

2



Contested Meanings

A Brief History

Learning Objectives

After studying this chapter, you should be able to

- LO 2-1: Recall six pivotal historical periods of environmental discourse.
- LO 2-2: Define Key Terms and classify them within the six periods outlined.
- LO 2-3: Compare and contrast how these major historical discourses and antagonisms continue to impact environmental beliefs today.
- LO 2-4: Critique how land-centric environmental histories may marginalize oceanic and climatic concerns.
- LO 2-5: Assess how *who* and *what* became understood as “public” shifted across these six historical periods.
- LO 2-6: Develop an appreciation for emerging antagonisms of environmental discourse today.

Since the latter half of the 20th century, few words have acquired the symbolic currency of *environment*. No matter which culture or time period one studies, it is important to realize that our beliefs about the environment and how we communicate about them are contingent; that is, they have and can change. As Jan E. Dizard (1994) wrote: “Nature might well be thought of as the original Rorschach test” (p. 160). Like Rorschach inkblot tests used by some psychologists to determine one’s state of mind, the hopes and fears we feel in relation to the environment reflect a good deal about ourselves in a specific place and moment of time, in addition to the environment we are describing. To illustrate this dynamic relationship and significant legacies that continue to shape perceptions today, this chapter traces some of the more notably contested meanings of *environment* in the United States. This is not exhaustive, but it is illustrative of how new ideas challenge taken for granted values.

Throughout this chapter, we imagine each of these historical periods through notable changes in **discourse**, or a pattern of knowledge and power communicated through human expression, both linguistic and nonlinguistic (Foucault, 1970). One way to analyze discourses is to identify their conditions of possibility, or how they reflect both previous prevailing attitudes and emerging antagonisms of a culture in a particular period of history.

In everyday language, the term **antagonism** means a *conflict* or *disagreement*. Here, we use the term more specifically to signal the cultural recognition of the *limit* of an idea, a widely shared viewpoint, or an ideology (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). A conceptual limit is recognized when questioning or criticism reveals a prevailing view to be inadequate or unresponsive to new or more pressing demands. Recognizing this inadequacy creates an

Photo 2.1 Pictured are petroglyphs in Nine Mile Canyon, Utah, now called “The Great Hunt.” As long as humans have been speaking and writing, we have been telling stories about the natural world and humans’ relationships with it.

Today, petroglyphs are imagined as historic records of storytelling to preserve, as well as sites of contestation over public land use for the common good (Dickinson, 2012).

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opening for a broader range of voices to be heard—in this case, illustrating the ever-changing relationship between people and the environment when old commonsense notions give way to or become challenged by new possibilities. The key terms we highlight all are contested—historically and today. Overall, we hope to show how environmental communication may change over time and that these changes are consequential.

In this chapter, we'll describe six pivotal historical periods in the United States and, ultimately, internationally through which communities and movements contested the dominant attitudes about the environment and what society accepted as an environmental problem or solution, as well as what or who was considered of value to public life. This is not an exhaustive list globally or even from the United States, but highlighting these antagonisms is meant to illustrate how contested meanings of environmental discourses are shaped by culture and shape culture in return. Who and what are imagined as mattering to public life have consequences, as we will show, and the terms we focus on continue to have salience for environmental communication today.

Overall, this chapter contextualizes and defines a cluster of words that often serve as synonyms for the environment, but signify distinct meanings and power relations. Following the definition of environmental communication in Chapter 1, each of the following discourses is born of *pragmatic* exigencies and *constitutes* different ways of relating with, in, and as part of the environment. The first period we want to focus on is Indigenous thought prior to 1492.

Turtle Island

The area as known by most today as “North America” also has been called “Turtle Island” for thousands of years. People who most likely had migrated from Asia had grown into a population of millions of people, forming thousands of tribes. We cannot do justice to that diversity of people and cultures in this chapter. Nevertheless, we want to introduce three key environmental communication concepts from different Indigenous cultures that existed during this time period and remain relevant today to ongoing contestations.

First, **storytelling**—or communicating sequence and meaning for events—was (and remains) a vital practice of connecting and disconnecting events to create shared meaning, language, culture, and community. “Storytelling,” Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2011) (Anishnaabeg) argues: “is at its core decolonizing, because it is a process of remembering, visioning and creating a just reality. . . . Storytelling is an important process for visioning, imagining, critiquing, the social space around us” (p. 33; 34). She notes this practice occurs today not only through oral *storytelling*, but also with “Indigenous artists through the written word, spoken word, theatre, performance, art, visual art, music and rap, film and video” (p. 34). For example, turtles long have been revered as wise for their longevity and, therefore, resilience. Unsurprisingly, then, the birth of the world and a connection to turtles is foundational to many cultures, including Hindu tales about Kurma, a great turtle, and Chinese traditional creation stories of AO, a giant turtle.

The reason many Indigenous tribes in the territories now known as North America refer to the continent (or Earth) as “Turtle Island” also is based in creation stories from, for example, Lenape and Iroquois people,

who have passed on a story for generations that “the Earth is created as soil piled on the back of a great sea turtle” (Grundhauser, 2017). Whether or not you share this perspective, we all can appreciate how important *storytelling* as a form of communication is to our most fundamental beliefs about the relationship between ourselves, where we live, and our identities (who we interpret ourselves to be).

