

The Green Agenda of the Red Power Movement: Public Reception of Indigenous vs. Institutional Environmentalists in 1960s America

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Introduction

On a warm spring morning in 1970, busy cities across the United States fell silent. Pedestrians and cyclists invaded Fifth Avenue in New York, congregating in masses. Demonstrators in Miami, Florida, dumped brightly coloured dye into sewage systems in order to track where toxic effluent pooled throughout the city.¹ In Fairbanks, Alaska, community organizers held a “teach-in” to educate their peers about proposed government pipelines through the northern state.² Community gardens were planted in Ann Arbor, Michigan, as young children skipped across roadsides collecting trash.³ Students, lawyers, Members of Congress, teachers, and children marched, rallied, worked, listened, and learned on a national level. The date was 22 April 1970, and twenty million Americans across the country were marking the first ever “Earth Day.”

Following the devastating aftermath of the 1969 oil spill in Santa Barbara, California, US State Senator Gaylord Nelson inspired the day of action through his creation of environmental “teach-ins.”⁴ Student learning thrived as a result of Nelson’s plan, and the movement quickly developed into a major initiative. The mass demonstration came after the turmoil of the 1960s, during which social movements such as civil rights coalitions and anti-Vietnam rallies gave university students a taste of the power of protest. As a result, many of these activists soon moved on to support the call for environmental justice in North America. Interestingly, these cries to action in the early 1970s closely echoed those of ‘Red Power’ movement activists in the decade prior. Throughout the 1960s, activists on reservations such as Pine Ridge, New Mexico and other locations across the country fought for environmental conservation alongside inherent Indigenous rights, as defined by centuries old treaties. Indigenous Americans were responsible for organizing the earliest forms of environmental protests; however, they are often omitted from contemporary articles chronicling the genesis of environmentalism. Curiously, few scholars have united the two

¹ Keith Woodhouse, “Review: After Earth Day: The Modern Environmental Movement,” *Reviews in American History* 42, no. 3 (2014): 556-7.

² *Ibid.*

³ E. W. Kenworthy, “For the Real Story, Look Beyond Earth Week: Pollution Protest,” *New York Times*, 25 April 1971, E1.

⁴ Terra Green, “Earth Day: The History of a Moment,” *New Delhi* 7, no. 2 (2014): 1.

advocacy groups to compare their intentions, actions, and treatments. This raises an important question – to what degree were the Red Power movement and the Environmentalism movement similar, and how were they portrayed by the media as different? By chronicling key events that lead to the formation of the groups, combined with a close reading of contemporary articles and files, it becomes clear that the two groups shared kindred values of sustainability, but received different treatment. Ultimately, youth advocates in the environmental movement were often depicted as being inherently ‘good’ activists, despite having closely allied goals and partaking in similar demonstrations to those of their ‘radicalized’ Indigenous American peers.

Chronicling the Formation of ‘Red Power’ and ‘Environmentalist’ Groups

In order to fully grasp the similarities and differences of the two groups, it is useful to first investigate the motivations behind their formation. In doing so, the depth and breadth of their influence can be evaluated, in order to determine how and why they came to be viewed differently in the court of public opinion.

To begin, the unrest that led to the formal advent of the Red Power Movement was a slow burn over the course of a few decades. Although Indigenous peoples have struggled with sovereignty as nations since the colonization of America in the 15th century, there were some key events that sparked the wave of activism in the 1960s. For example, following the passing of House Resolution 108 in 1953, development on reservation lands was legally permitted across the country. Indigenous peoples were being relocated from their ancestral lands to urban centres in large numbers.⁵ Left alone and unsupported by government assistance, Resolution 108 heavily fueled Indigenous dissatisfaction with the government and triggered widespread backlash. However, as noted by scholars such as Bruce D’Arcus, participants in the movement and the academic community can generally agree upon the occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1964 (and later in 1969) as being the catalyst for the formalization of the movement.⁶ Alcatraz Island is located in the middle of the San Francisco Bay, and served as a notoriously brutal maximum-security prison until its closure in 1963.⁷ The following year, Indigenous activists of the Sioux Nation organized a siege of the vacant island and proposed to purchase it for the same rate at which their land had

⁵ Troy Johnson, “The Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Roots of American Indian Activism,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 10, no. 2 (1994): 63.

