THE "NEW ENVIRONMENTALISM" OF THE 1960S

Before the new environmentalism

- Prior to the 1960s, environmentalism had taken two primary forms: the preservation of wilderness areas and the sustainable conservation of resources (e.g., timber and deer).
- Political activism was largely aimed at legislation and regulations concerning the consumption of nature.
- Several major shifts occurred in the 1960s, all of which involved an awareness of the ties between environmental and social problems.

Towards a new environmentalism:

Environmental degradation

- First, with the rapid expansion of the use of chemicals following World War II and then the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), there was a new emphasis on environmental degradation (especially pollution) as well as its relationship to human health.
- This lead to an intensifying call for government to regulate industry more closely.
- It also involved an increased awareness of the direct relationship between environmental problems and human society.
- Nature writers began to speak more of environmental problems, in addition to the appreciation of nature’s beauty.

Towards a new environmentalism:

A radical political critique

- Second, there developed a more sweeping critique of government and society. *Silent Spring* had exposed a collusion between industry and government in promoting and protecting the chemical industry, and corporations more generally, to the detriment of human well-being.
- This critical view of government was reinforced by the Civil Rights and Anti-War movements, which lead to a greater tendency to suspect that there was something fundamentally wrong with American government and American society as a whole.
- As such, there was a growing suspicion that government regulation was inadequate; a more deep-seated change may be needed.
- Thus, as with responses to *Silent Spring*, there was a greater recognition of the direct relationship between environmental and social issues.
- A significant number of nature writers and philosophers looked to radical political theory (e.g., anarchism, socialism, and ecofeminism) when critiquing environmental problems.

Towards a new environmentalism:

A new worldview

- Third, nature writers and environmental philosophers began to analyze more closely the fundamental values and worldviews at work in American culture’s views of nature.
- Starting with Aldo Leopold’s “Land Ethic” (1949) and stimulated by Lynn White’s 1967 article that blamed the biblical tradition and institutional Christianity for a destructive anthropocentrism, more people came to believe that traditional Western thought as a whole needed reconsideration.
- There was a shift toward more ecocentric perspectives, first promoted broadly by John Muir.
Also, more nature writers studied other cultures (particularly Buddhist and Native American) as sources for a new worldview concerning nature and its relationship to human society. This move echoed Thoreau’s interest in Asian religions and Mary Austin’s interest in Native American culture.

Again, environmental and social (in this case ideological) issues were seen as interrelated.

Towards a new environmentalism:

A new society

Fourth, nature writers and environmental philosophers began to consider alternative social systems as a way to move beyond what they considered a destructive and alienating society and concretely apply an ecocentric worldview at the social level.

Some based their ideals in their familiarity with other cultures (e.g., Gary Snyder and both Buddhism and Native American). Others based their social ideal primarily by looking back to earlier American culture (e.g., Wendell Berry and the Jeffersonian ideal of a country of farmers).

Another source for ideas of a new society came from radical political theory, particularly Western anarchist and utopian traditions.

This echoed the interest in alternative societies found in Transcendentalism, and Thoreau’s vision of a social and political ideal which differed sharply from conventional society.

One current framework for developing a vision of a new society in harmony with nature is bioregionalism, promoted by the Buddhist Gary Snyder, the Kentucky Christian farmer Wendell Berry, and ecofeminism.