

**Christopher J. Bosso.** *Environment, Inc: From Grassroots to Beltway.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005. ix + 194 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1367-0.



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Even to historians who know better, the label "environmentalist" can still evoke images of the counterculture. Birkenstocks. Composting. Brown rice. *Small is Beautiful* and *The Whole Earth Catalog*. Grassroots organizing for the common good. There is also the "type." The environmentalist, as Dr. Seuss describes the iconic Lorax in his 1971 parable of rising environmental consciousness, was "shortish. And oldish. And brownish. And mossy. And he spoke with a voice that was sharpish and bossy." He sported a scruffy moustache, and he persuaded by guilt. And, of course, he spoke for the trees.[1]

If the caricature is overdrawn, it is nonetheless true that during the twentieth century, a great deal of support for environmental causes began outside the mainstream political establishment. Citizens and scientists became activists. But somewhere along the way, the voices Americans today associate with speaking for the trees—from large environmental advocacy groups like the Sierra Club, to smaller ones like Earthjustice—started looking and sounding different. Conventional, according to their critics on the left, cautious, per-

haps a bit corporate. Indeed, by the dawn of the twenty-first century, protecting the environment had become Big Business with even Bigger Stakes. At least five major U.S. environmental advocacy organizations raked in revenues of over \$100 million apiece in 2003 alone. Over a dozen maintained membership rolls exceeding 100,000 and the behemoth World Wildlife Fund had over one million. Many maintained sophisticated lobbying outfits in Washington, D.C., though as recently as the 1960s, conservation groups had a total of only two lobbyists in the nation's capital (pp. 7, 35). Evidently, the Lorax has shaved his moustache, donned a blazer, left Vermont for Washington, D.C., and began hanging out with corporate donors. Why did environmental organizations seem to go so mainstream? How? Why did so many groups appear to follow similar courses? And had the environmental movement somehow sold out?

No, concludes Christopher Bosso in his ambitious study, *Environment, Inc.* According to Bosso, despite its failures (which he concedes are many), the professionalization of environmental advoca-

cy groups has been essential to the development of environmental policy in the United States. The systemic adoption of the trappings of modern bureaucracies, according to Bosso, was a necessary, if sometimes painful, adaptation to the changing American political scene. The groups that failed to adapt instead dissolved, like the often mentioned Environmental Action. Going corporate meant surviving. For the environmental historian, *Environment Inc.* provides a useful complement to the histories of modern environmental politics by Samuel Hays and Barbara Hays, Adam Rome, Paul Sutter, and Robert Gottlieb.[2] Instead of focusing on a single issue, group, or time period, Bosso takes an institutional approach, tracing the evolution of the environmental advocacy community (or, at least, the large slice of it with a national presence) over the entire twentieth century. The result is an analysis of how larger trends in American politics have shaped environmental advocacy and how that community has, in turn, helped keep environmental issues on the national agenda. Most importantly, by examining the organized environmental community as a whole, he is able to discern clear patterns in their responses to changes in the political landscape

Bosso begins with a sketch of the origins of some thirty major organizations that spoke to issues of conservation, wilderness preservation, and environmental protection. First came the "Progressive Pioneers" of the Sierra Club (est. 1892) and the National Audubon Society (est. 1901). Bosso emphasizes the institutional similarities of the two organizations. Both groups shared features that distinguished them from other conservation groups of the period. Both emerged in response to local conflicts over nature and natural resources: the Sierra Club to protect the newly designated Yosemite National Park from economic exploitation, the Audubon Society from the efforts of Boston elites to prohibit the trade of bird plumage in fashion. Both quickly generated distinct local or state chapters tied only loosely to a central office. And both quickly found that ideas

and issues could not sustain these organizations alone; they needed a measure of bureaucratization as well. For the Sierra Club, for example, its failure to prevent the flooding of Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy Valley by the damming of the Toulumne River had distinct organizational consequences. Since its supporters believed the club had lost the fight because it had too little support across the state, they pushed to expand its membership roles beyond the San Francisco Bay area and encouraged future Sierra Club leaders to thrust local and regional conflicts to the national stage (p. 24). Organizational survival thus depended on developing a bureaucracy capable of these tasks.

The emphasis of the study, however, is on the years after 1970, when environmental organizations began facing increasing pressures to become mainstream advocacy organizations. Though it was only a part of a larger shift in political and social values, Bosso attributes the election of Ronald Reagan as the watershed event that catalyzed environmental groups to change.

Bosso identifies six widespread responses to the Reagan revolution that were shared by many individual groups. First, in response to the erosion of federal funding, diminished access to powerful officials, and the decline in of government-based scientific research, many environmental organizations began cultivating their own, independent sources for research and financial support. This move towards self-sufficiency became a prerequisite for survival. Second, many environmental groups simultaneously launched successful campaigns for mass membership. Increasing membership served a vital double purpose: starved of federal funding, dues-paying members helped keep organizations afloat financially while their political support helped counterbalance the closing of doors in Washington. Next, greater self-sufficiency and mass membership created more complicated organizations, and led to the third major transformation in environmental groups in the 1980s: the hiring of larger professional staffs.

