

Introduction

*“The Fight for a Balanced Environment
and the Fight for Social Justice and Dignity
Are Not Unrelated Struggles”*

In the early part of 1962, Houghton Mifflin editor Paul Brooks asked U.S. Supreme Court justice William O. Douglas to write a review of Rachel Carson’s manuscript for *Silent Spring*, a methodical indictment of synthetic pesticides. Among the lines Brooks picked from the review to compose a jacket endorsement, Douglas acclaimed the environmental exposé “the most revolutionary book since *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.” Similarly, when *Silent Spring* was finally published, famed children’s author and essayist E. B. White predicted that it would be “an *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of a book,—the sort that will help turn the tide.” Both were referring to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s startling portrait of slavery, written a century earlier, which many believed had prompted the white South to secede and take up arms against the North. On meeting Stowe at the White House, President Abraham Lincoln had supposedly greeted her by saying, “So this is the little lady who started this great war.” Connecticut senator Abraham Ribicoff later alluded to that particular encounter when he opened a congressional subcommittee meeting about pesticides

and other environmental hazards. “You are the lady who started all this,” he said to Carson. “Will you please proceed?”¹

Even before many people had actually read her book, it seems, eminent intellectuals, public officials, and various others were anointing the popular science writer as the single-most important galvanizing force behind an emergent environmental movement. Unfortunately, Rachel Carson did not get to live with *Silent Spring* and its impact for long. Midway through writing the final draft she was diagnosed with breast cancer, which metastasized to her lymph nodes, and two years after the book came out she died. In the interim, exhausting radiation treatments and debilitating infections made it increasingly difficult for her to travel and be publicly active. So when the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) held its annual conference in Detroit in March of 1963 and Carson canceled as a keynote speaker, the NWF had to find a replacement. Executive Director Thomas Kimball did not need to look far. He asked Detroit-based United Auto Workers (UAW) president Walter Reuther to fill in, and Reuther gladly agreed. At the conference, NWF president Dr. Paul A. Herbert gushingly introduced him to the audience, lauding the working-class firebrand for his uncommon efforts “to help the common man.” Taking the podium, Reuther described the modern environmental catastrophe that humanity was facing, much as Carson might have done but characterizing it as a matter of social and economic justice. “There is a feeling of utmost urgency,” he insisted, “in the war against selfishness, greed, and apathy in meeting the ever-increasing needs of the people,” and he finished by pointing out the slow and inadequate efforts to control and abate industrial pollution.²

The next year, when President Lyndon Johnson delivered his “Great Society” speech at the University of Michigan’s com-

mencement ceremony, Reuther was invited to be on the stage, since the two men shared hopes of ending poverty in America and ridding the nation of racism. Shortly after, in the fall of 1965, the labor leader opened a UAW-sponsored "United Action for Clean Water Conference," an event attended by more than a thousand delegates representing a variety of labor unions, sportsmen's clubs, environmental organizations, and civic groups, the largest of its kind to date, and he invoked Johnson's resonant words. "A great society," Reuther declared, "is a society more concerned with the quality of its goals than the quantity of its goods." But, he lamented, the marketplace was becoming the only measure of good. To avert disaster there needed to be a "grand crusade," following a new set of values, with people mobilized at the community, state, and national levels to fight for clean water, pure air, and livable cities, challenging recalcitrant governments and irresponsible industry.³ Subsequently, in 1967, Reuther had the UAW establish a Department of Conservation and Resource Development. The union did this, department director Olga Madar explained, "because our members and their families are directly affected by the environment around them, both inside and outside of the plants in which they work." Yet the UAW was not concerned exclusively with its own membership. "Air and water pollution, the desecration of our land, and the unwise use of our natural resources," Madar said, "are of great concern to us all."⁴

