in California was repeatedly cited to argue that not only was new energy development needed in areas like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, but that new power plants were also needed—with energy secretary Spencer Abraham claiming as many as 1,300 new plants needed to be constructed in the next twenty years. As Bush explained, justifying his retreat from environmental policies, “I was responding to realities, and the reality is our nation has a real problem when it comes to energy.”⁶²⁶ Thus, Bush quickly set himself up for a broadly domestic policy agenda, emphasizing conservative positions on everything from energy to tax cuts until the September 11 terrorist attacks drastically shifted the attention of the administration towards foreign policy.⁶²⁷

The country, however, continued to wrestle with the legacies of environmental conflict in the 1980s and 1990s. Environmental groups continued to confront the never-fully-answered debates over the relationship between environmentalism and other social and progressive causes. The fight over the Sierra Club’s immigration policy in 1997 and 1998 proved to be only a prelude to a more organized effort by population and anti-immigration activists to seize control of the Sierra Club Board of Directors through a secretive ballot slate notably led and organized by John Tanton, founder of the anti-immigration Federation for American Immigration Reform, and radical environmentalist Paul Watson. In many ways an extension of the early fights over the Sierra Club’s stance on immigration, the effort was inspired by a memo by Tanton encouraging anti-immigration activists to take over the Club to make use of its respected reputation to mainstream anti-immigration policies. While the effort failed, largely due to an organized

⁶²⁶ Douglas Jehl, “Bush Defends Emissions Stance: Ties His About-Face on Carbon Dioxide to an ‘Energy Crisis,’” *New York Times* (New York), March 15, 2001.

⁶²⁷ Douglas Jehl, “Moves on Environment Disappoint Industry: Bush’s Early Acts Anger Oil and Mining,” *New York Times* (New York), March 11, 2001; Eric Planin, “U.S. Aims to Pull Out of Warming Treaty,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), March 28, 2001; Jehl, “Bush Defends Emissions Stance: Ties His About-Face on Carbon Dioxide to an ‘Energy Crisis’”; Joseph Kahn, “A New Role for Greens: Public Enemy,” *New York Times* (New York), March 25, 2001; Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, 435–40.

response by the Sierra Club establishment leaders like former president Robbie Cox, it reflected the continuing tension within the environmental movement over social issues.⁶²⁸ Similarly, Dave Foreman turned towards increasingly polemical works in the 2000s and 2010s to attack immigration and what he saw as the failure of major environmental groups to seriously confront threats to wilderness. The most serious danger, he argued, was what he called the “man swarm,” the continuing growth of the human population and the simultaneous rise in affluence. Conservationists, he argued, needed to stop being “politically correct” and should speak forthrightly about the problem of overpopulation and the role of immigration in fostering environmental degradation in the United States.⁶²⁹

This conflict over social issues critical to the continued progressive alliance would continue to plague environmentalists well into the 2020s. The ubiquitous protests over the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, over the summer of 2020 provoked an internal reckoning within the Sierra Club over its history. While the Club's efforts to improve its ethnic and racial diversity, particularly among staff, continued through the 2000s, they had only limited success. Turnover among people of color was high and the reputation of the Sierra Club as a white-led group continued.⁶³⁰ It was in this context that the inadequate response of Club Executive Director, Michael Brune, to the George Floyd protests upset people of color on the staff, leading him to publish a blog post, “Pulling Down Our Monuments,” strongly criticizing the racial exclusion and discrimination in the Club’s early history and racist comments by founder John Muir, not-so-subtly comparing the Club’s veneration of Muir to the statues of Confederate leaders then being dismantled across the country. The reaction was immediate and divisive as some members—young and people of color especially—praised the article as a courageous expression

⁶²⁸ Robert Cox, “Robert Cox: Sierra Club President 1994-96, 2000-01, and 2007-08, on Environmental Communications and Strategy” conducted by Roger Eardley-Pryor in 2020, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2023, 166-79.

⁶²⁹ Foreman, *Take Back Conservation*, 318–22; Dave Foreman, *Man Swarm: How Overpopulation Is Killing the Wild World*, 2nd ed. (Live True Books, 2014).