⁶ Bruce D’Arcus, “The Urban Geography of Red Power: The American Indian Movement in Minneapolis-Saint Paul, 1968-70,” *Urban Studies* 47, no. 6 (May 2010): 1244.

⁷ *Ibid.*

been acquired (47 cents per acre).⁸ The Alcatraz demonstration lasted approximately four hours, and swiftly came to an end after law enforcement threatened to charge all those present with a felony. After a few years of unsatisfactory deliberation with state officials, activists commandeered the island once again in 1969. However, this time the occupation was exponentially longer and louder. Local student advocates such as Richard Oakes had mulled over the idea of formally re-occupying the island for months, but when the San Francisco Indian Centre burnt to the ground, the plan was set into motion.⁹ The advocacy group Indians of All Tribes soon began their nineteen-month long occupation. In January of 1970, the following proclamation was published in the newspaper *The Movement*:

We, the native Americans, re-claim the land known as Alcatraz island in the name of all American Indians by right of discovery. We wish to be fair and honorable in our dealings with the Caucasian inhabitants of this land, and hereby offer the following treaty: We will purchase said Alcatraz Island for 24 dollars (\$24) in glass beads and red cloth, a precedent set by the white man's purchase of a similar island about 300 years ago.¹⁰

Alongside this statement, the group specified their development plans for the island. Their goals were to create a series of Indian institutions, such as a spiritual centre, an ecology centre, and a heritage centre.¹¹ The second demonstration came to an end in June of 1971 when government officials removed the remaining individuals following years of hardship and failed negotiation. The occupation of Alcatraz Island was a momentous event in comparison to the local and more grassroots protests that had occurred in the years prior. For the development of what would soon be coined the 'Red Power Movement,' Alcatraz was ground zero. As noted by scholars such as Troy Johnson, many participants went on to form other influence advocacy groups such as the American Indian Movement (AIM) or the National Indian Youth Council.¹²

While the Red Power movement has roots extending back centuries, the environmental movement was active for years in the academic community but only reached a younger demographic towards the end of the 1960s. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, small groups such as Organization for Environmental Quality, Fast for Life, and guerilla theater group ENVIROMENTI staged protests against.¹³ There were a plethora of proposed events that led to the rise

⁸ D'Arcus, "The Urban Geography of Red Power," 1245.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁰ Indians of All Tribes, "Proclamation: To The Great White Father and All His People," *The Movement*, January 1970, 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Johnson, *The Occupation of Alcatraz Island*, 75.

¹³ A. Youngeman, "Fast for Life," *The East Village Other* 5, no. 46 (13 October 1970): 17.

of the movement, such as the introduction of US forest management in the 1920s, but the publication of Rachel Carson's blockbuster book *Silent Spring* in 1962 undeniably improved environmental awareness. Carson's book detailed the adverse effects pesticides had on localised flora and fauna, accentuated by her remarks on the absence of bird calls near agricultural lands.¹⁴ To further stoke the fire of environmental concern, Carson also included the adverse effects of pesticides on air and water quality, directly relating the issue to human health.

The somber yet illuminating book sparked a new concern for the natural world amongst populations that were previously sheltered from the environmental degradation Indigenous nations had witnessed for years. In the years following, events such as 'Earth Day' flourished, and environmental legislation supporting inherent rights to clean water and air were passed across the country. However, scholars such as Lawrence Mastron have noted that the complexity of the environmental movement cannot be traced back to a precise genesis, given the aforementioned gradual acts of small conservation groups leading up to the publication of *Silent Spring*.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Carson was able to accomplish what many were not – delineating the dire state of the natural world to the general public.

Thus, the Red Power movement and the environmental movement had drastically different beginnings, with one fueled by racial injustice and the other the dissemination of academic literature. Though the movements spawned at different times and locations, their courses of action over the 1960s would eventually reach a junction. After having simply reviewed their motivations for coalescing, the similarity of the two movements is not overtly evident. However, chronicling the 'why' behind the group's formation is an important first step to understanding their organizational choices. By next examining their actions as social movements, their likeness becomes conspicuous.

