

## **The Systematic Undoing of Pollution Solutions**

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The shift after World War II saw the prioritization of consumption in the United States over production. The desire for convenience and comfort left consumers creating more than they consumed. With an emphasis on consumption, the expansion and logistics of waste became an issue. A larger number of people developed a consciousness of the environments they were living in and the quality of what they were consuming. Along with a growing number of social and political movements of the 1960s, environmentalism too was energized in the pursuit of positive change. New ideas of how humans interacted with the environment allowed for reflections and promoted how changes can be beneficial. There was an optimistic number of policies that came from Washington D.C. in the 1970s that helped reel in harmful practices from corporations. These policies were confronted by disagreeable parties and with a change in administration, the following decade saw the pushback that led to even greater consequences. More control was being returned to corporations and this saw the expansion of their practices move globally. International competition and growing corporate intervention escalated environmental concerns from a local issue to a global issue.

After the war, Americans looked to improve their quality of life by indulging in the conveniences that mass consumption had to offer. Indulging in a higher number of consumer goods led to a higher amount of waste by the consumers. Paper goods, for instance, more than tripled in quantity from 1947 to 1963. Along with domestic paper goods, boxes and newspapers contributed to waste to an even greater extent with only a fraction of it being recycled.<sup>1</sup> To divert the attention of corporation's contribution of waste, there was propaganda to push the responsibility of recycling

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 228.

the waste onto the consumer.<sup>2</sup> By giving the appearance of control to the consumer, it relieves pressure of potential questions about waste and lets corporations keep worrying solely on profits. Plastic products also contribute to the growing amount of waste due to the increase of consumption. Plastic items were quickly finding their way into American homes by way of “trash bags to Christmas trees.”<sup>3</sup> Plastic waste was also more harmful than paper waste because of its longevity. Like the propaganda about public recycling, items like biodegradable bags were sold to let the customer feel like they’re contributing to something positive, but it was, in reality, just adding to the waste. Additionally, plastic waste makes its way into the into the ocean resulting in the death of “Tens of thousands of sea mammals, birds, and fish.”<sup>4</sup>

In response to the increase in waste, landfills were established to meet the needs of the discarded. One of the landfills opened was the Fresh Kills landfill in Staten Island, New York which was repurposed from wetlands. The conversion of wetlands to a landfill meant it removed the ecological benefits wetlands provided. The wetlands could no longer “absorb and filter water and thus help prevent floods, while preserving water quality.”<sup>5</sup> Not only did it remove these benefits, but it added to the contamination of the water, soil, and air quality around the area. The Fresh Kills landfill and many similar were forced to shut down because they did not meet the regulatory standards. There was a need for the movement of people’s trash which resulted in the privatization of the country’s waste and landfills. Although a solution to the waste problem, there is an unevenness to the practice as it is the poorer, higher density states that are left with the mess.<sup>6</sup>

A more conscious approach to the environment was energized by Rachel Carson who

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<sup>2</sup> Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature s Role in American History*, 229.

<sup>3</sup> Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature s Role in American History*, 231.

<sup>4</sup> Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature s Role in American History*, 232.

<sup>5</sup> Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature s Role in American History*, 234.

<sup>6</sup> Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature s Role in American History*, 237.

presented important existing ideas into a contemporary context. The view was that humans and wildlife were not necessarily separate, they existed symbiotically and thus emphasizing the importance to consider the impacts human cause to the environment.<sup>7</sup> Carson took aim at the use of chemical such as DDT which seeped into the food supply. The pesticides caused harm to birds, for instance, but were also harmful to people's health. Carson's book *Silent Spring* allowed the public to understand these harmful impacts outside of the scientific community which led to movements of pushback against these practices.<sup>8</sup> Activism grew in response to the unfavorable practices that Carson included in her book which emphasized the harm that was being done for production. The timing of environmental consciousness also worked out along with the book, because the mid-1960s saw a severe drought that was the worst in 30 years. There was now the added attention to the country's water supply because of the low water level in Lake Erie which led the population to witness the chemical harm they were doing by indulging in the comforts of doing laundry. Steinberg emphasizes that "Detergents contained phosphates, a nutrient that... caused algae to bloom... only to die, decay, and drain oxygen from the water..."<sup>9</sup> Not only was there opposition to the use of pesticides, but many unfavorable practices were now being spotlighted. For instance, in Santa Barbara there was a movement to stop drilling on their coast and in Chicago a group that protested the heavy use of coal. One instance of this would be in Santa Barbara where attention was gathered because of an oil spill along the coast which was then made more public when a local university professor made a television appearance discussing the impact.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature s Role in American History*, 247.

