

Ideas, actors and political practices in the environmental history of Europe

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the development of environmental ideas, actors involved in environmental politics and policy, and political practices over the past 200 years. It highlights the interconnected nature of ideas, actors and practices, and emphasizes important continuities – such as the role of civil society – but also important changes, notably those associated with the “environmental revolution” of the 1970s, which globalized and politicised concerns about nature, and shifted it from a conservative, conservation concern to a progressive issue, relating to humanity’s future.



Across borders, anti-nuclear protest was an important part of environmentalist mobilization in the 1970s. Transboundary Protest against the Swedish Barsebäck nuclear power plant: Poster of first "Nordic Atomic March, 7 August 1976
(Picture: Lasse Herneklint)

Since the 1970s the concept of the environment has reframed the way we think about nature as a political issue. Environmental history has made us aware of the changing perceptions and ideas about nature, as well as the actors and political practices in the slow process of the politicisation of nature and the environment. Surveying this process in Europe for the past two hundred years, this article demonstrates that ideas, actors and practices are inextricably interlinked.

Enlightenment and romanticist ideas about nature

Ideas about nature have changed over time, but different ideas also co-existed simultaneously. This frequently led to conflicts over political priorities. During the age of the enlightenment, a new scientific perception of nature emerged. It compartmentalized nature by analysing specific forces and mechanisms. As a response to states' long-held concerns for their forest resources, 18th century foresters invented the concept of "sustainability". It simply described the imperative of harvesting no more wood than grows back within a given period of time. Foresters set up plantation forests, monocultures, homogenous in age. This greatly facilitated planning for the future, and informed forestry practice well into the 20th century. Nevertheless, it had little to do with sustainability in a modern, ecological sense.

By contrast, 19th century romanticists cherished nature primarily for its beauty, as illustrated by the numerous landscape paintings and literary descriptions of woods, lakes and shores. Such a new aesthetic appreciation of nature was closely linked to a sense of loss in the face of accelerating urbanisation and industrialisation. Indeed, the industrial revolution led to unprecedented air and water pollution. Initially, these largely remained local issues. Where conflicts emerged, they were addressed locally, in the courts or by administrations. Not everyone was able to seek redress. Workers and poorer parts of the population suffered disproportionately from pollution, while those who could afford it moved to the leafier, higher up, or more Western suburbs.

The rise of nature conservation before World War I

Towards the end of the 19th century educated and well-to-do citizens were increasingly concerned about nature, and formed groups to protect the nature (as well as the culture) of their homeland – *Heimat* or *petite patrie*, for aesthetic reasons. In an age of rising nationalism, the preservation of nature was increasingly promoted as a patriotic cause. Anti-modernist and anti-capitalist idealism informed some of the homeland movement's critique for instance of the cutting of hedges or intensification of agricultural production. Emerging tourist interests played a role for local support, such as in the Rhineland, the heartland of 19th century tourism, as well as in France, for instance, against mining in scenic rock formations. Such groups voiced their protest in letters to the authorities, or organised lotteries to raise money to acquire land.

One of the most influential concepts in turn-of-the 20th century nature conservation was the conservation of "natural monuments", scientific and aesthetic curiosities of natural history, like ancient trees or scenic rocks, along the established model of cultural monuments protection. Hugo Conwentz, the Prussian state commissioner for natural monument protection popularised this idea in Germany and lobbied for its use all over Europe: Europeans should protect nature in line with the more variegated and man-made European landscapes instead of following the model of large-scale American national parks and the preservation of "wilderness". Politically, this was much easier to achieve than trying to acquire and protect large tracts of (uninhabited) land. Indeed European conservationists protected "natural monuments", but also larger areas, before and after World War I, while others drew on the American model and established national parks, such as in Switzerland or Sweden. The seemingly wild and pristine nature in the European colonies fascinated a European elite of scientists, colonial officials and big game hunters, who cooperated to establish the protection of wildlife (and game) primarily in Africa.

