

FROM CONSERVATION TO JUSTICE FOR ALL:  
AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN'S  
ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

by  
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A common assumption about women's involvement in environmental activism is that it began in 1962 with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. One of the reasons for this false assumption is a lack of research and writing focussed on women's activism specifically. This thesis seeks to fill a void in environmental history by investigating and comparing female environmental activists from two different generations--the Progressive era and the contemporary period. Particular attention is paid to the motivations, attitudes, and ideology that women ascribe to their activism. It shows that while these two generations share some key characteristics, their differences reflect fundamental changes in the agenda and constituency of the environmental movement.

Primary source writings and historical literature reveal that during the Progressive era, a socially homogenous group of women worked on a narrow set of issues within the confines of traditional gender roles and the progressive conservation movement. Personal interviews and contemporary literature reveal that, in contrast, contemporary female activists are socially, racially, and ideologically diverse. In effect, they are challenging prevalent notions about the nature of environmentalism and activism.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### *Women's Environmental Activism in the Twentieth Century*

Most Americans are familiar with particular mileposts along the time line of twentieth century American women's activist history. The year 1920 is recognized because it marks when the nineteenth amendment crowned suffragists' campaign for women's enfranchisement. A few generations later, the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s made their mark by helping many women assert their right to civil, social, economic, racial, and sexual equality. Today as the 1990s draw to a close, is an appropriate time to reflect on women's activism throughout this century. A typical women's history account would include a variety of so-called women's issues, including voting and reproductive rights, and professional and family choices. However, "women's issues" are not the only subjects of women's activism. For thousands of women activists throughout the century, particularly during the Progressive era (1900s-early 1910s), and the contemporary period (late 1970s-present) environmental issues have been the cornerstone of their activism. The significant political and social contributions of this century's women environmental activists have been neglected by women's history and environmental history alike.

This thesis seeks to fill a void in environmental history by investigating and comparing women environmental activists from two different generations--the Progressive era, and the contemporary period. Particular attention is paid to the motivations, attitudes, and ideology that women ascribe to their activism. An historical perspective guides the comparison. It shows that while these two generations share some key characteristics,

their differences reflect fundamental changes in the agenda and constituency of the environmental movement. During the Progressive era, women environmental activists were from a relatively narrow social strata. They supported issues that were deemed “appropriate” for women, and the techniques they used to promote these issues fit within the confines of traditional gender roles. Contemporary women environmental activists, on the other hand, come from diverse backgrounds, and work on a broad range of issues in a variety of contexts. In effect, they are challenging prevalent notions of what constitutes an “environmental issue,” and the type of person that becomes an “environmental activist.”

The findings of this investigation and inter-generational comparison demonstrate the need for gender perspective in environmental history. Without it, environmental history has overlooked the work of Progressive era women activists and undervalued the contributions of contemporary women. With gender perspective, environmental history would be better equipped to analyze how ninety years of women's' environmental activism has influenced the American environmental movement. It would recognize that the motivations, attitudes, and ideology that contemporary women bring to environmental activism are expanding the meaning of environmentalism.

Chapters two through four comprise the investigative part of this thesis. Chapter two presents an overview of three areas of women's' environmental activism during the Progressive era. I choose to focus on conservation, preservation, and urban reform because these movements are the closest antecedents to contemporary women's' environmental activism. As one historian has asserted, “Nowhere has women's' self-

The white, middle- to upper-class, urban women of this crusade numbered in the thousands. In the years before women had gained suffrage, these women were actively organizing in their communities and lobbying in Washington D.C. in support of the “cause” of conservation. Contrary to what we might expect, the political influence that these women wielded was widely recognized and praised by the male policy makers and administrators of the era. conscious role as protectors of the environment been better

exemplified than during the progressive conservation crusade of the early twentieth century.”<sup>1</sup>

At first glance, one might guess that Progressive conservationist women were the “grandmothers” of today’s women environmental activists. Indeed, there is a striking resemblance between the “fight to save the trees” rhetoric that Progressive conservationists used and that which forest activists use today. However, further research into the ideological context that these women were working in reveals that Progressive era women adhered strictly to the established conservation ideology. Although the term “conservation” and “environmental” are sometimes used synonymously today, the ideas of the Progressive conservation movement in fact contrast sharply with contemporary environmental ethics. The former, aligned with Progressive era politics, basically advocated a scientific, technocratic, efficient approach to the management of natural resources (water, forests, etc.) for the benefit of “society.” As Conservation era women activists saw it, the solutions to inefficiency at the national resource policy level paralleled those at the household level. Organization, technology, cooperation, and planning were the solutions to the dangers of inefficiency, and both men and women believed that women were naturally disposed to this type of work. Thus, the parallels between efficient household management and the goals of national resource management created an opportunity for women to participate in the politics of conservation.

More research into Progressive era women’s activism revealed that urban reformers also relied on traditional assumptions about women’s domestic instincts to justify their initiative to clean-up cities. These women, however, were generally more socially liberal, and many achieved significant levels of professional and political power. Preservationists generally employed neither domestic nor maternal rhetoric in their environmental activism. Instead, their expressions about the intrinsic value of wilderness mostly echoed those of their male counterparts in the popular, male-led preservationist movement.

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<sup>1</sup>Carolyn Merchant, Earthcare: Women and the Environment (NY: Routledge, 1996): 143.



Chapters three and four explore the diverse field of contemporary women's environmental activism. My research reveals that since the mid-1980s, scholarly research and written commentary on the subject has increased geometrically. Much of the academic interest has coincided with the evolution of a new field of study known as ecofeminism. A multi-disciplinary field, ecofeminism raises theoretical issues that help us understand the historical significance of women's environmental activism. Questions that ecofeminist discourse on environmental activism raise include: "Why are most grassroots environmental activists women?" "Do women perceive their natural environment differently than men?" "Why are women under-represented in ecomangement positions?" and "Why do women become involved in activism? What does it mean to them?" These questions guided my research throughout the study.

Researching contemporary women's activism was a rewarding endeavor. I studied a range of materials, including books, journals, and academic anthologies (organized around issues concerning the environment, politics, activism, race, and gender) to learn more about the issues, ideologies, and interpretations of contemporary women's activism. The research suggests several trends in the types of stories that were being told. The two most common subjects were mothers-turned-activists, and environmental justice advocates. The majority of the scholarly literature profiles women who initially had no relationship to environmental issues, but became highly involved in them when the health of their families was threatened. The emergence of these trends piqued my personal and academic curiosity. In order to investigate their validity, I decided to ask some local women activists about their experiences in environmental activism.

Thus, my primary research on contemporary women was a series of interviews with nine women advocates in the Pacific Northwest. I found that their experiences in environmental activism did not necessarily fit into the trends I identified in the secondary sources. Their backgrounds, motivations, ideologies, and perceptions were in fact much more diverse than those described in the literature. Therefore, my research suggests that

full spectrum of women's environmental activism is considerably broader than the current literature shows.

Chapter three draws from both primary and secondary sources to chronicle the experiences of several women activists and their diverse issues. These stories are meant to acquaint the reader with the basic information about who these women are and what they do. Chapter four focuses on more analytical and theoretical issues. It combines insights gained from the interviews with observations presented in the scholarly literature to illustrate the historically significant contributions of contemporary women activists.

The final chapter is an issue-by-issue comparison of the most salient characteristics of the two generations. My own arguments are synthesized with a few scholarly theories about women's activism; all arguments are substantiated with material from the previous chapters. The comparison leads me to concur with a prominent historian's assertion that the full potential of environmental history has heretofore been impaired by its lack of gender perspective. I point out that the neglect of women's environmental activism is one regrettable, but amendable, example of this limitation. This thesis concludes by arguing that environmental history needs to pay closer attention to activism and gender if it wishes to chronicle the future of the environmental movement .

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Progressive Era

A common assumption about women's involvement in environmental activism is that it began in 1962 with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. Certainly, the book had a revolutionary impact on many Americans' general understanding of environmental threats, and it deserves credit for informing the environmental movement of the next two decades. Yet, if one looks at its impact on women's environmental activism specifically, one sees that it provoked more of a renaissance than a revolution.

To borrow a term from feminist studies, one could say that the women of the post-*Silent Spring* movement are the "second wave" of women environmental activists.<sup>2</sup> The first wave crested earlier in the century, when a considerable number of middle and upper-class white women were activists in the conservation movement. Their environmental issues ranged from forest conservation and wilderness protection, to city sanitation and urban reform. During this period, the primary premise of women's interest in the environment was based on their traditional roles as mothers, homemakers, and teachers. Initially, the women activists were well-received by the public, in large part because their issues and activism styles meshed neatly with accepted gender-roles.

The drawback of focussing on these women as the early pioneers of women's environmental activism is that it categorically excludes women of color and poor women. Subsequent chapters will show that today, women of all colors and socioeconomic backgrounds are environmental activists. However, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, less privileged women were both intentionally and inadvertently

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<sup>2</sup> First wave feminism generally refers to the suffrage movement; second wave to the movement that emerged in the late sixties in response to the civil rights movement.

excluded from nationally recognized environmental movements. The origins of this exclusion are discussed below.

The final section of this chapter steps back from the details of progressive era women's environmental activism to consider some broader social and political implications. Although the peak of women's contributions to conservation, preservation, and urban reform took place before women had the right to vote, their activities certainly had political dimensions. Throughout the Progressive era, women expressed mixed views about their roles in politics. Their discourse reveals important characteristics of an emerging women's political culture.

### *Conservation: From Movement to Crusade*

“And as it was the intuitive foresight of a woman which brought the light of civilization to a great continent, so in great measure, will it fall to a woman in her power to educate public sentiment to save from rapacious waste and complete exhaustion the resources upon which depend the welfare of the home, the children, and the children's children.”<sup>3</sup>

“In no national movement has there been such a spontaneous and universal response from women as in this great question of conservation.”<sup>4</sup>

The most outspoken women activists of the Conservation movement of the Progressive era had a strong sense of their place in American history. They believed that the “work of the nation”--conservation--was a project which women were naturally experts in. With the support of their male contemporaries, they marched fervently in the “conservation crusade” to defend the sanctity of their children, households, communities, and America. Their actions were guided by the ethics of the nation-wide Conservation movement. Even before women had gained the right to vote, women conservationists were

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<sup>3</sup> Lydia Adams-Williams, “Conservation--Women's Work,” *Forestry and Irrigation* 14 (1908): 350-51.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Russel Knudsen, “The Conservation of the Nation's Natural Resources,” in *Proceedings of the First National Conservation Congress held in Seattle, Washington, August 26-28, 1909*, by the National

following political avenues to conserve the nation's natural resources from unsustainable exploitation, and ensure environmental safety and cleanliness in urban areas.

The definitive history of the conservation movement is chronicled by Samuel P. Hays in The Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920.<sup>5</sup> Hays's rudimentary definition of the early 20th century American conservation movement suggests it was a political movement to implement the efficient, scientific management of the nation's natural resources (forests, waterways, minerals, etc.).<sup>6</sup> For the period between the mid 1890s and 1908, this definition is viable. Hays explains how, until 1908, the conservation proponents in the Roosevelt administration had little trouble advancing their forest, irrigation, and range management projects through the federal natural resource program. However, when they brought their larger projects, such as an expanded national water development program, before Congress, they met with reluctance and hostility.<sup>7</sup> In the face of opposition, the conservationists turned to the American public for support. They took a formerly economic ideology--the ethics of efficiency--and advertised its applicability to social and moral affairs.<sup>8</sup>

Not coincidentally, this was when women became involved in the movement. Conservationist rhetoric resonated strongly in social and domestic realms, and soon conservationism began to resemble more of a "crusade" than a movement. The ideological changes within the movement that earned it the term "crusade" became windows of opportunity for white, middle-class, Protestant women to contribute to this era of American history. The ideas that these select women promoted also appealed to many members of marginalized races and classes. Progressive rhetoric promoted a "spirit of efficiency" that

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Conservation Congress (Washington, D.C.: Executive Committee of the National Conservation Congress, 1909), 206-11.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel P. Hays, Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920, 1975 ed., (NY: Atheneum, 1987.)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

became especially prominent in the image of the idyllic “American” household. Recent immigrants and minority Americans could, hypothetically, make their homes resemble this ideal by adhering to the examples set by women conservationists. “The broader significance of the conservation movement stemmed from the role it played in the transformation of a decentralized, nontechnical, loosely organized society, where waste and inefficiency ran rampant, into a highly organized, technical, and centrally planned and directed social organization which could meet a complex world with efficiency and purpose.”<sup>9</sup>

Although this period of the conservation movement is well known, one important aspect of it is commonly left out of historical accounts. Among the new conservationists, the most enthusiastic and dynamic were women.<sup>10</sup> This particular omission of women’s history is ironic because at the time, many prominent men publicly recognized women’s contributions. The prophet of conservation, Gifford Pinchot, was highly supportive of women conservationists, speaking at their meetings and publicly praising their efforts.<sup>11</sup> Joseph Ransdell, chair of the National Rivers and Harbors Committee said: “We consider our movement one of the greatest and best ever inaugurated in the union and we know that the women can help us.”<sup>12</sup>

How was it that the conservation movement, led by male politicians trying to manage natural resources, appealed to unenfranchised mothers and housewives? How were their contributions valued? The answer lies in the rhetoric of conservation: its demand for efficiency; and its increasing focus on morality. By 1908, the Roosevelt

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>10</sup> Stacy Aliamo, “The Undomesticated Nature of Feminism: Mary Austin and the Progressive Women Conservationists,” *Studies in American Fiction* 26 (Spring 1998): 2.

<sup>11</sup> Merchant, 109. Incidentally, Pinchot was particularly proud of his own mother’s role as president of a Daughter’s of the American Revolution Conservation committee.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Ransdell, “Our National Waterways,” in *Tenth Biennial Convention Official Report*, General Federation of Women’s Clubs (Newark, New Jersey, 1910) 150, quoted in Merchant, *Earthcare*, 117.

administration's campaign against the waste and exploitation of natural resources was seeking public support in order to help pass legislation.<sup>13</sup> Concurrently, conservationists were recognizing that their efforts at the federal management level paralleled women's domestic endeavors to prevent waste and inefficiency in the home. The solutions to inefficiency were the same at the national and household levels--organization, technology, cooperation, and planning. Therefore, both men and women conservationists believed that an effective natural resource policy should be based on the model of a well-managed home. Thus, the parallels in the rhetorics of efficient household management and national resource management allowed some women to become involved in the politics of conservation.

As mothers and wives, these white, middle-class, socially conservative women were traditionally looked to as protectors of family and religious values. Those who became conservation activists capitalized on this accepted social role to help transform the conservation movement into a moral crusade. Many men publicly welcomed women's support for the cause of conservation, as long as they did not broach the boundaries of their previously defined social roles. The historical record shows that few, if any, women conservationists cared to do so.

### *Women Conservationists in Forest Activism*

In 1908, the president of the Women's National Press Association, Mrs. Ellen S. Cromwell, said: "There is no subject of more vital importance and interest to the present and coming generation than those of irrigation and the preservation of forests [sic]."<sup>14</sup> What would lead an early twentieth century woman journalist to make such a strong statement? The credit goes to the women activists who, under the banner of conservation,

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<sup>13</sup> Hays, 122.

<sup>14</sup> Ellen S. Cromwell, quoted in Lydia Adams-Williams, "National Forests and Public Opinion," Forestry and Irrigation 14 (Washington D.C.:1908): 83.

made it their goal to convince the nation of the importance of careful management of the nation's natural resources. Indeed, the primary role of women in the Conservation crusade was the creation of public sentiment that would support conservation legislation, especially forest management and protection.<sup>15</sup> This was done in many forums, including the print press, the home, women's clubs, and schools. Though the content and style of activism varied among these different groups, the great majority of women activists agreed that their mission was "To awaken an interest in this important subject, to educate public sentiment to an appreciation of the vital relations between forests and human life, [and] to urge definite and speedy action [on] behalf of forest preservation."<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the most outspoken woman conservationist in the press was Lydia Adams-Williams. While working for *Forestry and Irrigation*, the authoritative journal of the conservation movement, Adams-Williams portrayed herself as a sort of feminist who constructed an historical imperative for women's role in conservation. By glorifying select women in history, she illustrated precedents for the kind of role that she believed her contemporaries should play in the national politics of conservation. For example, she lauded the "patriotism and inspiration" of Joan of Arc and the fidelity of Napoleon's wife Josephine. She bent history for a dramatic effect when necessary, claiming that the world was indebted to the "foresight and divine sympathy" of Queen Isabella of Spain because it led to the "discovery of a great continent . . . the civilization that we enjoy today and for the great wealth of resources, the development of which has made us the most powerful nation on the face of the earth."<sup>17</sup> However, unlike queens and soldiers, American women could fulfill their historical mission without abandoning the obligations of motherhood. By educating their husbands about conservationist ethics, and "then inculcating in their children" the precepts of the national economy and patriotic duty, "the entire sentiment of

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<sup>15</sup> Women conservationists also worked on agriculture issues, such as irrigation and soil fertility.

