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THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT: AMBIGUITIES AND MEANINGS

GRANT McCONNELL†

The mercurial rise of the present movement to rescue the environment is one of the most striking social phenomena of recent times. It is also one of the most confusing. The evidence of confusion is abundant. The supporters of "ecology" (not the least element of confusion is the varied use of this word) are a very mixed lot; they include individuals and groups from both the left and the right, as well as from the amorphous center. On the one hand the "establishment" is being roundly denounced for a vast range of environmental sins, and on the other hand no few leaders of that same establishment are loudly lending their voices to the general clamor—rarely, it is true, to proclaim their own guilt and repentance, but still vigorously and passionately. Republicans and Democrats vie to identify themselves with the cause. Even the young and the old are willing on occasion to sit together in strategy sessions to plot new campaigns.

On the face of things, it would seem reasonable to suppose that a movement with such impressive diversity of support carried a message of the greatest clarity. Certainly clarion calls are heard; they are innumerable and unending. But together they make a din that is utter cacophony. Some of the calls are to save this spot or that on the landscape. Others are to preserve some species of wildlife or some bit of flora. Still others demand the instant end of practices into which great ingenuity and great resources have been poured, insecticides, chemical fertilizers and so on. New groups form on the national scene, in states and, increasingly, in localities to oppose carefully nurtured plans to build an arctic pipeline, manufacture an SST, drain a swamp, or provide housing for a growing population. Each has its own demon to denounce, the AEC, the automobile industry, the fur trade, developers of all kinds. And beyond all these are the true Jeremiahs, the generalizers to whom we might be grateful if they would only agree on what is afoot. But they don't agree, even on the nature of the evil. It is a general waste of the common substance; it is the need for better use of resources; it is the population explosion; it is technology; it is imminent danger of human extinction.

Faced with this confusion, the ordinary citizen may perhaps be forgiven if he retreats into an uneasy cynicism, regarding all the talk

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and agitation as simply the latest manifestation of a turbulent time, one in which all manner of certainties are being challenged. Looking at the civil rights movement, then the antiwar movement, perhaps even recalling earlier waves of radicalism, he may feel justified in dismissing the current crusade as one of those fast moving tides that occasionally appear, one succeeding the other, but all destined to recede as rapidly as they appeared. If there is a difficulty in that this tide, unlike the others in the present series, has caught up a puzzling diversity of supporters, there is the ready explanation that a crafty establishment is using it to break the force of the other more dangerous movements in the series. In this light, the environmental movement is really conservative and marks the turn back toward a placid normalcy.

In face of all these claims, counterclaims and suspicions, is there anything that can reasonably be said to explain this movement? At the outset, there is a problem that is both obvious and seldom noted: why has this movement emerged with such seeming vigor at this particular moment? Very nearly every feature of the crisis that is currently being proclaimed has been with us for a long time. Pollution was without doubt the central feature of those dark satanic mills cursed by English poets long ago. Preoccupation with the problem of a growing population was what placed the tag of "dismal" on the science of economics, and this too dates from the nineteenth century. And so it is with virtually all of the evils which have come under the current maledictions. Things may well have reached a state worse than before, and yet even this is not obvious to everyone involved; very probably few individuals really believe that survival is at stake in any immediate sense, and in any event if the issue is survival of the race, how many of us can remain excited for long about that? However much we may subscribe to current revulsions, the problem remains, and it goes directly to the question, what is the movement really about?

To approach this question it is worth while to glance back at some of the sources of the present movement. Contrary to the impression that might be derived from some of the present cries of alarm, the movement did not spring full-panoplied from the brain of Jove in the year 1970. It had a gestation period of some length and a complicated one. Its geneology is diverse, even contradictory, and it needs recalling.

The immediate source of the current movement is the "conservation movement." This term properly deserves the quotation marks, since it was a deliberate coinage. It was in 1907, if we are to take the testimony of Gifford Pinchot, that the idea for the label first ap-

peared and it was by his efforts beyond any question that it was popularized. For a brief few years it must have been the most conspicuous feature of the domestic political scene dominated by Theodore Roosevelt. Pinchot's efforts began with the forests of the nation, the target of some of the most egregious exploitation in history. Although others before Pinchot had been alarmed by the rapid devastation which was overtaking the northlands of the United States, Pinchot had just the right political gifts and appeared at just the right moment to be effective. His primary achievement was creation of a dedicated branch of the federal government, the U.S. Forest Service, of which he became the first chief. However, he went on from that to call for the public control of railroads, coordination of government agencies, better rural schools along with the conservation of soil, water, and people. His movement thus became steadily more diffuse as one cause after another was added to his list and as the various conservation conferences and congresses multiplied. Ultimately, however, he overreached himself and without the support of a popular President, was forced to withdraw from the position of prominence he had so flamboyantly enjoyed. His followers continued to carry his flag for a long time thereafter and to achieve occasional successes, but conservation was never the same.