Often to the frustration of activists within national organizations, the professionals brought administrative, organizational, and fiscal changes that began to make the groups seem more corporate. Fourth, charismatic leaders gave way to professional managers with backgrounds more often in politics and fund-raising than in activism, science, or law. Fifth, simultaneous drives for mass membership led to greater competition between groups for the same donors. Consequently, the groups increasingly distinguished themselves from their competitors more starkly; in Bosso's terms, they engaged in "accelerated niche positioning," either streamlining their activities or merging with like-minded organizations (p. 93). Finally, the shared limits to political action during the Reagan years led many of the leading advocacy groups to cooperate more regularly with one another.

But as Bosso describes elsewhere, the Reagan administration was only the first big shock to modern environmental advocacy organizations that compelled their transformation into what he calls Big Environment. More broadly after 1970, the rightward lurch of the Republican Party and the center-left position of the Democratic Party left most environmental groups with only one political party with which to work seriously. Furthermore, Republicans in political office were joined across the country by citizens' groups advocating "property rights" and "wise use," sometimes fronting for corporate interests, and which discredited the actions of environmentalists and built up grassroots opposition to them. Finally, Congress, the courts, and the presidency limited the access, influence, and tactics once available to environmental organizations.

None of these forces will seem new to most historians. Bosso's contribution is showing how uniformly environmental organizations responded to them. Taken together, the fate of environmental groups appears remarkably similar. The fortunes of environmental organizations seem to

rise and fall together. Take their influence in Congress. The most striking image in the book is a graph of the appearances of environmental organizations before congressional committee hearings between 1970 and 2003. During the 1980s, these organizations appeared roughly between 200 and upwards of 350 times a year; after the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994, there began a precipitous decline in these appearances, hovering around 75 for the rest of the 1990s, and then dropping still lower after 2000 to barely a few dozen (p. 134).

Bosso's reliance on the standard periodization and characterization of environmental politics occasionally leads him to overly stark generalizations, however. He describes Americans in the interwar period, for example, as less concerned with the scientific management of resources (as compared with the Progressive Era) and focused instead on the recreational opportunities offered by nature (p. 27). If this characterization is true of the organizations he examines, it is certainly not so of the larger political landscape—the agendas of environmental organizations must not be mistaken for the larger concerns Americans brought to issues such as conservation. Petroleum geologists and engineers in the 1920s, to choose one important case, pressed hard through professional associations and state governments for conservation and strict resource management. The issue eventually made the national agenda with President Calvin Coolidge's appointment of the Federal Oil Conservation Board in 1924. The conservation advocates ultimately succeeded to a remarkable degree, most notably through the Texas Railroad Commission, which in 1927 began curtailing oil production to limit waste and stabilize prices in the nation's most lucrative oil field. Other state and federal agencies soon followed suit. As these developments took place far from the activities of the groups the author examines, Bosso loses some of the complexity of American environmental politics.

Bosso also does his research a disservice by conflating models with metaphors. Writing for fellow political scientists, who tend to attach greater importance to formal models than do most historians, Bosso draws on Virginia Gray and David Lowery's *The Population Ecology of Interest Representation* (1996). According to Gray and Lowery (and Bosso), advocacy communities can be likened to populations that evolve over time in response to selective pressures. Individual organizations represent individual species. Just as species compete for niches in an ecosystem, interest groups compete for niches within the political system. As Bosso explains, "[t]he population ecology approach, then, enables us to look at the national environmental advocacy community for what it is: a bounded, contextually derived assemblage of discrete entities whose aggregate shape and internal dynamic make sense only when taken as a whole" (p. 13). But does evolutionary biology provide a model or merely a suggestive metaphor? In biological systems, of course, populations respond to selective pressures through individuals successfully passing on beneficial (and random) adaptations to successive generations. In a complex political-social system, however, and as Bosso himself emphasizes, the adaptations (or failure to adapt) of individual organizations "are also the products of human agency" (p. 13). Organizations clearly compete for limited resources, and Bosso persuasively demonstrates how new groups fill vacant policy niches, but to turn this ecosystem metaphor into a model tends to burden Bosso's analysis with unnecessary conceptual baggage.

Bosso concludes that American environmental organizations evolved because they had to. The trends towards professionalization and bureaucratization in the environmental community happened because the alternatives were irrelevance, ineffectiveness, or collapse. "With Big Business, Big Government, and Big Labor comes Big Environment," he writes (p. 154). This argument is persuasive, at least for the types of organizations

Bosso examines. Organizations that could not adapt to the changing political landscape crumbled. Individual organizations confronted new challenges according to the particular choices of their members and (increasingly) leaders, but change in some form was required; illustrating that so many organizations changed in similar ways is the great contribution of this study.

#### Notes

[1]. Dr. Seuss [Theodor Seuss Geisel], *The Lorax* (New York: Random House, 1971).

[2]. Samuel P. Hays, *A History of Environmental Politics since 1945* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000); Samuel P. Hays and Barbara D. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Paul Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002); Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2005).

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