⁶³⁰ Bruce Hamilton, “Bruce Hamilton: ‘Chief Agitator’ on Sierra Club National Staff, 1977-2021” conducted by Roger Eardley-Pryor in 2021, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2026, 173-75

of commitment to environmental and social justice, while others—primarily long-term members—expressed horror and alarm at the tearing down of a central figure in the Club’s storied history.⁶³¹

But even more alarming was the election of Donald Trump to the presidency. The years of the Obama administration had seen some significant successes. This included the establishment of his Clean Power Plan, finally reducing carbon emissions from power plants by mandating a reduction in coal energy production through executive order, and the signing of the Paris Climate Accord in 2015 without Senate ratification. However, as historian Meg Jacobs has argued, “these successes suggest the strength and weakness of the Obama presidency as a whole. Specifically, Obama’s environmental legacy highlights the role of the president to shape an agenda and use executive action to bring about reform while exposing the fragility of those very tools.”⁶³² Nearly all of the major environmental policy achievements of the Obama administration, without the permanence of congressional action, were rolled back by the Trump administration, most notably when the United States withdrew from the Paris Agreement in November 2020. Furthermore, the Trump administration employed a similar use of executive authority to not only repeal Obama-era policies but also enact its own, including the approval of the Keystone XL pipeline in January 2017, the reduction of Bears Ears National Monument in December 2017, and the opening of energy development leases in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in January 2021. However, these changes were reversed under the administration of Joseph Biden who, for instance, rejoined the Paris Agreement in 2021. The election of Trump to a second term, however, has seen yet another reversal as, once again, the United States withdrew from the Agreement in 2026. This turn towards the use of executive power to accomplish environmental policy goals, combined with the repeated interventions of the courts into these matters, has characterized what political scientists Christopher Klyza and David

⁶³¹ Vivien Li, “Vivien Li: Environmental Justice and Urban Waterfronts with the Sierra Club and The Boston Harbor Association” conducted by Roger Eardley-Pryor in 2021, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2024, 226-31; Bruce Hamilton, “Bruce Hamilton: ‘Chief Agitator’ on Sierra Club National Staff, 1977-2021,” 387-90.

⁶³² Meg Jacobs, “Obama’s Fight Against Global Warming,” in *The Presidency of Barack Obama: A First Historical Assessment*, ed. Julian E. Zelizer (Princeton University Press, 2018), 64; See also: Andrews, *Managing the Environment, Managing Ourselves*, 237–41.

Sousa call “alternative policymaking pathways,” in which Congressional gridlock has resulted in increasingly chaotic environmental regulations that change from administration to administration.⁶³³

These turns in environmental policy were accompanied by Trump’s placement of conservative ideologues in the environmental and land-use bureaucracy. The first Trump administration saw a general emphasis on conservative environmental policy that aligned with the goals and priorities of previous Republican administrations over the past twenty to thirty years. This included the nomination of Congressman Ryan Zinke, a Republican from Montana and advocate for American “energy dominance,” as secretary of the interior, and Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt, a frequent combatant with the EPA, as EPA Administrator.⁶³⁴ Both would resign by the beginning of 2019 under accusations of ethics violations.⁶³⁵

But among the significant appointees was the acting director of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), William Perry Pendley. Pendley had served as deputy secretary of the interior for energy and minerals under Watt in the Reagan administration where he had an active role in the Powder River Basin coal leasing program that eventually led to Watt’s resignation in 1983. After being accused by the Government Accounting Office (GAO) in 1984 of ethics violations in his handling of the leasing program, Pendley briefly moved to the Department of the Navy before resigning. By 1989, he had taken over Watt’s former job as president of the Mountain States Legal Foundation, where he oversaw numerous lawsuits against the federal government on land-use and environmental issues. During this time, he also published several books praising the work of the Reagan administration and the subsequent Wise Use Movement in fighting against “environmental extremists” and “government tyranny.”⁶³⁶ In

⁶³³ Christopher McGrory Klyza and David Sousa, *American Environmental Policy, 1990-2006: Beyond Gridlock*, Updated and Expanded (MIT Press, 2013), xvii; See also: Turner and Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal*, 15–17; Bathsheba Demuth, “Against the Tide: The Trump Administration and Climate Change,” in *The Presidency of Donald J. Trump: A First Historical Assessment*, ed. Julian E. Zelizer (Princeton University Press, 2022), 186–88.

⁶³⁴ Juliet Eilperin et al., “Interior Secretary Zinke Resigns Amid Investigations,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), December 16, 2018; Demuth, “Against the Tide: The Trump Administration and Climate Change,” 186.

⁶³⁵ Demuth, “Against the Tide: The Trump Administration and Climate Change,” 188–89.

⁶³⁶ Pendley, *It Takes a Hero*; Pendley, *War on the West*; William Perry Pendley, *Sagebrush Rebel: Reagan’s Battle with Environmental Extremists and Why It Matters Today* (Regnery Publishing, 2013).