Perhaps the best-known environmental concept from Indigenous cultures is the *Seventh Generation Principle*. Though not unique to one tribe, this term is most often attributed to the Six Nations (originally Five) known as the Iroquois Confederacy (Haudenosaunee). Some argue the Iroquois Confederacy is the oldest living participatory democracy and is acknowledged by historians as a major influence on what eventually became the democratic ideals of the Constitution of the United States. Articles 24 and 28 of the Constitution of the Iroquois Nations or The Great Binding Law (Gayanashagowa), states:

The Lords of the Confederacy of the Five Nations shall be mentors of people for all time. The thickness of their skin shall be seven spans. . . . In all of your deliberations in the Confederate Council, in your efforts at law making, in all your official acts, self interest shall be cast into oblivion. . . . Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surfaces of the ground—the unborn of the future Nation (Murphy, 1997).

From this constitution, the **Seventh Generation Principle** has endured as a fundamental value referring to the belief that we should make decisions based on how they will impact not just the current generation, but the next seven. From the U.S. Seventh Generation company (for cleaning, paper, and personal care products) to the global youth climate lawsuits and strikes we will discuss later (See Chapters 11 and 14), this principle carries on as a fundamental concept to communicate environmental values.

Imagining the consequences of our actions for seven generations is based on the assumption that we all impact each other in some way. Recognizing **interdependence** or mutual reliance as more fundamental than individual, self-interest may shape not only one’s concept of self in relation to other people, but also complex relationships or systems between plants and animals and all that exists in the world. Further, valuing *interdependence* shapes not only ecological relations but how we act in the public sphere. Betasamosake Simpson (Anishnaabeg) (2011) writes:

Interdependence was a core value of many precolonial Indigenous societies. It also created leaders who were full of humility, responsibility and respect. . . . It was a kind of leadership based on shared, not absolute power, . . . and it created communities that were profoundly less authoritarian, less coercive and less hierarchal than their European counterparts. (p. 123)

As we will see, this sense of *interdependence* and shared leadership historically would clash with colonial discourses, which leads us to the second

period we want to address: the arrival of European settlers. We also will provide contemporary examples of this clash between Indigenous values and settler colonial attitudes later on, particularly in Chapters 5 and 8.

Learning to Love Nature

European settlers did not immediately value *nature* in North America. Colonist Michael Wigglesworth, for example, described the dark forests in 1662 as “a waste and howling wilderness” (Nash, 2001, p. 36). “Progress” often was defined by dominating *nature* and Indigenous peoples to make way for colonial farms and cities. Writing from a European perspective of “the New World” at Plymouth in 1620, William Bradford incredulously asked, “What could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men?” With that phrase, he began what Roderick Nash (2001) called an American “tradition of repugnance” for nature and people associated with it (p. 24).

Foundational to the formation of U.S. national culture was the *Frontier Myth*. In the late 1800s, this myth became a story repeated again and again, influencing a wide range of attitudes, values, and practices that remain salient today. The **Frontier Myth** generally is used to mark a foundational story in many cultures that promotes the idea that the manifest destiny of great nations have been founded by pioneering individuals in contrast to what was imagined as empty, uncivilized, “savage” people and places. “The frontier myth,” as Nicolas C. Hernandez et al. (2019) argue, “centers a world-view embedded in imperialism that belies the lived experience of the indigenous peoples already occupying the land.”

These stories often center the perspectives of individual white males. As Janice Hocker Rushing (1986) argued:

From birth to maturity, America has drawn upon the frontier for its mythic identity. Whether fixed upon Columbus sailing the ocean blue or Buffalo Bill conquering the Wild, Wild West, the American imagination remains fascinated by new and unknown *places*. . . . Since the beginning, the pioneer spirit has shaped the American Dream and infused its rhetoric. (emphasis in original, p. 265)

Leah Ceccarelli (2013) has traced how this metaphor continues to be popular in contemporary science communication exploring “new frontiers” in everything from stem cell research to Velcro.

Although this perspective on the “wild” is not universal, it has many parallels internationally. For example, in her comparison of the roots of the English word “wilderness” and the Chinese word “ye,” Xinghua Li (2020) argues:

Between the Confucian tradition and the early American pioneer mentality, a parallel may be found: in both cases, wild man and wild land became synonymous as objects of fear and repulsion, as either targets of conquest or agents of destruction. (p. 6)

(These attitudes also remain relevant today, as Li illustrates in her analysis of discourse about the “wild” in contemporary North Face advertising in China, which reflects the broader trend of the massive growth of nature

tourism in China today.) Involving a long history parallel to the *Frontier Myth* in the United States, “Qing armies conquered Xinjiang, which means ‘New Frontier’ in Chinese, in 1759, and for more than a century afterward, travelers, prisoners, soldiers, and officials from the ‘inner lands’ . . . tended to depict the region as a vast unredeemable ‘wasteland’ (*huang*)” (Kinzley, 2018, p. 1).

Eventually, voices in art, in literature, and on the lecture circuits began to challenge the colonial view of *nature* solely as alien and exploitable through the championing of wilderness. In his classic study, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Roderick Nash (2001) identifies multiple sources of this cultural shift away from early colonial attitudes, including:

1. *Romantic aesthetics*: “Appreciation of wilderness,” Nash argues, “began in cities” (2001, p. 44). In the 18th and early 19th centuries, English nature poets and aestheticians, such as William Gilpin, “inspired a rhetorical style for articulating [an] appreciation of uncivilized nature” (p. 46). These urban dwellers were removed from the day-to-day hardships of living in rural areas and fostered, in American art and literature, an ideal of beauty in wild nature. “Combined with the primitivistic idealization of a life closer to nature, these ideas fed the Romantic movement which had far-reaching implications for wilderness” (Nash, 2001, p. 44). Carleton Watkins’s 1861 photographs of Yosemite were pivotal to establishing the area as the nation’s first protected land and in fostering admiration for the environment (DeLuca & Demo, 2000).