Just as Carson's voice was silenced by untimely death, however, Walter Reuther's own environmental advocacy was also cut short by unexpected tragedy. At the end of the 1960s, he had convinced the UAW executive board to replace the union's aging lake retreat at Port Huron, outside of Detroit, with a new labor education and vacation center at the more remote Black Lake. This would be "a thing of beauty," he hoped, "where man and nature can live in

harmony.” But only one week after he spoke to University of Michigan students on the first Earth Day, in April 1970, Reuther flew with his wife, an architect, and a few others to see the nearly finished building, and their plane crashed as it was landing, killing everyone on board. Nevertheless, the UAW went ahead with a planned environmental meeting at Black Lake that same year, in July, cosponsored by Environmental Action, the national group that had coordinated the Earth Day happenings. The weekend prior, the UAW and various conservation and environmental groups had delivered a nineteen-point plan to every U.S. senator, including a call for regulating industrial and auto emissions and improving mass transportation. At the conference—attended by students, community activists, and labor leaders—workshops focused primarily on “urban and industrial pollution” as well as the educational, legal, and political methods to force reforms. Victor Reuther, Walter’s brother, closed the meeting and received a standing ovation when he called on “working people and students” to join together against the “cold and calculated” strategy of industry and their allies to divide them.⁵

Throughout the next decade, Conservation Department director Olga Madar oversaw continued efforts to enact more environmental legislation as well as encourage labor unions, environmental organizations, and consumer groups to develop a common agenda. She had some initial success in 1971, when Michigan senator Philip Hart organized the Urban Environment Conference (UEC), which included the United Auto Workers, United Steel Workers, and Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers, as well as the Sierra Club and National Welfare Rights Organization. Several years later, some of those participants helped form Environmentalists for Full Employment (EFFE), and in the spring of 1976 the UAW, UEC, and EFFE hosted

another meeting at Black Lake, which they titled “Working for Environmental and Economic Justice and Jobs.” This was not as well attended as the 1970 conference, and discordant comments from some participants suggested that the weakening economy and other factors were starting to take their toll on inclusive environmentalism. Yet the very fact of the gathering, and perhaps the presence of people like Friends of the Earth leader David Brower, demonstrated the open movement’s hardiness. Greeting the few hundred activists assembled, the new UAW president, Leonard Woodcock, echoed his predecessor, claiming “common cause between union members and environmentalists—between workers, poor people, minorities, and those seeking to protect our natural resources.”⁶

“A REVOLUTIONARY BOOK”

As the brief chronicle of events above shows, United Auto Workers president Walter Reuther played a critical role in making and shaping the American environmental movement, and over the course of more than a decade he and Olga Madar worked diligently to keep the UAW at its center. What’s more, their efforts were not unknown at the time. They were recognized by preservation and conservation groups, applauded by other union leaders and members, welcomed by sympathetic public officials in state legislatures, Congress, regulatory agencies, and the White House, and regularly profiled in print and broadcast media. So how we tend to remember the origins of environmentalism today is perplexing. Rarely if ever do we pay attention to the particular ways in which working people experienced environmental problems, and equally rarely do we acknowledge the efforts workers, their unions, and labor leaders made to address those

problems, beginning at least as early as the 1940s. The standard interpretation of the American environmental movement's origins has changed little since *Silent Spring's* publication in 1962, unfailingly repeating the claims that the book—as well as a CBS television documentary “The Silent Spring of Rachel Carson,” broadcast in April 1963—“turned the tide” and “started it all.”

Among academics there is a near consensus about *Silent Spring* and its historical significance. Carson's biographer brands it “a revolutionary book” and credits it with seeding “a powerful social movement that would alter the course of American history.”⁷ A second, well-respected historian claims, “No single event played a greater role in the birth of modern environmentalism than the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and its assault on insecticides.”⁸ Another scholar calls the book “one of the most politically and culturally influential in American history” and commends Carson “for being the godmother of the Environmental Protection Agency, the ban on DDT and other pesticides, Earth Day, the 1972 Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act, and indeed of ‘Environmentalism’ as a philosophy and political movement.”⁹ A fourth cites “Rachel Carson's eloquent book” for dramatizing “the elemental interdependence of life on the planet,” revealing the ecological underpinnings of “modern consumer society,” and laying the groundwork for the environmental movement.¹⁰ And one historian boldly insists that the book launched the “modern global environmental movement,” inspiring and widening activism in the United States and “creating an environmental awareness” around the world.¹¹