<sup>16</sup> J.E. MacKisson, "The Nation's Need of Forestry Work," *Forestry and Irrigation* 14 (1908): 487.

<sup>17</sup> Lydia Adams-Williams, "Conservation-Women's Work," *Forestry and Irrigation* 14 (1908): 350-51.



the Nation may be changed by the motherhood of the country in a single generation, and this people converted from the most wasteful and extravagant in the world to the most prudent and conservative.”<sup>18</sup>

In many cases, women supported on-going conservationist projects. For example, Mrs. J.E. MacKisson, chairman [sic] of the Missouri Federation of Women’s Clubs, encouraged the chairmen [sic] of the women’s clubs to conduct educational campaigns through the press. Thus, they used their accepted role as teachers to further the cause of conservation. This work enhanced the Forest Service’s efforts to “educate the reading public to an appreciation of the state’s forest resources and the necessity for their preservation.”<sup>19</sup> Many women conducted their education campaigns directly in schools. Louise Klein Miller, Curator of School Gardens in Cleveland, Ohio, expressed an attitude common to female forest conservationists: “If an appreciation of forests and forest preservation is ever to become general, public sentiment must be aroused, and the most comprehensive way of accomplishing the result is to educate the children of the public schools and, through their parents.”<sup>20</sup>

In addition to educating the public, women conservationists believed that they should encourage scientific forestry and arboriculture in order to assure the constructive utilization and management of forests. In fact, women conservationists strongly supported scientific management of forests and other natural resources. In a lecture at the 1912 National Conservation Congress, one woman emphasized the importance of science to conservation: “If we do not follow the most scientific approved methods, the most modern discoveries of how to conserve and propagate . . . the time will come when the world will

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> J.E. MacKisson, 488.

<sup>20</sup> Louise Klein Miller, “Tree Planting in School Yards, Forestry and Irrigation 14 (1908): 211.

not be able to support life and then we shall have no need of conservation.”<sup>21</sup> At the same time that women conservationists were enthusiastic about the promise of science for conservation, the vast majority of them never assumed that women should understand and apply the science themselves. When the California [women’s] Club sponsored a bill to establish a School of Forestry at the University of California at Berkeley, Mrs. George Law Smith (wife of the university president) argued: “The need of guarding against forest fires and of lumbering the tracts, so that the industry may be permanent, necessitates the establishment of a School of Forestry where a sufficient corps of *trained men* may be graduated to *take charge of the forests and manage them scientifically*”(my italics).<sup>22</sup>

An important nexus of women’s participation in the forest conservation movement was the women’s club. These clubs emerged in the late 1800s as decedents of the benevolent aid societies that middle and upper-middle class white women had participated in throughout the decade.<sup>23</sup> The new clubs were distinguished by their issues of concern and the style of their activism. While the prime function of the benevolent aid societies had been to distribute aid to the poor, the clubs expanded their platform to include more controversial social issues, such as prostitution, alcohol, and slavery.<sup>24</sup> Eventually, the issue of forest conservation would be treated with the same sense of morality.

At the same time, black women were organizing around similar issues. Throughout the 1900s and 1910s, the over 50,000 members of Black women’s clubs worked to promote “high ideals and morality, civic concerns and a Christian homelife.”<sup>25</sup> Of course, black women faced many different social, economic, and political challenges than white

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<sup>21</sup> Mrs. Emmons Crocker, “Address,” in proceedings, Fourth National Conservation Congress, (Indianapolis, 1912), 258, quoted in Merchant, Earthcare, 117.

<sup>22</sup> Mrs. George Law Smith, Club Life 1, no. 9 (January, 1903): 1, quoted in Merchant, Earthcare, 113.

<sup>23</sup> Martha Killian Barefoot, “Between “True Woman” and “New Woman”: Oregon Women’s Clubs, 1890-1916,” Master’s Thesis, University of Oregon, June 1994.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

women faced.<sup>26</sup> In the end, their similar goals did not overcome their differences. Black women's clubs continued to be excluded from the white club federation. This instance of segregation contributed to a legacy of racial discrimination that has carried over into the contemporary environmental movement.<sup>27</sup> The history of race and class-based exclusion from environmental movements is further discussed in subsequent sections.

Recent studies have shown that the white women's clubs were eager proponents for the Conservation movement. In the process, they created new opportunities and responsibilities for women in the public sphere.<sup>28</sup> Initially, the largest club was the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Its agenda included women's suffrage, education reforms, prison reforms, minimum wage laws, and, eventually, conservation issues.<sup>29</sup> The WCTU had hundreds of thousands of members, organized in chapters across the country. They organized at the local and national level, conducting public education campaigns (targeting male voters) and lobbying politicians. The General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) was formed in 1890 to unite the thousands of smaller women's clubs across the nation, and encourage members to use the skills they had gained in clubs in their communities. By the mid-1900s, GFWC boasted over 800,000 members.<sup>30</sup> Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) was another major nation-wide club that eventually joined the conservation crusade.

Once they had adopted conservationist principles, club members used unique tactics to help pass legislation which supported their issues. For example, when the Minnesota

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<sup>26</sup> For example, in 1959 the Sierra Club director responded to an anti-discrimination resolution (which would have overturned the ban on Jews and people of color in the club) with "Now wait a minute, this is not an integration club, this is a conservation club." Quoted in Marcy Darnovsky, "Stories Less Told: Histories of US Environmentalism," *Socialist Review* 22, no. 4 (October-December 1992).

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<sup>28</sup> Barefoot, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 8.

Federation [of women's clubs] was organizing a repeal of the "Dead and Down Timber Act," it sent women to lobby in Washington. They told law makers "We represent the State Federation of Women's Clubs, which has a membership of between six and seven thousand and you know that six or seven thousand women represent six or seven thousand husbands and a few thousand sons who will possibly vote as their fathers vote."<sup>31</sup>

Besides lobbying for forest legislation, women also helped establish forestry schools, state forestry departments, and a host of other institutional apparatuses designed to carry out conservation policy.<sup>32</sup>

The importance of women's clubs to late nineteenth/early twentieth century history was clearly recognized by some academics and politicians of the era. In 1898, social visionary Charlotte Perkins Stetson (better known as Charlotte Perkins Gilman) wrote: "The women's club movement is one of the most important sociological phenomena of the century--indeed, of all centuries--marking as it does the first timid steps toward social organization of these so long unsocialized . . . Social life is absolutely conditioned upon organization."<sup>33</sup> In her book *Women and Economics*, Perkins explained how until the advent of women's clubs, the centers of significant social interaction were found in exclusively male institutions, such as the military, industry, education, and the church. Even in the benevolent aid societies, women performed token charitable acts--their participation did not constitute a realm of distinct social interaction outside the domestic sphere.

For most women, participation in a club did not represented neither a rejection nor an abdication of domestic obligations. Rather, clubs initially functioned as a sort of auxiliary to domesticity. The rhetoric of club leaders portrayed community activism as an

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>31</sup> Mrs. L.P. Williams, "Address," in Proceedings of the American Forest Congress (Washington, D.C.: American Forestry Association, 1905), 434.

<sup>32</sup> Merchant, Earthcare, *passim*.

extension of traditional obligations to the home and children, not as something that challenged it.<sup>34</sup> They argued that concerns about the health and welfare of children and communities were “natural” to women. In effect, clubs offered members a respectable way to express their “feminine” concerns and display their domestic “talents” in a larger social context. Organizing around social concerns in the community required women to utilize the communication and organizational skills that they had traditionally employed in running efficient households. Thus, the clubs enabled women to perform their traditional duties in a public context.

As was mentioned above, 1908 marked a shift in the Conservationist movement. Facing opposition in the Congress, Conservationists leaders in the administration began seeking more public support for their ideas. Women’s clubs responded with enthusiasm and soon began to promote conservationism on a national scale. Self-consciously proud of their own ability to simultaneously meet domestic obligations and make social contributions, they were eager to support a national movement whose values paralleled their own. The clubs and the conservation leadership both believed that the solutions to inefficiency were organization, technology, cooperation, and planning. With their large memberships and unique public niche, women’s clubs became an invaluable asset to the growing movement.

Club women incorporated conservation ideals into their rhetoric and work in various ways. For some, conservation spoke directly to the meaning of womanhood. One club member said in 1909 that “Conservation in its material and ethical sense is the basic principle in the life of a woman.” One of the goals of the GFWC was “the enactment of law which shall tend to the conservation of the vital forces represented in the mothers of the

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<sup>33</sup> Charlotte Perkins Stetson, Women and Economics, (Boston: Small, Maynard & Co., 1899): 164.

<sup>34</sup> Barefoot, 5.

race and the children who are the country's future citizens.”<sup>35</sup> Thus it appears that women did not treat conservation as a male politician's movement. Rather, they found a way to make it relevant to their own lives as white women, with children and households. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that conservation elicited such a “spontaneous and universal response from women”—it allowed them to feel that they were contributing to the betterment of the nation and their progeny, without changing their traditional roles as mothers and housewives.

Of course, the early twentieth century also featured a host of women who directly challenged assumptions about women's traditional and roles. One of the prime questions concerned how “political” women should be, and whether they should have the right to vote. On the subject of suffrage, conservationist club women took various positions. Some readily agreed with suffragist ideas, and believed that the fight for equal rights, human and political, should be of prime concern to women. The vote would be a mechanism for women to express their opinion on the issues that touched their lives through laws and institutions. However, many club women initially hesitated to embrace the implications of enfranchisement, and the GFWC did not officially support suffrage until 1910.<sup>36</sup>

The pro-suffrage women from this period that we hear most about, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, were in fact only a small minority of active women. For many conservationist club women, the “new woman” ideal that women like Stanton and Anthony put forth was a threat to the “true woman” that conservationist rhetoric had come to rely on.<sup>37</sup> Theodore Roosevelt responded strongly to the “new woman”, insisting that “woman must bear and rear the children as her first duty to the

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<sup>35</sup> Mrs Welch, “Address,” in Proceedings of the Second National Conservation Congress held in Saint Paul, Minnesota, September 5-8, 1910, by the National Conservation Congress (Washington, D.C.: National Conservation Congress, 1911), 161.

<sup>36</sup> Merchant, Earthcare, 130.

<sup>37</sup> Barefoot, 1.

state,” lest “the whole social system collapse.”<sup>38</sup> Many conservationist women agreed with him. The eloquent arguments of anti-suffragists fit in neatly with conservationist ethics. Alice Chittendon of Brooklyn concluded:

A diffused energy cannot be a vitalizing one . . . . If woman must assume the responsibilities and duties of political life--if she must do man's work in addition to her own natural powers and energies, we shall have deterioration and not progress . . . I would have women seriously consider whether she may not better serve her day and generation by conserving her God-given powers for her own great work as a Home-maker, rather than diffuse her forces by seeking to do a man's work also.”<sup>39</sup>

No doubt, it was the kind of dedication to social norms displayed by Alice Chittendon that allowed conservative men like Roosevelt and Pinchot to support women's contributions to conservation. Women could organize, educate, and lobby on behalf of conservation causes, but they should not be burdened by a “man's work” like voting.

My research indicates that there were few if any significant expressions of frustration with this situation. Instead, women emphasized the importance of their role as “shapers of public sentiment.” For example, in her article “The Nation's Need of Forestry Work,” Mrs. J.E. MacKisson summarized widely held ideas about how women should fit into the forest conservation movement. While the “chief object” of conservation work is “forestry legislation,” the most important work that women could do was to create “by educational and persuasive means . . . a sentiment favorable to forest preservation.” Their mission was “To awaken an interest in this important subject, to educate public sentiment to an appreciation of the vital relation between forests and human life, to urge definite and speedy action in behalf of forest preservation . . . In this work club women can give material aid.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, Mrs. MacKisson describes how women may be successful at

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<sup>38</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, quoted in Alaimo, 74.

<sup>39</sup> Alice Chittendon, “Anti-Suffrage,” General Federation of Women's Clubs, Tenth Biennial, 243-53, quoted in Carolyn Merchant, Earthcare (New York: Routledge, 1996), 131.

<sup>40</sup> Mrs. J.E. MacKisson, 487-491.

publicizing forest conservation issues, and fostering pro-conservation sentiment amongst male voters, without breaching the boundaries of traditional gender-roles.

In exchange for their efforts, women's clubs received recognition from national leaders. Some men were quite generous with their praise. For example, conservationist Frederick Newell "traced the forestry movement from its inception, about twenty years ago, at a meeting with a handful of people, 'mostly women--who loved trees' to its present great proportions."<sup>41</sup> Referring to three women leaders from GFWC and DAR, a (male) leader of the National Conservation Association once declared that they had "done as much . . . as any three men I know of."<sup>42</sup> At the same time, many women lauded themselves. Lydia Adams-William concluded "It is conceded that the almost universal sentiment in favor of preserving forests is due to the interest taken in the subject by the women's clubs and the work done by them."<sup>43</sup>

Thus, though they were proud to support the conservation movement, women did so within the confines of accepted gender-roles that relegated them to an auxiliary role. Evidence shows that the majority of women were content with that role, or at least did not publicly express their frustrations with their second-rank status. "We may not, it is true, formulate any new policies for you, or launch any issues, or make any very original contributions to your program, but there is one thing women can bring to a movement of this kind--an atmosphere that makes ideas sprout and grow, and ideals expand and develop and take deeper root in the subsoil of the masculine mind."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Frederick Newell, quoted in Merchant, Earthcare, 122.

<sup>42</sup> Harry A. Slattery to George Kibbe Turner, May 26, 1913, quoted in Hays, 142.

<sup>43</sup> Lydia Adams-Williams, "Conservation-Women's Work," Forestry and Irrigation 14 (1908): 351.

<sup>44</sup> Mrs. Carl Vrooman, "Address," in Addresses and Proceedings of the Third National Conservation Congress held in Kansas City, Missouri, September 25-27, 1911), by the National Conservation Congress (Washington, D.C.: National Conservation Congress, 1912), 119.



## *Women and Preservation*

During this same era, there were a handful of women activists who questioned the utilitarian attitude of conservation. At various times and to various degrees, women asserted that the natural world had intrinsic values which, while not measurable in dollars, warranted protection. As such, they could be considered allies of the preservation movement, which is commonly portrayed in environmental literature as the antithesis of the conservation movement. While the latter argued that natural resources should be managed for the sustained benefit of mankind, the former believed that areas of wild nature deserved protection from mankind's exploitation.

Most historical accounts illustrate the battle between conservationists and preservationists by comparing the movements' figureheads, Gifford Pinchot and John Muir respectively. Pinchot, founder of the US Forest Service, was a German-trained forest management expert who likened a naturally growing forest to a wanton waste of trees.<sup>45</sup> Muir, a Scottish immigrant and founder of the Sierra Club, is recognized as the spiritual father of the wilderness movement. He is best known for arousing a groundswell of support for his eloquent, impassioned fight to save the stunning Hetch Hetchy Valley (near Yosemite) from being dammed to create a municipal water source for San Francisco. Muir lost the battle, and ever since Hetch Hetchy has been considered a "bitter climax" to the conflict between conservationists and preservationists.<sup>46</sup>

Women participated in the conservation-preservation conflict in inconsistent ways. For example, although the women's clubs had been "staunch defenders of the federal forest policy and of Pinchot's entire program," they broke with him to oppose the Hetch Hetchy dam.<sup>47</sup> Apparently, they had a more pluralistic understanding of when nature should be appropriated for humans, and when it should be preserved for its intrinsic value. In their

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<sup>45</sup> Marcy Darnovsky, "Stories Less Told: Histories of US Environmentalism," *Socialist Review* 22, no. 4, (October-December 1992): 19.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

arguments for saving the breathtaking valley, they said things like “America’s greatest gift from the creator is about to be sacrificed at the feet of Mammon.”<sup>48</sup> By 1910, 150 women’s clubs had joined Muir’s battle to preserve Hetch Hetchy Valley. The records show that when they opposed conservationist projects, the women’s clubs were showered with criticism. A congressman from the San Francisco Bay area exemplifies this in a letter he wrote to Pinchot, in which he claimed that the opposition to the dam was a conspiracy “engineered by misinformed nature lovers and power interests working through the women’s clubs.”<sup>49</sup>

The ultimate meaning of club women’s opposition to the Hetch Hetchy dam is debatable. One could argue that they were still working in a utilitarian paradigm, and that they simply preferred a recreational “use” for the valley over a raw resource use. In light of everything else that club leaders were saying about natural resource management at the time, this is the most plausible explanation. Thus, while club women mostly embraced the ideology of conservation, they believed that there were legitimate exceptions to its prudent application. This situation also illustrates that public acceptance of women’s conservation activism depended to a large degree on their adherence to the male-constructed conservation agenda.

