Definition: green movement from Philip's Encyclopedia

Campaign to preserve the environment, and to minimize pollution or destruction of the Earth's natural habitat. The green movement formed its own active pressure groups, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, in the 1970s. It gained political representation shortly afterwards in the form of various European Green Parties. In affluent Western societies, effects of the movement included campaigns for environmentally safe products and a concern with the recycling of waste products such as glass, paper and plastics.

Summary Article: Environmental Movement from Encyclopedia of Social Problems

The environmental movement is a social movement dedicated to the management, protection, and restoration of the natural environment. Also referred to as the conservation movement, or more recently, the green movement, it is one of the more successful social movements of the 20th century, for it secured widespread public support and influenced governments to establish agencies and pass legislation consistent with the goals of the movement.

Although the movement is rooted in many ideas from the conservationist movement of the early 20th century, what can be called the modern environmental movement did not begin until the late 1960s and early 1970s. During this time the movement benefited from the increased political mobilization and cultural climate that accompanied the civil rights and anti-war movements. Also helping to launch the environmental movement was new scientific evidence increasingly indicating that human activity was harming the natural environment. Environmentalists pointed to river fires, gas station lines, and factory soot as examples of avoidable human behavior that was damaging to the environment.

Numerous highly publicized disasters occurred during the 1970s and 1980s that further increased public awareness. Two of these events—the near meltdown at Three Mile Island, Pennsylvania, in 1979 and the explosion at Chernobyl, Ukraine, in 1986—involved mishaps with nuclear energy. Both events received considerable media and public attention, resulting in a decline in public support for nuclear energy. In 1989, an oil tanker, the Exxon Valdez, hit a reef off the coast of Alaska, resulting in leakage of an estimated 11 million gallons of oil into the sea, one of the largest oil spills in U.S. history. The images of sea animals covered in oil further outraged the public and produced increasing support for the environmental movement into the 1990s.

Government agencies were established and legislation was passed near the beginning of the environmental movement, and these agencies and laws remain in effect today. In 1969 came the National Environmental Policy Act and establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency as a federal agency devoted to protecting and preserving the environment. In 1973, the Endangered Species Act sought to save species who were threatened by environmental destruction.

Various organizations promoting environmentalism have also had a profound impact. Two of the first
organizations, the Sierra Club and the National Audubon Society, have been promoting environmental issues for more than a century. Sporadic grassroots protests, referred to as Not In My Backyard (NIMBY) movements, reflect local concerns of the environmental movement by discouraging the establishment of waste sites and trash incinerators in local communities. Earth Day—first held on April 22, 1970—continues to serve as a day encouraging Americans to be particularly cognizant of environmental issues.

Recently, the environmental movement began focusing on such macro-level concerns as global warming, ozone depletion, and rain forest loss. In 2005, an agreement among more than 160 countries, known as the Kyoto Protocol, went into effect. Countries ratifying this protocol agreed to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases considered harmful to the environment. The United States has not ratified this protocol despite being the world's most significant producer of greenhouse gases.

Demographically, the environmental movement is primarily a middle-class movement. Many attribute the affluent nature of this movement to the greater amount of time devoted to recreation by the middle class and the tendency for the middle class to focus on aesthetics. A recent trend in the movement, however, has been an emphasis on environmental justice, which emphasizes racial and class disparities in the level of harm caused by pollution and waste. Those participating in the movement tend to be younger in age than participants in most other social movements. Despite the rural nature of the early conservationist movement, those participating in the environmental movement are more likely to reside in urban areas.

Although the environmental movement receives a great deal of public support, some groups resist the movement. Businesses with economic incentives to engage in what many consider to be environmentally harmful practices oppose the movement, typically stating that claims made by environmentalists are exaggerated or mythical. Recently, however, businesses have begun to alter their practices and images to act and appear more environmentally friendly. As a result, the culprit has become the general public, and emphasis has shifted to individual responsibility for environmental concerns.

See also
Environment, Eco-Warriors; Environmental Degradation; Environmental Justice; Environmental Racism; Global Warming; NIMBYism; Social Movements

Further Readings

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