This “big book” origin story is ubiquitous beyond academic circles as well. To mark *Silent Spring's* fiftieth anniversary, in 2012, for example, the *New York Times Magazine* ran a story titled “How ‘Silent Spring’ Ignited the Environmental Movement,”

claiming that the book's celebrated author "influenced the environmental movement as no one had since the 19th century's most celebrated hermit, Henry David Thoreau, wrote about Walden Pond."¹² Across the Atlantic that same year, the *Guardian* hailed *Silent Spring* as "one of the most effective denunciations of industrial malpractice ever written" and acknowledged that it is "widely credited with triggering popular ecological awareness in the US and Europe." The story quotes former Friends of the Earth director Jonathon Porritt heralding Carson as the first person to give voice to the notion that human beings had acquired the power to damage the natural world, as well as novelist (and social activist) Doris Lessing saying that the American scientist "was the originator of ecological concerns."¹³

Children's literature is also suffused with the standard dogma, obvious by titles alone, including *Rachel Carson: Pioneer of Ecology*, *Rachel Carson: Founder of the Environmental Movement*, and *Rachel Carson and Her Book That Changed the World*. The last, published in 2013, ends with a dense, small-print "Epilogue," apparently for adults, explaining that *Silent Spring* "opened the minds of millions to what was considered to be a new concept at the time: what we do to the air, water, and soil directly affects us, future generations, and animals and plants that share the earth with us."¹⁴ Another book, aimed at early elementary readers, has the unassuming title *Rachel: The Story of Rachel Carson*, but it finishes with the customary sweeping claim. "It is generally agreed," the author confidently states, "that today's environmental movement began with the publication of *Silent Spring*."¹⁵

Most if not all of the scholarly and popular accounts frame Carson's efforts to enlighten the American public as both extraordinarily prescient and heroically solitary. By their lights, her personal love of nature and training as a marine biologist gave

Carson an ecological consciousness that was very much contrary to prevailing assumptions of the day. And well-honed writing skills allowed her to single-handedly convince millions to adopt this sensibility, despite the arrogant vocal opposition of male scientists and a carefully crafted misinformation campaign waged by a powerful pesticide industry. Even existing conservation groups (the National Wildlife Federation among them) supposedly failed to come to Carson's defense.¹⁶ To many residents of postwar suburbs, however, *Silent Spring* was a "shocking revelation," one that galvanized them to join and remake old conservation organizations (like the NWF and Sierra Club) and to establish new environmental groups (like the Environmental Defense Fund and Friends of the Earth). This growing awareness and activist inclination became more apparent as the 1960s drew to a close, culminating with the first Earth Day, the moment that truly transformed what was still purportedly "inchoate" and "fragmented" engagement into a national movement that subsequently became the main dynamic force supporting a whole range of new federal environmental laws.¹⁷

To be sure, Rachel Carson did contribute to making American environmentalism. She introduced some readers (and viewers) to the concept that all living things are connected to one another and their physical environment, a scientific principle not original to her but one she articulated with clarity and authority. Her particular case centered on the countless ill effects of pesticides, yet in outlining that she demonstrated its wider cogency. More concretely, *Silent Spring* prompted President Kennedy to establish an advisory committee, which issued a report, "The Use of Pesticides," in May 1963, pointing out certain benefits of pesticides but supporting the claim that much was unknown about their potentially harmful effects. Around the same time, several congress-

sional committees organized hearings and proposed legislation, some of which passed, including a bill requiring consultation between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and state wildlife agencies before spraying, another establishing guidelines for better labeling and ensuring closer evaluation of chemicals used as pesticides, and one that prevented manufacturers from marketing pesticides without U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) registration. Later, in 1972, the newly formed Environmental Protection Agency banned most domestic application of DDT, and in 1976 the Toxic Substances Control Act established more comprehensive regulation for a range of chemical products.¹⁸

While it is reasonable to credit Rachel Carson with helping to popularize ecology as well as influence environmental regulatory policy, however, it stretches facts to claim that she brought the American environmental movement into being. Putting her at the center of the story, or putting *Silent Spring* there, substitutes a simple yet appealing mythology for a more complicated account of what actually happened. The conventional version of events not only exaggerates Carson and her book's historical importance (a mostly harmless error) but also fundamentally misunderstands environmentalism's full history (a greater error with real present-day implications). It does not properly explain the movement's origins (the "why") or correctly date it (the "when") or fully consider the wide range of historical actors involved (the "who"). That is, it misses the mark for the main questions that historians struggle to answer when crafting any sound interpretation of change over time, one faithful to the available historical evidence and carefully constructed according to certain standards of scholarship.

