

Environmentalism from Below: Appraising the Efficacy of Small-Scale and Subaltern Environmentalist Organizations

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Conveners: Jon Clapperton, Liza Piper, Helmuth Trischler



Participants: Jon Clapperton (University of Alberta, Canada), Jessica DeWitt (University of Saskatchewan, Canada), Marianna Dudley (University of Bristol, UK), Michael Egan (McMaster University, Canada), Sterling Evans (University of Oklahoma, USA), Zoltan Grossman (Evergreen State College, USA), Emery Hartley (Friends of Clayoquot Sound, Canada), Mark Leeming (Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada), Nancy Janovicek (University of Calgary, Canada), Hereward Longley (University of Alberta, Canada), Mark McLaughlin (Trent University, Canada), Ryan O'Connor (Trent University, Canada), Liza Piper (University of Alberta, Canada), Margarida Queiros (University of Lisbon, Portugal), Henry Trim (University of British Columbia, Canada), Helmuth Trischler (Rachel Carson Center, Germany), John Welch (Simon Fraser University, Canada), Anna Willow (Ohio State University, USA), Frank Zelko (University of Vermont, USA)

This workshop brought together scholars—historians, anthropologists, and geographers—working on the Americas and Europe to consider the role of local, small-scale, and subaltern environmental organizations in shaping the larger wave of environmental consciousness that has had a transformative impact in the West since the late 1960s. The workshop presentations, commentary, and discussion, combined with a public keynote talk delivered by Emery Hartley from the Friends of Clayoquot Sound, assessed the successes and failures of a range of organizations and initiatives, from the Conservation Council of New Brunswick, to Zero Population Growth, to the Fort Apache Heritage Foundation. While the examples presented by individual participants covered a wide range of topics, several common themes emerged from the discussions. Participants aimed to refine our collective understanding of the environmentalism under examination and especially what made it “environmentalism from below.” We examined the importance of class, radical politics, indigenous activism, and insider/outsider dynamics in environmental activism. There was a geographical dimension that recurred in our discussions, as participants identified small and especially rural communities as critical to understanding environmentalism from below. We sought metrics to better understand the efficacy of different environmental initiatives, particularly given that in many instances successful activism could have led or did lead to the termination of a particular initiative, while in other instances, Greenpeace being the most notable example, success meant that the initiative ceased to be small-scale. The environmentalist networks and leadership that overlapped between different case studies, as well as common modes of action, highlighted the presence of a larger cultural dynamic that was being expressed through multiple, dispersed initiatives. Lastly, participants assessed the significance of the workshop itself by asking how scholars can contribute to and help build local, small-scale environmental initiatives. What is the relevance of our work? Our reflections upon this question highlighted the significance of narrative, of telling stories that emphasize optimism and opportunity rather than failure and decline as a means of looking to the past to help chart ways forward in dealing with the manifold environmental challenges of the present.

Workshop participants identified five overarching threads joining the individual papers together:

1) Knowledge. Claiming to “know” the environment and how best to utilize it forms the basis of environmental struggles; having one’s knowledge implemented, in turn, means the acquisition of power. **MARIANNE DUDLEY** explored the competing claims to know the physical space of British rivers among more politically-connected anglers and relative newcomers: canoeists and swimmers. **MICHAEL EGAN** provided a critical examination of how the Canadian government and scientists employed by the state manufactured ignorance and deceit in the debates surrounding mercury pollution in northwestern Ontario, Canada. **MARGARIDA QUEIRÓS** examined the

tensions that arose over state-directed public policies to protect nature, from parks to species reintroduction programs (for example, wolves), in Portugal, and concluded that they fared best when local knowledge was valued. Clearly, one of the greatest challenges small-scale, subaltern, and indigenous groups face is obtaining widespread recognition of their environmental knowledge as legitimate. But, as these case studies from across the globe show, this challenge can be overcome.

2) Action. At some point environmental organizations are usually faced with the decision of whether or not to partake in radical action and physical confrontation. **EMERY HARTLEY**, the workshop's keynote speaker, detailed the history of the Friends of Clayoquot Sound on Canada's west coast. When negotiations with government and industry failed to halt old-growth logging, direct action proved an effective strategy for success. **FRANK ZELKO**, too, showed that the Greenpeace founders' early decision to engage in high-profile, media-savvy confrontations when many less-confrontational paths could have been travelled set its course to become the world's largest direct-action environmental organization. Meanwhile, **MARK MCLAUGHLIN**'s article described how the Conservation Council of New Brunswick chose to maintain a non-radical activist approach throughout its existence to ensure its survival. Key to these papers is the recognition that each environmental group has had to continually rethink their character and to change their tactics to maintain momentum and avoid irrelevance—a challenge that continues to confront, and to some extent confound, the environmental movement as a whole.

