

Lecture #26: Environmental Backlash

Suggested Readings:

Brian Drake, *Loving Nature, Fearing the State: Environmentalism and Antigovernment Politics...*, 2013
Norman J. Vig & Michael E. Kraft, *Environmental Policy: New Directions for the Twenty-First Century*, 2015.
Patrick Allitt, *A Climate of Crisis: America in the Age of Environmentalism*, 2014.

Outline

I. Reagan's Revolution

dramatic shift in American environmental politics began during 1970s with erosion of earlier bipartisan alignments that had been responsible for passing environmental legislation with lopsided votes from Teddy Roosevelt through Richard Nixon, Democrats & Republicans had competed with each other over which had stronger conservation/environmental credentials
most major laws of 1960s-70s were passed during Nixon Administration with majority votes from members of both parties: NEPA, Clean Air, Clean Water, Endangered Species, EPA, NOAA, etc.
Barry Goldwater in 1964 had campaigned on libertarian critique of social programs and excessive government intrusion on private liberty, need for strong military in Cold War era; Lyndon Johnson's campaign played on fears of nuclear war, most notoriously in famous "Daisy" ad on 9/7/1964 although Goldwater's massive electoral defeat was seen as death knell of Republican Party by those on the left, in retrospect it's now clear that it actually led to a long period of rebuilding in what would emerge as a new conservative movement that would transform Republican Party politics by 1980s
old New Deal coalition that had sustained large Democratic majorities since 1930s eroded for many reasons civil rights legislation drew Southern whites toward Republican party, sustaining a "states rights" rhetoric that would increasingly be directed toward other forms of federal intervention into state and local politics
Roe v. Wade led to movement of religious voters who had previously been sympathetic to environmental concerns away from secular environmentalist embrace of abortion toward new conservative movement; prominent examples include Francis Schaeffer and Richard John Neuhaus
economic concerns of 1970s inflation amid disaffection from radical protest politics of Vietnam and social activism coupled with growing conservative distaste for environmentalist critique of American way of life reactions against 1960s-era environmentalism were appearing as early as 1970s: conservative critics said environmental doom exaggerated, progress not bad, excessive regulation threatened economic growth, environmentalists portrayed as privileged elites out of sympathy with struggles of working-class people
Ronald Reagan combined these with general hostility to government intervention in private sector, resulting in systematic attack on TR/Pinchot-era conservation and later regulatory apparatus
James Watt, Secretary of Interior, as key player: wilderness-designated lands opened to coal/oil exploration, sought to sell large blocks of public lands; reduce land-use regulation; favor states and private sector
firestorm of opposition, petition drives; criticized for evangelical faith; removed for racist remark, 1983
EPA story similar: Anne Gorsuch reduced budget, staff, sought to end unnecessary regulation
environmentalist groups grew, seen as symbol for conservatives of new "special interest" status
western rural resentment of federal land ownership and management a recurring source of concern

II. Environmentalist Counterrevolution

critiques from env left as well: older organizations attacked for being coopted by regulators, not radical
USFS lands: attack on Reagan cut of old-growth forests attacked TR/Pinchot utilitarianism & multiple use
Dave Foreman's Earth First! as "non-violent" "eco-warriors": spiking trees, vandalizing equipment, etc.
modeled on Edward Abbey's 1975 novel *The Monkeywrench Gang*, in which a group of radical environmental activists plan to blow up the Glen Canyon Dam to liberate the wild country behind it
attack on U.S. Forest Service as having sold out to corporate development of lands that should be preserved forever in inviolate natural condition
deep ecology as more philosophical wing of radical environmentalism: romantic wilderness preservation tradition, biocentric vision of harmony with nature, ambivalence about human place in nature, direct critique of modernism itself: Arne Naess in Norway best known spokesperson (anarchist roots): human dominance vs harmony; infinite vs limited resources; anthropocentrism vs biocentrism; material economic growth vs living simply with appropriate technology; etc.
environmental justice movement critiqued "mainstream" environmentalism and society from the left, emphasizing the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on poor and people of color, including international critiques such as those of Ramachandra Guha in India against deep ecology
animal rights movement emerges from older anti-vivisectionist, humanitarian, vegetarian traditions, but rights-based defense of animal autonomy from human-induced pain/harm (roots in Jeremy Bentham)
individualism of animal rights vs. ecosystem/wilderness/species concern of deep ecology

III. Learning from Complicity

broad US public fairly removed from most of these: strong commitment to environmental protection, but balanced by an equal concern for economic prosperity and sense that no tradeoff needed
diminishing hope for simple environmental solutions in 1980s: politics of ambivalence
indoor air pollution as political vehicle for shifting controversy away from corporations & industry: but also serious problem, radon as natural pollutant, significant health threat which in part derived from energy conservation measures that insulated houses and diminished ventilation during 1970s
William K. Reilly as liberal Republican environmentalist EPA head for George H. W. Bush: how can we allocate funds to places to get greatest benefit, given public misperception of cost-benefit balance?
politics of disconnection: public lack of awareness of consequences of ordinary life
later critiques suggested that radon risk numbers had been exaggerated by relying on radon exposure and cancer among uranium miners (who were also heavy cigarette smokers)
Exxon Valdez runs aground 3/24/89, 11 million barrels spill, 1200 miles coastline contaminated, public outcry against corporate malfeasance produces clean-up that does further damage: all for cars
(Deepwater Horizon oil spill in Gulf of Mexico in 2010 would replay many of these same dynamics)

IV. Paradoxes of Preserving Sacred Land

old-growth forest debate in Pacific Northwest symbolic of deepening conflict between old conservationist concern for productive resources and preservationist goal of protecting sacred land
spotted owl as occasion for legal action: 1973 Endangered Species Act mandates federal protection of species (not ecosystems) threatened with extinction, so owl becomes surrogate for forest itself
(first such controversy came in late 1970s over snail darter at Tellico Dam in Tennessee [TVA])
in old-growth controversy, heated debate about local economies vs. irreplaceable national resources

V. Partisan Environments: What Counts as "Wise Use"?

1980s-1990s: Wise Use (West) and Property Rights (East) movements as attacks on government-based environmentalism: Wise Use argued against federal ownership and management of western lands, sought transfer of those lands to state and local governments and/or private sector; property rights movement argued that government regulation represented a legal "taking" of private property
by end of 20th century, the two parties starkly polarized on environmental issues as never before: Democrats favored wilderness protection, pollution control, energy conservation, regulatory oversight; Republicans favored development, rolling back federal control, protecting private property rights from government
2000 presidential campaign: Democratic candidate (Al Gore) with strong environmental record facing Republican candidate (George Bush) arguing for more balanced approach, with spoiler third-party candidate (Ralph Nader, also with strong environmentalist credentials) pulling votes away from Gore: environmental politics consequential but not in ways one might expect
after Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2006, large funds flow toward Heartland Institute and other groups to raise skepticism about climate change—and beyond mere skepticism, growing conservative emphasis on climate change as regulatory overreach, undermining economic growth, and government intrusions
geographical red-blue divide in recent presidential elections at both state and county level reflects longstanding tensions between urban and rural areas that have long been present in this course, amplified by changing partisan alignments, with rural areas in particular tending toward greater conservatism in part for environmental reasons