The Rise of Environmental Demonstrations in the 1960s

Long before crowds marched down 5th Avenue on 22 April 1970, Indigenous activists had been organizing demonstrations in the name of environmental protection for decades. Though many scholars have evaluated concerns of the American Indian Movement, such as identity and sovereignty, few have managed to recognize the overarching environmental concerns that

¹⁴ Lawrence Mastron, "Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (review)," *Film & History* 38, no. 1 (2008): 75.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

penetrate nearly all facets of Indigenous decision making. Unlike Western Judeo-Christian thought that explicitly dictates man's 'dominion' over nature, Indigenous cultures have had a spiritual connection to the environment, recognizing its inherent right to thrive - as opposed to its ecosystem services for humans. While both cultures privilege the aesthetic and psycho-spiritual value of the natural world, Indigenous peoples in the Americas live in harmony with the land and nature, not removed from it.¹⁶ As noted by contemporary scholar Dee Brown in her 1971 *New York Times* article "The First Environmentalists," environmental protests by Indigenous peoples in the United States date back to as early as 1867.¹⁷ Apart from localized negotiations, protests, and clashes with industries, certain environmental actions started to gain mainstream media attention over the course of 'the long sixties'. In the state of Washington, 'The Great Fish War' went on for over three years in the mid 60's due to industrial intervention on Indigenous fishing grounds. The interferences by industries were directly threatening the viability of aquatic species and infringed on Indigenous livelihood.¹⁸ This type of standoff with industrial powers would continue as the country developed well into the 1970s. In 1970, the Navajo and Hopi Nations were approached by an Arizona coal company looking to acquire strip mining rights on their ancestral land of Black Mesa.¹⁹ Fearful of irreversible degradation, the nations formed an agreement that at the end of the company's occupation of the land "the terrain would be replaced, and the native vegetation replanted."²⁰ This event is illustrative of how the environment has historically been the ultimate priority for Indigenous Americans. As noted by Brown, the Navajo and Hopi Nations were incredibly poor, having family incomes of less than \$3,000 a year.²¹ Regardless of their hardships, the 1970 negotiations never foregrounded monetary compensation. Rather, preservation of native biodiversity emerged as the supreme value at stake for Indigenous negotiators. Even Indigenous activists who did not overtly target conservation made sure to include it. For example, in the height of the tensions surrounding the occupation of Alcatraz Island, the Indians of All Tribes group announced in the newspaper *The Movement* that one of their goals on the island was to construct an Indian Ecology Centre, to "train and support our young people in scientific research and practice

¹⁶ Dee Brown, "The First Environmentalists," *New York Times*, 15 June 1971, 43.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Homer Bigart, "Indians are Pitted Against Game Wardens in Great Fish War of Northwest," *New York Times*, 14 August 1966, 68.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Brown, "The First Environmentalists," 43.

to restore our lands and waters to their pure and natural state.”²² Indigenous activism has historically been synonymous with environmental activism, regardless of this omission by contemporary scholars. This is very plainly demonstrated in the popular 1974 article by Buttel and Flinn “The Structure of Support for the Environmental Movement: 1968-1970” that never once uses the word ‘Indian.’ Given that this article had the goal of conveying how “over time [the] concern with pollution and support for the environmental movement were drawn from increasingly broader bases of social structure,” its failure to address Indigenous activism is even more striking.²³ This omission highlights the strong and absolute correlation of environmentalism with white students, even when Buttel and Flinn were explicitly studying diversity within the movement. Moreover, Indigenous activists were never put in leadership positions during the height of the environmental movement, regardless of the years of experience they had accomplishing the same goals of environmental conservation and protection.

