

“The Specter of Environmentalism”: Wilderness, Environmental Politics, and the Evolution of the New Right

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In 1982 conservative Republicans in the House of Representatives released an internal report titled “The Specter of Environmentalism.” Coming on the heels of Ronald Reagan’s landslide election in 1980, the appointment of James Watt to the Department of the Interior, and, above all, growing frustration with environmentalism, the Republican Study Committee’s report reflected a new conservative opposition to the modern environmental movement. It described environmentalists as “extremists” who posed a growing threat to the orderly development of the nation’s resources. It warned that environmentalism was not just about the environment anymore; it was about “an entire outlook of broad political and social affairs.” And it cast environmentalism in the keywords of a culture war: it was the rallying point for liberals, revolutionaries, and the counterculture. The report concluded that challenging environmental reform offered a political opportunity for the Republican party. Just a decade after Richard M. Nixon had signed into law the legislative foundations of the modern environmental regulatory state, the Republican party saw political advantage in opposing efforts to increase protection of the environment, specifically, an expanding and cumbersome array of federal environmental regulations. It was a strategy that played particularly well in the American West, where citizens, local and state government officials, and their political allies in Congress had grown increasingly angry at what they described as the environmentalists’ “War on the West.”¹

The modern American environmental movement has been a broad and varied affair—spanning issues from clean air and water to nuclear energy to international trade treaties and mobilizing people and organizations at both the local and the national levels. Yet much of the historical literature on American environmental politics has explored the social and cultural dimensions of environmental activism and reform while neglecting the evolution of the opposition to environmentalism.² This essay examines the formative role

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¹ Tim Peckinpugh, Republican Study Committee, “Special Report: The Specter of Environmentalism,” 1982, folder 52, box 267, series 9, Sierra Club Records, BANC MSS 71/103 c (Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley); “Interview with James Watt,” *Human Events*, July 3, 1982.

² The classic study of the modern environmental movement is Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955–1985* (New York, 1987). See also Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington, 2005); Adam Rome, *Bulldozer*

that debates over public lands and wilderness protection played in the reorganization and polarization of American environmental politics between the 1960s and 1990s. Focusing on those debates recasts our understanding of modern environmental politics. To explain the genesis of the modern environmental movement in the 1960s and early 1970s, many scholars have emphasized a transition from an older generation of place-based conservation issues, such as parks, public lands, and wilderness, to a newer generation of environmental issues focused on clean air and water, toxics and hazardous waste, and other threats to human health.³ That transition has been important to the dynamics of the modern environmental movement, but it does not explain the organization and transformation of the environmental opposition. Some of the most popular manifestations of the environmental opposition since the 1970s, including the western stirrings known as the sagebrush rebellion and the wise use movement, emerged most forcefully and publicly in response, not to the new environmental issues, but to changed debates over the earlier conservation issues, such as public lands and wilderness.

Analysis of the opposition to protection of public lands raises questions about the West in modern American politics. The federal government had a defining presence in the West during the twentieth century, building dams to harness rivers, expanding the region's transportation system, sponsoring the military-industrial complex, and, most important to this article, overseeing the federal lands. Indeed, the federal government owns 50 percent of the land in Alaska and eleven states in the West (Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming). The politics of these twelve western states have never been entirely congruent with national politics. The fierce libertarianism of western Republicans and the antifederal politics of western Democrats have often confounded national politics. But although the West has often been idiosyncratic, at important moments its politics have not only aligned with, but helped reshape, national politics. Indeed, without the West's sharp turn right, the Republican party would not have held a majority in the Senate during such key periods in American history as the start of the Reagan administration, the mid-1990s (the heyday of the Contract with America), and the start of the George W. Bush administration. Considering the debates over the public lands and the evolution of the New Right together suggests that the West's turn toward the political Right after the 1970s did more than track

in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism (New York, 2001); Hal K. Rothman, *The Greening of a Nation? Environmentalism in the United States since 1945* (Fort Worth, 1998); and Victor B. Scheffer, *The Shaping of Environmentalism in America* (Seattle, 1991). Historians have given little attention to the environmental opposition, according to Samuel P. Hays, *A History of Environmental Politics since 1945* (Pittsburgh, 2000), 109–21. On that opposition, see R. McGregor Cawley, *Federal Land, Western Anger: The Sagebrush Rebellion and Environmental Politics* (Lawrence, 1993); James McCarthy, "Environmentalism, Wise Use, and the Nature of Accumulation in the Rural West," in *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millennium*, ed. Bruce Baun and Noel Castree (New York, 1998), 126–49; Jacqueline Vaughn Switzer, *Green Backlash: The History and Politics of Environmental Opposition in the U.S.* (Boulder, 1997); and David Helvarg, *The War against the Greens: The Wise-Use Movement, the New Right, and Anti-environmental Violence* (San Francisco, 1994).