Until recently, the conservation/preservation conflict has been the central feature of most environmental history chronicles. As such, environmental history as it has been traditionally told has replicated the racism and class bias of both movements. In her article “Stories Less Told: Histories of US Environmentalism,” Marcy Darnovsky argues that this has led to a contemporary environmentalism that is “still tinged with turn-of-the-century assumptions about race, class, and gender, and nature.”<sup>50</sup> Both movements were founded

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<sup>47</sup> Hays, 193.

<sup>48</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, House Committee on Public Lands, Hearings on HJ Res 223: San Francisco and the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, 60th Cong., 2nd sess., 332, quoted in Merchant, Earthcare, 133.

<sup>49</sup> William Kent to Gifford Pinchot, October 8, 1913, quoted in Hays, 194.

<sup>50</sup> Darnovsky, 26.

by and for affluent Euro-americans, oftentimes to the purposeful exclusion of other classes and races. She gives an example of the “virulent racism” and sexism exhibited by some preservationists by quoting Madison Grant, co-founder of the California Save-the-Redwoods League. “Negroes of the United States,” he wrote, “were not a serious drag on civilization until . . . they were given the rights of citizenship.” “Women in all human races . . . tend to exhibit the older, more generalized and primitive traits of the race’s past.”<sup>51</sup> While the conservationist and preservationist women that this study profiles (and whom Darnovsky fails to mention) might not have concurred with Grant’s prejudices, there is little evidence of their interest in remedying the racism and class bias of their respective movements.

These two movements, however, are not the only historic sources of race and class discrimination in women’s environmental activism. The “nature appreciation” movement of the previous century was an antecedent to women’s participation in the conservation and preservation movements. By the early 1900s, certain outdoor pursuits and studies, such as botany, gardening, and birding, had become socially acceptable pursuits for women. These types of activities were accessible only to middle and upper-class white women who had the resources to enjoy “nature” for pleasure. In this era, most women of color, poor women, and single women had neither. Furthermore, the influential trend setters took specific measures to exclude poorer Americans and people of color. Historian Vera Norwood describes how this happened: “Stereotypes among the Euro-American middle class have depicted most racial and ethnic minorities and lower-class peoples as insensitive to nature. Intellectual elites . . . have displayed little interest in other groups’ folklore, gardens, or material arts.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>52</sup> Vera Norwood, Made From This Earth (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), xvii.

## *Women and Urban Reform*

Like their counterparts in forest conservation, the majority of club women in the urban reform movement were white middle-class housewives and mothers.<sup>53</sup> Oftentimes led by upper- and upper-middle class club leaders, these women agitated around issues that affected urban sanitation, including “cleaning streets, inspecting markets, abating smoke, purifying water, and collecting and disposing of refuse.”<sup>54</sup> Their work took many forms, from instigating individual litter control projects to lobbying for municipal government reforms. They also conducted educational campaigns, and promoted sanitary worker training programs. Like the efforts of women for forest conservation, the positive changes wrought by women sanitary reformers were well received by prominent men.<sup>55</sup> Also similar is their common reliance on traditional assumptions about women’s domestic abilities. When Katherine L. Bowlker founded the Women’s Municipal League of Boston, she said that the “one peculiar and inalienable function of woman [was] the provision of a suitable environment for her offspring,” and that “the housekeeping of a great city was women’s work.”<sup>56</sup>

In fact, several individual women were actually hired by municipal governments to become city inspectors, a level of professional status that few women forest activists ever achieved. Yet, even with professional status, these women approached their jobs with the same sort of attitude that they applied to domestic work. For example, Philadelphia’s first female city inspector of street cleaning, Edith W. Pierce, conducted her work under the self-styled ethics of the “three C’s”--“Care, Common-sense, and Co-operation.” For sanitary reformers, the professional role of inspector was an amplification of the traditional

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<sup>53</sup> Suellen M. Hoy, “‘Municipal Housekeeping’: The Role of Women in Improving Urban Sanitation Practices, 1880-1917,” in Martin V. Melosi, ed. *Pollution and Reform in American Cities, 1870-1930* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980), 174.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Mayors and city officials, for example; Hoy, 176.

role of house-cleaner.<sup>57</sup> In 1887, the Ladies' Home Health Protective said that women should be hired inspectors because "keeping things clean, like the training of children and the care of the sick, has ever been one of the instinctive and recognized functions of women."<sup>58</sup>

A few women rose above even the inspector position to become recognized experts on sanitary issues. By 1912, Caroline Bartlett Crane had become a nationally known city sanitary expert, and was steadily employed by cities and citizen groups to conduct extensive surveys of city sanitation systems. Crane's study of sanitation had begun ten years earlier when, after witnessing the horrific conditions of local meat packing plants, she learned that there was no authority to regulate slaughterhouses outside the city limits of Kalamazoo. Of her own volition, she undertook a formal study of meat inspection laws, and within a year she was responsible for passing a new regulatory law through the Minnesota legislature. With continued study and several civic projects (including founding the Women's Civic Improvement League) Crane made herself into a sought-after expert with a track record of instigating sanitary reforms in cities across the nation.<sup>59</sup> Among the handful of women who became well-known for their municipal sanitary reform efforts and other civic contributions are Mary McDowell (the "Garbage" lady) and Jane Addams (founder of Hull House), both in Chicago.<sup>60</sup>

Although most women sanitary reformers of this era began as volunteers with only "natural domestic ability" to guide them, a few came to the cause with educational credentials and professional scientific experience. One such woman was Ellen Swallow

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<sup>56</sup> Dorothy Worrell, The Women's Municipal League of Boston: A History of Thirty-five Years of Civic Endeavor (Boston, 1944), xiii., quoted in Hoy, 177.

<sup>57</sup> "The First Woman Street Cleaning Inspector in Philadelphia," American City 9 (September 1913): 262, quoted in Hoy, 175.

<sup>58</sup> Ladies' Health Protective Association, Memorial of the New York Ladies Health Protective Association, to the Hon. Abram S. Hewitt, Mayor of New York, on the Subject of Street Cleaning, (New York, 1887), 4, quoted in Hoy, 175.

<sup>59</sup> Hoy, 181.

Richards, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) first female graduate. A pioneering lab scientist, she was a co-founder of the new science of "sanitary chemistry," which included analyzing food, water, sewage, and air. She was interested in using scientific analysis to improve environmental quality and safety--in the home and the community. Her work on domestic sanitation led to her being best known for her major contribution to the field of home economics.<sup>61</sup> Another woman with deep social concerns and professional ambitions was Florence Kelley. As a resident in Jane Addams' Hull House, she helped its residents in their campaign to enact a state-wide factory inspection law. When the law passed, she herself became the chief factory inspector. Her commitment to the cause inspired her to subsequently earn a law degree to better prosecute violators.<sup>62</sup>

The significance of the pioneering work done by women like Crane, Swallow, and Kelley is multidimensional. Certainly, their research and activism had a direct impact on the content of the urban reform agenda. More importantly, they exemplified and advocated for new progressive attitudes towards women's roles in reform efforts. For example, Crane advised that women could contribute to the "keeping" of the city, but did not need to support this assertion with rhetoric about women's "natural" housekeeping abilities. As a former Unitarian minister, she approached her career as a sort of "civic revivalist," not a concerned mother.<sup>63</sup> In her tours with women's clubs around the country, she argued that women should try "new and untried kinds of social service." Certainly, Ellen Swallow was not following any domestic "instinct" when she enrolled as a chemistry student at MIT in 1873. She was in fact denying every social convention that would discouraged her from science and a professional career. Yet, even these ambitious, professionally successful

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 188-190.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 179-80.

<sup>62</sup> Suzanne Lebsock, "Women and American Politics, 1880-1920." In Women, Politics, and Change, ed. Louise A. Tilly and Patricia Gurin, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1990), 47.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 187.

women devoted their work to essentially *domestic* issues. Thus, while these women were distinguished by the level of their education and involvement, the issues that concerned them were traditional “women’s” issues.

When we compare the contemporaneous conservation and urban reform movements, we see that both relied on traditional assumptions about women’s domestic and maternal skills. However, many ambitious urban reformers challenged the constricting aspects of those assumptions. Instead of confining their work to the family and home, they made their skills the basis of professional, political, scientific, and activist careers.

### *Is Women’s Environmental Activism a Political Endeavor?*

In a typical college-level American history textbook, the plethora of social, economic, and political improvements that the women achieved during the Progressive era may receive only a handful of paragraphs. Typically, such texts include references to the GFWC, the WCTU, women’s labor unions, the introduction of birth control to public discussion, and the initial victories of the women’s suffrage movement.<sup>64</sup> Regrettably, such texts usually do no more than reference these women and their accomplishments. The contemporary significance of their work is not chronicled; their political and social legacies are left unexplored. discussion, and the initial victories of the women’s suffrage movement.<sup>65</sup> Regrettably, such texts usually do no more than reference these women and their accomplishments. The contemporary significance of their work is not chronicled; their political and social legacies are left unexplored.

A few explanations for this exclusion are particularly relevant to this thesis. The first has to do with the nature of these women’s work, and whether or not it is considered “political.” This matters because most entry-level historical texts focus on political and

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<sup>64</sup> John M. Blum, “The Progressive Movement and the Square Deal,” chap. in *The National Experience*, 6th ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 542-566.

institutional history, not social history. One could argue that women conservationists, preservationists, and sanitary reformers were not working in a political context because they were not working in the electoral political system. Thus, their activism would be considered social, not political, history.

In her article “Women and American Politics, 1880-1920,” Suzanne Lebsock comes to a similar conclusion. She says “The four decades preceding the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, in fact, were a great age for women in politics--certainly greater than anything that had been seen before and arguably greater than anything seen again until after the rebirth of feminism in the late 1960s.”<sup>66</sup> In the article, she describes how during the period, “politics” was considered a dirty, slimy affair that men partook of, and was entirely unsuitable for “ladies.”<sup>67</sup> Cradled in the rhetoric of conservation, motherhood, and domesticity, the voluntary reform work done by women was most often considered philanthropy or service--not political reform. Even as they lobbied elected officials and spearheaded new government programs, women were technically outside the realm of real politics. Yet, Lebsock argues, women were not unpolitical. Rather, they created their own “political culture” within the context of their own women’s groups.<sup>68</sup> She suggests that this political culture may have had a greater affect on the American political system than we currently recognize. For example, in their extensive dealings with government, women’s politics was interest and issue-specific. That is to say, it was not based on partisan politics. Thus, Lebsock concludes, women’s groups may have had a significant role in the major shift from mass politics to interest group politics that occurred at this time.

Although much remains to be researched and theorized about a Progressive era “women’s political culture,” we can make note some of its characteristics. By the latter half

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<sup>65</sup> John M. Blum, “The Progressive Movement and the Square Deal,” chap. in The National Experience, 6th ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 542-566.

<sup>66</sup> Lebsock, 62.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.



of the nineteenth century, the women's clubs were the most common form of voluntary association for women. Before suffrage, these associations were also the most common form of indirect political activism for women.<sup>69</sup> While both black women and Jewish women had national clubs by the turn of the century, the majority of club members were of European descent, and for the most part they maintained racial segregation. Excluding the suffrage groups, the majority of white women's clubs were not designed with the intention of advancing women politically. Oftentimes, their intention was to enhance women's traditional roles as virtuous mothers, teachers, and domestic caretakers. "Home Protection" was the banner which most women proudly marched under, "For God and Home and Native Land."<sup>70</sup> "Politics of the Mother Heart" was another such slogan that was used, implying that women were naturally attuned to certain home and family issues that deserved political and government attention.<sup>71</sup>

Indeed, the Progressive era women activists believed that government should play an active role in social and environmental reform. Lebsock notes that the clubs: "consistently promoted an interventionist state--a common enough concept now, but at the time a significant innovation."<sup>72</sup> For example, women's clubs were highly supportive of the Roosevelt Administration's proposal to create a government controlled national forest system, adhering to the Conservationist position that only government could preserve natural resources. "From my observation," said Sarah S. Platt Decker, "the preservation of the forests, the streams, and the agricultural interests can be successfully accomplished,

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<sup>69</sup> Lebsock, 36. Nancy A. Hewitt argues that by focussing on "middle-class, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant women who were involved in public associations. . . before suffrage," historical studies of female voluntarism have excluded working class organizations (such as unions) and partisan associations (parties). Further research and reporting on these neglected areas of women's activist history are warranted. Nancy A. Hewitt, "Varieties of Voluntarism: Class, Ethnicity, and Women's Activism in Tampa," in Women, Politics, and Change, ed. Louise A. Tilly and Patricia Gurin (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1990): 63.

<sup>70</sup> Frances E. Willard, quoted in Lebsock, 39.

<sup>71</sup> Lebsock, 41.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

only by the purchase and creation of National Forests.”<sup>73</sup> Preservationists similarly supported federal efforts to purchase and maintain national parks. Sanitary reformers lobbied hard to ensure tighter government regulation of municipalities and food industries. The work done by Progressive era women reformers led to changes in government policies and regulations that continue to affect public life to this day.

In light of this legacy, one might expect that today’s female environmental activists would look to these women reformers their predecessors, and as the “founding mothers” of women’s environmental activism. In many cases, the rhetoric used by women environmental activists today echoes that of conservation movement women. However, few women today are aware of this, or even consider that generations of women before them were fighting for the same issues. The only female historical figure ever mentioned in the interviews I conducted was Susan B. Anthony.<sup>74</sup>

This sense that today’s women environmental activists are “without history” has a few obvious causes. First, we know that much of women’s contributions to American history are yet to be chronicled; this particular episode is only one. In all of my research, I found only one historian (Carolyn Merchant) who has even mentioned women’s contribution to the forest preservation during the conservation movement. In contrast, there are several books about the “founding fathers” of environmentalism, such as John Muir and Teddy Roosevelt. The ties between Progressive era urban reformers and today’s environmental movement may be hidden for a different reason. As Martin V. Melosi points out, urban reform “has generally eluded [environmental] historians . . . Because it operated within the larger context of the Progressive Movement and was not seen as separate from

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<sup>73</sup> Sarah S. Platt Decker, quoted by Lydia Adams-Williams, “National Forests and Public Opinion,” *Forestry and Irrigation* 14 (1908) 82.

<sup>74</sup> Norma Grier, interview by author, Tape recording, 13 November 1998.

it.”<sup>75</sup> Therefore, unless one studies urban reform specifically, the popular generalizations about Progressive era politics obscure its environmental components.

I propose a third reason for the apparent disconnection between these two generations of women environmental activists. At the ideological level, they may have more differences than similarities. Although environmental issues prompted women to new levels of activism and public participation, by and large their efforts did not challenge dominant patriarchal ideologies of the movements they joined. Subsequent chapters will show that today’s women activists challenge patriarchal ideologies and are engaged in a dialectical process of defining their own guiding ideology.

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<sup>75</sup> Martin V. Melosi “Environmental Reform in the Industrial Cities: The Civic Response to Pollution in the Progressive Era,” in Environmental History: Critical Issues in Comparative Perspective, ed. Kendall E. Bailes (New York: University Press of America, 1985): 497, quoted in Darnovsky, 26.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Stories of Contemporary Women Activists

In the past twenty years, women from a wide variety of backgrounds have emerged as key figures in grassroots campaigns to conserve environmental quality in their communities. The “contemporary era” of women’s environmental activism began in the late seventies, when women across the country began to receive national recognition for their roles in major grassroots environmental battles. In some instances women had created entirely new roles for themselves in these struggles, in other cases they had made activism more accessible to women. The battle to protect the residents of Love Canal is probably the best known example of a grassroots environmental struggle of this new generation. Lois Gibbs became famous for initiating and leading a grassroots fight against a relatively unknown environmental threat--toxics--in her own backyard. Much of the attention given to the Love Canal struggle focussed on the fact that it was led by women, specifically, “mothers and homemakers.” Around the same time, a nonviolent direct action antinuclear group known as the Clamshell Alliance became known for the work done specifically by its women activists. In the early eighties, the campaigns by inner city women of color against toxic pollution began to receive more attention within the context of environmentalism. In the later eighties, some women began to consciously apply feminist principles to the EarthFirst! movement.

An historical perspective on the nature of women’s environmental activism reveals a discontinuity with previous generations of women activists. These women are not struggling to gain privileges exclusive to men, as were the suffragists, nor are they fighting for gender equality, as did feminists. Furthermore, few of these women had any previous relationship with the environmental movement. Instead, the work done by the foremothers of the contemporary generation of women grassroots environmental activists effectively

challenged the established notions about environmental activism. Today, women activists continue to redefine the concept of environmental activism. A close examination of this “second wave” of women environmental activists shows that they are in fact constructing new environmentalisms.