As opposed to the longstanding omission of Indigenous activism from environmental discourse, mainstream environmental demonstrations in the 1960s and 1970s generally received more attention and acclaim. As was common in the period, the majority of the actions were initiated by college students. As described by Gladwin Hill in 1969, concerns over pollution of the natural world were “sweeping the nation’s campuses with an intensity that may be on its way to eclipsing student discontent over the war in Vietnam.”²⁴ For example, students at the University of Minnesota held a mock funeral burying a gasoline engine to protest against air pollution.²⁵ Nearby, students dumped over 26,000 empty beverage cans on the front lawn of a local manufacturer, calling attention to unnecessary packaging. At the University of Texas, environmental groups filed formal complaints against local industries and the university, asking them to claim responsibility for polluting a local lake.²⁶ Similar disruptions such as blockades, marches, artistic demonstrations, and formal complaints occurred at the University of Hawaii, University of Illinois, University of California Berkley, and the University of Nebraska in the late 1960s.²⁷ This is all to say that the tangible actions of the environmentalists were similar to those

²² Brown, “The First Environmentalists,” 43.

²³ Frederick H. Buttel and William L. Flinn, “The Structure of the Environmental Movement, 1968-1970,” *Rural Sociology* 39, no. 1 (Spring, 1974): 56.

²⁴ Gladwin Hill, “Environment may Eclipse Vietnam as College Issue: ‘Environmental Crisis’ may Eclipse Vietnam as College Issue,” *New York Times*, 30 November 1969, 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

of Indigenous activists. Both groups worked with intensity and purpose, looking to change the status quo. They both physically disrupted industrial action and tried to renegotiate institutional contracts for the sake of the planet's health. However, a closer read of the aforementioned articles highlights a critical difference that would permanently shape the legacy of the two groups – how they were treated by the media.

Public Reception

*“I doubt you’ll find many anarchist ecologists,” commented Steve Berwick, a 28-year-old Yale environmentalist. “Ecology is a system, and anarchy goes against that.”*²⁸

While there exists a plethora of similarities between the ‘Red Power’ and ‘Environmentalist’ social movements, no difference is as striking and telling of the period as the different ways they were perceived by the general public. The 1960s saw the creation of a belief that went on to be held for generations – that Indigenous activists protected the land for their own interests, while environmentalists did it for the collective good. To begin, since its creation, the environmental movement has been seen as inherently ‘good’ in the eyes of the general public. The movement was often described in language that painted it to be more refined and methodical than other coalitions such as Black civil rights groups. For example, a 1969 *New York Times* article on the student environmentalist movement described the Boston University picket lines as being “friendly” and not “hippy in appearance.”²⁹ While important activists such as Earth Day organizer Denis Hayes tried to stress that “environmentalism was as radical as any movement,” scholars such as Thomas Woodhouse argue that environmentalists continued to be seen as mild threats to the status quo in the public eye.³⁰ The movement was appealing to respectable students and those who “wanted to show the good side of students for a change.”³¹ The polished and attractive descriptions of the environmental movement in its early days undoubtedly accounted for why it was more graciously treated by reporters. Furthermore, a Ken Faboski article on an Atlantic-Richfield Oil Company luncheon very graciously described the presence of student picketers surrounding the building. The protest came in response to company owner Thornton Bradshaw’s plan to construct an Alaskan pipeline to transport crude oil across the state. Faboski describes the

²⁸ Hill, “Environment may Eclipse Vietnam as College Issue,” 1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Woodhouse, *After Earth Day*, 558.

³¹ *Ibid.*

protest as being diplomatic and quiet, with protestors not “wanting to crash the meeting.”³² Considering that the picketers went on to state their plans of constructing a blockade in Alaska regardless of the law (with one even stating, “if we get arrested, all the better”), their portrayal as being benevolent is an interesting angle to take.³³ This repeated emphasis on the passiveness of environmentalists as opposed to their temper contributes to the narrative that white student activists were more attractive to report on than Indigenous land protectors.