³ For the distinction between "old" conservation issues and "new" environmental issues, or "first-" and "second-" generation issues, see Robert Cameron Mitchell, Angela A. Mertig, and Riley E. Dunlap, "Twenty Years of Environmental Mobilization: Trends among National Environmental Organizations," in *American Environmentalism: The U.S. Environmental Movement, 1970–1990*, ed. Riley E. Dunlap and Angela G. Mertig (Washington, 1992), 13–14; Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Green Revolution: The Environmental Movement, 1962–1992* (New York, 1993), 14, 18; Stephen Fox, *The American Conservation Movement: John Muir and His Legacy* (Madison, 1981), 291–92; Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence*, 13–39; Philip Shabecoff, *Earth Rising: American Environmentalism in the 21st Century* (Washington, 2000), 3–7; and Scott Hamilton Dewey, *Don't Breathe the Air: Air Pollution and U.S. Environmental Politics, 1945–1970* (College Station, 2000), 1.

the rise of Republican power nationwide; it played an important supporting role in the consolidation of modern conservatism and postwar Republican political power.⁴

To understand the evolution of the environmental opposition and its importance to American politics, one must consider the political claims and strategies that the environmental movement itself pursued in the 1960s and 1970s. On the issue of the public lands, I argue, wilderness advocates adopted a political strategy grounded in “reform liberalism,” which emphasized the role of government in protecting the public interest. Such reform liberalism allied wilderness advocates with the Democratic party, particularly during Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society, and hitched the success of environmental reform to an expansion of the powers and responsibilities of the federal government.⁵ That strategy helps explain the mixed success of the environmental opposition in the 1980s and 1990s. The opposition in the West, represented by the sagebrush rebellion and the wise use movement, emerged as a response, not just to the successes of wilderness advocates, but to the way environmental decisions were made, the role of the federal government in environmental protection, and the consequences that had for free enterprise and private property owners. Between the late 1970s and the early 1990s, the opposition evolved in ways that shaped and reflected broader shifts in the New Right, as critics of public lands protection moved away from the reactionary opposition to the federal government and environmental reform grounded in states’ rights claims characteristic of the sagebrush rebellion, toward the more positive assertions of individual property rights and liberties characteristic of the wise use movement. Notably, whereas in the 1980s wilderness advocates met the challenges of the sagebrush rebellion and the Reagan administration with confidence, they later struggled to do so in the face of the wise use movement. This changing political relationship between wilderness advocates and their opponents—defined by competing definitions of the public good, individual rights, and the role of government—has been important, not just to environmental politics and the American West, but to the rise of the conservative Right in national politics.

Wilderness and the Public Interest

The Wilderness Act of 1964 was among the earliest of a new generation of laws expanding the federal government’s responsibilities for environmental oversight. It established the National Wilderness Preservation System, a new category of protection for federal lands that barred most forms of development and the use of motorized vehicles from designated areas and, equally important, established a ten-year public review process for protecting more such federally owned lands as wilderness in the future. The new law aimed to “secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.” That goal reflected the wilderness movement’s

⁴ On western political history, its complexities, and the importance of the West to the rise of the New Right, see Alan Brinkley, “The Problem of American Conservatism,” *American Historical Review*, 99 (April 1994), 409–29; Richard White, “It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own”: *A New History of the American West* (Norman, 2001), 370–82, 576, 604; Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, 2001); Daniel Kemmis, *This Sovereign Land: A New Vision for Governing the American West* (Washington, 2001), 103–35; and Jennifer Burns, “O Libertarian, Where Is Thy Sting?,” *Journal of Policy History*, 19 (Fall 2007), 452–70.