In the *Silent Spring* origin story the emphasis is on how unintended consequences of post-World War II technological

advances made the environmental movement necessary. Nuclear tests (part of a Cold War weapons race) filled the atmosphere with radioactive fallout, automobiles demanded ever-expanding road networks and produced noxious exhaust, other consumer goods (often plastic) added to the waste stream, tract housing construction (sustained by postwar federal mortgage guarantees) threatened to transform millions of acres of wetlands, hillsides, and floodplains, and pesticides (which had their origins in chemical warfare research) brought toxins directly to people's bucolic neighborhoods, yards, and homes. The standard narrative also highlights suburbanization—the move to the bucolic places—as the primary experience galvanizing consciousness and protest. During the 1950s and 1960s, white, middle-class Americans migrated from city to suburb by the millions, carrying a supposedly new regard for “quality of home and leisure,” and the contrast between those values and the new looming threats to the natural environment and human well-being was stark. It was this contrast that Carson so adeptly presented in an attempt to effect change, calling on readers to save songbirds and themselves from an imminent chemical-laden apocalypse, and they eagerly responded by making an environmental movement.¹⁹

By exclusively concentrating on the postwar era, though, the familiar telling overlooks America's longer environmental transformation by industrialization. From its beginning in the nineteenth century, industrial manufacturing consumed vast amounts of natural resources and generated considerable amounts of noxious waste. Textile and paper mills, iron foundries, leather tanneries, cartridge (i.e., munition) factories, slaughterhouses, and other industry dumped millions of gallons of wastewater—laden with scouring chemicals, spent dyes, curing liquors, lubricant oil, and animal parts—directly into local streams and rivers.

There it mixed with raw sewage and household refuse from the thousands of workers drawn to bustling cities for jobs, living (and dying) in dense quarters with only primitive municipal sanitation services. This turned the waterways into “sewer basins,” often the source of drinking water for downstream communities, and that made them a highly effective means to communicate water-borne pathogens. As a result, the ever-increasing and ever-growing industrial towns and cities saw recurrent deadly disease epidemics (like cholera and typhoid), besides elevated rates of illness and death from other “crowd” diseases (such as tuberculosis and diphtheria).

Worsening conditions eventually generated widespread apprehension and state intervention. In New England in the years after the Civil War, public health crusaders organized city and state boards of health and pushed for pollution control laws. Henry Ingersoll Bowditch, a self-proclaimed “radical” who chaired the Massachusetts board, pitched these efforts as a logical expansion of traditional American rights. “We believe that all citizens have an inherent right to the enjoyment of pure and uncontaminated air, and water, and soil,” he explained, “and that no one should be allowed to trespass upon it by his carelessness, or his avarice, or even his ignorance.” Persuaded by that appeal, in 1878 the Massachusetts legislature passed a law prohibiting the discharge of untreated industrial waste and sewage into the state’s streams and rivers. Not surprisingly, manufacturers saw the legislation as a threat, and they convinced the governor to merge the board of health with the boards of lunacy and charity and appoint a corporate lawyer as the new board’s chair. Less than a decade later, however, lawmakers reestablished a separate board of health and enacted a measure expanding health officials’ authority to oversee water quality for all inland waters,

again affirming the principle of state regulatory action to address environmental problems.²⁰

By the turn of the next century, much of the focus on water pollution in Massachusetts had shifted to purifying drinking water. Ellen Swallow Richards—the first woman to enroll at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the first woman to teach there, and a founder of both “sanitary” chemistry and bacteriology—played a critical role in this area. She oversaw the work of a group of scientists at a newly organized experiment station perched on the banks of the Merrimack River in Lawrence. There they conducted tests of various filtering methods, aeration techniques, and coagulation agents, many of them quite successful. Subsequently, in 1907 the city began cleaning all of its daily water supply, significantly lowering mortality from water-borne disease and prompting other cities across the country to follow their lead. Most hesitated to treat their raw sewage, though, since there was no advantage in it for them, and mills and factories continued to dump manufacturing wastes into rivers and streams without restraint. These pollution problems lingered until later, in New England and elsewhere, although when state and federal governments did begin to address them in the 1930s, throughout the region and across the United States, there was already well-established precedent for public responsibility and regulatory law.