2018, Pendley was appointed Deputy Director for Policy and Programs at the BLM—a political position not subject to Senate confirmation. The following year, however, interior secretary David Bernhardt unilaterally appointed Pendley as acting Director of the BLM without Senate confirmation—after more than two and a half years of Trump not formally nominating any permanent holder of the office. While Trump did end up nominating Pendley for the position in June 2020, the nomination was withdrawn after it became clear that confirmation was unlikely. Indeed, in September 2020, a federal district court judge ruled that Pendley was illegally occupying the position because he lacked Senate confirmation, ordering his removal. Pendley, however, claimed through the remainder of Trump’s first term that he had never formally been appointed as acting Director and that, because the Director position was unfilled and he, as Deputy Director, was the highest ranking official in the BLM, he would continue to operate the BLM in spite of the court’s decision.⁶³⁷

Trump’s defeat in the 2020 election left this constitutional crisis unresolved, but equally compelling was the emergence of a notable split in conservative attitudes towards public lands. One of Pendley’s longstanding policy positions was support for the transfer of federally-owned lands in the West to state governments or, preferably, outright privatization—reminiscent of arguments being put forward during the Reagan administration. This was notably in opposition to the position of Zinke, who, at the time of Pendley’s elevation to BLM chief by Zinke’s successor, was sharply critical of Pendley’s policies, remarking that he was “absolutely against transfer or sale of public land.”⁶³⁸ As he explained during his time in Congress, while the federal government needed “to do a much better job of managing our resources,” reform of government policy was the solution. “The sale or transfer of our land is an extreme proposal,” he argued, insisting that he “won’t tolerate it.”⁶³⁹ Notably, at the time, this appeared to be

⁶³⁷ Steven Mufson, “Trump Pick to Manage Federal Land Opposes the Concept,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), August 5, 2019; “Public Lands Chief Ousted for Serving Unlawfully,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), September 26, 2020; David Montgomery, “The Abnormal Presidency: Donald Trump Has Dramatically Changed the Job. Here’s a List of What’s Been Broken--and How to Fix It,” *Washington Post Magazine* (Washington, D.C.), November 15, 2020.

⁶³⁸ Mufson, “Trump Pick to Manage Federal Land Opposes the Concept.”

⁶³⁹ Amy Harder and Michael C. Bender, “Montana Rep. Zinke Tapped for Interior Post,” *Wall Street Journal* (New York), December 14, 2016.

Trump's own position. In a January 2016 interview with *Outdoor Life*, Trump expressed his opposition to the sale or transfer of public lands, arguing that under such a program there would be no controls for what states would do with it and that the federal government—together with users like hunters and fishermen—needed to continue to be “great stewards of the land.”⁶⁴⁰ For his part, Pendley was dismissive of what he saw as the moderation and compromising attitude of Zinke in his leadership of Interior, arguing that Zinke's recommendation to only reduce the size of four national monuments—instead of a general reduction or elimination of all national monuments under the Antiquities Act—amounted to going “rogue” from the established policy of the Trump administration. In Pendley's words, Trump needed to “heed his own pugnacious” nature, not “Zinke's pusillanimous counsel.”⁶⁴¹ This division amongst Republicans over the proper approach to public lands reflected, in many ways, the halting reaction of Reagan administration leadership to similar proposals for the sale or transfer of public lands. It was, arguably, Trump's on-the-record opposition to such a proposal that prevented its outright pursuit for much of the period.

However, by Trump's second term of office, Republican commitment to the protection of federally owned lands was far less certain. The Heritage Foundation's *Project 2025*, one of the blueprints for policy in the second Trump administration, included a chapter written by William Perry Pendley laying out recommendations for the Department of the Interior. While it did not expressly recommend the idea of public land sales or transfers, its emphasis upon the expansive development of public lands—through energy and mineral leasing for instance—was clear.⁶⁴² The 2024 Republican Platform more

⁶⁴⁰ Anthony Licata, “Q&A: Donald Trump on Guns, Hunting, and Conservation,” *Outdoor Life*, January 22, 2016; See also: Juliet Eilperin, “House GOP Changes Federal-Land Rule,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), January 4, 2017; Some argued that Trump's position on the issue at the time was due to personal lobbying by his son, Donald Trump Jr., who allegedly helped handpick Zinke for the Interior position. See: Matea Gold and Juliet Eilperin, “Conservationists Turn to Trump Jr. As Their Champion,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), January 12, 2017.

⁶⁴¹ William Perry Pendley, “Trump Wants to Free Up Federal Lands, His Interior Secretary Fails Him,” *National Review*, September 25, 2017; See also: William Perry Pendley, “The Federal Government Should Follow the Constitution and Sell Its Western Lands,” *National Review*, January 19, 2016; Mufson, “Trump Pick to Manage Federal Land Opposes the Concept.”