Perhaps the most appropriate way to begin a study of women’s grassroots environmental activism is to become familiar with who these women are and what they do. To this end, this chapter offers biographical profiles of more than a dozen contemporary women environmental activists. The first half of the chapter paraphrases profiles from published books and articles. Much of the current scholarly literature on women’s grassroots environmental organizing focusses on two general themes. One depicts women who were initially mothers and/or homemakers in suburban areas becoming activists in response to an environmental threat. The other shows inner-city women and women of color, groups traditionally under-represented in environmental policy making and groups, forming their own urban community activist groups to fight environmental threats. These themes are particularly interesting because each has a lesser-known precedent. The previous chapter demonstrated that the mother/homemaker-becomes-activist theme was ubiquitous in the rhetoric of women Conservationists, and that inner-city women have been fighting for urban reform since at least the late 1800s.

Although these two themes dominated the scholarly literature, I knew from personal experience that they did not represent the full spectrum of women activists.<sup>76</sup> I subsequently realized that secondary sources alone were inadequate to depict the racial and class diversity of today’s grassroots women activists. Hence, I decided to procure primary source material on contemporary women activists by conducting a series of interviews with local activists. Profiles of these women form the later half of the chapter.

The women interviewed for this study were not chosen for any specific personal trait or environmental issue. Rather, the primary prerequisite was a demonstrated commitment to

grassroots activism. This criterion was chosen for several reasons, including my own personal interests, as well as the practical need to work with a single defined, familiar category. It would have been beyond the resources of this study to simultaneously consider women environmental activists in law, electoral politics, and government as well. The secondary prerequisite was residence within the Pacific Northwest. (This geographical limit was chosen for logistical reasons, but it also limited the range of issues considered, and the backgrounds of women interviewed. For example, if my focus had been South East US or Los Angeles, I would have encountered more women of color working on toxics issues, and fewer forest activists.) Most of these women had been activists for long enough that either I had met them at conferences or environmental events, or they were recommended to me by reputation.

One result of this relatively unsystematic recruitment process is that all the women I interviewed are full-time, paid activists. Though each began as a volunteer activist, they now earn a living for their work. Their status does not make their work any less grassroots. It does mean that their activism has different characteristics than that of women working on “in my backyard” issues with no pay. Years of experience have allowed these women to “polish” their activism, and the stability of full-time employment has afforded them the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of activism in larger social and political contexts. Furthermore, many of the women I spoke with did not begin their careers with a “backyard” threat--they became activists for more philosophical reasons. Despite their different backgrounds, all of the women I interviewed have a deep, long-standing commitment to grassroots activism. Though there are some geographical and contextual limitations to my research, these interviews provide a more diverse, inclusive set of personal histories on which to base an analysis (presented in chapter three) than was available in the current literature. Throughout the study, the focus of my inquiry was “what does grassroots environmental activism mean to the women who do it?”

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<sup>76</sup> Possible reasons for this focus are presented in chapter five.

### *Women featured in the Scholarly Literature*

Any discussion of women in grassroots environmental organizing will inevitably mention Lois Gibbs, and for good reason. Gibbs may be considered a founding mother of the toxics awareness movement in the United States. This movement became nationally recognized as a result of Gibbs' experience confronting a hidden toxic waste dump in her community. In the late seventies, Gibbs' son underwent a rash of health problems during the first two months of school in Love Canal, New York. Eventually, she suspected some connection between the school and his health problems, but when the school refused to let her transfer him elsewhere, she turned to her neighbors. She went door-to-door in the modest neighborhood, asking about their children's health problems. What she found was "a litany of odd illnesses," especially amongst children, and high rates of infertility, miscarriages, and birth defects.<sup>77</sup> The scope of the investigations grew, and her community soon learned that their homes had been built atop a buried toxic waste dump. For years, the residents of Love Canal had unknowingly been living with toxic waste in their homes and yards, and now the tragic result of their ignorance was manifest in the wasting health of their children.

Gibbs spearheaded community efforts to achieve some sort of justice in the face of senseless tragedy. After further research, lobbying, and intense battles with the government, the Love Canal Homeowners Committee achieved a small victory when it got the government to agree to buy the homes of people who wanted to move away.<sup>78</sup> Though this offer by the government could not undo the harmful effects already suffered by the community, the women of Love Canal have earned a significant place in the history of women's activism. One authority has described theirs as a victory of formerly "isolated homemakers" who, in the face of adversity, transformed themselves into "sophisticated

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<sup>77</sup> Kaplan, 20.

political organizers and citizens.”<sup>79</sup> When the several-year struggle died down, some of the women returned to their previous family and household situations. Gibbs, however, went on to share her experience and expertise with a national community. In 1981, she founded The Citizen’s Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste (now the Center for Health, Environment, and Justice), which grew “from her realization that others wanted to fight back, as she and her neighbors had, against companies that damaged the environment and against government bureaucrats who underestimated their determination to save their families from destruction.”<sup>80</sup>

A phenomenon similar to Love Canal occurred two thousand miles away in the inner-city of Los Angeles, California. During the mid-1980s, many mothers and homemakers became aware of proposed private and government projects that, if completed, would have jeopardized the health of their communities. In response, these previously non-political women organized to voice their concerns and oppose perceived threats.<sup>81</sup> In this way, they were similar to the women of Love Canal. The characteristic that distinguished them from Love Canal women, and most environmental groups in general, is race. The women in LA who voiced their environmental concern through grassroots activism campaigns were mostly women of color (black and latina). Their actions helped bring attention to the disproportionate occurrence of toxic threats in communities of color. Their community campaigns contributed to founding the national environmental justice movement.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>81</sup> By ‘non-political’ I mean not active in any political or government interest group.

<sup>82</sup> Environmental Justice is an area of social justice activism and legal study that recognizes that communities of color bear a disproportionate burden of pollution and environmental degradation. For further information, see: Robert Bullard, Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990); Dick Russel, “Environmental Racism: Minority Communities and their Battle Against Toxics,” Amicus 11, 222-32; Center for Health, Environment, and Justice, Everyone’s Backyard; Earth Island Institute, Race, Poverty, and the Environment.”



One of the better publicized community campaigns led by women of color resulted in the defeat of a proposed toxic incinerator in South Central Los Angeles. The Los Angeles City Energy Recovery Project (LANCER I) was to have been the first in a series of plants designed to produce energy by incinerating garbage and toxic waste. The city government and the sanitation bureau wanted to avoid arousing public controversy over the potentially hazardous plant, and they were told that the South Central community of Commerce would be highly unlikely to protest. After all, the neighborhood was younger, poorer, less fluent in English, and was afflicted with high unemployment rates-- characteristics which indicated to the city that the community would neither know nor care about this potentially controversial project.<sup>83</sup> In fact, authorities did not even notify the neighborhood about the proposed site until a year after the site had been selected, and a final environmental impact report was approved by the city council. It was this report that local citizen Robin Cannon would wave when she told her sister "They're trying to kill us."<sup>84</sup>

Though this statement was perhaps exaggerated, the need for community involvement in this issue could not be overstated. Throughout the planning process, the people who would have been most affected by LANCER I, mostly poor Latinos and Blacks, had never been consulted. Robin Cannon spent the next three years working to educate and organize other concerned community members in opposition to LANCER I. Thus was born the grassroots community coalition Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles (CCSCLA). In classic grass-roots style activism, CCSCLA did their work in living rooms, on the phone, through petitions, and by lobbying politicians, all while maintaining their regular jobs. Their first victory was the withdrawal of LANCER I from their neighborhood.

Joining the efforts of CCSCLA was another grass-roots organization, Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA). Like CCSCLA, MELA initially formed to oppose a single

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<sup>83</sup> Louis Blumberg and Robert Gottlieb, "The New Environmentalists: Saying No to Mass Burn," Environmental Action (January/February 1989): 29.

issue--the site of a state prison in their neighborhood. Since that victory, they have opposed a variety of projects "detrimental to the quality of life in the central city" and beyond.<sup>85</sup> Along the way, their membership has swelled to over four hundred. The core members of MELA are bilingual women who have lived at least thirty years in East Los Angeles. Some, like leader Aurora Castillo, can trace their family existence in California back to "since before the first Anglo set foot on California soil."<sup>86</sup> Their involvement in MELA adds another layer to their community involvement, which already includes church, school, and labor organizations. All along, MELA has taken pride in the effectiveness of its grass-roots style, using phone-trees, public meetings, and lobbying to strengthen its members' position.

Perhaps one of the most impressive characteristics of the women of Love Canal, CCSCLA, and MELA is their resourcefulness. They used organizing skills and community resources they already had to fight a new kind of struggle, and they were successful. While these women certainly deserve admiration for their achievements, it is extremely important to remember *why* they had to fight the struggle in the first place. All of these women faced environmental threats because they were victims of class and race discrimination. The situations they found themselves in *forced* them to be innovative; if they wanted to live in nontoxic community, they *had* to be successful. On both sides of the country, race and class were major reasons why these women's communities were subjected to toxics in the first place.

In Love Canal, the 40,000 tons of toxic waste that Lois Gibbs "discovered" had been intentionally "hidden" by the government thirty years before. Just as intentionally, the government did not share with the neighborhood the toxicology reports that described how those 40,000 tons of waste may adversely effect the community's health. At a recent

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<sup>84</sup> Dick Russell, "Environmental Racism: Minority Communities and Their Battle Against Toxics," Amicus (Spring 1989): 26.

<sup>85</sup> Mary Pardo, "Mexican American Women Grassroots Community Activists: 'Mothers of East Los Angeles,'" Frontiers 11, no. 1 (1990): 1.

<sup>86</sup> Russell, 22.

keynote address, Gibbs described why the government did not tell her community that they were at risk. She related how the EPA had used an objective “cost analysis” formula to determine that her lower-middle income community was not worth the money it would have taken to clean up the waste. According to the formula, her husband was worth his yearly wage, her son was worth half that (assuming he would some day earn a wage), she herself was worth nothing (she did not earn and income as a housewife), and her daughter was worth nothing.

In Los Angeles, the city government weighed a similar consideration when they were looking for a place to build a waste incinerator plant. In 1984, the city was told by a public relations firm that the town of Commerce was a good place to build it because the Mexican American, low-income community there was unlikely to resist the plant. Cerrell Associates, Inc. reported that:

middle and upper socioeconomic strata possess better resources to effectuate their opposition. Middle and higher socioeconomic strata neighborhoods should not fall within the one-mile and five-mile radii of the proposed site. Conversely, older people, [and] people with a high school education or less are least likely to oppose such a facility.<sup>87</sup>

The prejudiced predictions of this report caused the city to greatly underestimate the huge political protest that would be staged by the women of MELA and CCSCLA. The success of their campaigns surprised the city, and proved Cerrell Associates wrong.

For the women of Love Canal, Los Angeles, and many other environmental justice battles, class and race discrimination have been central issues of their environmental activism from the beginning. In the more mainstream environmental movement, however, race, class, and gender issues have been traditionally ignored as irrelevant to “nature.” In the past twenty years or so, women have been at the forefront of making these issues relevant to the environmental agenda.

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<sup>87</sup> Cerrell Associates, Inc. “Political Difficulties Facing Waste-to-Energy Conversion Plant Siting,” Report Prepared for California Waste Management Board, State of California (Los Angeles, 1984): 43, quoted in Pardo, 1.

Judi Bari is an excellent example of an activist who worked for a “traditional” environmental issue--forest preservation--but also worked to make class and gender part of the way people thought about the issue. For Bari, labor rights and sexual equality were key components of long-term solutions for forest protection. She sought new ways to encourage more female participants by redesigning direct action strategies and developing female leadership within the Northern California Earth First! movement. She helped forge alliances between forest activists and timber workers by renouncing tree spiking and conducting outreach campaigns. The net effect of her work “was pivotal in the creation of ecofeminism as a feminist rebellion within EarthFirst!”<sup>88</sup> The next chapter will explore the nature and effect of this “rebellion.”

#### *First Person Accounts from Northwest Women Activists*

In my own research, I interviewed two women whose primary activist work was on forest issues. Each had a unique background and approach to her activism. Julie Norman began her activist career with the unlikely background of a childhood in Texas, an MA in computer science, and eight-years as a river raft guide. “I was looking for something new” she said, “but I didn’t know what.” She joined a local forest protection group in Southern Oregon, and her involvement increased rapidly. In less than ten years, she was the president of one of the largest forest protection groups in Southern Oregon (Headwaters), served at the President’s Forest Summit, and amongst timber industry officials had become known as “The Dragon Lady.” As president of Headwaters, her work included: coordinating a variety of forest protection strategies, from lawsuits to direct action sit-ins; representing her group to the community and the media; and arranging coalition efforts with other environmental groups. She became so widely known during her thirteen-year tenure that

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<sup>88</sup> Noël Sturgeon, *Ecofeminist Natures* (NY: Routledge, 1997).

when, at the age of fifty, she stepped down, the associated press reported it. Her story shows that there are no defined prerequisites for a successful career in forest activism.

The other forest activist I interviewed is a much less public figure. Karen Coulter's activism career began when, in the late 1970s, she protested the government's plans to cite MX missiles in the hills of Nevada. Her activism continued throughout her undergraduate career at Reed College in Portland. Today, she approaches activism more as a life's pursuit than a secondary pastime. She prefers to call herself an activist in the "general sense," rather than a "forest activist," because she is in fact an activist for many issues--including peace, social issues, and wildlife. Karen currently co-directs the Blue Mountains Biodiversity Project of Eastern Oregon, which she co-founded. This project involves many responsibilities, from scouting timber sales and writing appeals, to fund-raising and publicizing the project. As a member of the Program on Corporations, Law, and Democracy, she attends international strategy meetings and speaks at universities and conferences across the country. She is also part of the EarthFirst! Movement.<sup>89</sup>

Issues surrounding the adverse effect of pesticides are the primary concerns of two other women I interviewed. Norma Grier has been involved in pesticide issues for twenty years, for the past sixteen as director of a regional coalition working to reduce pesticide use. Although she is widely recognized throughout the region as an outstanding spokesperson, activist, and organizer, she became the regional director of the Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides without any prior managerial experience, nor activist experience in other issues. Norma owes much of her success to her passion for activism, which, in her mind, has ecological and social dimensions. "We work hard," she says, "applying our knowledge and values to the work we do--that is what activism is about to me."<sup>90</sup> Her peers note that she is particularly effective in her abilities to face adversaries without being

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<sup>89</sup> Karen Coulter, interview by author, Tape recording, Portland, Oregon, 11 December 1998.

<sup>90</sup> Norma Grier, interview by author, Tape recording, Eugene, Oregon, 13 November, 1998.

intimidated, and she to articulate her position in straightforward, admittedly blunt language.<sup>91</sup>

Neva Hassanein works for the same coalition. She first became interested in environmental issues as an undergraduate and has since pursued an ambitious mix of activism and academia. In her life, the importance of the two are of equal and interrelated importance. Upon earning a Ph.D., Neva forewent the traditional path of teaching in favor of returning to grassroots activism. “I am extremely committed to trying to foster the kind of influence that people at the grassroots level can have in terms of shaping the environment and their communities.”<sup>92</sup>

As one might expect, the concerns about pesticides that Norma and Neva express are similar to the concerns of women who organize against toxics. However, neither of these women fit into the mother-protector model on which much of the current literature on anti-toxics organizers (such as Gibbs and MELA) focusses. Neither is a mother and neither have faced a direct personal threat from pesticides. Rather, both came to work on the issue with backgrounds in social and ecological concern. They continue their activism because they believe that they are fundamentally right, and that they can actually remedy certain aspects of the problems they perceive. They, like many of the women with whom I spoke, appear to thrive on the mix of intellectual stimulation and social energy that is part of their work.