In fact, accounts of environmentalism that venerate *Silent Spring* as a pivotal centerpiece not only miss the growing environmental awareness prompted by industrialization but also exhibit a striking disregard for the earlier activism that it provoked, even neglecting what was happening on the very eve of the book’s publication. In a speech at the National Parks Association’s annual meeting, Carson herself acknowledged how her interest in the dangers of pesticides came partly from letters

people had sent to her pleading that she do something about federal spraying programs in their neighborhoods. And in her book and other public appearances she alluded to the importance of a 1957 lawsuit by some Long Island residents to stop the USDA from spraying in their community.²¹ Yet neither *Silent Spring* itself, nor the public conversation about the book or the histories of environmentalism that feature it, gives any real sense of the many citizen campaigns that were already working on a whole range of environmental problems. If *Silent Spring* had an impact, however, it was because it appeared in a receptive place and time, in the same way that Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* contributed to a long-established abolitionist movement. Certainly by the mid-twentieth century a considerable portion of the American public had realized that modern industrial "progress" needed to be calibrated and controlled to protect humankind and the rest of the natural world, and countless numbers of people had started to do something about it, without Carson's prompting, inspiration, or guidance.

In the southern Appalachian coalfields, for example, during the 1940s and 1950s local residents were waging an increasingly militant fight against new surface mining methods, one way industrialization had come to the countryside. Early on in eastern Ohio, farmers and their rural allies joined together to challenge operators who leased land, scoured the topsoil for the coal below, and left without doing proper reclamation (or sometimes without doing any at all). Wellsville legislator William F. Daugherty first proposed a control bill to deal with this in 1937, and others followed, but it was not until after World War II that support was strong enough to actually get a law passed. "The demand for legislation to regulate coal stripping has come from the people," the editor for the *Cadiz Republican* declared, and their campaign

was “a cry for self-preservation.” As one local farm woman explained, what once was a pastoral countryside was fast being ruined. The lovely fields had been turned upside down, she said, “farm homes destroyed and in their places [were] those awful unsightly piles of dirt.” As Ohio State Grange Master Joseph Fichter and many others pointed out, this “exploitation of people and our God-given natural resources” was particularly short-sighted, sacrificing otherwise plentiful natural resources as well as the health of entire communities for a quick profit. Governor Frank Lausche agreed (he once described stripping as “sheer butchery, disemboweling the land and leaving its ugly entrails exhibited to the naked eye”), and he very willingly signed the control bill the legislature passed in 1947.²²

Similarly, in western Pennsylvania, where an adolescent Rachel Carson once roamed the hills to go bird watching, conservation-minded sportsmen got a control law passed in 1945. A decade and a half later, and a full year before the publication of *Silent Spring*, deep miners and other workers, many of them hunters and anglers themselves, joined together to enact even stricter regulatory legislation in the face of considerable coal operator resistance. “We are unequivocally opposed,” the Allegheny County Labor Committee declared at one point, “to the selfish interests and to the legislators they appear to control who resist effective regulation of strip mining, [which] despoils our natural resources and endangers the health and lives of our citizens.” The deep miners were watching their jobs disappear to the more efficient, nonunion, unregulated strip mines, which also ravaged local communities with deforestation, landslides, acid runoff, and other environmental effects. Worried that lobbying alone would not be enough to get a law passed, someone (possibly a miner or group of miners familiar with explosives)

resorted to industrial sabotage. One night in July 1961 they dynamited a power shovel and bulldozer at a Fayette County strip mine. Shortly after, Senator John Haluska, a friend of one of the state's largest surface mine operators, received a death threat for holding a proposed regulatory bill in his committee. The note warned him to stop dithering and set an August 8 deadline, and it was signed "an honest sportsman who is a good shot with a gun." Haluska took this threat seriously and released the bill with just two days to spare. Then, when it got held up in the assembly, United Mine Workers District 5 president Jock Yablonski and other union officials intervened, putting pressure on the holdouts, and legislators finally passed the improved law.²³