This attitude held by the media was drastically different than that towards Red Power activists. In aforementioned cases such as the 1966 Washington state fish-ins, over one half of a contemporary *New York Times* article focused on detailing the threats and violence that occurred at the event rather than the important reasons why it was happening in the first place. Another striking example of these reports occurred in March of 1970, when Indigenous activists organized a demonstration at Fort Lawton in Seattle. Activists were lobbying the state government to turn the fort into an Indian Education, Ecology, and Cultural centre, as opposed to the plans to establish a new park.³⁴ The protest garnered a plethora of media attention, mainly because it was attended by actress Jane Fonda who was arrested on site. Demonstrators set up a series of tepees around and inside the fort, intending to camp out until the government accepted their proposal.³⁵ More than seventy-seven Indigenous activists were arrested about an hour later. A 1970 article on the event described the activists as “invaders” who “attacked” Fort Lawton.³⁶ The article even included a photograph of a protestor being restrained and dragged out of the fort, with the caption reading that he was being “escorted.”³⁷ The article goes on to state that “Several Indians contended that they had been beaten. But the only violence witnessed by a newsman came when an Indian youth was shoved against a desk in an office.”³⁸ Even when reporters witnessed the use of excessive force on demonstrators, it occupied only two sentences. However, there were some leftist newspapers that did acknowledge Indigenous American activists as being foundational to the environmentalist movement, notably *The Movement*, which often foregrounded Red Power voices. There is one notable example of mainstream media shining a light on Indigenous

³² Ken Faboski, “Oil President Picketed,” *Berkeley Bob*, 3 August 1973.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ “Indians Seized in Attempt to Take Over Coast Fort,” *New York Times*, 9 March 1970, 22.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

environmentalism. In 1971, Dee Brown wrote an article for the *New York Times* entitled “The First Environmentalists,” which foregrounded the history of grassroots environmentalism amongst Indigenous activists.³⁹ Nevertheless, the most widely consumed contemporary publications undoubtedly crafted a narrative of intentional deviance amongst Red Power activists – a decision that has permanently changed how historians’ study and evaluate mid-century environmentalism.

Unlike the articles on student activists, reports failed to mention the expertise of Indigenous youth on conservation issues, and instead painted them in a negative and selfish light. This was a stark contrast to reports on environmentalists (also by the *New York Times*), such as the 1969 article “Environment May Eclipse Vietnam” that only dedicated two sentences to mentioning the arrest of twenty-nine University of Texas students who attempted to block workers cutting down trees on campus to make way for a new building.⁴⁰ The rest of the large article was devoted to the impressive dedication of student advocates. Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, media outlets reported on a plethora of environmental demonstrations, but framed their reports very differently. Activists on both sides were often working towards the same goals, taking the same actions, and initiating the same level of conflict. However, the attractive and educated look of the student environmentalist was much more favourable to news outlets who were recovering from the long and difficult reporting on the social turmoil of the 1960s. This harmful framing of Indigenous land protectors as violent and self-indulging would permanently change the history of the environmental movement.

Conclusion

*“Ecology has become an overnight issue. Everyone is climbing on the bandwagon – including the major polluters themselves” – Radical Coalition for Environmental Action, 1970*⁴¹

In conclusion, the Red Power and American Environmentalist social movements both tried to instill a new appreciation for the natural world through their demonstrations. The two groups held similar values and passions, with the Indigenous activists having strong cultural motivations and the environmentalists excited over the start of something new. Looking back through the lens of contemporary conservation politics, it is academic to nominate Indigenous activists as some of the first environmentalists. In the 1960s, however, they did not receive the same treatment. As

³⁹ Brown, “The First Environmentalists,” 43.

⁴⁰ Hill, “Environment May Eclipse Vietnam,” 1.

⁴¹ Radical Coalition for Environmental Action, “Pollution Protested Coopted!,” *Swill and Squeal*, 1 June 1970.

demonstrated by their exclusion from leadership in the environmental movement and their unjust media backlash, Red Power activists were critiqued for their cries for sovereignty instead of consulted by conservationists looking for allies. Luckily, modern day environmentalists have begun to realize the value of the knowledge of the natural world that Indigenous nations across North America held, and the movement has become more intersectional. The omission of Indigenous activists from scholarship in the 1960s has yet to receive a suitable degree of attention, however publications on sustainability continue to grow. Moving forward, Indigenous activists of the Red Power movement should be seen as an important part of environmentalism, given their long history of protecting the land through demonstrations analogous to those of university students in the 20th century.

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