

Spreading Fissures Weaken the Movement

Single-issue and mainstream groups must work together; the late conservationist Sydney Howe is an exemplar.

May 10, 1996 | ROBERT GOTTLIEB | Robert Gottlieb is the author of "Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement" (Island Press, 1993.)

The environmental movement is in trouble. Attempting to beat back continual attacks by hostile congressional opponents and industry antagonists, the movement also has to contend with deep internal divisions.

These divisions go as far back as the first Earth Day in 1970. Mainstream environmental groups in that era, such as the Sierra Club and the National Wildlife Federation, already were worried that the activists behind Earth Day were promoting "approaches other than those the traditional movement has pioneered and knows best," as a Sierra Club leader put it.

Today, environmentalism is seen as a collection of different movements. Some are concerned about managing the natural environment; others focus on such everyday concerns as air, water and food. There are mainstream organizations, headquartered in Washington, staff-run, involved in lobbying and litigation, that seek to influence policymakers, the media and industry. Many of these groups are busy reacting to the antienvironmental onslaught coming out of Washington, seeking to protect the legislative and regulatory environmental policy system they helped to establish while challenging much of its implementation--a number of groups have sued the government for failing to carry out mandated provisions of existing legislation in a timely manner. On the other side of this divide are the alternative environmentalists, who take up a single issue such as opposition to a toxic waste incinerator or saving a particular wetlands or stream. These environmental justice groups, many led by women, tend to be community-based rather than policy-oriented. Such groups are often out of the loop when it comes to negotiated agreements around environmental policy crafted (or dismantled) in Washington and state capitols.

This environmental divide clearly has weakened the movement, particularly the mainstream groups vulnerable to the charge of being part of the system. Overcoming this divide is more pertinent than ever for environmentalism's future success. One important example of how to bridge these movements can be found in the career and advocacy of the late Sydney Howe.

Howe, who died last month at his home in Holderness, N.H., was a New England blueblood and avid conservationist who also became a champion of an environmentalism for the poor and underrepresented constituencies, themselves victims of pollution and other forms of environmental degradation. When he became the head of the Conservation Foundation in the late 1960s, he sought to expand agendas, arguing the need to incorporate justice and equity into the environmentalist cause. He actively sought alliances between environmentalists and labor and civil rights organizations and promoted the idea that the environmental cause was embedded in urban settings as well.

Not widely known at the time, Howe played a major role in the first Earth Day by providing a crucial loan to its organizers. Over the years, he despaired at the disunity among increasingly divergent environmental organizations and constituencies, of the mainstream groups' failure to connect with and organize around environmental justice concerns, and the sometimes parochial and limiting nature of the grass-roots efforts.

Howe's efforts remain a model for reconstituting environmentalism. The Sierra Club's recent decision by referendum to challenge logging deals suggests one area where change is occurring. Another example is the development of a California coalition of civil rights, mainstream environmental, environmental justice and community development groups that have begun a dialogue on issues like population, immigration and water policy.

Ultimately, environmentalism needs a justice agenda as well as one for more technically developed pollution prevention and environmental protection. The movement needs organizers and experts, community participation and advocates who are also professionals. It needs to address where people, live, work and play while also focusing on ecosystems, carcinogens, habitats and watersheds. The cause remains broader than its individual--and divided--parts.

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