

## Lecture #19: Environmentalism Triumphant?

### Suggested Readings:

Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the U.S.*, 1987.

Lewis L. Gould, *Lady Bird Johnson and the Environment*, 1988.

Noel M. Burns, *Erie: The Lake that Survived*, 1985.

Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism*, 2001.

### Outline

#### I. Mounting Crisis and the Beauty of America

by mid-1960s, old conservation movement gradually undergoing a sea change toward environmentalism:  
contributing strands included population, bomb, pesticides, aesthetic conservation, wilderness.

crisis of values as much as of resources

from ethic focused on producers to one organized around consumers, from work to leisure

ugliness of human landscape a central critique, in contrast to natural beauty

urban "blight," litter, and billboards as chief objects of aesthetic criticism

champion of anti-litter/billboard cause: Claudia Alta Taylor, a.k.a. Lady Bird Johnson, married LBJ 11.17.34,  
entered White House 1963 with strong political agenda for beauty

First Ladies as significant political movers when they wish to shape Washington politics

"beautification" became Lady Bird's chief theme: first sought plants for Washington

joined Laurance Rockefeller to organize May 1965 White House Conference on Natural Beauty, issued  
report on *Beauty for America*: "ugliness is bitterness," crisis of spirit

10/22/65: Highway Beautification Act created fund to buy billboards, wall off junkyards (never as successful  
as hoped, proved to benefit billboard co.s in certain ways)

Lady Bird's vision of America as garden: the flowering plant as symbol of restored beauty

#### II. Air, Water, and the Premature Death of Lake Erie

crisis of beauty not limited to billboards; pollution too a source of ugliness & sickness

mounting concern about hazards of air pollution, smog in cities, factory emissions, citizens protest usually at  
local level, typical of many such pollution actions

hostility toward corporate pollution easy target; fear too of science and technology echoed fallout and  
pesticides controversies. cf. anti-flouride campaigns of 1950s, attacking flouridation of public water  
supplies as toxic, anti-libertarian, Communist (hence Mom & Apple Pie marketing of Crest when  
introduced as first flouride toothpaste in 1956)

water as much a source of ugliness as air, with corporate sources objects of attack

classic cases: Torrey Canyon tanker disaster in 1967, Santa Barbara oil spill 1969: "the blowout heard  
around the world" ran wild for ten days, fowled beach, killed wildlife: images of oil-laden birds and  
marine animals become symbol of devastated nature

Lake Erie equally famous case of pollution reported widely in media: 1969 Cuyahoga River fire

L. Erie as shallowest of Great Lakes, most industrial, steady accumulation of heavy metals since 19th  
century, rising mercury levels in fish, DDT byproducts in sediments

worse: eutrophication from over-fertilization of water with nitrogen and phosphorous, produced algal blooms,  
decay of dead plants yielding oxygen deficit, killing fish

by mid-1960s, scientists and activists announcing "the death of Lake Erie", irreversible?

but eutrophication less from industry than more domestic sources: agricultural nitrate fertilizer, and home  
laundry done with new phosphate detergents, introduced by Proctor & Gamble 1933 as Dreft,  
dramatically increased phosphate content of sewage & lake

(note that apocalyptic portraits of Lake Erie "death" in 1960s did not come true: shifts in detergents and  
sewage treatment slowed many eutrophication processes; although pollution by toxics and heavy  
metals continues, early prophecies proved considerably exaggerated)

#### III. The Unexpected Consequences of a Consumer Society

problem of disposing soapy water akin to problem of disposing increasing solid wastes from non-returnable  
bottles, heavily packaged goods, fast foods

important links here to underlying structural changes in American life: mass housing communities like post  
WWII Levittown made affordable housing widely available

shifts in food market: coming of refrigerators cheap enough for ordinary consumers to afford allowed families  
to store much fresher food for longer periods, reducing labor of cooking

shift depended on invention of chlorofluorocarbons--CFCs--as easily compressed gases capable of very  
efficient cooling even at modest compression, very low toxicity, all solving serious dangers and  
expenses associated with previous industrial refrigeration by ammonia

automobile and refrigerator changed nature of food marketing in post-WWII suburb: daily shopping with small handbasket replaced by weekly shopping in large grocery cart, 1937  
Clarence Birdseye (1886-1956) tries quick freezing of fish in 1923, able to freeze meat, vegetables by 1928, founds General Foods Co., making frozen food widely available by 1930s  
assembly line factory assembly of food replaced home cooking (TV dinner as metaphor): parallels increasing participation of women in workforce  
simultaneously: rise of fast food industry, (Ray Kroc buys franchise to MacDonald Brothers' hamburger stand in 1954; Col. Harland Sanders Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise begun in 1956), providing alternative auto-dependent diet outside household  
all of these changes of food and diet tied to changes in marketing: frozen and canned convenience foods all sold in disposable packages which are central to advertising product  
ergo: rising solid waste problems in decades following WWII; motorized refuse collection had begun in some cities in 1910-20 period, large-scale garbage collection essential by 1950s  
hence corporations/factories not only source of problem; American standard of living to blame  
Walt Kelly's Pogo: "We have met the enemy, and he is us." chief slogan of new movement

#### **IV. Earth Day**

sense of apocalypse at end of decade of turmoil: Civil Rights, Vietnam, continuing Cold War, combined with vision of earthrise over Apollo 8's moon, unity of humanity  
environmentalism a call to unity, collective guilt, in national crisis of divisiveness  
on one hand: grassroots movement that white middle-class people could feel unthreatened by, sidetracking attention from more conflicted areas of social justice, racial conflict, Vietnam War; on other hand, genuinely collective impulse toward action on behalf of whole community, rhetoric of inclusiveness even if underlying conflicts not fully addressed  
Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog*, 1968: "We are as gods and might as well get good at it"  
September 1969, Sen. Gaylord Nelson (D, WI) proposes day of national reflection on environmental crisis:  
1st Earth Day, April 22, 1970. widespread activism, media attention  
declarations of crisis, calls for new spiritual vision, and practical suggestions: returnable bottles, fight pollution, preserve open space, put bricks in toilets  
but problem here: are these small acts really adequate responses to potential apocalypse? tension between rhetoric of doom and apparently incommensurate responses