Of course, by excluding activism like the campaign against strip mining in Appalachia from the history of environmentalism, we not only get the cause and timing of the movement wrong but also fail to see the full set of historical actors who made it. The "big book" interpretation assumes a "great man" (or rather, a "great woman") understanding of historical change. It privileges the writings of a lone scientist, missing the many other countless ordinary people who contemplated, worried over, and acted to address various environmental problems. Without question, some individuals did have an outsized role in seeding and growing American environmentalism—from Henry Ingersoll Bowditch and Ellen Swallow Richards in the nineteenth century to Walter Reuther and Olga Madar in the twentieth, as well as Rachel Carson—and they should be prominently included in any historical record. Fixing on one person, or just a handful, however, cannot truly explain change or continuity over time. History is usually made by a dynamic interplay between a select few acting "from the top down" and a mass of people acting "from the bottom up," and often the efforts from below are more

important, especially when it comes to social movements. That was certainly true for environmentalism, which took root and spread largely because of common people's efforts. This was not because they read a particular book or heard a certain speech or watched a television program but (initially, at least) because they were driven by their own actual circumstances. And sometimes they thought and acted contrary to those who were most famously recognized for defining an environmental ethic and leading environmental organizations.

In southern California, for instance, where decades of land consolidation and the adoption of industrial farming methods had effectively created "factories in the field," migrant Mexican and Mexican American farmworkers joined together in a union campaign that lasted throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s and intentionally attempted to attract environmental allies. The workers' primary grievances were meager wages, long hours, and inadequate housing as well as makeshift or nonexistent protection from exposure to pesticides and herbicides. Since the campaign coincided with the rise of the *chicano* empowerment movement, they also linked their health concerns to a pattern of racial discrimination, an important connection that other activists would later term "environmental racism."

The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) first investigated agricultural chemical poisoning in 1949, when two dozen pear pickers were sickened by exposure to parathion. Even without correcting for the high rate of underreporting, within a decade agriculture had the highest rate of occupational disease among all the state's industries, most of that concentrated in the counties with the largest number of migrant farmworkers. Oddly, though, with the exception of a few brief lines, Rachel Carson paid little attention to the plight of these or any

other workers in *Silent Spring*. What's more, the lobbying she did, along with the government response it prompted, led growers to switch from chemicals that, though less persistent, were more acutely toxic when applied, providing greater protection for consumers while increasing the risks to field hands (and other living things nearby). By the mid-1960s, when the CDPH did another survey, 71 percent of farmworkers questioned had some symptom of chemical-related illness, from itching and chills to headaches and stomach pains.²⁴

As conditions in the fields and orchards became increasingly intolerable, community activists César Chávez and Dolores Huerta came to the San Joaquin Valley and founded the National Farm Workers Association, eventually combining forces with the primarily Filipino Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee to form the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee. Together, they helped thousands of field hands march, picket, and strike for union recognition and collective bargaining rights, but it was a difficult struggle. Growers, public officials, and police colluded to intimidate, beat, and jail activists, and so the workers solicited outside support. Early on, Walter Reuther made a visit with a check from the UAW for \$10,000 as well as a pledge to contribute \$5,000 a month, and later his union bankrolled a short film, *Brothers and Sisters*, which farmworker organizers used to tour the country. Meanwhile, volunteer nurse Marion Moses established a health and safety commission to investigate pesticide exposure, and California Rural Legal Assistance lawyer Ralph Abascal examined spray application records, lab analyses, and lawsuits, assembling a critical mass of evidence. Drawing on that work, in 1965 the newly renamed United Farm Workers (UFW) called for a consumer boycott of table grapes, with a stunning pamphlet titled "The Poisons We Eat."²⁵

Notwithstanding seemingly common interests, however, the UFW repeatedly encountered hesitation from “environmental” and “ecology” activists. When a radical Berkeley group made an “Ecology Walk” against “agri-chemical powers” in 1970, organizers kept their distance from striking workers, to “maintain a safe neutrality” and “reach all the people they wanted to reach.” Some of the marchers ignored the plan, split from the procession midway, and went to an Easter mass in Delano, where union members applauded their disobedience. “The farm workers’ struggle,” they insisted, “is a valid and important part of Ecology.”²⁶ Mostly, though, attempts to explain the logic of solidarity fell on deaf ears, and local and national environmental groups continued to exhibit cautious reluctance in the decade following. “Surely,” one frustrated UFW staff member wrote in a letter to the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), “the fight for a balanced environment and the fight for social justice and dignity are not unrelated struggles.”²⁷ Leaders at the EDF, Sierra Club, and other organizations claimed to agree, yet they did little or nothing to lend their membership and resources to the campaign.²⁸

“A MATTER OF DEFINITION”

