

# Rachel's Environment & Health News

## #735 - The Environmental Movement -- Part 3: Civic Environmentalism

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The mainstream environmental movement developed during the 1970s, building on the legacy of John Muir, Gifford Pinchot and other early conservationists. From 1970 to 1980, the federal government created a complex new environmental protection regime of laws and institutions. President Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Congress created the Council on Environmental Quality and passed a dozen hefty environmental statutes.

Within the new environmental protection regime, the mainstream environmental groups, like Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and Environmental Defense (ED, formerly Environmental Defense Fund), saw opportunities for lawyers and scientists to influence public policy via lawsuits, regulatory rule makings, and the setting of scientific standards. These public interest lawyers and scientists were idealistic, enthusiastic, and willing to work long hours. They focused their efforts on lobbying and standards-setting, and legitimized their operations by creating boards of directors who were well-connected. They raised money by direct mail appeals to a largely passive constituency. They didn't try to build a movement that could appeal to a majority of Americans because they genuinely believed that an elite group of professionals playing an "insider's" game could protect the environment. For a time, their formula seemed to work.

The advent of Ronald Reagan in 1980 changed many things, including the environmental protection regime in Washington. Herblock, the cartoonist, caught the essence of the change when he depicted President Reagan and his Secretary of Interior, James Watt, picnicking together, their checkered tablecloth spread over a tree stump. Behind the smiling men, as far as the eye could see, lay rolling hills covered with nothing but tree stumps. The caption read, "It doesn't get any better than this."

Then came George Bush the elder, Hillary and Bill Clinton, and Newt Gingrich. Environmentalists were tolerated at best and were labeled "ecoterrorists" at worst. As "free market" theology swept through Washington and many state capitals, the traditional environmental movement adjusted to the new climate, learning to describe themselves as "friends of business" advocating the use of market mechanisms for environmental protection.[1, pg. 105] Many of them advocated (and still advocate) the sale of "pollution rights" which tend to funnel toxicants into poor communities and communities of color.

In hopes of gaining "access" to the Clinton administration, mainstream environmentalists went to bat for corporations, helping pass the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Environmental Defense, National Audubon Society, National Wildlife Federation, Natural Resources Defense Council and World Wildlife Fund created the Environmental Coalition for NAFTA and began promoting the free trade theology of their corporate adversaries. Sierra Club refused to join. John Adams of NRDC would later boast, "We [environmentalists] were one of the two big prongs the administration had to fight. The other was labor. We broke the back of the environmental opposition to NAFTA. After we established our position, Clinton only had labor to fight. We did him a big favor." [1, pg. 188]

Ultimately, however, such anti-democratic "insider" strategies failed. As Jay Hair of National Wildlife Federation described his relationship with the Clinton/Gore administration, "What started out like a love affair turned out to be date rape." [1, pg. 177]

For the past 20 years, the mainstream groups have found themselves unable to influence national policy in any lasting way because tweaking regulations and lobbying to amend laws -- a strategy of "whispering in the king's ear"-- doesn't put any lasting pressure on the king. The king may arbitrarily grant your wishes, but just as quickly such favors can be reversed because there's no organized constituency across the country holding the king's feet to the fire.

Thus national environmental policy in the U.S. remains stuck where it was in the 1970s. As Europe, Australia, New Zealand and parts of the Third World have adopted new principles of environmental protection, based on precautionary action, extended producer responsibility, pollution prevention, clean production, and zero waste (which we will describe later in this series), the U.S. remains hamstrung by an unworkable system based on risk assessment of one chemical at a time, and inefficient and ineffective end-of-pipe controls.

Now, as we saw in RACHEL'S #732, the mainstream environmental strategy of lawsuits and rulemakings has shipwrecked as the federal courts have fallen under the sway of Big Money and right-wing "free market" extremism.

At this point in history, can the mainstream environmental organizations reinvent themselves to regain relevance? There are signs that some can. World Wildlife Fund has become a leader in international negotiations, advocating the precautionary principle and urging the phase-out of whole classes of chemicals (those that are persistent or bioaccumulative). Sierra Club has begun to take environmental justice (EJ) activism seriously and has begun talking to organized labor. Whether other mainstream environmental groups can make the shift to modern perspectives remains to be seen. Yet the D.C.-based mainstream groups still receive roughly 70% of all the money available for environmental protection.[1, pg.41]

Meanwhile, a new kind of environmentalism has now emerged, even though it remains astonishingly underfunded.[2] It started in Love Canal, New York and in rural Warren County, North Carolina in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It has since spread across the country, combining human concerns about social, economic and environmental injustices with a focus on local places. Often it has taken the form of a fight to stop a polluter from setting up shop in a black or Latino community, but in some cases it has gone considerably further, becoming a holistic approach to community revitalization and development.