2. *American national identity*: Believing that the new nation could not match the reverence many felt for Europe’s illustrious monuments and cathedrals, advocates of a uniquely American identity championed the distinctive characteristics of its natural landscape. “Nationalists argued that far from being a liability, wilderness was actually an American asset” (Nash, 2001, p. 67). Writers and artists of the Hudson River school, such as Thomas Cole, celebrated the wonders of the American wilderness by defining a nationalistic style in fiction, poetry, painting, and eventually photography. For example, Cole argued, “American scenery . . . has features, and glorious ones, unknown to Europe. The most distinctive, and perhaps the most impressive, characteristic of American scenery is its wildness” (quoted in Nash, 2001, pp. 80–81). Nash’s student, Alfred Runte (1980), calls this desire to create remarkable scenery “monumentalism” (as opposed to a desire to preserve ecological systems, for example).

3. *Transcendentalist ideals*: The 19th-century philosophy of **transcendentalism** also proved to be an important impetus for revaluing wild nature. Transcendentalists held that “natural objects assumed importance because, if rightly seen, they reflected universal spiritual truth” (Nash, 2001, p. 85). Among those who drew on such beliefs to challenge older discourses about wilderness was the writer and philosopher Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau (1893/1932) argued that “in Wildness is the preservation of the World,” and that there exists “a subtle magnetism in Nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright” (pp. 251, 265).

Although Nash identifies evidence of culturally dominant perspectives, we understand that, like the public sphere, there is no one “American mind”

but many. Further, who was excluded from being imagined as consequential to the public sphere during this time was limited to white males. Nevertheless, these broad brushstrokes of early colonial attitudes do point to key environmental values that did and still do matter.

Most notably, with the articulation of each of these discourses, though they vary in many ways, the focus primarily is on constituting the environment as **nature**, or the physical world that generally exceeds human creation (trees, birds, bears, clouds, rainbows, oceans, seashells, and so forth). This concept required erasing humans from the landscape, including the dispossession of land from Indigenous peoples as well as a clash with the Indigenous recognition of *interdependence*. The colonial domination of women and nature also are intertwined in these discourses (Merchant, 1980).

Of course, today, from practices in landscape architecture that radically transform the Earth (such as New York City's Central Park) to the capability of genetically cloning animals, this distinction between what humans can create and what we cannot is even more complicated, which perhaps is why *environment* has become a more prominent term than *nature*. Nevertheless, how humans relate with these perspectives remains of ongoing cultural relevance. Consider, for example, Richard Louv's (2008) best-selling book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature Deficit Disorder*, in which he argues that in an age of increased technology, we must remember how direct exposure to nature is essential for emotionally and physically healthy human development and our ability to respond to current environmental crises. How many of you were or knew someone who was raised with a designated amount of "screen time" growing up, encouraged to "go outside"? Those concerns seem to resonate with early beliefs that the salvation of urban dwellers would be found in nature, imagined as a space separate from humans.

As another example, imagine how you might represent national pride where you live: does it involve monuments or parks? Often, it does still. Does your faith or fundamental beliefs about life involve foundational stories speaking through nature?

While we are skipping a great deal of history in between, early settler colonial discourses continue to shape a third influential historical discourse we want to introduce.

Wilderness Preservation Versus Natural Resource Conservation

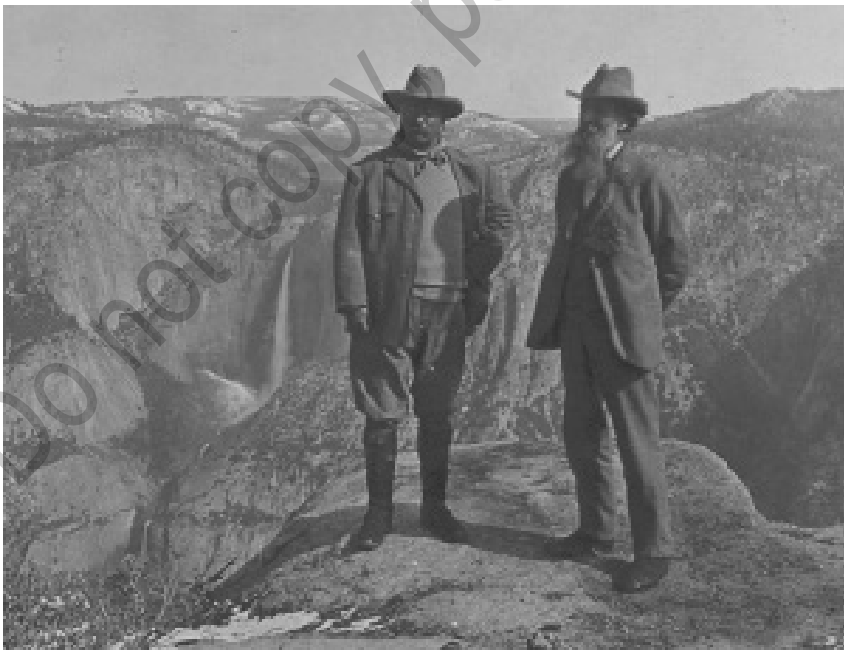
The Progressive Era of U.S. history, 1890s–1920s, was defined by a range of activism and policy changes, including conflicting discourses about land. Notably, although African Americans and women "contributed both ingenuity and skilled labor" as homesteaders, they generally are excluded from being imagined as leaders by dominant culture during this time (Merchant, 2005, p. 105). Even rural communities, whose practices consisted of subsistence farming and hunting, were impacted with the rise of conservation, which favored certain uses of the land over others (Jacoby, 2014). As more people in decision-making roles began to imagine the value of nature, diverging viewpoints emerged regarding its use. Should we set spaces aside where humans tread lightly in order to enable nature to thrive? Or should

we find ways to cultivate nature efficiently for increasing human demands for wood, paper, drinking water, and more?