The protection of animals, notably birds, was indeed a central concern in late 19th century nature conservation. In many countries, bird protection laws – such as the one in the newly founded German nation state in 1888, were among the earliest pieces of conservation legislation, however, protecting only birds "useful" for agriculture. Since the 1880s, bird protection associations were founded in Britain, Germany and many other European countries. They quickly grew in membership, built up political ties, and accumulated scientific knowledge, professionalising in

ornithology. Within these groups, women played a prominent, at times a leadership role. Class divisions however kept workers from joining bourgeois associations. Hence they established their own nature groups, which encouraged outings for recreation, and tried to spread knowledge and appreciation of nature.

Nationalism and scientific conservation in the interwar years

During the interwar years, European networks of scientists and conservationists only slowly recovered from the enmity brought about by the Great War. The establishment of the League of Nations provided them with a new addressee for their ideas. Different national practices of conservation continued, often remained linked to nationalist ideas, but increasingly informed by science: some of the newly created states such as Poland or Czechoslovakia set up national parks to celebrate their nation's nature. Authoritarian governments promoted nature protection, too. Fascist Italy created national parks, while Nazi Germany enacted a new, far-reaching nature protection law, allowing even for eminent domain. By the 1930s, civil society eroded in various countries: German conservation groups very willingly subjected themselves to National Socialism. Landscape architects became an important new group of professional actors. As expert planners of the environment they for instance tried to integrate the newly constructed highways into the natural landscape, in order to allow for scenic views and patriotic feelings. German landscape architects also planned for the "Germanisation" of landscapes in German-occupied Eastern Europe.

Postwar divisions and continuities

The division of Europe following World War II also put nature conservation on different paths. In Soviet-dominated Central and Eastern Europe, Communist governments tried to ideologically link nature conservation to the new Socialist societies they were intending to build. They highlighted that overcoming capitalism also meant the end of the exploitation of nature. Nature conservation groups were included in state-controlled bodies, such as the cultural league in East Germany, which continued to celebrate the nature and culture of a Socialist "homeland" or *Heimat*, very much in continuation of 19th century traditions. At the same time, in the 1950s, socialist states often made ambitious laws concerning nature conservation and established new national parks, such as the transnational Tatra national park between Czechoslovakia and Poland, or new parks in Yugoslavia.

In Western Europe, older ideas dating back to the 19th century *Heimat* and nature conservation movement continued to thrive in the 1950s and 1960s. In West Germany and Austria, museums and films celebrating scenic landscapes and traditions offered consolation to the numerous refugees, expelled from Central and Eastern Europe. Landscape planning thrived in an age of government planning. Wealthy individuals often played a central role in nature protection. The Hamburg merchant Alfred Töpfer bought up rural land to establish "nature protection parks", preserving traditional agricultural practices and landscapes, while opening them up for tourism.

The economic boom of the postwar years brought about the rise of mass-consumerism, mass-motorisation and the chemical revolution. Chemicals increased agricultural productivity, but impacted negatively on landscapes and biodiversity. Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring", published in 1962 and soon translated into European languages, warned against the impact of DDT and other chemicals on human health and nature. Towards the end of the 1960s, scientists and experts gathered alarming data about pollution, waste and environmental destruction across countries. International organizations provided a forum for such concerns. Governments increasingly discussed how these side-effects of growth endangered their citizens' "quality of life", and started to engage in environmental policy.

The rise of environmentalism

The new concern about the environment culminated at the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in

Stockholm. The alternative conferences on the fringes of the Stockholm conference provided an unprecedented opportunity for spreading environmentalist ideas – namely the new perception that concerns about pollution and nature protection were two sides of the same coin, that science and ecology should inform any assessment of the environment, that environment was a global and urgent problem and that it needed to be addressed by policy. This meant the beginning of the environment not just as an idea but as an issue of politics and policy making. Indeed, before or after Stockholm, most governments in Europe – both East and West – set up environmental ministries, environmental agencies or created environmental programmes. In the wake of Stockholm, the European Communities (EC) enacted its first environmental action programme, which paved the way for numerous new laws in water and air pollution control, and even bird protection in the course of the 1970s. European directives thus shaped and aligned the environmental law in the EC member states right from the start of the new policy, and environmental groups cooperated and increasingly professionalised to make their voice heard in European policy-making.