Just as United Farm Worker organizers were perplexed by environmental leaders’ reluctance to broaden their perspective, it might seem puzzling why it has been so difficult to get historians, journalists, children’s authors, and others to adopt a more inclusive interpretation of environmentalism’s origins. The root of the problem in both cases is a matter of definition—who counts as an “environmentalist” and what counts as “environmentalism.” Many of those who are part of the environmental movement or who are contributing to telling the movement’s

story simply cannot imagine that workers and the poor and people who are not white might have an environmental sensibility or that they might participate in environmental protest, whether past or present. They also have trouble regarding the typically multifold concerns of working people, the impoverished, African Americans, Latinos, and others as properly environmental, discounting any effort that explicitly links environmental problems and economic or social injustice, or labeling it as something else. Consequently, activists are challenged to expand environmentalism's ranks and enlarge its agenda, and historians are challenged to see anything other than the flawed version of the environmental movement's founding and unfolding, one focused mostly on the white middle-class and limited to their particular interests.

This narrow perspective is clear in the stark absence of African Americans from almost all accounts of wilderness preservation, resource conservation, and environmental activism. In part, the absence reflects their somewhat marginal place in each. Many past leaders, organizations, and followers associated with those endeavors were white, and they presumed that only white (elite) people had the civic-mindedness, appreciation of beauty, and concern for the future to care about the natural world. Often-times they matched this presumption with an explicit unwillingness to welcome black participation as well as active efforts to exclude blacks from their ranks. "The pot-hunting Negro," lamented game conservation advocate Charles Askins in 1909, "has all the skill of the Indian, has more industry in his loafing, and kills without pity and without restraint." They hunted for food, he explained, not for sport, and once guns became more readily available, they began to decimate local songbird populations, prompting southern sportsmen to complain, "The niggers

are killing our quail.”²⁹ Meanwhile, the Prairie Club, the Midwest equivalent to the Sierra Club in the West and Appalachian Trail Club in the East, stated that its wilderness activities were “open to white people of any nationality or creed.”³⁰

In the face of the color line’s extension to these arenas of public life, some blacks simply created separate organizations, conjoining appreciation of nature with racial defiance. In 1923, for example, seventeen African American residents of St. Paul established the Gopher Gun Club, “to protect game fish and wild birds of all varieties” and to secure “adequate hunting grounds to meet the demand of the Northwest sportsman.” Their hope was to purchase 600 acres outright to serve as a “hunting reserve and fishing point,” and they planned to erect cottages there for members to bring their friends and families on weekend trips and longer vacations. If that proved too difficult, however, they intended to lease 1,000 acres from a local bank, which had already agreed to their terms. “The necessity of such a plan,” the charter members declared, “should be obvious to every race person in the Twin Cities.”³¹

In fact, the lack of African Americans in the narrative about environmentalism is also a failure to acknowledge black environmental thinking and protest that did happen, often because it somehow deviates from a standard “white” understanding of what warrants recognition. Environmental histories following in the footsteps of *Silent Spring* easily incorporate white suburban residents’ objections to DDT spraying in their neighborhoods, for instance, but they tend not to include black activists’ campaigns against lead poisoning caused by peeling paint in city slum apartments. Why? The latter very much resembles the former, except for race and place. In one of the very few historical accounts of the struggle to deal with lead, historian Robert

Gioielli details how activists in the northside ghettos of St. Louis worked diligently over the course of the 1960s and 1970s to set up blood tests for thousands of children and to push public officials to enact and enforce lead paint laws there. When they sought aid from scientist Barry Commoner at nearby Washington University, he helped them establish the Environmental Field Program, which hired African American Wilbur Thomas as the director. On the first Earth Day, in April 1970, Thomas gave a speech titled “Black Survival in our Polluted Cities,” explaining the racist economic and political forces responsible for the environmental burden urban black Americans experienced. St. Louis passed its first lead law soon after, yet this proved too slow to adequately address the problem, since it split enforcement between the health department and housing division. Organizers then began a series of direct action protests led by the newly formed People’s Coalition against Lead Poisoning, including sit-ins at realtors’ offices and rent strikes against recalcitrant landlords. This eventually led to modifications in the law, Gioielli observes, although the changes still did not bring an end to lead poisoning, and the campaign continued at local, state, and national levels.³²