An excellent recent book from MIT Press, *THE LAND THAT COULD BE* by William Shutkin, labels this new approach "civic environmentalism." [3] As Shutkin sees it, "What ultimately defines civic environmentalism and distinguishes it from other forms of social action is the explicit link between environmental problem-solving and the goal of community building. Civic environmentalism is fundamentally about ensuring the quality and sustainability of our communities, economically, socially, and environmentally," Shutkin says.[3, pg. 128]

Civic environmentalism rests on six "core concepts," which are:

1. Democratic participation in decision-making. "Civic environmentalism provides for the regular, practical participation of all citizens in environmental decisions so that environmental outcomes are the shared function of the many," Shutkin says.[3, pg. 129] For this to work, all affected parties must be in the room (not just a few experts): corporate executives, developers, government officials, representatives of the not-for-profit sector, workers and residents. For such a process to work, people need to take each other seriously, regardless of age, race, income, gender, ethnicity, or geography. Face to face work is essential: Without face-to-face meetings, people tend to see their opponents as caricatures, not as real humans. Over time, face-to-face work fosters a sense of community, which in turns fosters more participation. This approach validates the experience of ordinary people, allowing experts to play their proper role as information providers and advisors, not elite decision-makers. But for participatory democracy to work, decisions must be made with the full, informed consent of those affected. This concept has been tried little in the U.S. where "democratic participation" is usually limited to paying taxes and occasionally voting.

2. Community and regional planning. Without going into detail,

planning means deciding what kind of future your community wants 5 or 10 years hence, taking stock of the resources needed to get there, inventorying local assets, then taking steps to achieve the desired future and measure progress along the way. Lack of planning has given us urban sprawl, loss of open space and habitat for wildlife, air pollution, forsaken city centers, and a commuter culture.

3. Environmental education aims first to allow young people to grow up respecting their place in the natural order, so that they will want to "fit in" with nature, not dominate and thus destroy it. Environmental education also seeks to inform both producers and consumers about the consequences of their economic activities, in hopes that they will change their practices. Environmental education can inform people about the disproportionate burden of pollution borne by the poor and people of color. Citizens have often provided their own form of environmental education, alerting government and corporate officials to unsuspected relationships between the environment and human health. Residents and workers have recognized many serious environmental problems long before science has revealed cause and effect connections.

4. Industrial ecology. Shutkin uses this term instead of the more common "clean production." The basic idea here is that industrial processes of extraction, production, distribution, consumption, and discard should work roughly the way ecosystems do.

As Shutkin says, industrial ecology (clean production) "provides environmentalists with a compelling model of economic development, enabling them to engage and promote economic development and the built environment as a legitimate environmental issue." [3, pg. 138]

Shutkin outlines a set of modern "design principles" developed by architect William A. McDonough and published as "The Hannover Principles." [4]

5. Environmental justice. Civic environmentalism demands that communities provide EVERYONE a healthy place to live, work and play. It demands that EVERYONE have a real opportunity to participate in decisions that affect their health and their environment, especially those who have traditionally been left out. Justice implies environmental health and safety for all, including workers, the poor, the dispossessed.

6. Place. Shutkin conveys the importance of place by quoting Alan Gussow: "A place is a piece of the whole environment that has been claimed by feelings." As poet Gary Snyder says, "Of all the memberships we identify ourselves by (racial, ethnic, sexual, national, class, age, religious, occupational), the one that is most forgotten, and that has the greatest potential for healing, is place.... People who can agree that they share a commitment to the landscape -- even if they are otherwise locked in struggle with each other -- have at least one deep thing to share." [3, pg. 140]

Shutkin argues that we already possess most of the ideas and technologies needed to achieve desirable communities. We even appear to have the will, he says, citing poll after poll showing that most Americans favor environmental protection and want greater civic involvement and sense of community. What we are lacking is examples to follow: "There are too few working models of sustainable communities to inspire and guide us," he says. [3, pg. 141]

Shutkin ends his book with four case studies of "civic environmentalism" at work in the real world in the Dudley Street neighborhood of Boston, in the Fruitvale section of Oakland, California, in rural Douglas county, Colorado, and in Morris and Somerset counties in New Jersey. Here the seeds of a new environmental politics are being sewn, but much work lies ahead.

[To be continued.]

--Peter Montague

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[1] Mark Dowie, *LOSING GROUND* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995). ISBN 0-262-04147-2.

[2] Daniel R. Faber and Deborah McCarthy, *GREEN OF ANOTHER COLOR: BUILDING EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN FOUNDATIONS AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT* (Boston, Mass.: Philanthropy and Environmental Justice Research Project, Northeastern University, 2001).

[3] William A. Shutkin, *THE LAND THAT COULD BE* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000). ISBN 0-262-19435-X.

[4] Available at <http://repo-nt.tcc.virginia.edu/classes/tcc315/Resources/ALM/Environment/hannover.html>