John Muir and the Wilderness Preservation Movement

By the 1880s, key figures had begun to argue explicitly for the **preservation** of wilderness areas, that is, to maintain certain places and protect them from harm, in order to safeguard water supplies and areas for recreation (Nash, 2001). Arising out of these efforts were campaigns to designate spectacular regions of natural scenery as preservation areas. The discourse of *preservation* was invoked to prioritize certain areas for appreciation, study, and low-impact outdoor recreation and tourism, as opposed to the growing popularity of industrial development (through urbanization, railroads, and more).

One of the leaders of the U.S. preservation movement was Scottish immigrant John Muir, who was influenced by Thoreau and whose own essays in the 1870s and 1880s did much to arouse national sentiment for the *preservation* of Yosemite Valley. Compared to the banality of labeling experiences or destinations as “sublime” today, its initial articulation was to mark exceptional places and feelings. Communication scholar Christine Oravec (1981) has observed that Muir’s essays evoked a **sublime response** from his readers through his description of the rugged mountains and valleys of the Sierra Nevada. This reaction on the part of readers was characterized by (a) an immediate awareness of a sublime object (such as Yosemite Valley), (b) a sense of overwhelming personal insignificance and awe in the object’s presence, and (c) ultimately a feeling of spiritual exaltation (p. 248).



Library of Congress, U.S. Public Domain

Photo 2.2 Shown here, posing on Overhanging Rock at the top of Glacier Point in 1903, John Muir led U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt into Yosemite Valley as part of his continuing efforts to advocate for the preservation of wilderness areas.

Muir's influence and the support of others led to a long-term national campaign to preserve Yosemite Valley, including the art of George Catlin (Mackintosh, 1999) and the landscape photographs of Carleton Watkins (DeLuca & Demo, 2000). By 1890, these combined efforts resulted in the U.S. Congress's creation of Yosemite National Park, "the first successful proposal for preservation of natural scenery to gain widespread national attention and support" from the public (Oravec, 1981, p. 256). By then, Yellowstone (1872) was established as the first U.S. National Park, followed by Sequoia (1890), and Grand Canyon (1908).

During the same time period, imagining the *preservation* of certain places as a national project also takes hold transnationally, including the first national parks established in New South Wales and Australia (1879), Canada (1885), New Zealand (1887), South Africa (1898), India (1905), and Sweden (1909, which involved the establishment of the first national park "system") (Tyrrell, 2012). Thus, while *nationalism* continues to perpetuate a discourse of American exceptionalism through national parks, we hope you are beginning to more fully appreciate how all of these contested terms remain so.

In the United States, logging of giant redwood trees along California's coast in the 1880s also fueled interest in the preservation movement, leading to the creation of environmental NGOs you may recognize still today. Laura White and the California Federation of Women's Clubs were among those who led successful campaigns to protect redwood groves in the late 19th century (Merchant, 2005). As a result of these early campaigns, groups dedicated to wilderness and wildlife preservation began to appear: the Sierra Club (1892, founded by John Muir and his allies), the Audubon Society (1905), the Save the Redwoods League (1918), the National Parks and Conservation Association (1919), the Wilderness Society (1935), and the National Wildlife Federation (1936).

In the 20th century, these environmental NGOs launched other preservation campaigns that challenged norms of exploitation and efficiency as sole markers of progress. The National Parks Act of 1916 established a national system of parks that continues to expand today. Other designations of parks, wildlife refuges, and wild and scenic rivers would follow into the 21st century.

One of preservationists' most significant victories in the United States was the 1964 Wilderness Act, which authorized Congress to designate **wilderness** areas using the following definition:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man [*sic*] and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.

The creation of the idea of humans as separate from nature and mere visitors to certain places appealed—and still does appeal—to many. The concept of "wilderness," as William Cronon (1996) writes, on the one hand, seems to naively offer "us the illusion that we can escape the cares and troubles of the world in which our past has ensnared us" (such as settler colonialism) and, on the other, "a place where, symbolically at least, we try to withhold our power to dominate"—arguably, a worthwhile practice for all to embrace (p. 16; 23).

ANOTHER VIEWPOINT

THE LIMITS OF A LAND-CENTRIC PERSPECTIVE

While much of the histories we share here are focused on human relationships with land, water is a vital part of our lives. Both Catalina M. de Onís and Tiara Na'puti have argued that communication studies should learn from *archipelagos* and *oceanic places* that a less land-centric perspective is vital to reimagining unsustainable relationships between humans and the environment.

de Onís (2018) focuses on Puerto Rico after the 2017 disaster of Hurricane María. In her research, a tropical storm brought flooding, a loss of water access, and highlighted ongoing concerns about sea level rise from climate change. As we will discuss more in Chapter 8, this research is timely in an age of climate chaos and injustice.

Na'puti (2019) also focuses on relations of water/land/island in the Mariana Islands area

to argue: “When critical scholarship prioritizes landscapes over oceanic environments it dilutes our capacity for advancing cultural and political struggles of Indigenous peoples in lands and waters that are heavily settler colonized” (p. 3). In contrast, she (2020) persuasively argues: “*Oceanic rhetoric* expands perspectives on place and power and notion of the ‘field’ itself by investigating the profound importance of the ocean—challenging overwhelming land-based preoccupations and containment through colonial logics” (p. 96).