On the face of things it would seem that the story was a simple one, a force of righteousness belatedly rising to halt a categorical evil and then waning as the cause was substantially won. The reality, however, was considerably more complex. "Conservation" to Pinchot and his era was not only a miscellany of particular causes, but a mixture of ideas whose relationship to each other was never thought out and which were in fact the set which had come together in the general atmosphere of Progressivism. Beyond the very simple urge to stop the destruction of the forests, there was, first, the idea that waste should be avoided. Certainly the devastation of the forests was wasteful, but only a few individuals had been concerned about this hitherto. Another idea, a very different one, was imbedded in the conservation movement that Pinchot invented. This was the deeply-felt sense that it was wrong the forests should be exploited for only a few buccaneering robber barons. The lands which became National Forests were public lands before the reserves were created, part of the national domain. And with the public domain there was a long history of scandal. As the frontier disappeared in the eightennineties, the land predators appeared in the forested areas of the west and great fortunes were made by a large range of devices that did not exclude simple theft of publicly-owned timber. It is probably not too cynical to say that had the spoils of forest destruction been available

on an equal basis, the conservation movement of the early nineteenth-hundreds would have had little force or impact. This is not to say that Pinchot and his lieutenants would have been satisfied with any such a simple solution at the expense of continued devastation, but they were as much the children of their era as others and they shared fully in the mild egalitarianism of the Progressive period. Pinchot reiterated that the benefits of the forests were for all the people, and like other leaders of the time, he saw those benefits as very nearly wholly economic.

This ambiguity, fundamental as it was, however, does not itself explain the full complexity of the seemingly simple notion of conservation in this period. The apparently obvious idea of avoiding waste was itself loaded with the baggage of the time. Samuel P. Hays has elaborated on the meaning of this theme; in his eyes it was the heart of "conservation" which was "the gospel of efficiency." And once again, efficiency is an idea of disarming appearance. Hardly anyone in the Progressive era asked the question, efficiency toward what end? The implicit answer in that time would have been, in all probability, toward the end of maximizing output of economic goods per unit of human labor. This end was so much to be taken for granted in the era that to have asked the question would have appeared absurd. This was the time of economic growth and development *par excellence*; it was also the time of Taylorism and scientific management in both the private and the public spheres. Progressivism, of which the conservation movement was so much a part, was deeply imbued with this theme.

In this very same time there was a second strain of thought relating to the environment. It was older and in some respects more fully developed than that of the conservation proclaimed by the Progressives. It was from this that the first warnings about the destruction of the forests had been sounded, but as the new century approached the end of its first decade it was cast into deep shadow by the political pyrotechnics of Pinchot and his friends. This was a vision of the wholeness of Nature perceived by a small group of individuals, most of them scientists. If this group had needed any prophet, it would have been George Perkins Marsh, whose great work appeared during the Civil War. In many eyes it will seem odd that this group of men most of whose life work centered on the search for understanding through the disciplined pursuit of science became the guardians of a set of values thoroughly alien to the men of the conservation movement just discussed. It is only a partial exaggeration to characterize this set of values as religious. Indeed, the language of religion was

recurrently used in the writings of some of the scientists, including those of Marsh.

It would be risky to construct a statement of the philosophical system shared by the individuals of the second group. Occasionally one or another of them spoke in highly teleological terms, but even this may have been no more than a figurative use of language. At most it is possible to note two elements. First was a largely intuitive sense of the interrelatedness of things. This was that vision of wholeness. Second was a feeling of awe and wonder. It would appear to have been rather similar to the deism of the eighteenth century except that it was far more charged with emotion. Inevitably, the sense of awe and wonder had an aesthetic dimension. The beauty of the wild places of the earth was probably as much of a magnet as any need to explore them and place names upon empty spaces of the map, to catalogue new varieties of plants or to understand those freaks of nature which were unknown in the civilized regions. For the most part, however, this was hidden under the standard justifications of science, and sometimes, of economic development.