The beginning of the 1970s also saw the transformation of the old nature conservation movements into new environmental movements. What distinguished the new movements from the old ones was not only their social composition, attracting young people and people with left-leaning ideas, but also their “style” of engaging in political conflict. Traditionally nature conservation had been a concern of older, conservative people, who wrote letters or humble petitions to authorities, or networked with influential people. By contrast the new environmentalists were influenced by new left ideas, and modes of protest of the 1968 student movements, taking to the streets. They staged spectacular protest to attract media coverage.

The new environmentalism also put new issues on the agenda and framed them as environmental problems. Most prominent and controversial among them was nuclear power, which was expanding at the time all over Europe to cover the anticipated growth in electricity demand. Conservationists previously often welcomed nuclear power as a “clean” source of energy, compared to dirty coal and dams for hydropower dams. Transnational cooperation among environmentalists spread information about the potential impact of radiation and nuclear waste. Linking local citizen concerns about land, water and crops with the new environmentalist critique, anti-nuclear mobilization also helped popularise new modes of protest, such as site occupations, street protests and informal modes of organization in citizen action groups. Nevertheless, also older conservation issues, such as bird protection, thrived. In various countries environmentalism got a parliamentary voice with the creation of green parties.

New concerns since the 1980s

New concerns emerged in the 1980s, when environmental issues were increasingly perceived and represented as catastrophic. This differed along national lines. Dying forests (*Waldsterben*) alarmed many West Germans, and finally pushed the government to crack down on air pollution, an international concern since the early 1970s. Chernobyl’s resonance also differed widely across Europe, but contributed to the perception modern society as a “risk society” (Ulrich Beck). Finally, the 1980s were also the decade of concerns over the hole in the ozone layer – a problem that could be solved in international negotiations and with a technological fix – and the final breakthrough of climate change, as the most threatening global environmental problem, where solutions proved much more difficult to find.

In the 1980s new scientific and political concepts – and buzzwords – emerged which remained influential until the present day. Biodiversity connected ecological and conservation ideas and provided a measure for the ecological quality of habitats. Sustainability or sustainable development reconciled the environmental concerns of the global north with the desire for development in the global south. All these issues were negotiated in international forums, but also informed debates down to the local level.

The fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989/90 pushed environmental issues out of the limelight for some time, in the face

of urgent social and economic issues, and democratic transition. This is remarkable, given the prominent role of environmental issues in the protest against the late socialist regimes. The economic transition brought environmental dividends, with the closure of polluting industries, albeit at the price of high unemployment. Technological and financial support from the EU and the transfer of environmental laws and standards in the run-up to EU membership introduced more effective environmental policies, while the arrival of mass consumerism also had negative environmental side effects.

In the 1990s, policy makers – first and foremost at the EU level, but also in some of the member states sought to reform the instruments and practices of environmental policy. In the spirit of a (neo-)liberal fascination with markets, binding laws and administrative action were derided as ineffective “command and control”, that should be replaced by using market forces. One of the results of this reshuffle was the introduction of emissions trade as the centre-piece of EU climate change policy – albeit along with more traditional instruments such as emission norms for cars.

Conclusion

The environmental history of Europe of the past 200 years is thus characterised by a great change in ideas and ideals about nature and the environment – with at times curious continuities in terms of terminology, as in the case of “sustainability”, which has however completely changed its meaning. The range of actors changed and broadened, with a prominent role of the state and international organizations. Civil society – where it was tolerated – made a difference, from 19th century associations to citizen action groups and today’s increasingly professionalized environmental NGOs. In line with this political practices have changed – from humble petitions in the 19th century to the more massive protests culminating in the 1970s and 1980s. However, street protest seems to have had a recent revival with “Fridays for Future”, and the overwhelming presence of young people, worrying about the future of the planet, as did their grandparents in the 1970s.

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