When you think about “the environment,” does water come to mind? How? Does having a less land-centric bias about environmental history move you to think differently about our relationships with water and land? What histories do you know about contested environmental communication that are shaped by the ocean?

Today, contested debates about the value and uses of the U.S. National Park Service continue to center on perceptions of “escape” and “domination.” Consider, for example, the controversy over whether or not communication technologies should be allowed to expand into public lands so people can connect for work and/or social media about their experiences or if the point is to preserve spaces to unplug (Tobias, 2020). Or whether or not the voices of the Intertribal Coalition (led by the Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, Pueblo of Zuni, and Ute Indian Tribe), which advocated for Bears Ears to be designated as a national monument, will be recognized or not (Five Tribes, 2019).

Gifford Pinchot and the Conservation of Natural Resources

Muir’s ethic of wilderness preservation clashed with a competing vision that sought to manage America’s forests more like a “natural resource” that needed to be cultivated and harvested efficiently. Influenced by the British philosophy of **utilitarianism**, the idea of the greatest good for the greatest number of people long has shaped American attitudes toward nature. This perspective centered Jeremy Bentham’s question: “What use is it?” to prioritize use-value across all elements of life (Driver, 2014).

As a result, some Europeans and European settlers in the early 20th century began to promote a conservation discourse that promoted economic gain as the primary value to arbitrate contested decisions about nature. Associated in the United States principally with Gifford Pinchot, President Theodore Roosevelt’s chief of the Division of Forestry (now the U.S. Forest Service), the term **conservation** interpreted the most valuable relationship

with the environment to be “the wise and efficient use of natural resources” (Merchant, 2005, p. 128). That is, while conservationists tended to enjoy the outdoors for hunting, fishing, hiking, and more, they believed that human relationships with the environment ultimately should be determined by economic demands, including water power (through dams) and timber sales. For example, using European methods to manage public forest lands as a source of timber, Pinchot instituted a sustained yield policy, according to which logged timberlands were to be reforested after cutting, to ensure future timber supplies (Hays, 1989; Merchant, 2005). In the following decades, Pinchot’s conservation approach strongly influenced the management of natural resources by U.S. government agencies such as the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

The debate between preservationists and conservationists came to a head in the fierce controversy over the building of a dam in Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park. In 1901, the City of San Francisco’s proposal to dam the river running through this valley as a source for its residents’ water supply sparked a multiyear dispute over the purpose of the new park, broadly with Muir and the Sierra Club launching a grassroots campaign to stop the dam and Pinchot ultimately supporting the dam. This conflict over the value of national parks and of the environment more broadly defined would continue long after conservationists won and the Hetch Hetchy dam was approved in 1913. (For more on Muir and Pinchot, see: Worster, 2008 and Miller, 2001; for more information on Hetch Hetchy, see <http://vault.sierraclub.org/ca/hetchhetchy/history.asp>.)

Roosevelt’s presidency continued to involve fostering a distinction between what he perceived as corporate abuse of the environment and the “wise use” of natural resources for the public good now and for future generations. To promote this new discourse of *conservation*, he linked the environment to a civil religion, aligning misuse of natural resources with sinning. He also eventually modified and retold the *Frontier Myth*, “which had long positioned pioneers as conquerors, heralding their destruction of the environment,” instead, lauding cooperation and what he portrayed as “the yeoman farmer, whose tireless work to use nature wisely—instead of simply destroy it—symbolized true progress” (Dorsey, 2016, p. 18; 82).

Today, much of the contestation about revitalizing the U.S. economy has borrowed or adapted discourse of the Civilian *Conservation Corps* (CCC), established by President Franklin Roosevelt after the Progressive Era in 1933. Among other CCC projects: “By 1942, the 3.4 million participants in the ‘Roosevelt’s Tree Army’ had planted more than three billion trees, built hundreds of parks and wildlife refuges and completed thousands of miles of trails and roads” (O’Mara, 2020). Though not a perfect program, the contested discourse of *conservation* remains a cultural resource of inspiration for many. Likewise, we find the use of national parks for utilitarian tourist desires continues to thrive in popularity internationally, constantly raising contested questions about the most and least desirable uses for mass tourism at these beloved destinations.

In Chapter 12, we revisit the discourses of preservation and conservation as they continue to matter to contemporary debates over public participation and public lands, as well as when these efforts now integrate

Indigenous voices or not. For now, we turn to our fourth historical period, which introduces more contested terms expressed in environmental communication today.

Public Health and the Ecology Movement

The prefix *eco* in *ecology* (and *economics*) has roots in ancient Greece with the term *oikos*, meaning a house or dwelling. Yet it wasn't until the turn of the 20th century that a German scientist and artist, Ernst Haeckel (1904), coined the modern term **ecology** as the study of how an organism relates with its exterior world. The U.S. environmental movement remains heavily influenced by early 20th-century ecologists and the core terms they have identified, such as **resilience**, an organism's ability to adapt and to persist at the same time. This perspective not only assumes that the environment always is dynamic or changing but also recognizes limits to a species' ability to adapt before failing to thrive. These developments led to the fourth historical period we want to introduce: the 1950s–1970s.