⁶⁴² William Perry Pendley, “Department of the Interior,” in *Project 2025: Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*, ed. Paul Dans and Steven Groves (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 2023), 519-38.

specifically included a plank calling for making housing more affordable by opening “limited portions of Federal Lands to allow for new home construction.”⁶⁴³ With this in mind, both the Department of the Interior under Secretary Doug Burgum and Congressional Republicans encouraged proposals to sell public land for housing. A draft strategic plan for the Department of the Interior leaked in May 2025 recommended construction of housing on public lands alongside transfers of public lands to state governments that environmentalist commentators described as subterfuge for “inevitable” privatization as state governments found themselves unable to afford the costs of maintaining them.⁶⁴⁴ Meanwhile, Congressional debate over the proposed tax cuts packaged under the so-called “Big Beautiful Bill” saw two proposals to partially fund them through sales of public land for housing. The first, a comparatively smaller provision by Republican Reps. Mark Amodei of Nevada and Celeste Maloy of Utah, sought sales of approximately 500,000 acres only in Nevada and Utah. This, however, was overshadowed by the much more expansive proposal by Mike Lee, Republican Senator of Utah and chair of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, seeking sales of up to 3.3 million acres across 11 states.⁶⁴⁵

What was notable about these developments, however, was not simply the about-face on the issue from Trump’s first term, but rather the intense backlash the proposals engendered not only among self-proclaimed environmentalists, but also among committed supporters of the Trump administration. Environmentalist criticism was predictable, with Franque Bains, the Utah Sierra Club Chapter Director, dismissing the proposal as giving “billionaires and corporate polluters free rein to drill, mine, and log our treasured landscapes without oversight or accountability, and sell millions of acres of public lands to

⁶⁴³ Republican National Committee, *2024 Republican Party Platform: Make America Great Again!* (Milwaukee, WI: Republican National Committee, 2024), 14.

⁶⁴⁴ Alexander Nazaryan, “More Extraction and Less Conservation: What a Leaked Version of an Interior Department Strategic Planning Document Reveals,” *New York Times* (New York), May 27, 2025; See also: Rachel Siegel, “In the West, Manifest Destiny With a Modern Twist: Sale of Federal Land Could Boost Las Vegas’s Housing Market, An Idea Trump May Gamble On,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), February 15, 2025.

⁶⁴⁵ Brad Plumer, “G.O.P. Revives Plan to Sell Public Land for Housing,” *New York Times* (New York), June 13, 2025; Matthew Daly and Matthew Brown, “Republicans Push to Sell Public Lands in the West,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), May 8, 2025.

private developers, locking out American families forever.”⁶⁴⁶ But such arguments also found ready acceptance among right-wing Trump supporters who expressed bewilderment at Senator Lee’s proposal. Ryan Zinke, once again serving as a Republican Representative for Montana, declared the issue to be his “San Juan Hill,” and responded to questions whether he had changed his views by vowing that “It’s a no now. It will be a no later. It will be a no forever.”⁶⁴⁷

Now, however, confronted with actual proposals, the grassroots backlash was much clearer. One Idaho outdoorsman directly confronted Sen. Lee, arguing that Washington was “better than [investment firm] BlackRock,” to which Lee retorted that he’d “trust anyone owning that land more than the U.S. Government.” But Lee soon found himself isolated in this view, facing a backlash ranging from reactionary ideologues like Christopher Rufo, who dismissed the idea as a “vestige of libertarianism” within the Republican Party, to sportsmen influencers like Terry Zink who attacked the proposal as coming from political advisers who don’t understand the West or its appeal to Westerners. “[They] don’t live it, breathe it, eat it like we do... Westerners live here because of what those lands provide them—the opportunity of real freedom.” Stumbling to recover, by late June, Lee announced that he “had listened to hunters” and scaled back the program to only include public lands within five miles of population centers. When the criticism did not let up, he fully withdrew the amendment a few days later, admitting that he could not promise that the land would go to American families, “not to China, not to BlackRock, and not to any foreign interests.” He also complained that the “left” had been able to “dupe conservatives” by making it seem that the lands sold would be “the stunning vistas of Western tourism brochures.”⁶⁴⁸ But the framing seemed to work as Lee did not attempt to pursue the project again through the time of writing.

⁶⁴⁶ Emily Bosch, “Sierra Club Utah Chapter: Senator Lee’s Public Lands Sell Off is Bad for Everyone but Billionaires,” *Sierra*, June 12, 2025.