The book you are reading now, *The Myth of “Silent Spring,”* is meant to provide a more accurate (but not comprehensive) history of the American environmental movement, incorporating stories like the black activists’ lead campaign in St. Louis, Mexican and Mexican American farmworkers’ pesticide battle in southern California, Appalachian mountain residents’ struggle against surface coal mining, Michigan autoworkers’ organizing against water pollution, and other critical yet slighted contributions to a tradition of environmental protest in this country. It is necessarily a “long” history, not by its actual length but rather

by its scope, starting in the early nineteenth century, when industrialization began to create the environmental problems that spurred environmental awareness and galvanized environmental activism, and ending in our own century, when industrial capitalism is still the root cause of the most imminent and ominous environmental threats. This unusual recasting of environmentalism's past is essential because, at the very basic level, we should know what really happened, which is not what many think happened. The interpretation is more than an abstract or academic argument, however, since how we understand the environmental movement's history also guides how we conceptualize and do environmental activism in the present. Pushing the origins of environmental concerns back to the start of the modern industrial era, marking the ways class exploitation, racial inequality, and other forms of social injustice were inextricably linked to those evolving concerns, and acknowledging the role many ordinary people played in doing something about them—all of that enables us to better see the full complexity of environmental problems today and empowers us to shape our activism accordingly.³³

The rest of the book following this introduction is organized into three chapters and a conclusion, arranged chronologically as well as topically, with an eye to helping readers easily follow the revisionist narrative they build. Each chapter begins with reference to an aspect of *Silent Spring*, to raise initial questions about environmentalism's traditional rendering and suggest how and why we need a different account. Chapter 1, "I Think Less of the Factory Than of My Native Dell," focuses on the environmental conflict that played out with the rise of industrial capitalism in New England during the nineteenth century and continues to follow that story in a few places out West. Chapter 2, "Why Don't

They Dump the Garbage on the Bully-Vards?," concentrates mainly on the Midwest during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as different groups of Americans continued to develop their environmental thinking and organize themselves to confront various environmental problems. Chapter 3, "Massive Mobilization for a Great Citizen Crusade," ranges more widely by geography, sampling the vast array of environmental campaigns that occurred both before and after *Silent Spring* was published. And the conclusion, "They Keep Threatening Us with the Loss of Our Jobs," highlights a particular way that our stunted historical consciousness about environmentalism's origins and evolution hinders contemporary efforts to organize an effective environmental movement, bringing history to bear on the supposedly mutually exclusive choice of "jobs versus environment."

One thing that will become evident from chapter to chapter is that the way people have thought about environmental problems, and what they have tried to do about them, varied from place to place and changed over time. American environmentalism was certainly a polyglot and dynamic affair, containing a whole host of ideas and approaches, manifested in wide-ranging individual and group action. Talking about this as part of a single "environmental movement," however, does not inevitably understate or overlook that diversity. Just as it is possible to better understand the rich variety of workers' consciousness and organizing by considering it all as part of a "labor movement," framing environmentalism in a similar manner can actually make its complexity more rather than less evident. It can also draw attention to how different kinds of thinking about managing natural resource use, preserving wilderness, and controlling pollution are interrelated, evolving from decade to decade,

building on one another, whether in hostile opposition or mutual validation, even sometimes demonstrating considerable continuity. Perhaps the clearest example of this is how we are compelled to retell the history of “environmental justice” activism (supposedly born from a sharp break with mainstream environmentalism in the 1980s and 1990s) by connecting it to a long-standing, rich tradition of similarly militant protest. That tradition likewise linked environmental problems to economic inequality and ethnic and racial marginalization, emphasized grassroots community organizing in the face of corporate and government intransigence, and occasionally employed nonviolent civil disobedience as well as armed self-defense.

Finally, it should be noted that a revisionist interpretation of American environmentalism would not be possible without a steady stream of other pioneering scholarly books and articles published over the last decade and a half (or more). Taken together, they point toward a broader, more inclusive, more empowering narrative of American environmentalism. As often as possible, in relevant sections, *The Myth of “Silent Spring”* acknowledges individual historians for their contributions, crediting them for venturing into uncharted territory and reconfiguring the shape of the larger story (like John Cumbler and his *Reasonable Use*) or returning to well-worked ground and uncovering fresh insights (like Elizabeth Blum and her *Love Canal Revisited*). For readers who want to explore a particular topic or theme in greater depth, the book includes a final section, “Further Reading,” with an abbreviated list of sources that were most useful to me in developing the ideas presented here.