By the 1960s, much was changing in the United States and internationally. Global signs of ecological crisis were causing alarm, including the first person to die of mercury poisoning in 1954 in Japan, after eating shellfish from waters polluted by a chemical plant (Harada, 1995). Meanwhile, international awareness of a need to establish an ethic of care also was rising. In 1958, for example, the world decided through the UN to approve the Law of the Sea, which established global diplomacy as the accepted approach to fishery rights, sea mineral claims, jurisdiction in coastal areas, and more (Treves, 2020). In Switzerland in 1961, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) was established as an international wildlife preservation NGO to protect endangered species and their habitats with a logo of a giant panda, a gift from China to the London Zoo that year (WWF, n.d.).

In the following pages, we map how, within the United States, a shift in discourse, public opinion, and policies about *public health*, as well as the watershed year of 1970 for the institutionalization of the environmental movement.

Rachel Carson and the Public Health Movement

Often, in the United States, biologist and writer Rachel Carson is credited for voicing the first nationally recognized public challenge to business practices that affect the environment, including public health or the prevention of disease and prolonging human life. In her book *Silent Spring*, Carson (1962) wrote, “We are adding a . . . new kind of havoc—the direct killing of birds, mammals, fishes, and indeed, practically every form of wildlife by chemical insecticides indiscriminately sprayed on the land” (p. 83). Fearful of the ecological consequences of insecticides like DDT (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane), she warned that modern agribusiness had “armed itself with the most modern and terrible weapons, and that in turning them against the insects it has also turned them against the earth” (p. 262). With her prescient writings, public advocacy on behalf of national toxic legislation, and untimely death from cancer, Rachel Carson is widely considered to be the founder of the modern environmental movement.

Although *Silent Spring* did prefigure a popular movement, earlier voices from the 1880s through the 1920s had warned of dangers to human health,

from poor sanitation and occupational exposures to chemicals. Trade unions, *sanitarians* (reformers from Jane Addams's Hull House in Chicago), and public health advocates had warned of hazards to both workplace and urban life: "contaminated water supplies, inadequate waste and sewage collection disposal, poor ventilation and polluted and smoke-filled air, [and] overcrowded neighborhoods and tenements" (Gottlieb, 1993, p. 55). Ellen Swallow Richards was the first woman admitted to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, earning her degree in 1873. Although Richards is considered the founder of home economics, she was trained as a chemist and is an underrecognized early thinker on what has become known as "ecology" through her work on water and pollution, as well as other areas of research (Pezzullo, 2014). Dr. Alice Hamilton also was "a powerful environmental advocate in an era when the term had yet to be invented" (Gottlieb, 1993, p. 51); she worked in the 1920s to reform the "dangerous trades" of urban workplaces. With the publication of *Industrial Poisons in the United States* and her work with the Women's Health Bureau, Hamilton became "the country's most powerful and effective voice for exploring the environmental consequences of industrial activity" (Gottlieb, 1993, p. 51), including the impacts of occupational hazards on women and minorities in the workplace.

Still, at the time, there was no such thing as an "environmental movement" in the United States, in the sense of a "concerted, populous, vocal, influential, active" force (Sale, 1993, p. 6). However, by the late 1960s, news coverage of air pollution; nuclear fallout; fires on the Cuyahoga River near Cleveland, Ohio (when its polluted surface ignited); and oil spills off the coast of Santa Barbara, California, fueled a public outcry for greater ecological protections. Although the discourse of public health continues throughout the textbook, in Chapter 11 we focus on risk communication and will consider, among other things, the 1984 Bhopal gas disaster and how Europe's toxic chemical regulations far surpass the United States today.

Earth Day and Legislative Landmarks

U.S. president Richard Nixon did not campaign in 1968 with the promise of caring about environmental matters; nevertheless, a growing environmental movement soon swayed the direction of the nation dramatically. By the first **Earth Day** on April 22, 1970, students, public health workers, activist groups, and urban workers had coalesced into a movement to champion environmental controls on industrial pollution (see Photo 2.3). Some 20 million people participated in protests, teach-ins, and festivals throughout the country in one of the largest demonstrations in U.S. history. The 50th anniversary of Earth Day in 2020 was a global event. We discuss environmental advocacy campaigns and how everyday people continue to make a difference as they did in 1970 again in Chapter 5.

Internationally, we cannot do justice to the range of environmental advocacy practices and discourses that swept the globe in the 1970s; however, it is important to remember that the United States was not acting in isolation. One notable milestone was the United Nations Water Conference (1977), which was hosted in Mar del Plata, Argentina, which established the public health and ecological goal of clean water and adequate sanitation by 1990; although not met, this international conversation laid groundwork for international efforts to make these connections. Another notable



Bethmann/Bethmann/Getty Images

Photo 2.3 Image from the first Earth Day in 1970. “Earth Day can—and it must—lend a new urgency and a new support to solving the problems that still threaten to tear the fabric of this society . . . the problems of race, of war, of poverty, of modern-day institutions. Ecology is a big science, a big concept—not a copout. It is concerned with the total ecosystem—not just with how we dispose of our tin cans, bottles and sewage.” (Senator Gaylord Nelson, April 22, 1970, Denver, Colorado)

international effort of cooperation occurred in 1973, in which the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (“CITES”) was signed by over 80 countries and remains “recognized as the world’s most influential conservation treaty” (Lewis, 2009).