⁶⁴⁷ Michelle Nijhuis, “It Turns Out, Some Republicans in Congress Do Have a Red Line,” *New York Times* (New York), May 20, 2025; Karin Brulliard, “Right-Wing Revolt in the West Dooms GOP Proposal to Sell Off Public Lands,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), July 10, 2025.

⁶⁴⁸ Brulliard, “Right-Wing Revolt in the West Dooms GOP Proposal to Sell Off Public Lands”; See also: Maxine Joselow, “A Conservative’s Plan to Sell Public Land Gets Criticism From the Right,” *New York Times* (New York), June 30, 2025; Nijhuis, “It Turns Out, Some Republicans in Congress Do Have a Red Line”; Lila Seidman, “Not in Trump’s Megabill: A Plan to Sell Western Land,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), July 4, 2025.

Furthermore, the Trump administration seemed to be pivoting away from the idea. While later reporting would reveal the close collaboration between Senator Lee's office and Department of the Interior staff on the proposal, including the Department crafting talking points for Senator Lee, the backlash from conservative corners seemed to have given the administration pause. Interior Secretary Doug Burgum dismissed Senator Lee's proposal as not important to the Big Beautiful Bill when questioned about it in late June. And later, Trump's ultimate nominee for BLM chief, Steve Pearce, who had long voiced support for sales of public lands, now demurred. In confirmation hearings, he did not disavow his previous support for sales, but he also said he did not "visualize selling large swaths of land," admitting that the law did not allow it.⁶⁴⁹

This alternative framing of keeping public lands safe from elite machinations, so popular among conservative critics of public land sale proposals, in part represents an important continuity with the rhetoric of the Sagebrush Rebellion, James G. Watt, and Ron Arnold, but also represents an equally crucial break. While local Westerners were, yet again, framed as the best arbiters of Western land use decisions, such arguments were now being made to justify continued federal control and protection to ensure wide public access rather than transfers to state or private ownership. As journalist Karin Brulliard explained in her analysis of the "right-wing revolt" against Senator Lee's proposal:

The conservatives' defense of federal terrain is threaded with references not to Sierra Club founder John Muir but to former president Theodore Roosevelt, an ardent hunter who designated millions of acres as public. Their emphasis is on wild land as an American birthright and embodiment of freedom, held in trust by the government but owned by the people.⁶⁵⁰

The public lands are, therefore, not simple pieces of property holding economic value, but cultural objects of pride, needing protection from elite ownership and exploitation—elites that were now read as corporate, or potentially foreign, rather than governmental.

⁶⁴⁹ Chris D'Angelo, "Interior Department Crafted Talking Points for Public Lands Sell-Off Agenda," *High Country News*, April 15, 2026; Lisa Friedman, "Trump's Pick to Manage Public Lands Now Pledges No Mass Sell-Off," *New York Times* (New York), February 27, 2026.

⁶⁵⁰ Brulliard, "Right-Wing Revolt in the West Dooms GOP Proposal to Sell Off Public Lands."

While such framings, very familiar to historians of conservation and public lands, are no doubt simplistic and dismissive of the complicated entanglements of American land use policy with structural forces of domination and violence like settler colonialism and white supremacy, they also offer potential pathways forward for reconciliation in our common understanding of the environment and “environmentalism.”⁶⁵¹ These conservatives’ understanding of public lands, therefore, hints at an increasing alignment of the broader conservative movement with the recreational mindset that historian Richard White once noted among their environmentalist opponents in the 1990s.⁶⁵² Differences still, clearly, exist. The sportsmen emphasis on hunting and fishing does not fit cleanly with ideas of the wilderness and preservation, let alone with the contemporary environmental concerns of environmental and climate justice. Furthermore, the idea of public lands as an inherited right, like that described by Bruillard, can have a dark side, evoking ethnically or racially defined rights to land reminiscent of far-right “blood and soil” ideologies. But it is a start. The support of federal ownership and regulation of public lands among conservatives represents an important shift back towards notions of conservation that raise the prospect of collaboration and, perhaps, limited forms of political coalition on issues specifically related to environmental protection.

This helps us to continue to place the narrative of environmentalism in the late twentieth century into context. While certainly facing setbacks, amidst internal conflict and challenges from conservative reinterpretations of environmental principles, one cannot simply reduce the story to one of decline. Far from marking the “end of the environmental movement,” the election of Ronald Reagan and other developments over the following two decades signified highly contingent transformations and adaptations. That history continues to the present, giving us both lessons and warnings as we face our own moments of change.

⁶⁵¹ See, for example, Powell, *Vanishing America*; Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature*; Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (Oxford University Press, 2000), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195142433.001.0001>.

⁶⁵² White, “Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living”; See also: Warren, *The Hunter’s Game*.

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