Like Neva and Norma, Yolanda Sinde also has a strong belief in fostering grassroots influence. The director for the Community Coalition for Environmental Justice (CCEJ) in Seattle defines it this way: “Grassroots means bottom up, it means people power. It means you start with the people and you don’t come in with an agenda and try to get everyone to fit into it.” The only African American woman that I was able to formally interview, Yolanda has a respect for grassroots organizing that has developed over years of

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<sup>91</sup> Julie Norman, interview by author.

experience working first for a mainstream environmental group and then being a start-up member of CCEJ. Looking back on earning the title of CCEJ director, she reflects on the profound differences between the two groups:

I don't think I would ever have gotten that kind of recognition [director title] in any other kind of group or movement because I have the same talents now I that had when I worked for a large mainstream group. There, they went untapped because of the kind of low expectations that people had of women and people of color and. . . That kept me from showing that I really could write well, that I was articulate, that I could understand data . . . I was never challenged in that job. But I continually every day am challenged to grow more here and learn more. I think that I'm really lucky to be in the movement here I think it's one of the few movements that are really driven by women of color.<sup>93</sup>

At a recent panel discussion of women in the environmental justice movement, Eraina Dunn noted that husbands are not always supportive of the leadership roles that women assume in environmental justice struggles. "Give up this work or give up your husband" is a common ultimatum she says. Eraina chose to keep working, and is now the president of the Human Action Community Organization in the predominately African American community of Harvey, Illinois. Since 1989, her community has fought six attempts to build a toxic medical waste incinerator in the neighborhood. The importance of the work keeps her going. "We're talking about saving human lives" she says.

The "inner drive" that keeps women going through environmental justice struggles was also discussed (at the same panel) by Susan Masten, an activist from the Yurok tribe of Northern California. She believes that certain kinds of social conditioning help women excel in activism. "Women are particularly good at this kind of work," she says, "because from the time we are young, we are learning to organize and respond to crises." For Susan, the circumstances of growing up as an ambitious girl in a male-dominated culture also prepared her to be a successful organizer. "It wasn't good enough to be as good as the boy next to me. I had to be better." In her work as an advocate for native fishing rights,

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<sup>92</sup> Neva Hassanein, interview by author, Tape recording, Eugene, Oregon, 29 December 1998.

<sup>93</sup> Yolanda Sinde, interview by author, Tape recording, Seattle, Washington, 29 January 1999.

however, she notes that she has to balance her use of “feminine” organizing skills with a “masculine” competitive drive.

“Driven” is an adjective that applies to many activists, including Eugene resident Lynn Coody. A former farmer, Lynn is currently self-employed as an agricultural policy analyst. At first, one might not think an analyst could be an activist, but she would say quite the opposite. Her background includes a science-focused education and eight years of organic farming. When she became unable to continue the latter, she continued being an advocate for the organics movement, and eventually made herself an expert. “I swam the waters I was in,” she says, referring to the way that she became an activist-analyst. Like many of the other women that I interviewed, Lynn feels that her issue is multi-dimensional, and she finds satisfaction in working with the diversity of interests and challenges that it encompasses.<sup>94</sup>

Although the majority of the women interviewed for this study began their activist careers with certain issue-specific interests, a few began without defined intentions. Diane Valentine began her affiliation with the Oregon Natural Resource Council as a volunteer receptionist some years ago. Since then, she has worked her way up through the organization. “Big projects just sorta fell into my lap,” she says. Now, she is in charge of coordinating statewide volunteer efforts, including an adopt-a-wilderness program and letter-writing campaigns. Like many of the women I spoke with, she credits her success to her ability to “learn-by-doing” throughout her activist career.<sup>95</sup>

### *There Are No “Average” Women Activists*

These profiles have shown that although the women committed to grassroots environmental organizing have diverse backgrounds, motivations, and concerns, they share some personal characteristics. They are often exceptionally perceptive, critical, and positive

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<sup>94</sup> Lynn Coody, interview by author, Tape recording, Eugene, Oregon, 17 December 1998.



individuals. Their attitudes are constructive and confident. They feel strongly that the work they do is ecologically and socially significant. Furthermore, they relish the ongoing process of contextualizing their issues relevant in larger social and political frameworks.

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<sup>95</sup> Diane Valentine, interview by author, Tape recording, 4 December 1998.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Reflections on Women's Grassroots Environmental Activism

A gender-specific query guides this study. Asking “why do *women* choose to become activists?” presupposes that women may become involved in activism for different reasons than men. Studies have shown that in most parts of the world, women express more alarm over environmental threats and are more likely to support new regulatory laws and spending than are men.<sup>96</sup> Yet, there is a reverse gender imbalance at the “upper-levels” of “eco-management.” Across America, the law firms, government offices and board rooms where environmental management decisions are made reveal a dearth of women.<sup>97</sup> In the mainstream environmental groups, 60-80 percent of members are women; in grassroots groups, the percentage is higher.<sup>98</sup> This study does not purport to explain the gender imbalance between the managerial and grassroots levels. Rather, it seeks to better understand why some women become *activists*, and how they feel about their activism.

The preceding chapter profiled a selection of women grassroots environmental activists. This chapter examines some of the key characteristics that makes this kind of women's activism particularly unique and historically important. It considers in depth the factors that motivate women to environmental activism; the meanings they attach to their activism; their attitudes towards politics and social issues; and how they see their activism fitting into larger political and social contexts. Published sources and interviews inform the analysis.

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<sup>96</sup> J. Schahn, and E.Holzer, “Studies of Individual Environmental Concern: The Role of Knowledge, Gender, and Background Variables,” Environment and Behavior 22 (1990): 767-86; UNEP, United Nations Environment Program, Public and Leadership Attitudes to the Environment in 14 Countries, (New York: Lou Harris/UNEP, 1989)

<sup>97</sup> Kirpatrick Sale, “The Trouble with Earth Day,” The Nation 250 n17 (30 April 1990): 594.

<sup>98</sup> UNEP, United Nations Environment Program, Public and Leadership Attitudes to the Environment in 14 Countries, (New York: Lou Harris/UNEP, 1989).

### *Why Be An Activist?*

A handful of scholars have written about women's motivations for environmental activism.<sup>99</sup> The phenomenon of mothers becoming activists to protect their families and communities from environmental threats (e.g., pollution or danger caused by industry or government) is ubiquitous in the current literature. This section will briefly summarize the "mother-protector" theme, and, in a subsequent section, offer a possible explanation for its ubiquity in the scholarly literature. Next, the unique motivations of environmental justice activists are examined. Finally, I describe the findings of my own interviews and compare them with the existing literature on women's environmental organizing.

Not surprisingly, many of the women whose activism fits into the mother-protector pattern cite maternal instinct as their primary reason for becoming an activist. These women feel compelled to protect the quality of life in their communities as an extension of maternal obligations. Some describe this compulsion as a "gut-feeling"--an instinct of the female sex. Lois Gibbs readily attributes her initial motivation for environmental and political activism to a sense of obligation to protect her children and community from harm.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, Gibbs describes how traditional mother-housekeeper duties prepare women to be activists. As the preeminent mother/homemaker-turned environmental activist herself, she is qualified to assert that the majority of leaders in the Toxics Movement are mothers/homemakers because their skills are easily translated into activist organizing skills. The women of CCSCLA and MELA are similarly motivated. These women see in their roles as mothers the obligation to protect their children's "environment," which, in the inner city,

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<sup>99</sup> See Giovanna Di Chiro, "Defining Environmental Justice;" Joni Seager, "'Hysterical Housewives' and Other Mad Women;" Noël Sturgeon, *Ecofeminist Natures*; Ann E. Herda-Rapp, *Women's Activism in the Toxic Waste Movement*.

<sup>100</sup> Kaplan, 94.

includes the neighborhood, church, and classroom. As one woman puts it “Women want to protect their children . . . we’re trained to think that mothers should save the world.”<sup>101</sup>

The gender imbalance between institutional and grassroots approaches to environmental protection (noted above) has led geographer Joni Seager to observe: “Many women in the United States who are active in the environmental area (and there are thousands of them) are taking on environmental issues in their own backyards. . . On their own terms as leaders and workers in grassroots, community-based organizations that lie outside the formal structure of green politics and environmental organizations.” Seager’s observation is informed by her own study of women’s activism. Among other things, she explores the characteristics that distinguish women’s environmental activism from that of men. “At a generalized level, women do seem to express environmental caring and concern differently than do men.”<sup>102</sup> For example, women in a certain community may assert that cleaning up the city park is more important than establishing a new wilderness two hundred miles away. They would point out that more people, and especially children, benefit from the improved park. Seager also notes that women take on environmental issues, such as toxics disposal, that men do not.<sup>103</sup>

Seager uses the concept of “social roles” to explain these phenomena. “Women’s environmental activism occurs *within the context of* and often as a *result of* their particular *social roles*” (my italics).<sup>104</sup> This concept helps us understand that as race and class are major determinants of social roles, so they also have a significant effect on the content and character of women’s activism. For example, a working class black woman may become ill because the well-established black neighborhood that she lives in is being poisoned by a factory. Racist factory owners have assumed that they can “get away” with this because the community is black and will not protest. If the woman takes action against the factory,

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

she will most likely do it in the context of a black community struggle. This pattern of events has played out in hundreds of environmental justice campaigns across the country. The pattern applies to middle class white college students as well. Such a student may become concerned about forest preservation issues during recreational visits. She will subsequently use familiar resources and tactics, like her hiking club and lobbying, in her activism. These are generalizations, of course, but nonetheless Seager's concept helps us understand that the myriad variations of women's environmental activism is a reflection of the diversity of women involved.

Motherhood is also a social role. Seager's theory corroborates the mother-protector theme in two ways. First, it points out that the mother/homemaker role puts women in a position to notice the effects of environmental threats. They may notice that their children become sick with a certain regularity, or that the factory across the street smells unusually foul. Second, mothers recognize the urgency to "take matters into their own hands" when situations threaten their families. When necessary, they seek solutions before governmental agencies overcome bureaucratic inertia. Their urgency is proportional to the relationship between the environmental threat and their daily life. When a woman spends every day cooking, cleaning, and bathing children with contaminated water, she is more likely to want to fight the source of contamination than is a woman or man who works in an office and drinks bottled water.

Seager's theory does not, however, assert that *only* mother/homemakers are in a position that leads to activism. She does however, point out that whatever their social role may be, women are more likely than men to use the resources of that role in their activism. For example, one of the women profiled in "'Hysterical Housewives' and other Mad Women" was a hairdresser from rural Oklahoma without children. When this woman, Jessie Deer-in-Water, became alarmed about plans to dispose of toxic sludge in her area, she took a protest petition to the beauty salon where she worked. "This was a great

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

organizing site because ten or twenty women came through each day” and were a perfect “captive audience.”<sup>105</sup> This is just one example of how women activists utilize existing social forums to advance their causes.

Jessie’s activism was also influenced by her prior experiences working for Native American issues and opposing a nuclear power plant. In both endeavors, working with the US government was challenging. She commented that when she became active on the toxic-sludge issue, she did not have to overcome “any delusions about the government working for our best interest.” Seager notes that Jessie’s activism career follows a pattern common amongst women of racial minorities. Many such women begin their activism with concerns about race, class, or social inequity. These concerns lead them to work on issues that may be classified as “environmental.” For women activists, the differences between these categories is less important than the overlap between them. “Women speak of a broader connectedness,” notes Seager, further implying that women’s activism is different than men’s.

Oftentimes, women of color who work on issues of environmental health and safety hesitate to call themselves “environmental” activists. In her article, “Defining Environmental Justice,” Giovanna Di Chiro points out that this is because many of these women see the “environmental movement” as one in which white, middle-class, suburban folks save whales and wilderness.<sup>106</sup> In contrast, most women of color in low-income urban areas are fighting to preserve human health in the “human environment.” This includes the home, the work place, the schools, and the neighborhood. Their struggle is aptly referred to as “environmental justice.”<sup>107</sup> Di Chiro suggests that the women in the Environmental Justice movement would be more accurately described as “new civil rights” or “new social justice” activists than as “new environmentalists.” These terms are more

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<sup>105</sup> Seager, 274.

<sup>106</sup> Giovanna Di Chiro, “Defining Environmental Justice: Women’s Voices and Grassroots Politics,” Socialist Review 22, no. 4, 1992.

appropriate because historically, the women of this movement have their “roots in and political continuities with the social justice movements of the sixties, including the civil rights, welfare rights, labor and farm worker movements.”<sup>108</sup>

The majority of literature on women’s environmental activism focusses on two themes: the mother-protector; and the environmental justice advocate. In both cases, maternal concerns about social justice, health, and safety motivate women to environmental activism. The women I interviewed, however, followed rather different avenues towards activism. Of the seven women that were interviewed in this study, three were mothers. Only two cited any sort of maternal feeling as a motivation for activism, and only one of them was actually a mother. The discrepancy between the scholarly research and my findings is, I believe, the result of selective processes that determined what kind of activists were studied. All of the women I interviewed were college educated, middle class professionals. Their passion and belief in grassroots organizing is genuine, but their commitment to the work also has professional overtones. Technically, these women have more freedoms than mothers. One could quit her “job” and “do something else” in a way that mothers cannot “quit” being a mom. However, I do not think that any of the women I spoke with would ever consider orphaning their respective projects because they are so deeply invested in them. Thus, in some ways even non-mothers are “mothers” to their environmental activism.

I believe that many academics have focused on the mother-protector theme because the image is powerful and the topic seems novel. They write about the ways that motherhood, which once confined women to domestic roles in the home, has compelled women to take on public political roles. Chapter three of this study, however, shows that motherhood rhetoric has been used to justify political and environmental activism in the past. The potential problem with the ubiquity of the “fighting mom” image, particularly as

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<sup>107</sup> See footnote 83 for definition of environmental justice.

<sup>108</sup> Di Chiro, 97.

it appears in the mainstream press, is that it may give the impression that *only* women who are mothers become environmental activists. Of course, this is not true.

On the other hand, women in the environmental justice movement are considerably less publicized in the national media. Yolanda Sinde noted that in Seattle “our first challenge is making people realize that there are black people and poor people [in fairly affluent Seattle].” The next step is educating the community about the disproportionate environmental threats endured by these peoples.

We spend a lot of time doing education because a lot of people here aren’t really familiar [with environmental racism] or even have an idea that a movement is going on so when we talk about these things people are kinda like--they’re still not understanding that the environment is not just whales and wilderness. So that’s one of our biggest challenges-- trying to change perceptions about who environmentalists are and what the environment is.<sup>109</sup>

Today, scholars are giving environmental justice struggles deserved attention in journals and scholarly publications.<sup>110</sup> They argue that the movement is historically significant because it challenges definitions of “environmentalism” and forges new premises for political action by people of color.<sup>111</sup> Most of the stories about women environmental justice activists perpetuate the image of mothers fighting direct threats to the health of their family and community. The prevalence of this theme may obscure the fact that some women join the movement for ideological reasons.

If they are not fighting to protect their children, what motivates women to be environmental activists? In the interviews, several women described activism as something which allows them to express their environmental, political, and social concerns in a proactive way. “To my mind, what makes someone an activist is them taking action, about things they care about, on an emotional, gut level, for things that are critical to what they value in life,” says Karen. Norma, Lynn, and Neva also mentioned how activism is about

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<sup>109</sup> Yolanda Sinde, interview by author.

<sup>110</sup> See Works Consulted, Secondary Sources.

<sup>111</sup> Di Chiro, 93.



expressing one's values and trying to get them incorporated into decisions about the environment. They say that it seems as if all their previous interests and life experiences prepared them to do the work that they now enjoy. "From an early age," said Lynn, "I had a very defined sphere of interests." She realized she was an activist when she found herself defending those interests against people who disagreed with her. At the same time, she understood that she was needed to represent others (especially farmers) who shared her interests but did not have time to be activists. "So being an activist had two components to me at that time: one was to be a communicator of ideas for others, and the other was to be a person who wouldn't back down in the face of adversity, but would stand up for what was important and back it up with facts and passion."<sup>112</sup>

#### *How Do They Do It? Growing from the Grassroots.*

The term "grassroots" is most often used as an adjective to describe the structure and nature of a political effort. Newspapers may report on a "grassroots effort" to defeat a ballot measure, or refer to a "grassroots coalition" of various interest groups. Popular use of the term implies a commonly understood definition. In this thesis, "grassroots" generally implies these popular connotations. For further clarification, this section examines the use of "grassroots" in two contexts. It considers the use of the term in the scholarly literature, and it explores the meaning of "grassroots" to contemporary women environmental activists.

Webster's seventh dictionary defines "grassroots" roughly along the same lines as the popular connotation. The major difference is that the former calls the term a noun, while the latter employs it as an adjective. Webster's second entry for "grassroots" reads: "society at the local level especially in rural areas as distinguished from the centers of

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<sup>112</sup> Lynn Coody, interview by author.

political leadership.”<sup>113</sup> In popular use today, “rural” is not central to the meaning, but a certain type of distance from the “centers of political leadership” generally is. This distance may not be a physical separation, but more likely an ideological difference. Commonly, grassroots efforts begin in the location of the environmental threat, and are usually aimed at changing a situation or law that was created by a center of power elsewhere. An example would be a campaign by suburban residents to change a state law that allows a certain kind of toxic disposal in their area. Most often, the people who initiate the grassroots response to the environmental threat are from the locale of its effects. This does not mean, however, that the grassroots nature of a movement is automatically forfeited when people from outside the range of the threat support it.<sup>114</sup> Rather, “grassroots” simply implies that most of the work is done by ordinary people to whom the issues at hand matters. Webster’s third entry supports this clarification when it calls grassroots “the very foundation or source.”<sup>115</sup>

The literature on women’s grassroots organizing reveals multiple perspectives on the nature of “grassroots.” For Temma Kaplan, the term “generally implies being widespread and common, in the sense of being universal.”<sup>116</sup> Obviously, this contradicts the local focus of the above definitions. However, it does concur with the idea that the grassroots are the “foundation” on which everything is built. Most people would agree that the health and well-being of children and families is a “widespread and common, . . . universal” concern. So, when women are acting to protect the health and well-being of a community, they may consider themselves a local, grassroots groups working on behalf of a “universal” concern.