These two currents, profoundly different as they were, came together during the Progressive era. Some scientists such as Charles Van Hise, for example, accepted the economic materialism of the Progressive movement, but the difference of outlooks did not disappear. Nevertheless, there could be agreement on such policy matters as halting destruction of the forests and general avoidance of conspicuous waste. The fundamental difference remained submerged until the second decade of the century. It came to the surface over the conflict on the building of the Hetch Hetchy Dam in Yosemite. This was an almost perfectly symbolic statement of the basic issue, for it not only pitted economic development against the protection of aesthetic values but it also brought the two most articulate spokesmen of the two strains of conservation into personal collision, Gifford Pinchot and John Muir. The victory of the dam builders seemed to settle the issue of what were the first values of the environment in America—if, indeed, there was any widespread doubt. The Hetch Hetchy Dam was for a public purpose, the water supply of San Francisco, and there could be little effective charge that the benefits of the dam would not be widely shared. With that issue absent, the dominant current of conservation was satisfied. It subsequently became possible for Pinchot's descendents to insist that conservation did not mean anything so simple as preservation, but something quite different, something they were not altogether clear about, but something that was definitely not "sentimental."

With the close of the Progressive era, the conservation movement might almost be said to have ended. However, the word "conservation" remained in currency, a word of righteousness to which no one could be opposed. Moreover, it had the quality, as should be evident, of being able to suggest a great variety of contradictory things. The institutional monument of the movement, the U.S. Forest Service, prospered and came to enjoy both prestige and power. But this was very nearly all that remained of the onetime "conservation movement." And this was the condition that prevailed until after World War II. At the end of that conflict there was a renewal of concern that the resource base of the economy was being dissipated. To this fear, a presidential commission responded reassuringly in 1952 that it was a fallacy to believe that "physical waste equals economic waste," and that with a bit of prudence things were going to be all right. Conservation meant "something very different from simply leaving oil in the ground or trees in the forest." It might have been written by Pinchot.

In that very decade of the 1950s, however, something curious happened. The term "conservation" was captured by the spiritual heirs of John Muir. The strain of thought they represented had never disappeared. It had, in fact, achieved a few minor victories of its own, the creation of a small federal agency, the National Park Service, for example. And it had sometimes enjoyed the conservation label despite the historic clash with Pinchot. That was all ancient history, however, and a new crusade for "conservation" got underway, but led this time by the enthusiasts for wilderness, parks, and wildlife—the "birdwatchers," the "sentimentalists," as their opponents tagged them with intended ridicule. Affecting an attitude of tolerant contempt, proponents of dams, reclamation projects, logging, mining and a host of schemes for economic development sought to brush aside the "unrealistic" demands of the new crusaders. On the face of things it should have been easy. But it proved otherwise. Very real advantages lay in the hands of the unrealists. First, there was the availability of that wonderful word, conservation; it was firmly appropriated by the crusaders, although probably more from confusion than by any Machiavellianism. Second, the battlegrounds chosen for the new war were such as to provide the maximum drama and to create the greatest public sympathy. Again, these battlegrounds were not picked with any sense of general strategy, but were the critical spots which must be saved before all else, the parks, and the scenic climaxes of the nation. To the surprise of nearly everyone, a substantial victory came to the conservationists in the mid-

fifties' battle against the proposed Echo Park Dam on the Colorado River. This was a turning point of historic significance.

The large consequences of this victory was a reassessment in many minds. Conservationists suddenly found their ranks swelled by formerly passive sympathizers who had to this point despaired of ever seeing effective opposition to massive projects undertaken in the name of economic development. A few alert political leaders also began their own reassessments. And among the conservationists, euphoria mounted and plans for a grandiose expansion of the crusade were drawn up. A Wilderness Bill to protect a vast acreage of public lands from any economic exploitation and to establish a wholly new public policy was drawn immediately after the Echo Park victory. And at the Wilderness Conference of 1956 serious attention was given to population problems. In many localities, sharp attacks began to be mounted on pollution of air and water. The objective condition and the general trend of environmental deterioration, however, had not changed, and the euphoria quickly vanished. Conservationist energies seemed to be dissipated in a seven-year struggle for the Wilderness Act, a much more abstract and much less dramatic campaign than one to "save Echo Park" or some other scenic climax. Nevertheless, even the Wilderness Act was passed,¹ although in highly diluted form. Thereafter came a series of battles over specific spots of great beauty threatened by economic exploitation. The climax came in the fall of 1968, when concurrent victories were won on the fate of the Grand Canyon, the Redwoods and the North Cascades. They were all very qualified victories, but that was much less important than the fact that they occurred at all. Not the least interesting feature was that "conservationists" won against proponents of reclamation and intensive timber management, groups that had supposed themselves the real heirs of the conservation cause.