⁵ For the full taxonomy of liberalism drawn on here, see Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York, 1996), 8–11. On the environmental movement and the Great Society, see Adam Rome, “‘Give Earth a Chance’: The Environmental Movement and the Sixties,” *Journal of American History*, 90 (Sept. 2003), 527–34.

confidence that its strongest argument for protecting the public lands was an appeal to the national interest.⁶

This confidence that the Wilderness Act met a public interest inspired wilderness advocates and propelled the legislation forward. When the Wilderness Act became law in 1964, it was approved by the Senate 73–12 and by the House 373–1. Its coalition of supporters included not only national and local conservation organizations, such as the Wilderness Society and Sierra Club, but the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the American Planning and Civic Association, and the nation's leading labor organization, the American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations. Knowing that environmental politics would be paralyzed by partisanship in the 1980s and 1990s, it is worth considering how the Wilderness Act galvanized such a broad constituency in the 1960s. The campaign was not won with careful research briefs on the state of the nation's natural resources or the scientific benefits of protecting the public lands. Instead, the campaign appealed to national values—patriotism, spirituality, outdoor recreation, and a respect for nature—and the responsibility of the people and the government to protect them.⁷

This appeal to the public interest succeeded in part because of the wilderness movement's moderate approach to politics. Not surprisingly, the Wilderness Act faced opposition, largely from the natural resource industries and western congressional representatives. Industry, concerned that wilderness protection would limit development of the public lands, spearheaded the opposition. In response, wilderness proponents did not challenge the nation's commitment to economic progress or, more specifically, the access of industry to economically valuable public lands. During the eight years of legislative debate that led to the Wilderness Act, proponents of the law accepted compromises that reduced the threat wilderness designations might pose to economic activities. For instance, the Wilderness Act allowed the continuation of grazing in perpetuity, of mineral exploration until 1984, and of some commercial activities (such as guided trips and camps) where they were already established in wilderness areas. And leading wilderness advocates promoted a system that would include 2 or 3 percent of the nation's total land—almost entirely lands that were not valued for timber, minerals, or other economic uses.⁸ This pragmatic approach, which acknowledged the need for both economic development and wilderness preservation, generated broad political support in Congress.

⁶ Wilderness Act, P.L. 16 U.S.C. sec. 2(a) (1964). The Wilderness Act required the Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service to undertake a ten-year wilderness review process that included an agency review at the local and national levels, local public hearings, recommendations to the president, and a presidential recommendation to Congress. In 1964 the Wilderness Act required reviews of approximately 60 million acres. In the 1970s wilderness advocates expanded the reviews to include additional national forest land, federal lands in Alaska, and the public domain overseen by the Bureau of Land Management in the lower forty-eight states. An important exception to the emphasis on the national interest was the call made in William O. Douglas, *A Wilderness Bill of Rights* (New York, 1965). On the commitment to individual rights inspiring that call, see Adam M. Sowards, "William O. Douglas's Wilderness Politics: Public Protest and Committees of Correspondence in the Pacific Northwest," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 37 (Spring 2006), 21–42.

⁷ On the campaign for the Wilderness Act, see Mark Harvey, *Wilderness Forever: Howard Zahniser and the Path to the Wilderness Act* (Seattle, 2005), 186–223; and Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, 2001), 200–237. In 1962 the federal government produced a report on the nation's recreational resources and public lands that was important to the debates over the Wilderness Act. See Wildland Research Center, *Wilderness and Recreation: A Report on Resources, Values, and Problems* (Washington, 1962).

⁸ Stewart L. Udall, "To Save the Wonder of Wilderness," *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, May 27, 1962, p. 13; Michael Nadel, "The Wilderness Act's Land Requirements," *Living Wilderness* (Autumn–Winter 1962), 45.

The Wilderness Act, like much of the important environmental legislation in the 1960s and 1970s, was championed foremost by Democrats, particularly in the Senate, where it enjoyed the support of Frank Church of Idaho, Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota, and Clinton Anderson of New Mexico as well as the Johnson administration. These Democrats built bipartisan support for the legislation with Republicans. Yet party support for the Wilderness Act, as for environmental reform more generally in these years, was not uniform. In the House of Representatives, Wayne Aspinall, a Colorado Democrat, was the legislation's most dogged opponent. Aspinall carefully guarded the West's ability to develop its natural resources; as chair of the House Interior Committee with oversight of the public lands, he was in a powerful position to do so. It was John Saylor, a Pennsylvania Republican, who was the Wilderness Act's leading proponent on the House Interior Committee. Why was a Democrat the leading opponent of the Wilderness Act and a Republican its leading proponent in the House? Both Aspinall and Saylor were political mavericks, whose leadership roles in environmental reform were shaped more by their allegiances to their home constituencies than the priorities of their parties. Aspinall represented rural Colorado and prized western self-determination, which for him meant harnessing federal reclamation to promote the West's independence and economic development. Saylor represented rural Pennsylvania and joined his personal appreciation for the West to a commitment to keeping the federal government out of the energy business. Discouraging federal construction of hydroelectric dams was good for private coal mines and miners in his district. Aspinall and Saylor's roles in this debate offer a reminder of the complex ways environmental issues map onto party politics.⁹