<sup>8</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *American Environmental History: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2007), 194.

<sup>9</sup> Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature s Role in American History*, 248.

<sup>10</sup> Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature s Role in American History*, 249.

A major step forward in environmental consciousness came by way of political policies that took aim to regulate corporations' practices in relation to their environmental impact. Congress' legislation contributed policies that would also focus on air and water through the Clean Air Act of 1963 and the Water Quality Control Act of 1965. Richard Nixon followed this up by then putting into place the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970, which allows for government intervention "to regulate air and water quality, radiation and pesticide hazards, and solid-waste disposal".<sup>11</sup> Another thing established was the National Environmental Policy Act which aimed to create a relationship between humans and nature that reduced negative impacts by people leading to the healthy longevity of the environment. Industry leaders made sure that new cost heavy regulations wouldn't cut into profits by passing the cost onto the consumer. They also continued to contribute to the damage of the environment by moving waste into "landfills, inner city neighborhoods, and toxic waste dumps, and began exporting wastes to the Third World."<sup>12</sup> The major step back came at the hands of Ronald Reagan as many of the policies established in the previous decade were diminished. Players in the major industries now had a seat at the table regarding regulation or lack thereof. There were also voices from the Christian right wing, with the support of the Coors Brewing Company founder, which disregarded the science in favor for religious interpretations as far as the use of nature's resources. The reduction of regulations was directly responsible for the increase in levels of toxic waste and dangerous chemicals in the environment, especially in poorer minority communities.<sup>13</sup>

The negative environmental consequences reached further than the concern of American corporations and their practices. The Cold War with the Soviet Union had long negative impacts

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<sup>11</sup> Merchant, *American Environmental History an Introduction*, 197.

<sup>12</sup> Merchant, *American Environmental History an Introduction*, 200.

<sup>13</sup> Merchant, *American Environmental History an Introduction*, 203.

due to the arms race and the production of plutonium. The atomic bomb caused the spread of radionuclides, such as uranium, into the soil, air, and water. Radioactive iodine and radiation would also be exposed to the environment which caused cancers and resulted in deformities in animals.<sup>14</sup> Beyond the Cold War, international attention came from the establishment of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Implementing international free trade meant industries could expand and exploit other countries, usually those of the Third World, for their resources. The World Bank supplies loans to countries with an influence of how the money is to be used. For instance, Thailand was influenced to expand their timber industry for export. This led to rampant deforestation which then caused devastating flooding to occur. Timber and emphasis on agriculture also led to the displacement of many residents who lived on the lands.<sup>15</sup> The United States would export their single crop agriculture style using genetically modified, high crop yielding seeds. Beyond the lack of genetic diversity of the crops, single crop agriculture led to issues with pests, which made the use of pesticides a necessity.<sup>16</sup> Third World countries would fall into debt taking part in these ventures, and asking for more money from the World Bank and the IMF often forced these countries to shape their demands in a way that was most beneficial for the lenders. The lenders essentially create a scenario for the Third World countries to become reliant on them and ultimately mold the country to fit the free-market ideology that would be best for the lenders.<sup>17</sup> Globalization hurried along environmental consequences by industrializing every corner of the globe. The increased use of fossil fuels globally caused carbon dioxide to be released at a higher rate than ever before. Carbon dioxide becomes more impactful to the atmosphere due to deforestation which

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<sup>14</sup> Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature s Role in American History*, 264.

<sup>15</sup> Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature s Role in American History*, 266.

<sup>16</sup> Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature s Role in American History*, 270.

<sup>17</sup> Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature s Role in American History*, 272.

aims to neutralize carbon dioxide with oxygen.<sup>18</sup> The cycle of resource exploitation not only creates harm to the environment but in the process also removes the natural remedies that earth provides.

American consumer needs after World War II allowed for the industries to rapidly expand because the market allowed. The expansion of consumerism led to the expansion of waste which created another set of environmental issues. Environmental movements played and continue to play an important role in keeping attention to repercussions of irresponsible industry practices. Energizing a population of people proved vital as there are ongoing efforts to find beneficial solutions to corporate amplified environmental problems. It is evident that government policies are responsible for both positive and negative outcomes depending on who is in power. Government regulations on corporations saw positive change whereas deregulation saw regression and further negative impact. The evolution to a global market not only exported industries, but it also exported the environmental issues through rapid growth and natural resource exploitation. Although efforts have been made to curb negative consequences, globalization impacted the population spike, ozone depletion, and a higher number of endangered species which are all consequences that the environment must take for humans' continual industrial expansion.

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<sup>18</sup> Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History*, 274.