

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 led 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 led 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.