Like much of the environmental legislation enacted in these years, the Wilderness Act vested increased powers in the federal government. Neither wilderness advocates nor environmentalists more generally placed a blind faith in the government; they knew that many environmental problems, from clear-cutting of forests to indiscriminate use of DDT, were the product of government action or inaction. But wilderness activists joined a liberal confidence in the government's ability to protect the public interest with a commitment to participatory democracy. The Wilderness Act required congressional approval of all future expansions of the wilderness system, rather than placing such powers solely in the executive branch. Requiring such congressional oversight was Aspinall's key achievement in the legislative negotiations, but the wilderness movement turned that compromise to its advantage. The Wilderness Society made citizen involvement the centerpiece of its activities. Stewart M. Brandborg, the Wilderness Society's executive director from 1964 to 1976, did not choose to invest the organization's limited resources in economic, scientific, or legal expertise—strategies that became increasingly important for many of the national environmental organizations, including the Wilderness Society, in the 1970s and 1980s. In his view protecting wilderness meant “stimulating widespread involvement of public-spirited private citizens across the country in the work of rounding out the Wilderness System.” For the Wilderness Society in the late 1960s, success was measured not only by the acres of wilderness saved but also by the number of wilderness activists trained. Thousands of citizens took part in wilderness reviews in these years, attending

⁹ On the political history of the Wilderness Act, particularly the roles of Wayne Aspinall and John Saylor, see Thomas G. Smith, *Green Republican: John Saylor and the Preservation of America's Wilderness* (Pittsburgh, 2006), 158–79; Harvey, *Wilderness Forever*, 224–43; and Steven C. Schulte, *Wayne Aspinall and the Shaping of the American West* (Boulder, 2002), 130–62.

wilderness advocacy training programs, surveying potential wilderness areas, participating in agency hearings, and testifying before Congress.¹⁰

It was an effective political strategy for the wilderness movement. Between 1964 and 1978 Congress protected 134 additional wilderness areas, and at the behest of citizens, it often protected more land than the federal land agencies recommended. The wilderness movement's success in shepherding expanded wilderness proposals through the agencies and to Congress is notable for two reasons. First, congressional oversight of wilderness designation might be expected to favor resource industries, their trade associations, and western political interests, which had historically worked in close cooperation to promote economic development on the public lands. That was not so under the Wilderness Act. Through coordinated and sustained citizen participation, wilderness advocates guided the implementation of the Wilderness Act—a task made easier by the low economic value of the public lands considered for protection in the 1960s. Second, the commitment to legislative activism is significant in the context of the late 1960s and early 1970s. While other contemporaneous movements that made rights-based political claims, such as the antiwar movement, black power, and the protests at the Democratic Convention in 1968, favored extralegal protest activities, the wilderness movement worked through the political system for legislative change. There were no tree-sits or road blockades and few extralegal activities on behalf of public lands protection (all became hallmarks of more radical environmental activism in the 1980s). Like a broad range of environmental activists in these years, wilderness advocates remained committed to advancing reform by working through the political system.¹¹

This political strategy is relevant to the place of wilderness advocacy in environmental and American politics. Historians have described a post-World-War-II-era shift from a reform-based liberalism central to the Democratic party to a rights-based liberalism focused on advancing the interests of specific social groups.¹² Many scholars have folded the emerging environmental movement into the new generation of rights-based social movements that reshaped the Democratic party and national politics in the 1960s and 1970s. Scholars have noted that environmentalists argued for people's right to a safe and healthy environment and the rights of nature, much as other social movements of the 1960s advocated on behalf of their constituencies. They have often singled out Earth Day as a pivotal moment in the history of American environmental politics, when new environmental concerns and a changing liberalism seemed to converge, thrusting a new environmental movement into the national limelight. In late April 1970, millions of Americans from all walks of life expressed concern about the environment at political rallies, educational forums, stream cleanups, antibusiness protests, parades, and more. Some activ-

¹⁰ Stewart M. Brandborg, "The Wilderness Act in Practice: The First Three Years," April 7, 1967, folder 10, box 136, series 2.30, Sierra Club National Legislative Office Papers, BANC MSS 71/289 c (Bancroft Library). The strategy of the Wilderness Society is reflected in its archives, congressional wilderness hearings, and its magazine, the *Living Wilderness*. See "Cogs and Levers," *Living Wilderness*, 37 (Winter 1974), 5.

