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The Environment and the U.S. Government



Recent public opinion polls indicate that Americans strongly support clean air, water, and land - our shared environment. It was not always so. In fact, environmental concern is a fairly recent phenomena in American history, initially expressed by groups of outdoor enthusiasts and preservationist in the past 150 years.

The History of the Issue

When European settlers first colonized North America its forests were thick, game was abundant, freshwater teemed with life, and its air was pure and clean. As much as any pioneering spirit, it was this natural bounty that allowed Americans to push westward in the early 18th century, They explored and settled the southwest, built cities in the Ohio Valley and Great Lakes regions, planted cotton in the south and corn in Midwest prairies. In the latter half of the 1800's, America's railroad expansion greatly affected frontier settlement patterns and spurred the growth of cities in the Midwest and west.

Forests were logged. Plains and prairies were devoted to grain production and livestock. Nature was commoditized. Public demand for beef, corn, and timber grew sharply. Large sewer systems

were developed that dumped wastewater into freshwater resources. Industry was consuming clean water and disposing dirty water. Coal was burned, darkening city skies. Solid waste removal became a challenge in urban areas. Fur trapping and sport hunting were depleting wildlife resources. Gradually it became apparent that some of these resources were finite. But it was not until shortages in resources such as water and timber arose that individual Americans and the government responded to conserve and preserve certain commodities.

Americans in towns and cities were literally distanced from nature. Grassroots organizations sprung up to safeguard natural resources and to protect wildlife. Some of the better known efforts continue today. The forerunner to the Audubon Society was begun in 1886 to protect the birds of America. The Sierra Club was founded six years later to study, preserve, and enjoy the Sierra Nevada. 30 years later the Izaak Walton League was founded to combat water pollution and the Wilderness Society was created soon after.

Public interest in environmental issues rose rapidly following World War II. This increase is often attributed to sharply higher college enrollments and to scientific advancements in ecology, the study of relationships between organisms and their environment. By the end of the 1960's, public interest in environmental protection, spurred by media stories of industrial pollution, wasteful energy consumption, and catastrophic accidents such as oil spills, culminated in the celebration of the first Earth Day in 1970.

Federal Government Response

The Federal government responded in two ways. First, it created agencies to study the Nation's natural resources and to promote their multiple use while continuing to stimulate economic growth. Other organizations were created to conserve natural spaces and to protect species. And beginning in the early 1960's, the Federal government began to set goals for clean air and water and to regulate industries that made it difficult to achieve those goals.



Long before there was a National Park Service, Yellowstone National Park was created in 1872. For the first time the term "conservation," so commonly applied to coal, iron, or other raw materials of industry, was now applied to mountains, lakes, canyons, forests and other great and unusual works of nature, and interpreted in terms of public recreation. The United States Geological Survey was created in 1879 to assess mineral, energy, and water resources. The U.S. Forest Service was established in the early twentieth century to scientifically manage and conserve our forests. Despite warnings about the environmental impacts of irrigating the wastelands, public lands were sold to create and fund the Reclamation Service that engineered large water projects. Drought was also the driver behind the creation of the Soil Erosion Service.

Public interest in the preservation of wildlife species helped established the Federal Biological Survey. In the same year that the first Earth Day was observed, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was established to protect human health and the environment. In addition to the creation of agencies to study, regulate, or manage natural resources, a number of key laws were passed in recognition that the health of our Nation's land, water, and air were being challenged.

- The National Environmental Policy Act is the basic national charter for protection of the environment.
- The Clean Air Act regulates air emissions.
- The Clean Water Act controls water pollution.
- The Safe Drinking Water Act was established to protect the quality of our drinking water.
- The Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act created what's commonly known as the Superfund to inventory hazardous waste sites, to assess liability for these sites, and to provide for site cleanups when no responsible party could be identified.
- The Endangered Species Act was passed to conserve threatened and endangered animals and plants and their habitats.
- Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act provided Federal control of pesticides.
- The Oil Pollution Act of 1990 strengthened EPA's ability to prevent and respond to catastrophic oil spills.