

Environmental Citizenship: Local and Global  
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Summary

There has been an outpouring of articles and books on environmental citizenship in the last two decades in a diverse array of fields, ranging from political science and sociology, psychology and philosophy, through community development, urban planning and public health, to environmental studies and education, conservation biology and restoration ecology, but the topic has been given very little attention by historians. Most authors tracing the origins of the concept credit it to educational efforts of Environment Canada beginning in 1990.

This presentation will argue that the concept and practice of environmental citizenship developed long before 1990 and that it may gain clarity and strength from a deeper historical understanding. Citizenship as a general concept may be traced to the city-states of ancient Greece at the time of Socrates and Aristotle, when the most ethical person was expected also to be a good citizen contributing to the betterment of the community. The concept of citizenship has gained increased traction in the past two centuries when it has usually been applied to citizens of a *nation*. *Environmental* citizenship, by contrast, suggests our relationship to the larger community of life. It is most effectively practiced at the *local* level but may have important *global* implications, a potential that is increasingly being recognized by agencies, member states and NGOs working through the United Nations and other international efforts. We should also acknowledge that although the concept has been articulated in the last two decades principally by scholars in Canada, Europe, and the United States, a case could be made that it has deep historical and cultural resonance in many indigenous cultures worldwide.

Though I can't adequately explore all of these aspects today, I will relate how I began to think about environmental citizenship, relating some of my experiences teaching and traveling abroad in the last quarter century as well as engaging in environmental citizenship at home. Then I will briefly trace changes in the thought and practice of environmental citizenship through my own field of American environmental history, beginning in the eighteenth century. I will conclude with some observations on the key contributions of the American environmental thinker Aldo Leopold and on efforts through the United Nations and other international bodies to develop an ethically grounded Earth Charter in which the concept of environmental citizenship plays a central role.

Teaching experiences in China and Finland in the 1980s and South Africa in the 1990s coupled with my own involvement in citizen environmental organizations in the United States led me to think about the role of citizens and civil society in strong and weak states, both democratic and authoritarian. Where the state is relatively weak, there seems to be a greater need and also latitude for citizen action to protect the environment, though citizens everywhere have been able to take advantage of opportunities to help shape a healthier and more sustainable environment.

The practice of citizenship in America (often with respect to the environment) may be seen in early colonial society and before that among Native American cultures, but it became a self-conscious political philosophy in the eighteenth century at the time of the American Revolution. Until recent decades, however, there was a general consensus among historians that the United States was fundamentally a liberal individualist society, in which citizens were free to pursue their own self-interest in the realm of the economy. Many Americans still believe that, though today they call their beliefs conservative. Beginning in the 1970s, some historians, while rereading the pamphlets and tracts of the revolutionary era, began to discover the concept of Republican "virtue," harkening back to the ethical concept of citizenship in ancient Greece, in which the good citizen would sacrifice his own self-interest for the good of the community. One historian even coined a term for the practice of citizenship at the time, calling it "the people out-of-doors," by which he meant citizens acting outside the formal channels of government.

The tension between the liberal individualist and the civic republican interpretations of the era of the American Revolution may be seen in competing interpretations in our own time of the first two amendments to the constitution, known as "the Bill of Rights." To this day, the prevailing notion is that these amendments guarantee the *rights of individuals* to freedom of religion, speech, religion, the press, to assembly peaceably, to petition the government, and to bear arms. But some of us view these rights as emanating from the civic republican tradition, in which the good citizen had an *obligation* to act in cooperation with and for the good of his community.

On a separate track, environmental historians and other scholars began to appreciate the extent to which environmental concerns permeated the writings of the founding fathers and the practice of citizenship in local communities. An example is the frequent petitions of fishermen and farmers to local and state legislative assemblies or courts in defense of their traditional access to salmon, shad, and other anadromous fish that were being blocked in their passage upstream by the newer, larger dams of textile mills at the birth of the American Industrial Revolution. In the early years, they often won their demands for limits on seasons or hours of operation, the construction of fishways around the dams, or even the right to remove the dams. But increasingly by the 1830s the courts began to side with more development-oriented uses of property by industrial corporations rather than with traditional access to resources by local communities. Community-minded citizens kept pressing their claims, however, and they won just often enough to keep their idea of "the public trust" alive for future generations. Today, in the United States, more people and government agencies appreciate the values of free-flowing streams; we are now removing more dams than we are building in order to restore the natural ecosystem functions of our streams.