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<sup>113</sup> Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, (1971), s.v. “grassroots.”

<sup>114</sup> Although it is often the case that outside groups or interests try to help a grassroots effort, and inadvertently (or, sometimes, purposely) displace the grassroots functions with their own, more polished, political mode of operations.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Kaplan, 2.

Kaplan's definition of "widespread and common . . . universal" overlaps with Seager's assertion about women's sense of "broader connectedness" (above) with interesting implications. The synthesis of their theories suggests that the organizational structures that women use in environmental activism (eg: non-hierarchical, grassroots) are prefigured by their understanding of relationships between people, issues, and the environment. Thus, grassroots environmental groups founded by women are different from other types of groups that women form. For one, they usually formed independent of larger political and social institutions. In contrast, women's political action groups and community service organizations are usually formed under the auspices of a party or church, while reproductive rights organizations child advocacy groups are typically managed in a traditional hierarchical structure.<sup>117</sup> "To the women claiming its provenance, being from the grassroots generally means being free from any constraining political affiliations and being responsible to no authority except their own group."<sup>118</sup>

This freedom from "constraining political affiliations," however, may strain the internal operations of the group. For members, being accountable to an entire group of peers may be more challenging and less efficient than being responsible to one authority. Consensus is the most common model of decision making, even though it is often time consuming and sometimes results in stalemates. Yet, women activists believe that consensus-style decision-making is a key characteristic of grassroots activism. When I asked Julie Norman what "grassroots" meant to her, she responded "decision making is spread across many people; it is non-hierarchical." Many other interviewees shared similar sentiments. "They realize that the decision-making process itself is a primary issue in the debate over environmental problems" says Darnovsky.

A commitment to inclusive decision-making stems from the belief that every one in the community should be involved in decisions that affect their daily lives. In order to work,

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<sup>117</sup> That is, with an executive body and/or governing board, an administration, and a membership body.

therefore, most grassroots environmental organizations focus on a specific geographic area. Every woman I spoke with described her activism in terms of the local, community, or regional level. One woman suggested that “connection to a particular place” may be the most important feature of grassroots groups. However, none of the women suggested that grassroots organizations should be provincial in their attitude. Rather, they spoke about the importance of coalitions and networks to work on larger issues when necessary. The success of grassroots efforts, says Gibbs, relies in part on recognizing that “everyone has something to contribute. . . Networks are made up of people who’ve had experiences.”<sup>119</sup>

Most women grassroots activists feel that, in the end, building a strong group or maintaining a movement is more important than the outcome of a particular battle. Their belief in the universal importance of their issues, and their sense that their activism is connected with other important causes, consistently affirms the value of grassroots-style activism. Norma Grier summarized the meaning of grassroots beautifully. Grassroots groups, she said,

. . . are working on the community level, and have a commitment to community level action. That doesn’t mean that those working on the community level aren’t thinking about what’s happening in the US Congress, or GATT, or issues in Africa. It doesn’t mean that they don’t look beyond their community, but there is a bond at the community level. It is a neighbor to neighbor, flesh to flesh connection. And in the end, I fell very strongly that our work is only as strong as the personal bonds that we build with each other because as humans we can sustain each other’s energy, and encourage each other and bring certain values to how we treat each other. . . . I think its a really good basis to build the foundation of our work on, that human bond, and that’s what grassroots activism is all about.”

Grassroots organizing presents advantages and challenges. On one hand, an argument exists that grassroots groups are more spontaneous and organic and therefore less prone to corruption in their activism, than the well-polished mainstream groups. These qualities may be a result of their commitment to non-hierarchical, consensus decision-making. This approach, however, requires certain kinds of communication skills. Many of

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<sup>118</sup> Kaplan, 2.

<sup>119</sup> Lois Gibbs, quoted in Kaplan, 86.

the women I spoke with believe that women predominate at the grassroots level because they have these communication skills. While they were hesitant to pigeonhole men, they readily described characteristics of women. Karen observed: "Whereas men are, quite often, more 'lone wolf' type activists. . . women are more used to the give and take of 'well, what do you think of this?' and 'well, I think this,' back and forth and just chewing things over." The average woman activist, she says, understands that playing devil's advocate and working over ideas for the sake of refining and improving them is a good thing. Men are oftentimes more defensive of their own positions, and slower to compromise. She admits that she can not say whether this difference is biological or socially conditioned. In any case, "It's a different kind of dynamic" working with women versus men.

Julie was slightly less cautious about describing the difference between men and women activists. "Women have a more well-rounded psyche" she said. Furthermore, women are oftentimes more successful in the public sphere and with authorities because "women aren't personally threatening." Lynn spoke about why women maintain good inter-group dynamics:

I think that women have less of a need to want to have credit [for the work that they do]. Women are more likely than men to focus on the fact that the job was done, than who did it. . . . Women, maybe because they work in a more cooperative way, the credit is spread out across more people.<sup>120</sup>

Diane thinks that the predominance of women at the grassroots level may have to do with the low amount of prestige that "grassroots organizer" carries. Perhaps, she says, men see it as an undesirable position to work in because it involves many ambiguous responsibilities and does not require special training. For women, however, the importance of the issue oftentimes supersedes the less glamorous details of working on it. Norma mentioned that the issues of pesticides and toxics seem to "get to the guts of women." Furthermore, the work environment created by organizing around these issues is particularly

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<sup>120</sup> Lynn Coody, interview by author.

appealing to women. “I think a number of women are interested in working with other women on these issues. . . it’s been a very empowering professional choice for women.”

The synergy of motivated women activists and a grassroots philosophy can have profound effects on even male-dominated institutions. One example is illustrated in the history of the radical environmental group Earth First! (EF!). EF! Is best known for its grassroots direct-action campaigns to save precious forests. According to EF! activist Judi Bari, women have always been active in EF!. “As in all such groups,” she says, “there have always been competent women doing real work behind the scenes. But they have been virtually invisible behind the persona of ‘big man goes into big woods to save big trees.’”<sup>121</sup> In the past decade or so, however, the women of EF! have assumed more front line positions and are effectively reshaping the front line. The grassroots nature of EF! made such redefinition possible. In her article “The Feminization of Earth First!” Bari credits the “decentralized, non-hierarchical” nature of EF! for allowing the kinds of change that made more women comfortable in EF!<sup>122</sup>

As Bari sees it, the main flaw in the original EF! strategy--its reliance on “individual acts of daring” to make a point--excluded women from EF! activities. For example, common EF! direct-action techniques like lock-downs and tree-sits favored men because women with families and children were less likely to be able to commit to them. In addition, this strategy had limited effectiveness. “Isolated individuals” she says, “cannot bring about the massive social change that is necessary to save the planet.”<sup>123</sup> Bari’s proposed solution to the flaw within EF! was simple, but fundamentally different: long-term community-based organizing. As she describes the experience of implementing long-term community-based organizing, her sentiments echo those of other women grassroots activists. “So, we began to organize with local people, planning our logging blockades

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<sup>121</sup> Judi Bari, Timber Wars (Monroe, MA: Common Courage Press, 1994), 220.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

around issues that had local community support. We also began to build alliances.”<sup>124</sup> This new strategy had positive effects on EF! and the local community, especially women. “As our successes grew, more women and more people with families and roots in the community began calling themselves Earth First!ers in our area.”<sup>125</sup>

Another indication of the influence that grassroots women activists can have may be found in the words of William Ruckelshaus. As a former EPA director and CEO of a waste-management firm in Houston, he has witnessed grassroots activists in action. He says: “They’ve been empowered by their own demands. They can block things. That’s a negative power. But it’s real power.”<sup>126</sup>

Where does this “real power” come from? How does a group of people, many of whom have never been political previously, become a force that frustrates the plans of government and multi-million dollar corporations? Part of the answer lies in the effectiveness of the grassroots model itself. Perhaps even more important, however, is the sense of values that motivate activists, and particularly women grassroots activists. Although a grassroots environmental struggle may be more complex than a case of the people being “right” and the source of the environmental threat being “wrong,” many women in fact make such an assertion. Though women “generally recognize their seeming powerlessness against corporate and governmental opponents, they also assert their moral superiority, their right to be responsible citizens, not according to official laws, but on their own terms.”<sup>127</sup> On their own terms, women activists are changing the nature of environmental activism across the country.

Oftentimes, the media uses “grassroots” to describe a nation-wide movement. Given the characteristics described above, is it possible to have a nation-wide grassroots movement?

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Blumberg and Gottlieb, 32.

The women I spoke with had various things to say about this. Neva noted that there is a common belief about “a dichotomy between the grassroots activists and the national, highly professionalized groups.” Often national organizations try to use the grassroots to influence legislators, she says, but they “do not always fully understand the concerns and challenges that we face in our own communities.” Yet, the increasing influence of grassroots groups is forcing national groups to respond to the grassroots concerns.

Kettleman City is an example of a successful coalition between a grassroots group and a national organization. In fact, it was the national organization--Greenpeace--that originally alerted the community that a toxic incinerator was being proposed for their area.<sup>128</sup> Subsequently, citizens formed a bilingual, bi-cultural community group, *El Pueblo para el Aire y Agua Limpio* (People for Clean Air and Water), to fight the proposal. Not surprisingly, the leaders of the new group were two women. *El Pueblo* member Magdalena Avila was initially skeptical of Greenpeace’s entry into their community. “I’ve been a critic of the major environmental organizations for their failure to recognize and address issues of concern to people of color beyond mere tokenism and participation. But when Greenpeace came to Kettleman City, the relationship was beneficial. . . I never saw Greenpeace take the agenda away from the community. . . Greenpeace was there to provide the resources.”<sup>129</sup> The relationship that grew between *El Pueblo* and Greenpeace is part of the “network” that Gibbs referred to (above). *El Pueblo*’s network of support included native american organizations, political figures, and other environmental justice groups. “The relationship between the community and outsiders has been crucial,” claims Avila. “It’s the coalition

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>128</sup> I acknowledge that Greenpeace’s action would seem to exclude the Kettleman City case from my earlier definition of grassroots. However, in all other aspects, the campaign was grassroots in style.

<sup>129</sup> Magdalena Avila, “David Versus Goliath,” *Forward Motion/Crossroads* (April 1992): 13-15, reprinted in Carolyn Merchant, *Green Versus Gold*, (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1998), 445-448.



building model that has made this battle so effective. . . This is a coalition that's building into a major social movement."<sup>130</sup> Women are at the forefront of this movement.

*Being Political, Working With and Against the Government.*

Women grassroots activists are notably innovative in their efforts to reframe environmental concerns and reinvent environmental activism. They also recognize the power that established political institutions have over the situations that they want to change. In my research, I found that the extent to which women activists become involved in politics varies with respect to the nature of their concerns, and their individual personalities. Consider for example a woman who joins a neighborhood fight against a local polluter. She is technically an activist when she writes a few letters and attends a rally, but her "activist career" may end when she returns to "normal" life after the conclusion of the campaign. Other women continue their activism by participating in long-term community organizing projects. Often times these women have deeper concerns about the issues that were represented in the initial struggle, such as racial inequity or water pollution. The importance of these issues propels women into public political situations that they never imagined they could handle. Aurora Castillo of MELA shares her wisdom on this subject:

You know, nothing ventured, nothing lost. You should have seen how timid we were the first time we went to a public hearing. Now, forget it, I walk right up and make myself heard and that's what you have to do.<sup>131</sup>

To outsiders, it might appear that the women of MELA (Mothers of East Los Angeles) fashioned themselves into political environmental activists by virtue of organizing against a toxic incinerator. Demographic patterns would suggest that Mexican American, middle-aged, Catholic, urban, and high-school educated women are unlikely to become involved in either environmentalism or political affairs.<sup>132</sup> Therefore, the best way to

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<sup>130</sup> Avila, 447.

<sup>131</sup> Aurora Castillo, quoted in Pardo, 6.

<sup>132</sup> Pardo, 4.

understand the work of MELA members is to consider it on their terms. Initially, the women of MELA did not consider theirs an environmental nor political issue *per se*. As they saw it, this group of Mexican American women created a successful “community movement.” The purpose of the movement was to protect their neighborhood from an environmental threat. Their political action was simply an extension of traditional familiar and cultural networks and resources. Hence, while the content of their activism may qualify as “environmental” activism, they would probably shun this classification. As Di Chiro points out, the “political culture” amongst women of color working on environmental issues is more closely aligned with the civil rights and social justice movements of the sixties than any era of the environmental movement.

The women interviewed in this study have various opinions about how “political” their activism is, corresponding to various understandings of what “political” means. Karen said, “From a personal standpoint, I hate politics; I’m not a political animal.” Julie concurred, and mentioned that lobbying and electoral politics especially can be personally draining. But both women admitted that the goal of their activism (both work on forest issues) is to influence decisions made in a political climate. Karen explained:

In my way of thinking, in order to change the political climate, you have to build a sort of a mass public movement that very well may step outside the legal sphere, like law and custom. In my experience, there hasn’t been any significantly successful movement in this country for *systemic* social change that hasn’t done that. The civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, women’s suffrage--all pushed the boundaries further. It’s almost a definitional question. You’re not creating systemic change unless you are pushing the boundaries of the status quo, and you can’t push the boundaries of the status quo unless you step outside the system. So in that sense, I’m not political at all, because I’m not trying to operate within the system.<sup>133</sup>

In contrast, Neva said that she was “definitely political.” She believes that it is “extremely important to be aware of and involved with political process.” To her, “politics involves holding elected officials responsible for their decisions and responsive to people.” Her co-worker Norma has a broader understanding of what it means to be “political.” All

decisions about how we use our natural resources are influenced by our values, which makes them political. “For example,” she says:

as a government, do we only take action after we have dead bodies, or do we think about the fact that there is enough evidence to be concerned about the situation and try to prevent it ahead of time? Those kind of value judgements, about when to take action, are very much human decisions, and if you’re not involved in that process, then the values that you think are important are not going to be the ones that drive the decisions that are made about the allocation of resources and how we conduct ourselves as a society. I think that if you’re an activist, you are political.<sup>134</sup>

Several of the women I spoke with have reached a level of expertise which allows them to work cooperatively with government bodies. Karen, Lynn, Norma, Neva, and Julie have all worked directly with government to produce policies and regulations governing their respective interests. They welcome opportunities to be conduits between grassroots concerns and government, and they hope to make government more responsive. Norma admitted that sometimes her best sources are government employees who send her “dynamite documents” in brown paper bags. On multiple occasions, however, her group has sued government agencies for failing to do their job correctly. Lynn noted that while she has a good working relationship with the state government, she has a lot of problems with federal level interests.

Distrust and disgust are the general feeling described by women who accuse government agencies and officials of environmental neglect or mismanagement. Examples include the toxic cover-up in Love Canal, the waste incinerator citing in East Los Angeles, and “salvage” timber sales in the Northwest. Lois Gibbs points out that before their discovery of toxic waste in their backyards, most of the women of Love Canal probably thought that the government was okay. But after their protracted struggle against government cover-up, denial, and delay, many are still bitter. She says: “Americans like to believe in the good intentions of their government, and they frequently consider the absence

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<sup>133</sup> Karen Coulter, interview by author.

<sup>134</sup> Neva Hassanein, interview by author.

of politics to be an ideal state of being. Hardly a person from Love Canal doesn't wish she could turn back the clock and forget what she knows about the government."<sup>135</sup>

Thus, the nature and tenor of the relationship between grassroots women activists and the government are highly variable. If they see an ideological difference between their group's interests and those of the government, women will remain more distant from the political processes that create government. For example, members of MELA consciously resisted becoming players in the greater political structure. Their reluctance is related to their initial reason for involvement. "Mothers are for the children's interest, not for self-interest; the governor is for his own political interest."<sup>136</sup> Others women, like Norma, believe that activism and politics go hand in hand.