At the same time, new NGOs arose to address the relationship between human health and the environment. Among the earliest were the Environmental Defense Fund (1967), Environmental Action (1970), and the Natural Resources Defense Council (1970). The popularity of the paradigm shift of ecology, expressed through the discourse of the environmental movement, led lawmakers to enact bold, new federal legislation in 1970, including the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Clean Air Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Act (commonly referred to as OSHA), and the creation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Despite these landmarks, struggles to hold polluting entities accountable for their impact on everyday people and the environment continued in the United States and globally. Communities became increasingly worried by the chemical contamination of their air, drinking water, soil, and school grounds. For example, the small New York community of Love Canal became a symbol of the nation’s widening consciousness of the hazards of chemicals. (See the description of that movement in Chapter 1). Ordinary citizens felt themselves surrounded by what Hays (1989) termed the “toxic ‘sea around us’” (p. 171) and began to organize in community-based groups to demand cleanup of their neighborhoods and stricter accountability of corporate polluters, as well as establish federal laws for greater protection. Nevertheless, what is imagined as a public good (like clean water or air) and

who deserves to be heard in public remains contested in the United States and globally, as we will discuss more in Chapter 7. Now, we turn to our fifth period of contested environmental history.

Environmental Justice: Linking Social Justice and Public Health

Even as the agenda and support of the U.S. environmental movement grew in popularity, there remained a definition of the environment that provided contradictory accounts of humans' place in nature and assumed a "long-standing separation of the social from the ecological" (Gottlieb, 2002, p. 5). By the 1970s, however, new activists had begun to gain ground in challenging the dominant perceptions of nature as a wild place apart from people's everyday lives, disclosing another notable antagonism: environmental justice.

Redefining the Meaning of "Environment"

Despite earlier efforts to bring environmentalist, labor, civil rights, and religious leaders together in the 1960s and 1970s, U.S. environmental organizations largely failed to recognize the problems of urban residents and communities of people of color. Interdisciplinary scholar Giovanna Di Chiro (1996) reports, for example, that in the mid-1980s, residents in South Central Los Angeles who were trying to stop a solid waste incinerator from being located in their neighborhood discovered that "these issues were not deemed adequately 'environmental' by local environmental groups" (p. 299). Identifying a salient antagonistic limit in communication, activists in communities of color were particularly vocal in criticizing mainstream environmental organizations for being "reluctant to address issues of equity and social justice, within the context of the environment" (Alston, 1990, p. 23).

In a historically significant move, the movement proposed to expand our notion of the word *environment* to mean "where we live, where we work, where we play, and where we learn" (Lee, 1996, p. 6), which we noted in the Introduction is the definition we are using when we use this term. The discourse articulated a new perspective for environmental matters in the United States and beyond, in which U.S. civil rights and environmental advocacy became intertwined in their values, tactics, and solutions. Arguably, this broader notion of "environment" also resonates with pre-colonial perspectives in the West and East.

For example, as we will discuss more in Chapter 11, a key moment in the launching of this new movement occurred in 1982 with the protests by residents of the largely African American community of Warren County, North Carolina. Local residents and leaders of national civil rights groups tried to halt the state's plans to locate a toxic waste landfill in this rural community by sitting in roads to block 6,000 trucks carrying soil contaminated by toxins known as PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls). Robert Bullard and Beverly Hendrix Wright (1987) called this moment in Warren County "the first national attempt by blacks to link environmental issues (hazardous waste and pollution) to the mainstream civil rights agenda" (p. 32).

With similar struggles in other parts of the nation and reports of the heavy concentration of hazardous facilities in people of color neighborhoods, some charged that this pattern of inequity was a form of *environmental*



s pants/Flickr- The Washington Post/Getty Images

Photo 2.4 “Many people assume that I must have been inordinately brave to face down the thugs and police during the campaign for Karura Forest. The truth is that I simply did not understand why anyone would want to violate the rights of others or ruin the environment. Why would someone destroy the only forest left in the city and give it to friends and political supporters to build expensive houses and golf courses?” (Wangari Maathai, 2008, p. 272)

racism (Sandler & Pezzullo, 2007, p. 4) or, more broadly, environmental injustice (Roberts, 2007, p. 289). For the first time in history, **environmental racism** named the systematic discrimination of the health and well-being of people of color through decision-making about where people live, work, and play. The term *environmental racism* meant not only threats to public health from polluting industries disproportionately burdening people of color, but also the ways particular voices were being excluded from public decision-making.

Defining “Environmental Justice”

Emerging from these grassroots struggles was not only a criticism of dominant discourses and practices, but also new, robust *discourse of environmental justice*. For most activists, *environmental justice* connected public health and quality of the environment with concerns for social and economic matters. Residents and movement activists insisted that environmental justice referred to the basic right of all people to be free of poisons and other hazards, expanding notions of which public goods and services should become rights for all. This included a vision of the democratic inclusion of people and communities in the decisions that affect their lives. At its core, then, **environmental justice** expressed: (a) calls to recognize and halt the disproportionate burdens imposed on poor and people of color communities by environmentally harmful conditions, (b) more inclusive opportunities for those who are most affected to be heard in the decisions made by public agencies and the wider environmental movement, and (c) a vision of environmentally healthy, economically sustainable, and culturally thriving communities.

FYI

PRINCIPLES OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE (1991)

The following are excerpts from the 1991 text adopted by delegates to the first People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, Washington, D.C.

WE, THE PEOPLE OF COLOR, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities . . . do affirm and adopt these Principles of Environmental Justice:

1. Environmental Justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction.
2. Environmental Justice demands that public policy be based on mutual respect and justice for all peoples, free from any form of discrimination or bias. . . .
3. Environmental Justice demands the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision making, including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement and evaluation.
4. Environmental Justice affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment. It also affirms the right of those who work at home to be free from environmental hazards.
5. Environmental Justice protects the right of victims of environmental injustice to receive full compensation and reparations for damages as well as quality health care. . . .
6. Environmental Justice affirms the need for urban and rural ecological policies to clean up and rebuild our cities and rural areas in balance with nature, honoring the cultural integrity of all our communities, and provides fair access for all to the full range of resources.