To this point it could be said with some accuracy that the conservationists of the new wave were a small group, an elite in some eyes. The recent dramatic conflicts, however, had elicited a degree of public support that astonished many Congressmen. They had also emboldened many individuals to leave the sidelines and to fight battles against evils that had long been before their eyes. There is no way of knowing how many individuals went through the experience of awakening to a generalized vision of environmental degradation from a start with outrage at some specific problem, but it was fre-

1. 16 U.S.C. § 1131 (1964).

quent. The large result was that the political base of conservation was enormously broadened. It became a popular movement.

In this development, scientists have once more played an important role. One after another has spoken out in plain language to sound the alarm on potential consequences of one form of development after another. One of the consequences is ironic. Even while many scientists are thus declaring themselves, hostility to science as such is growing as a result of the common contemporary identification of science with technology. But there is an even larger irony present than this. It is to be seen in the current headlong effort to mobilize technology to "clean up the environment." This is most evident with campaigns to reduce or eliminate air and water pollution. Plainly there are many important tasks for technologists to perform on this score. The implicit assessment of "the environmental crisis," however, is mistaken. Many of the evils which are now the objects of rising public wrath will not readily yield to technological solutions. Thus, more efficient exhaust attachments or new automobile engines may conceivably reduce air pollution to acceptable levels, but they will not affect other problems associated with a culture in which decisions to provide total mobility of automobiles at any and all costs have been permitted to determine the shape of cities, the uses of rural lands, and to affect virtually all aspects of life. The questioning of the values associated with an automobile-ridden society will continue and probably expand. And this is but an example of the nature of the Pandora's box that has been opened.

What light does this review of a not particularly prominent bit of history cast on the questions posed in the opening of this discussion? The first point to be noted is that a concern with the quality of the environment is not new. It is of long standing with a past minority, one that has occasionally acted with some effectiveness, although necessarily on small points of critical importance. It has also been long associated with an ecological point of view.

Second, there is a profound ambiguity in the movement we now see before us. Its roots in the conservation movement appear again and again as groups with the most contradictory objectives seek to declare themselves the true keepers of the faith. On the one hand, a very substantial faction is found proclaiming that the goals of economic growth and development are over-riding, provided only that benefits are not monopolized. It is willing to concede a minor importance to abatement of some of the most conspicuously adverse effects of past and present economic development. Insofar as a noisy minority is making demands for new parks and wilderness, a policy of appeasement should be followed, but not so far that it interferes

in any substantial way with the serious economic business of life. This faction enjoys entrenched positions in both government and business. On the other hand, another and rapidly growing faction is demanding that first importance be recognized in an expanding range of policy decisions for the quality of the environment. By the same token, it seeks relegation of economic considerations to secondary status. The conflict is sharp and it tends to be argued out with the special intensity which charges of heresy arouse.

Third, the environmental movement is unlikely to disappear. It has a long history and its emergence as a substantial force is sudden in appearance only. It has been gathering strength over a period of at least two decades; what is new is that it has just recently achieved the critical mass necessary to command serious public attention. This is not the entire explanation, but it is sufficient to suggest that, although some of the stridency may subside, the widespread concern for the environment will continue in being and will probably continue to grow in effectiveness. The defeat of the SST in Congress is likely to prove a harbinger.

Beyond this, it is evident that today's environmental movement is both new and old. In one sense it has a past that has had a significant effect in helping to bring about a massive change of outlook, one that is rejecting the total primacy of economic materialism. On the other hand, the movement is itself partly the product of that change of outlook. That change is also the result of other forces, some of which are still obscure. But the trend is evident: while the emphasis of American society upon material values is unlikely to disappear, it may well be progressively curtailed as a search for alternative values becomes increasingly prominent. This change of outlook, far more than the very real deterioration of the objective environment is what the environmental movement will probably prove to be about.