### *Implications*

Having explored women's motivations for activism, the nature of grassroots activism and its implications, and interactions between women activists and other groups and institutions, I would like to try to take a broader look at the historical significance of women's activism. What affect has women's grassroots environmental activism had on social and political institutions? In many ways, these women are redefining concepts of democracy, politics, and justice. Concurrently, their activism is helping to reframe environmental history and expand the definition of environmentalism.

For the last two hundred years, the overwhelming majority of environmental policy makers have been men, many of whom are sympathetic to resource extraction industries and businesses. Thus, the vast majority of environmental laws and natural resource policies protect the interests of these parties. Even when a law appears to be truly for "nature," (such as the Endangered Species Act) lawmakers consistently find ways to exempt powerful interests (with legislation like the Salvage Rider and Habitat Conservation Plans). Women

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<sup>135</sup> Kaplan, 16.

environmentalists are quick to point out that the cost of protecting business interests is usually borne directly by the communities--human, flora, and fauna--living in the jurisdiction of the law or policy.

The corrupt nature of this situation has caused some environmentally concerned groups to denounce democratic means of influencing government, industry, and politics entirely. EarthFirst!, Greenpeace, and the Sea Shepherds (who have been rated the most violent of environmental activist groups) are known for supporting direct action protest as the primary means of expressing their outrage. This study shows that, by contrast, environmentally-concerned women activists believe strongly in democratic participation. Their ideals of democratic participation range from direct-action to electoral politics, with combinations and permutations in between. All emphasize the point that citizens should better utilize existing political structures. Darnovsky emphasizes the innovations of women's activism: "But unlike other leaders and movements that have undermined the political systems we know, discrediting democracy itself, these grassroots women's groups have attempted, through moral claims for justice and human rights, to transform politics in far more democratic directions than ever seemed possible."<sup>137</sup>

What exactly does it mean to "transform politics" in "democratic directions"? This study has illustrated several examples of how women activists have widened the sphere of political participation. The mother-protectors have shown that motherhood is not a hindrance to political participation, but rather a reason for it. Women of color have amplified the voice of their communities in decisions affecting the health of their neighborhoods. Women in EarthFirst! have made that organization more responsive to timber communities and families. Thus, a significant part of moving politics in democratic directions is leveling the obstacles posed by sexism, racism, and class bias. The environmental justice movement has been particularly key in this endeavor. Describing her

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<sup>136</sup> Aurora Castillo, interviewed by Mary Pardo, 15 January 1988.

<sup>137</sup> Darnovsky, 7.

enthusiasm for the initial formation of CCEJ, Yolanda noted “I was really happy to finally see a discussion of race and class and environment together, because at the time, I worked for a [mainstream] environmental group. I was working there for about four years as a field program assistant and there wasn’t you know, very much diversity.”<sup>138</sup>

Another way that women are working to make environmental activism more inclusive has to do with their attitudes toward group dynamics and leadership. They have said that when working for long term political change, decision-making should be by consensus. They have said that group cohesion and communication are more important in the long-run than victory in the short term. Even the concept of a “leader” has been affected. Instead of acting as an overseer, a grassroots leader may play every role within the organization--from canvasser to letter writer to speech giver. Temma Kaplan describes the effect: “These women pay as much attention to the nitty-gritty of daily organizing as to making points that register at the national level. In so doing, they create new political cultures.”<sup>139</sup>

What does it mean to create a “new political culture”? In the context of this thesis, I consider political culture the ideas and behaviors of a defined set of people in a given period of time. Specifically, this chapter is concerned with how contemporary women activists perceive the political culture of their own grassroots environmental activism. As I interpret it, Kaplan’s theory of “new political culture” implies many things. It means that as more women fight at the political level for the well-being of women, children, and communities, more women and men will make these interests political priorities. It means that as more communities of color organize against environmental threats, fewer polluters will underestimate their resistance. It means that the more often concepts of justice and the environment are mentioned in the same breath, the more intertwined the two concepts will become in the American mind. Indeed, the ideal of “justice” is an underlying goal of all

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<sup>138</sup> Yolanda Sinde, interview by author.

the women activists I studied. Although circumstance often determines the ultimate meaning of “justice,” Lois Gibbs summarizes a commonly held sentiment. “Justice is about choice; it is the goal and democracy is the process.”<sup>140</sup>

Prior to their encounter with the blatant injustice of an environmental threat, most women activists did not give concerted attention to the concept of “justice” or the political process. Thus, for women activists who were previously non-political, their introduction to the process of democracy occurred within the unique political culture of women’s grassroots environmental activism. As these new political actors seek redress from the government or other institutions, they employ rationales unique to this culture. Even women who have had prior political exposure, such as the women that I interviewed, employ rationales nurtured in women’s political culture. Darnovsky describes this phenomenon: “They draw on a implicit theory of human rights, seeking to make community health a corollary of justice, deriving its power from common sense notions of human need rather than codified laws.”<sup>141</sup>

### *New Environmentalisms*

Until recently, issues of “community health” and “common sense notions of human need” were not considered part of the “environmental” agenda. Rather, “environmentalism” was a set of ideas surrounding “nature” and “wilderness,” not necessarily human nature. Issues such as water quality and urban sanitation have traditionally been excluded. Although the “natural” environment and the urban environment now share space in environmental discourse, Marcy Darnovsky notes that vestiges of the wilderness-focused environmental movement remain. She blames the narrow focus of traditional environmental history for giving the impression that only white people

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>140</sup> Kaplan, 14.

<sup>141</sup> Darnovsky, 7.

have ever been concerned about the environment. “Historians of conservationism and preservation too often replicate the repression and omissions built into the wilderness concept” she says. “They leave unexamined race, gender, and class politics in the discourse of. . . environmentalism in the United States.”<sup>142</sup>

Grassroots women today are, via their actions, responding to these omissions. They talk about racial discrimination in public, in the press, and with government officials. As noted above, they talk plainly about gender, and the differences between men and women in activism. They directly challenge mainstream groups to acknowledge and remedy the under-representation of people of color in their membership and governing boards.<sup>143</sup> Groups like the Love Canal Homeowners Association and MELA have become models for activism all over America, especially for women and communities of color who are otherwise overlooked by the more powerful so-called environmental organizations. The grassroots model is particularly important in communities of color because it integrates established social and cultural institutions. As this paper has shown, women are particularly adept at utilizing existing social and cultural resources for activist purposes.

In 1990, one of the first academics to write about environmental justice, Robert Bullard, wrote:

hundreds of volumes have been written in the past several years on the environmental, labor, antiwar, and civil rights movements. Despite this wide coverage, there is a dearth of material on the convergence (and divergence, for that matter) of environmentalism and social justice advocacy.<sup>144</sup>

Today, this dearth is being alleviated by the historians, geographers, sociologists, and political scientists who study women environmental activists. Their studies document struggles like those at Love Canal and South Central Los Angeles, where environmental pollution is being fought as a social injustice. From these studies we learn that racism and

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>143</sup> Di Chiro, 100.

<sup>144</sup> Bullard, quoted in Darnovsky, 47.



class bias still lead government and industry to disproportionately poison people of color and poor people. We also learn that women are at the forefront of the self-determined campaigns to combat these environmental injustices. My interviews demonstrated that more privileged women also have strong concerns about social justice and the meaning of environmentalism. By incorporating social justice issues in environmental struggles, women environmental activists are expanding the definition of environmentalism.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### From Conservation to Justice: Comparing the Generations

In 1987, Ralph Nader wrote the forward to a book called *Women Activists*. He praised the book because it encourages people to ask the question: “Why are most community activists women--does their gender influence their activism?” The present study has shown that gender has had a significant influence on two different generations of women environmental activists. The way that gender has influenced activism, however, has changed between the generations. Women from both eras analyzed above expressed that women have unique reasons for becoming activists, particular skills that are valuable in activism, and attitudes towards environmental activism that differed from men. The generations’ perspectives differ, however, on what those reasons, skills, and attitudes are. A comparison of those perspectives highlights the ways that environmental history would benefit from closer attention to gender.

#### *Essentialism, Context, and Location*

Although environmental history has been slow in recognizing the unique dimensions of women’s environmental activism, sociologists and women’s studies scholars have shown interest in the subject for more than a decade.<sup>145</sup> One area of study in particular--ecofeminism--has examined the role of gender in environmental organizing. Among other things, ecofeminism purports that the domination and degradation of the earth is related to the domination and degradation of women. Since it emerged in the mid-1970s,

ecofeminism has been both a movement and field of study. It has become an umbrella category for a diversity of perspectives that concurrently consider women and ecological concerns. A brief survey of recent ecofeminist literature will reveal that some of these perspectives are in fact contradictory: one will assert that women are biologically “closer to nature” while another will call for an “ungendering” of nature.<sup>146</sup>

These contradictions are central to an often discussed concern of ecofeminist discourse -- “essentialism.” Noël Sturgeon thoroughly examines the issue in her 1997 book *Ecofeminist Natures*. She gives special treatment to the theoretical problem of essentialism and its appearance in women’s grassroots activism. Her analysis criticizes “essentialist constructs” which are “notions of nature, women, or certain racially defined groups, that use biological, universalist, ahistorical, or homogenizing ways of definition.”<sup>147</sup> With reference to women in environmental activism, an essentialist argument would posit that women are biologically “closer to nature” and therefore *should* be environmental stewards. Furthermore, women’s traditional roles as caretakers of the “domestic environment” make them ideal environmental “cleaner-uppers,” while their virtuousness qualifies them to make moral arguments for environmental protection. Many second wave feminists would balk at the suggestion that biology and tradition should obligate them to such roles; their position constitutes “anti-essentialism.”

One of the greatest differences between the Progressive era activists and contemporary activists is the way that each deals with essentialist constructs of women’s character. The former embraced traditional ideas about women’s “nature”--indeed, they relied on such constructs to justify their political activities in a time when women did not have any political rights. Progressive era women spoke strongly and often about the correlation between progressive ideology, especially conservation, and the “natural

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<sup>145</sup> See bibliography.

<sup>146</sup> See Merchant, *Earthcare*.

<sup>147</sup> Sturgeon, 5.

attributes” of the female sex. “Conservation in its material and ethical sense is the basic principle in the life of a woman” said one woman. Conservation activists argued that women had a particular interest in the conservation cause and were therefore justified in supporting the cause through political action. They could help pass laws which would “tend to the conservation of the vital forces represented in the mothers of the race, and the children who are the country’s future citizens.”<sup>148</sup> Urban reformers’ rhetoric also relied on essentialist constructs about women’s abilities and interests. Thus, conservation and urban reform were endeavors that women could contribute to without challenging their traditional roles as mothers and housewives.

Contemporary women activists also rely on essentialist constructs to justify their activism. In contrast to Progressive era women, however, contemporary activists do not allow these constructs to define or limit the issues and style of their activism. Instead, some women proudly acknowledge that it was their maternal instinct that incited them to expand their sphere of activity to include political activism. I have heard of other women who, when told by men that they are being “hysterical” about an issue, respond with “Of course I’m hysterical about this! Why aren’t you?” At the same time, other women associate their activism with a conscious rejection of women’s traditional gender roles. Are these two positions contradictory? Is this internal dissension a sign of weakness in women’s political culture?

Sturgeon argues that the coexistence of apparently opposite views of essentialism does not detract from the validity of either side of the issue. As she explains them, the apparent inconsistencies between the various perspectives of ecofeminism, such as those surrounding essentialism, are not weaknesses at all. Rather, women from all nations and classes can benefit from reclaiming and redefining their own essentialist nature. By so doing, women may escape patriarchal essentialist constructs which hold that women are

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<sup>148</sup> Mrs Welch, “Address,” in Proceedings of the Second National Conservation Congress held in Saint Paul, Minnesota, September 5-8, 1910, by the National Conservation Congress (Washington, D.C.:

“closer to nature and the home” and therefore are obligated be environmental cleaner-uppers. Subsequently, women may claim that certain essential aspects of their lives--their status as mothers and homemakers--give them a *right* to be a respected participant in environmental decisions. Sturgeon calls this a useful “shifting and strategic” essentialist identity. “Essentialist rhetorics in the construction of political collectivities, in circumscribed situations, can be a positive tool of liberation.”<sup>149</sup>

Furthermore, Sturgeon argues, the sum of many women participating in these processes adds up to the creation of a “shifting and strategic identification of the relation between women and nature.” This identification is important because it creates positive political effects: “it creates unity between very different kinds of women; it justifies a feminist critique of environmentalists. . .[and] participatory democratic structures.”<sup>150</sup> In the Northwest, women from diverse backgrounds are unified by their mutual concerns for grassroots environmental causes. Together, they are constructively criticizing male-dominated environmental groups and environmental history and working to make participatory democracy more representative of environmental concerns. As more women (and the scholars that write about them) explore different contexts for relating to the environment, from motherhood, to ecomanagement, to activism, the boundaries of ecofeminism are expanded. Sturgeon praises these “strategic and dynamic qualities of the formation of ecofeminism as a political location within specific historical and political contexts.”<sup>151</sup>

Geographer Joni Seager is also interested in the historical and political contexts of women’s activism. Her 1996 article “‘Hysterical Housewives’ and Other Mad Women” considers how these contexts shape women’s environmental activism. Seager’s article approaches the issue of essentialism, but does not deal with it directly; this study follows a

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National Conservation Congress, 1911), 161.

<sup>149</sup> Sturgeon, 9.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 11.

similar course. Instead, Seager simply observes: “At a generalized level, women do seem to express environmental caring and concern differently than do men. Women speak of broader connectedness . . .” The women profiled in chapter two illustrate this observation. Seager takes an additional step, however, and muses: “If we are witnessing the emergence of a distinctive women’s voice on the environment, does this suggest a universal female “ecoconnectedness?”<sup>152</sup> She stops short of answering this question, however, for the same reason that this study does not ask it. Her reason for not exploring this potential “ecoconnectedness” is grounded in her own research. None of the women she interviewed supported the concept of a “woman’s position” on the environment. Similarly, none of the women I spoke with believed that women have the kind of special “relationship” with “nature” that essentialist constructs may assert.

Seager does admit, however, that “women took on environmental issues when men did not . . . that women use arguments of morality and emotionality when men do not . . . and that women take up environmental issues out of a sense of “life giving” or lifesaving obligation and outrage.”<sup>153</sup> Two generations of women profiled in this study corroborate her observation. Seager explains this phenomenon without resorting to essentialism or ecoconnectedness. Instead, she takes a sociological approach: “If there is a universal of a “women’s voice” on the environment,” she writes, “this may reflect a certain *universal in women’s social location*. Women’s environmental *activism occurs within the context of* and often as a result of their particular *social roles* . . .” (my italics)<sup>154</sup> As I interpret it, this concept incorporates factors like age, marital status, race, class, and religion. This study has shown that the “social location” that many women environmental activists from both the Progressive and contemporary eras share is motherhood. It is not surprising that mothers would fit Seager’s observation. But what about the women who are not mothers,

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>152</sup> Seager, 79.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

but still fit the characterization? Some women assert that whether or not they actually become mothers, they are socially conditioned to think and act like mothers. “Women want to protect their children . . . we’re trained to think that mothers should save the world.”<sup>155</sup> For other women, the earth itself inspires the “emotionality” and “life-saving obligation” that are usually associated with motherhood. “The Earth” she said, “will heal herself if we just let her, but if we give it a hand that’s even better.”<sup>156</sup> Whether these feelings are gender specific social constructions or real biological traits is debatable. The salient point is that these feelings inspire women to sustained levels of environmental activism.

### *Morality, Social Roles, and Class*

This study has also shown that though they have different rubrics, both generations analyzed above use moral arguments to justify environmental activism. Conservation movement women claimed that the wanton waste of natural resources was wrong, even immoral. They joined male conservationists in upholding the virtues of scientific expertise, technology, and organization as the models by which homes and the nation should be managed. In the same way that a clean, efficient home was an indication of high moral character, so the management of natural resources should reflect the superiority of American morality. Women conservationists did not push the boundaries of accepted morality, they simply asserted the important roles that women played in it.

Contemporary women activists, on the other hand, are effectively redefining traditional concepts of right and wrong as they encounter new “wrongs.” For example, they commonly assert that nuclear proliferation, clear cutting, and corporate dominance are morally wrong. They will admit that regardless of whether or not they fully understand the mechanisms that control these institutions, their harmful effects must be mitigated. When

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

necessary, today's women activists will fashion themselves into experts on issues in order to validate their assertions. For example, many women have become well-versed on the effects of toxics to support their position that putting children at risk of exposure to toxic waste is morally wrong. Other women equate morality with biocentric ethics. They assert that non-human species have a right to exist that is equal to humans', and that abrogating those rights is morally wrong. The entire environmental justice movement is based on a response to a wrong--specifically, the racism that has put people of color at a higher risk of exposure to toxics than white people.