When Alexis de Tocqueville of France traveled in America in the 1830s and observed the functioning of democracy in our relatively weak or "incomplete" governmental system, he marveled at the role of voluntary associations of citizens acting outside the formal channels of government on a wide range of activities: "Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see the government in France or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association." More recently, American historians studying the lives of factory girls in industrial textile mills and even African Americans in slavery have discovered their remarkable ability to find small "free spaces" in their largely regimented lives where they

could develop a measure of autonomy and cooperate with each other in order to better their living conditions, in the process learning civic skills that they could apply even more effectively in the future.

During the Progressive Era, 1890-1920, especially during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, conservation of natural resources became a national priority with the establishment of the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, and other federal and state environmental agencies. Some historians have interpreted this as an example of the process of modernization, during which scientists and other professional elites assumed leadership roles in government and advocated for rational planning and more efficient development and resource use, emphasizing values of order, efficiency, and control. In this interpretation, the leadership came from the top down and was often, in fact, supported by certain large corporations that saw the advantage of greater government regulation and control.

But other historians, focusing primarily at the local level, began to see a new kind of citizenship emanating from the grassroots, in which citizens working primarily through voluntary associations demanded cleaner air and water and safer food. Much of this effort came from the poorest areas of rapidly urbanizing cities. A good example is the work of Jane Addams and other civic reformers, mostly women, who worked with immigrants to develop their civic skills to demand—and create—better, more healthful living conditions. Jane Addams even got herself appointed garbage inspector for her ward so she could work with local people and officials to clean up the dirty, crowded tenement neighborhoods. She called it "municipal housekeeping." Some historians have begun to interpret these progressive reform efforts as emanating from the civic republican, more community-oriented strain of American political philosophy.

In a new wave of environmental concern in the 1960s and '70s, the U.S. Congress passed dozens of major new national environmental laws, but historians have disagreed as to whether the major impetus came from the top-down or the bottom-up. Many of these laws seem to have passed with relative ease because of inspired leadership by a few well-placed individuals in Congress or government agencies while others, such as the National Wilderness Preservation Act of 1964, clearly resulted from years of effort by national citizen environmental organizations, which greatly expanded their memberships during these years. By the late 1970s these national NGOs began to be challenged from the left by grassroots citizens and environmental movements such as Earth First!, which argued that the national NGOs had become too bureaucratic and no longer paid attention to local issues, and from the right by anti-environmentalist citizen movements advocating the privatization or local government ownership of the federal lands in an effort to expand individual or corporate access to natural resources. Most of these struggles related to the national forests and other public lands in rural areas of the West.

Not until the 1980s, when local urban groups, often led by women or people of color, began increasingly to voice concern about threats to public health from hazardous wastes, did the major national environmental NGOs begin to pay much attention to urban problems. Issues of social justice and environmental racism finally began to gain some traction after the publication in 1987 of a study on *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*. The United Nations and citizen movements in many countries elsewhere in the world were way ahead of the United States on issues of social and environmental justice.

My conclusions from this brief review of American environmental citizenship: the United States, which has been a relatively limited or weak state (at least domestically) during much of its history, has had a vibrant tradition of voluntary environmental citizenship from its origins as a nation. But this tradition has emphasized protection of wild lands and natural resources more than urban issues, and on matters of social and environmental justice we have lagged behind.

What can Aldo Leopold contribute to our understanding of environmental citizenship? He began his career as an elite professional in the U.S. Forest Service in the Progressive Era, where he was dedicated to progressive values of order, efficiency, and control. But early in his career he organized many local citizen associations for the protection of wildlife, even winning a letter of commendation from former President Theodore Roosevelt for "setting an example to the whole country."