¹¹ On one of the few demonstrations organized in support of public lands protection, an effort in the late 1960s to protect French Pete near Eugene, Oregon, see Kevin R. Marsh, *Drawing Lines in the Forest: Creating Wilderness Areas in the Pacific Northwest* (Seattle, 2007), 113–17. On the emphasis on working through the political system in campaigns for clean air and clean water legislation in the 1960s and early 1970s, see Dewey, *Don't Breathe the Air*, 135–57; and Paul Charles Milazzo, *Unlikely Environmentalists: Congress and Clean Water, 1945–1972* (Lawrence, 2006), 139–62.

¹² On the transformation of liberal politics, see Brinkley, *End of Reform*, 8–11; Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York, 2004), 47–66, 269–300; and Terry H. Anderson, *The Sixties* (New York, 1999), 181–209.

ists hoped to launch what one Earth Day speaker described as a “social revolution based on the platform of ecology.” One historian of the sixties has suggested that “the ecology movement broadened the definition of domination to include human exploitation of nature, and it extended the notion of community to the entire ecosphere.” Focusing on Earth Day makes it easy to find the origins of the modern environmental movement in the social and political ferment of the protest movements of the sixties—emphasizing aspirations to challenge the status quo, embrace militancy, and push for social and cultural change. But such activities and hopes, while important, did not distinguish the most lasting accomplishments in environmental protection in the 1960s and 1970s.¹³

In contrast, situating the growing concern for the environment in an earlier tradition of reform liberalism—embraced most enthusiastically by the Democratic party—reveals that much environmental reform, including protection of public lands, sought to enlarge federal responsibilities, avowedly for the good of all Americans. Indeed, Democratic leadership was so strong that Richard Nixon, a Republican, considered it a political imperative to make environmental issues a centerpiece of his administration’s first-term domestic agenda. He established the Environmental Protection Agency and signed into law a wide range of federal environmental measures, including additional wilderness legislation, the Clean Air Act, the Federal Water Pollution Control Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which was especially important for public lands policy. All either vested new powers in, or expanded the responsibilities of, the federal government for addressing environmental issues. While the issues differed, and rights-based claims were important, particularly in the clean air and water campaigns, the emphasis in many of the campaigns and the legislation they promoted was on the shared threat to the environment and the public welfare and the national interest in addressing environmental degradation. As Senator Edmund Muskie, a Maine Democrat, argued on Earth Day, “The only strategy that makes sense is a total strategy to protect the total environment.” He described the “Environmental Revolution” as “one of laws, not men; one of values, not ideology; and one of achievement, not unfulfilled promises.” The debates over the public lands suggest that this political formula—rooted in reform liberalism, committed to a strong federal government, and predicated on the public interest—more than the protest politics of Earth Day or rights-based political claims, was vital to the emerging environmental movement. Indeed, this liberal faith in the government both laid the groundwork for the modern environmental regulatory state and later provoked the environmental opposition, especially in the West.¹⁴

¹³ Douglas W. Scott, “Student Activism on Environmental Crisis,” *Living Wilderness*, 34 (Spring 1970), 8; Edward P. Morgan, *The Sixties Experience: Hard Lessons about Modern America* (Philadelphia, 1991), 12. Accounts that emphasize the radical or countercultural origins of the “new” environmental movement, include *ibid.*, 231–42; Fox, *American Conservation Movement*, 322–26; Christopher J. Bosso, “Adaptation and Change in the Environmental Movement,” in *Interest Group Politics*, ed. Allan J. Cigler and Burdett A. Loomis (Washington, 1991), 151–54; and Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York, 2001), 88–91.

¹⁴ See J. Brooks Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment* (Albuquerque, 2000). None of the legislation makes specific reference to the rights of people to a clean environment or to the rights of nature. Most often the laws refer to the value of protecting the “public health and welfare.” See the Wilderness Act, P.L. 16 U.S.C. 1131 (1964); Air Pollution Prevention and Control Act, P.L. 42 U.S.C. (1967); National Environmental Policy Act, P.L. 42 U.S.C. 4321 (1970); Clean Air Amendments, P.L. 42 U.S.C. 7401 (1970); and Federal Water Pollution Control Act Amendments, P.L. 33 U.S.C. 1251 (1970). Nixon vetoed the Federal Water Pollution Control amendments, but his veto was overridden with bipartisan support. See Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment*, 182–83. Edmund Muskie, “A Whole Society,” in *Earth Day: The Beginning*, ed. Steve Cotton (New York, 1970), 92. Edmund Muskie did draw on rights-based arguments in his political support for clean air and water. But in the official compilation