Another difference between the generations is closely related to these moral differences. The roles that Progressive era women created for themselves were narrow in comparison to the multi-dimensional roles that today's activists are forging for themselves. Women conservationists believed that their talents were best put to use "creating public sentiment" favorable to conservation issues. They did this mostly through channels traditionally open to women, such as women's clubs and schools. Urban reformers took on slightly expanded roles, becoming experts and professionals. Only a few, such as those who joined settlement houses, left traditional domestic life entirely.<sup>157</sup>

Today's activists, on the other hand, are not limited to a single niche. Even at a specific level of participation, such as the grassroots level, women environmental activists create a wide range of activist roles. For today's women activists, "creating public sentiment" is a component of grassroots efforts, but it is not their sole mission. Furthermore, today's activists define their own environmental agenda. This means that at times their roles are primarily re-active (responding to a toxic threat, for example), while other times they strive for proactive changes (long-term community organizing in timber communities). They utilize a bevy of strategies and tactics, from direct action to public campaign lawsuits. They interact directly with legislative bodies and corporate boards.



Overall, women today are defining their roles as environmental activists according to their own social situations and interests.<sup>158</sup>

Considered together, the differences between the Progressive era women activists and today's women activists indicate a greater underlying difference: class. During the Progressive era, the vast majority of women activists were white, middle- to upper-class, protestant wives and mothers. These women had the necessary resources--time, money, and education--to organize themselves in support of issues that were previously the domain of male politicians. Through their impressive rhetoric, volunteer organizing, and pioneering professional work, they argued that women could make significant contributions to the conservation and urban reform movements. What they actually meant was that women like themselves should be part of the movements. The potential contributions of lower class women and women of color were not considered.<sup>159</sup>

The environmental movement still bears evidence of the race and class bias of Progressive era movements. For example, the almost entirely white and middle- to upper-class contemporary forest preservation and wilderness protection movements are direct descendants of the conservation and preservation movements. Throughout this century, environmentalism has primarily been a concern for white, well-off, educated, suburban Americans. They have had the leisure and access to the enjoy the environment as an amenity, and the interest and resources to defend the amenity from destruction. The "environment" is often equated with "wilderness"--a place that humans visit and enjoy but do not stay. Middle-class environmentalism, therefore, has traditionally been concerned with protecting *nature* from human harm. But protecting humans from human harms has

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<sup>157</sup> In many ways, the style of activism pursued by Jane Addams and other settlement house residents most closely resembles that of contemporary women environmental activists. Certainly, this relationship would be a rich source of study.

<sup>158</sup> There is no doubt that the self-determination exhibited by today's women activists is a result of second wave feminism. In this study, however, the different social opportunities available to pre-suffrage era and post-second wave women is a given.

<sup>159</sup> For examples of purposeful class-based oversight and exclusion, see Norwood, Made From This Earth.

not been on the environmental agenda until relatively recently. Yolanda Sinde describes how pervasive this construction of the environment is, and how her introduction to the environmental justice movement helped her see this:

For a long time like most people I had thought of the environment in a very main stream way, like thinking that the environment was some place that I had to drive very far to get to. [As if] I didn't really have an environment in my own back yard. And so I was really happy to finally see a discussion of race and class and environment together [in the environmental justice movement].<sup>160</sup>

In addition to excluding urban residents, middle-class environmentalism often aggravates class relations in rural settings. For example, in their efforts to preserve nature, environmentalists too often blame select groups of humans, such as loggers. The results include the so-called timber wars between lower middle-class timber workers and middle-class forest defenders in the Northwest. In their campaigns to save forest ecosystem, environmentalists often try to cancel, shut down, or otherwise prevent timber sales through actions against the US Forest Service. Timber communities, however, interpret this as an assault on their economic way of life. Regrettably, polemical arguments between these groups exacerbate environmentalism's inherited class segregation. There are women, however, such as Judi Bari and Karen Coulter, who are concerned about forging relationships between the groups based on identifying common oppressors. This concern was part of the reason that Karen joined the Program on Corporations, Law, and Democracy.

I became more and more interested in fighting corporate power over communities and ecosystems. The largest corporations dominate our culture and our government and our economics . . . Basically, as I fought regulatory agencies [for forest protection] and things like that, it became more and more clear that there was no lasting solution that way, that we had to get to the root of the problem and deal with it on a systemic level.<sup>161</sup>

Contemporary women's environmental activism is ameliorating class-based segregation and discrimination in the environmental movement. Certainly, there are many

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<sup>160</sup> Yolanda Sinde, interview by author.

<sup>161</sup> Karen Coulter, interview with author.

thousands of white, middle-class, educated women activists; and in many ways they reveal the (positive and negative) traits of previous environmental movements. But as Judi and Karen demonstrate, this generation of privileged women has witnessed political and social changes that encourage them to recognize their privilege and find means of bridging the cultural and racial divides that it creates. Norma Grier's group, Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides, is another example of a mostly middle-class white organization that feels that the work it does is important to all colors and classes of people. But it is also true that some people, including Mexican farm laborers, are disproportionately impacted by pesticides. Therefore, working with their union is a delicate but extremely important part of NCAP's mission. It involves much more than going to them and presenting NCAP's concerns, Norma says. It requires recognizing, for example, that pesticides are probably not their primary concern when they have to worry about whether or not they are being paid. For Norma and NCAP, coalition building is an on-going, vital process: "I think that we have a lot more to learn, and a long ways to go, before we've done a good job."<sup>162</sup>

While is true that a generation of white men has been raised in the same climate of increasing awareness, when considered in aggregate, their attitudes and practices of environmental activism have not changed *as much* as a result.<sup>163</sup> Contemporary women activists have been at the forefront of challenging traditional environmentalisms, particularly those that perpetuate racial and social inequalities. Today's activists are part of a generation that has seen women of color and low income women become leaders in grassroots environmental struggles, and they have learned specific things from those leaders. They have learned to use cultural resources, grassroots organizing, and political tools to right environmental wrongs. Subsequently, they have brought values nurtured in the contexts of their various socioeconomic, racial, spiritual, and intellectual backgrounds to environmental

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<sup>162</sup> Norma Grier, interview by author.

dialogues. Women today are advocating for a broader, deeper environmentalism that is respectful of and relevant to all human and non-human life.

### *A Place for Women in a Refocused Environmental History*

Regrettably, environmental history has paid scant attention to women's environmental activism. Evidence has shown that while Progressive era women activists were well-recognized in their time, the history and significance of their contributions is almost unknown. Contemporary women's activism has received attention from social scientists, but environmental historians have been slow to recognize its importance. How can a discipline ignore a constituency that has contributed so much to it? The answer lies in its historiography, and in three facets of the study in particular.

The first begins with the study of the Conservation and Preservation movements. The authoritative text on the Conservation movement, for example, mentions only briefly the work done by women conservationists; most books omit them entirely.<sup>164</sup> Instead, their studies focus on the legal and legislative accomplishments of the movement. Though women supported these endeavors and worked hard to assure their success, they were not official political participants. The potential significance of women's auxiliary role has never earned the attention of Conservation historians. Similarly, preservation history focusses mostly on its famous men, especially John Muir. The truth is that a sizable percentage of early Sierra Club members were women, but their stories are not considered part of the Preservationist canon. These things considered, it appears that Conservation and Preservation historians have been more sexist than the movements they write about. Today,

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<sup>163</sup> A great deal of this inertia is simply due to the fact that in general, more men subscribe to more "traditional" ideas about environmentalism. Evidence for this may be found by noting the predominately male leadership of mainstream environmental groups and institutional environmental management.

<sup>164</sup> Hays, *Gospel of Efficiency*.

environmental history perpetuates the sexism it inherited from Conservation and Preservation history.<sup>165</sup>

Environmental history's second omission is the subject of activism. Until recently, most environmental history texts have ignored activism all together. Books like Hays' Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States focus on institutional approaches to changing legislation, and the historic processes that foster sentiment about the American environment.<sup>166</sup> As such, they under-represent the effects of public demonstrations and radical environmental activism on the course of environmental history. More recent books, such as journalist Kirpatrick Sale's The Green Revolution, give more agency to extra-institutional actors. He writes about how events like Earth Day and radical groups like EarthFirst! have shaped American environmental history. He even includes sections on Lois Gibbs, ecofeminism, and environmental justice. He does not, however, consider the *reasons* why people, and women particularly, become activists.

Thus, Sale reproduces environmental history's third oversight: the issue of motivation. The basic question "why do people become environmental activists?" is not one that environmental historians address.<sup>167</sup> Other social scientists, however, have explored what motivates people to activism. Many studies have focussed on women in particular. Sociologists, political scientists, and geographers are bringing attention to the myriad social, economic, and intellectual reasons that women today become environmental activists. They have looked at white middle-class suburban women protecting ancient

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<sup>165</sup> The role that women played in urban reform movements is better documented. However, their work is not usually considered as environmental per se. Historian Martin Melosi suggests this may be because urban reform efforts were so integrated with the Progressive ideology that the *environmental* aspect of the issue has eluded historians. I would suggest too that the prevalent conception of "the environment" at that time was of a green, pristine place, and therefore urban issues were not considered environmental.

<sup>166</sup> Thank you to Dr. Jeffrey Ostler for pointing this out.

<sup>167</sup> Perhaps this is another legacy of Conservation and Preservation studies. During that time, the political and moral arguments for environmental management were clearly defined by the movement, and such a question was unnecessary. Environmental history also generally ignore why other interests, such as corporations, participate in environmental decision making. The answer in all cases is, obviously, self-

forests “in defense of mother earth;” low income Mexican American urban women struggling against toxic waste for the sake of their children’s health; native women protesting mining operations for spiritual reasons; and so forth. This research has revealed such diversity that grouping all activists together under the singular term “environmental movement” can seem problematic.

Yet I would argue that the term is useful because it encourages us to consider how ecological issues can unite diverse and divided people. Often times, when different groups of people face common forms of oppression, fighting that oppression together helps the groups understand and bridge their differences. Environmental pollution is an example of an oppression that diverse people can combat together. Women activists have been key figures in this collaborative process. The working class women of the Mexican American community in Kettleman City are an example. Though they may not seem to have much in common with the white directors of Greenpeace, they did join forces in a campaign against a toxic incinerator. Initially, each group probably had different ideas about why the toxic incinerator was wrong. One could assume that Greenpeace members were more likely to talk about how toxics harm the Earth, while first person accounts reveal that the community members were more concerned about their own health. In the end, their uncommon partnership was symbiotic and educational for both. The community got resources and expertise from Greenpeace that only a big environmental group could provide. Greenpeace organizers got a better understanding of environmental racism and the power of community based organizing. The literature shows several examples of such relationships between “traditional” environmental groups and victims of environmental racism, and women activists have been central in the great majority of them.<sup>168</sup>

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interest. However, the disproportionate environmental impacts of corporate self-interest in comparison to individual self-interest are rarely considered.

<sup>168</sup> See for example Dick.Russell, “Environmental Racism: Minority Communities and their battle against toxics;” Mary.Pardo, “Mexican American Women Grassroots Community Activists: ‘Mothers of East Los Angeles;’” Giovanna Di Chiro, “Defining Environmental Justice: Women’s Voices and Grassroots Politics.”

Without concerted attention to incorporating diverse peoples and issues, the environmental movement risks becoming irrelevant to our increasingly diverse society. Environmental history could slide into irrelevancy too, if it does not develop new perspectives. Studying the motivations of activists, especially contemporary women environmental activists, is a window on the future of the environmental movement. The “second wave” activists demonstrate that there are multiple reasons, from biocentrism to human health and social justice, to become an environmental activist. While many men also believe (and act) on these issues, women have been most active in bringing these issues to the forefront of the environmental agenda. The research I did for this project leads me to believe that this trend will continue. Closer attention to gender would help environmental history chronicle this trend.

The lack of gender perspective in environmental history has been talked about since at least 1990, when historian Carolyn Merchant wrote “Gender and Environmental History” for the Journal of American History. In it, she argues that the framework for research and writing environmental history would be enhanced by gender perspective. Merchant cites episodes from two millennia of history in which gender analysis has enriched understanding about the past. She concludes “Thus the way in which world views, myths, and perceptions are constructed by gender at the cognitive level can be made an integral part of environmental history.”<sup>169</sup>

Studies like this one contribute to the project of making women’s perceptions “constructed by gender at the cognitive level” an integral part of American environmental history. During the Progressive era, the majority of women subscribed to traditional gender roles and believed that their proper sphere of activity was the home. Concurrently, one of the prevailing ideas about the natural environment was that it was one big household in need

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<sup>169</sup> Carolyn Merchant, “Gender and Environmental History,” *The Journal of American History* 76 no. 4 (March 1990): 1117-1121.

of management. The overlap of narrow gender constructions and conservation ideology allowed some women some authority to speak publicly on environmental matters.

Contemporary women's activism, however, features a greater variety of women's perceptions of the environment as "constructed by gender." Thanks to the increased diversity of women voicing environmental concerns, and a more tolerant movement, these perceptions have augmented the (broadly-defined) environmental movement.<sup>170</sup> Mothers and housewives, for example, note that *their* "environment" is the house and the neighborhood where they raise their families. Inner-city environmental justice advocates are overcoming prevalent notions that the environment is a "green" place to assert that it includes *all* the places where people live, work, and play. Therefore the inner-city pollution of a waste incinerator constitutes an environmental threat, as well as an assault on the community. Thus women's perceptions of the environment have convinced mainstream environmental groups like the Sierra Club to include environmental justice issues on their agendas.

Some strands of ecofeminism also present a gender specific construction of the environment. It says that women are biologically closer to the earth's reproductive capacities than men and thus are more empathetic to environmental degradation. Gentle "feminine" ways of treating the earth are more sustainable than demanding "masculine" ways and should be the basis for a sustainable society. While I believe that many of the qualities typically associated with "femininity" could inform a more earth-friendly society, it does not seem constructive to continue to portray them as exclusive to women. Rather, it makes sense to place a high social value on these qualities as *human* qualities and thereby encourage them in all people.

In general, women's environmental activism has made the environmental movement more inclusive by emphasizing that *environmental* issues are also *human* issues. Safety, human health, and social equity are issues which people of all backgrounds and beliefs can



agree are important. By illustrating the connections between social human issues and the environment, many women activists are helping the movement overcome the sexism, racism, and class bias that it inherited from conservation and preservation. At the same time, women working on social-environmental issues are learning from and cooperating with women activists who are working on more traditional environmental issues (wilderness preservation, biodiversity, etc.). Together they are revealing common forms of oppression, such as corporate domination and government corruption. The diverse, inclusive, cooperative approach that women's activism exemplifies will, I think, become a source of relevance, strength, and longevity for the environmental movement throughout the next century.

If environmental history is to record the changes and continuities over time of the environmental movement, it will need to adopt the gender perspective that Merchant prescribed. With it, environmental history will recognize that for (at least) ninety years, women have fought for environmental preservation for the sake of future generations of human, and non-human, life. Whether they are motivated by "maternal instinct" or "gut feeling" or social conditioning, their activism is a significant social and political force. It is informed by an environmental ideology akin to a value system. Their activism says that *all* people, and all future generations, inherently deserve a safe, healthy environment and a means to sustain themselves. If every person subscribed to this ideology, an unprecedented common ground would be established. There, citizens could come together: forest defenders would understand timber workers, law makers would listen to activists, and EPA officials would respect mothers. Thousands of women environmental activists are working at this moment to forge that common ground.

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<sup>170</sup> With the significant persistence of the mother-protector theme.

## AFTERWORD

What if the environmental movement was free of racism, sexism, and class bias? What if environmental history had a lucid understanding of gender? Would the environment be “saved?” Of course not. The second wave of women’s environmental activism may well improve the social nature of the environmental movement, but this does not ensure a corresponding improvement in environmental itself. Corporate business practices, on the other hand, *do* have a direct effect on the environment. There is no doubt that decisions made by the Ford Motor Company have had a more significant impact on the global environment than the activist efforts of Green Peace, Sierra Club, and the Audobon Society combined. Theoretically, government agencies should regulate the extent to which corporations harm the environment, but that subject is another thesis altogether. And as for getting rid of corporations altogether: I applaud the idea, but in America, in this day and age, it seems about as feasible as freeing the earth from the gravity of the sun.

Thus, I am inclined to believe that the most significant long-term solutions for environmental problems will be found only through some sort of multi-lateral, internal reconstruction of corporations. I would like to predict that the overhaul, or dismantling, of corporate structure will be the third wave of women’s environmental activism. In the same way that women have used a variety of innovative techniques to challenge the social inequities of the environmental movement, so they might also combat the social injustices perpetuated by corporate practices. The ultimate goal would be to replace the corporate bottom line that benefits only a few--profit--with a new bottom line that benefits people and the earth--environmental justice.

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