3) Alternatives. Many who associate with local, small-scale environmental activism are drawn to the appeal of the alternative lifestyles it offers: an alternative to capitalism, industrial society, unsustainable development, or globalization. **NANCY JANOVICEK** found this self-conscious decision to lead an alternative lifestyle clearly embodied in British Columbia's Kootenay region, a popular spot for 1960s and 1970s "back-to-the-landers," many of whom still reside there. **HENRY TRIM** complicated the relationship between environmentalism and the state and the history of sustainable development through his analysis of the small maritime province of Prince Edward Island's experiments with alternative economic development schemes, such as early renewable energy schemes. Rounding out the papers on Canada's Atlantic coast by focusing on Nova Scotia, **MARK LEEMING** provided evidence to challenge the typical view that rural populations are less interested in alternative economies than are urban, specifically arguing that small-scale, rural environmentalist groups were central to establishing a province-wide environmental movement. **JOHN WELCH**'s personal account of his involvement with the creation of the Fort Apache Heritage Foundation—a non-profit organization chartered by the White Mountain Apache Tribe—made the poignant observation that historic preservation, too, can be an alternative form of environmentalism while simultaneously supporting Native American sovereignty. If the

environmental movement is ultimately concerned with creating alternatives, then focusing on the local and the small-scale is a vital undertaking for both academics and activists.

4) Identity. Environmentalists are constantly engaged in a process of identity (re)formulation in relation to one another and their opponents; at the local level this process is no less important than at the large scale. Both **ANNA WILLOW** and **ZOLTAN GROSSMAN** addressed the emergence of constructive and meaningful cooperation between Aboriginal groups and non-Aboriginal peoples over logging and fossil fuel shipping, respectively. Willow's focus on non-Natives who self-identified as environmentalists in Canada, and Grossman's examination of the Cowboy Indian Alliance demonstrated that collaborations between peoples historically at odds can lead to a more pluralistic environmentalism and greater cross-cultural understanding. Finally, **JON CLAPPERTON** traced the attempt—sometimes successful and sometimes less so—by the Society for the Promotion of Environmental Control (SPEC), Vancouver, to portray themselves as community “insiders” in order to gain popular support among very diverse communities, from city councils and student radicals to labor unions, loggers, and miners. Unpacking and theorizing the processes of identity construction is key to understanding the motivations, actions, successes, and failures of environmental organizations.

5) Connections. Even locally based environmental activism in the late twentieth century often participated in much wider trends. **STERLING EVANS** illuminated marked similarities in the character of indigenous conservation and the protection of cultural resources—in particular ancient petroglyphs—from park lands (and more precisely “badlands”) ranging from Canada and the US to Costa Rica and Brazil. **JESSICA DEWITT** sought to better understand the significant role of a range of “non-elites” in state and provincial park formation and protection across Canada and the United States. **RYAN O’CONNOR** examined the group Zero Population Growth, a US export that was adapted to particular national circumstances, albeit with limited success, in Canada. Recognizing the international connections between these different initiatives highlights the importance of both the particular *and* the universal, or the local *and* the global, in shaping late twentieth-century environmental activism.

Viewed collectively, the papers presented at the workshop illuminate an under-studied aspect of the environmental movement. They created new understandings of the dynamics of environmental organizations over time, the pressures that shaped and directed their policies, and the difficulties in being able to be “heard”—and even the extent to which they wanted to be seen—among the much “louder” and omnipresent national and international environmental organizations. The workshop also served to map the myriad interconnections—local, regional, national, and transitional—among

local, small-scale, and subaltern organizations, as well as their interconnections with other progressive social movements.

Environmentalism “from below” matters. Those who have taken part in such movements and organizations have changed the environment, have taken it upon themselves to redress ecological and social injustices, and will continue to play a vital role in the efficacy of the environmental movement.

Revised versions of the papers discussed in this workshop will be submitted for publication in a collection, edited by Clapperton and Piper, titled *Environmentalism on the Ground: Processes and Possibilities of Small Green Organizing*. Participants will also prepare an issue of the Rachel Carson Center’s *Perspectives* journal focused on environmental knowledge and politics.

-- Lisa Piper and Jon Clapperton