In an effort to locate him within the tradition of American environmental citizenship I began, as I often do when trying to relate Leopold's thought to some new theme, by paging through his *Sand County Almanac*, and I was quite surprised by what I found. We meet the first citizen in the very first essay, "January Thaw": the meadow mouse, "a sober citizen" going about his own business—the quintessential liberal individualist. Several essays later we encounter the pines, each species with its own constitution that prescribes terms of office for its needles. Later there are the thick-billed parrots of Chihuahua who "wheel and spiral," debating in effect the criteria of the good life, which in Aristotelian thought is an activity of citizenship more fundamental even than that of developing constitutions. Then we meet the grebe, whose call "wields the baton for the whole biota" in the Clandeboye Marsh in Manitoba; the grebe is in effect an ethical leader of the whole community.

It is not until the last section of the book that we meet *human* citizens and learn that for Leopold there is a more highly evolved aspect of citizenship even than ethical leadership: the practice of husbandry, in which one engages as "plain member and citizen" of the land community in working with one's hands, rather than just with one's vote, on behalf of the larger community of life. It is a concept of civic virtue in a community broader even than a republic of humans, in which one recognizes an obligation to help restore the health (or resilience) of the biotic community. Though I don't have time to demonstrate it today, I believe this reading of Leopold's thinking about citizenship is fully supported by his growing emphasis throughout his life on ethical reasoning and cooperation with others at the local level to restore abused or degraded land. His essay "The Land Ethic," the final chapter of *A Sand County Almanac*, was one of the first and most influential efforts to articulate an environmental ethic that we may now realize was fundamentally a concept of environmental citizenship.

With this concept of environmental citizenship in mind, let us look at the efforts through the United Nations to encourage environmental protection and develop a global environmental ethic known as the Earth Charter. The first UN Conference on Conservation was in 1949, shortly after the founding of the United Nations, but the effort to develop an Earth Charter, which began at the Rio Conference in 1992, is modeled on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, approved in 1948. The drafting committee for the universal declaration was led by Eleanor Roosevelt of the United States and Chang Peng-Chun of China.

While Aldo Leopold's concept of a land ethic was not likely known to those drafting the declaration, it was known to influential leaders of the first UN Conference on Conservation and Leopold himself was a member of one of the NGO committees preparing for the conference before his untimely death in 1948.

The UN Conference on the Human Environment at Stockholm in 1972 was a major turning point for global attention to the environment. It was followed by the Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, at which leaders hoped to produce a blueprint for an earth charter, but it didn't happen, in part owing to the increasing lack of involvement by the United States in the United Nations.

In 1994, Mikhail Gorbachev and Maurice Strong, secretary general of the 1972 and 1992 conferences, called for civil society—the thousands of citizen environmental groups at international, national, and local levels who had become increasingly involved in preparations for the conferences—to engage other citizens worldwide in an effort to agree on a statement of common ethical principles for the charter. This effort, the most open and participatory consultation process ever conducted for an international document, produced a draft charter circulated to governments for adoption at the 2002 Johannesburg Summit for Sustainable Development. The first principle was and remains similar to Aldo Leopold's land ethic—"respect and care for the community of life." When the governments gathered at the 2002 Johannesburg congress again failed to adopt the charter, the effort was left entirely to civil society—the environmental citizens who, after all, would be guided by such an ethic.

Meanwhile, millions of people all over the world are already acting on their own environmental ethic—working with their own hands in their own communities—in what author Paul Hawken, in his book *Blessed Unrest* (2007), has called "the largest movement in the world." They include Chipko activists in India inspired by an effort dating back to 1730, Chico Mendes and his rubber tappers in Brazil who inspired the Rio Conference in 1992, Hispanic children restoring the Rio Grande bosque in New Mexico, and Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai of Kenya, whom the world sadly lost a few weeks ago, but her Green Belt movement lives on. These citizens, and millions more like them, are living their environmental ethic day by day—writing their ethic on the land—and from them we can all take heart.