Source: "Principles of Environmental Justice" at www.ejnet.org/ej/principles.html.

The demand for environmental justice received significant publicity in 1991, when delegates from local communities, along with national leaders of civil rights, religious, and environmental groups, convened in Washington, D.C., for the first People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. The delegates adopted a powerful set of **Principles of Environmental Justice** that enumerated a series of rights, including "the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural, and environmental self-determination of all peoples" (*Proceedings*, 1991, p. viii). In 1994, federal legislation established environmental justice as vital to environmental protections; however, since 2016, this federal support greatly has diminished—though the terms "environmental justice" and "environmental racism" were used for the first time in U.S. presidential debates in 2020. We expand on the principles, policies,

and practices of the environmental justice movement most directly in Chapter 11, though this perspective informs the entire textbook. For now, we turn to our sixth and final historical period: contemporary discourses.

Contemporary Movements for Sustainability and Climate Justice

While this chapter has focused on notable environmental discourses and antagonisms in U.S. history, environmental matters around the world have salience. To highlight just two contemporary antagonisms that have strong salience globally, we now turn to sustainability and climate justice.

Introducing Sustainability

A discourse that has become commonplace internationally, though it too once was a new antagonism, is *sustainability*. The rhetorical appeal of sustainability, as Tarla Rai Peterson (1997) argues, “lies in its philosophical ambiguity and range” (p. 36). For our purposes, a working definition of **sustainability** will be the capacity to negotiate environmental, social, and economic needs and desires for current and future generations. Sustainable initiatives today often are articulated as accounting for the three Es (environmental protection, economic health, and equity) or the three Ps (people, profit, and the planet) now and in the future.

For example, Wangari Maathai (1940–2011), founded the **Greenbelt Movement** in Kenya in the 1970s with the belief that sustainable development could make connections between planting trees, fostering peace and democracy, and providing opportunities for women’s economic rights (see Photo 2.4). Kundai Chirindo (2016) has shown how Maathai’s Bantu discourse of *mariika* (“generations”) and *ukama* (“relatedness”) fostered a rich relationship, in particular, between peacebuilding and environmental rhetorics. In recognition of the significance of her transformative efforts, in 2004 she became the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

Chirindo (2018) also has argued that Maathai’s rhetoric goads us to consider the value of micronationalism “as a means of cultivating strong agonistic national cultures” and “postnational publics” (p. 387); that is, to imagine communal relations beyond the state and as a key “ingredient of the national project” (p. 391). The point for our textbook being: sustainability provides a way to consider how ecological, economic, and social equity are interconnected through public life; an agonistic discourse often has implications for dominant notions of all three elements. Let us now turn to contemporary discourses that continue to bridge agonistic publics with dominant discourses and institutions.

Moving Toward Climate Justice and a Just Transition

Sustainability efforts implicate the local and the global. The **climate** refers to average atmosphere changes over a long time. While the first scientific study of “how certain gases trap heat” that impacts the climate were in 1824 by French mathematician and physicist Joseph Fourier, it has taken a long time for this scientific perspective to gain traction in the public sphere (Wogan, 2013).

Climate justice is a global movement that recognizes the intertwined relationship between global warming and social justice or power between

people. That is, climate justice activists point out that (1) the root causes of our current climate crisis are primarily due to First World fossil fuel consumption; (2) low-income communities and communities of color around the globe are the people who are most significantly impacted first, which is why they are called “frontline communities”; and, therefore, (3) solutions to the climate crisis are to be found by listening to and learning from these frontline communities.

Both sustainability movements and climate justice movements are critical of the unrestrained growth of carbon-based economies, often called a “**business as usual**” (BAU) scenario of the future. Carbon is the energy source—primarily fossil fuels such as oil, coal, and “natural” gas—used by human societies to produce electricity, fuel transportation, and sustain other dimensions of life. Questioning these energy sources has been important because climate scientists believe there is an increased warming of the Earth due principally to the emissions (CO₂) caused by the combustion of fossil fuels as well as other so-called greenhouse gases. We elaborate on sustainability in Chapter 7, climate science communication in Chapter 10, and the climate justice movement in Chapter 8.

For now, we want to conclude by noting a related movement for a *just transition*. **Just transition** is a term developed by labor and climate justice movements to advocate the idea that the major transformation we are undergoing from a global fossil fuel, carbon-based economy to a renewable energy economy should incorporate ecological *and* social justice or (what some call “equity”). The first person to coin the phrase was Tony Mazzocchi (1926–2002), best known for championing OSHA. During his speech at the first national Green Party Convention in Denver, Colorado, on June 25, 2000, Mazzocchi called for a proactive plan for workers losing jobs as a result of environmental policy: “If there’s to be a real alliance around our shared concerns, the cornerstone has to be a just transition, a transformation, moving from the type of society that does harm to a great many people to a society that does harm to no one and a society that’s free of want.” (<http://www.kclabor.org/mazzgreen.htm>). Perhaps uncoincidentally, in 2019, the state of Colorado became the first to establish a statewide Just Transition Office, initially focusing on transitioning coal workers.

In 2020, the global pandemic linked *just transition* plans to a just recovery. For example, U.S. President Donald Trump signed the bipartisan legislation called the “Great American Outdoors Act,” which was touted as “the biggest land conservation legislation in a generation” (Harsha, 2020). It guaranteed funding for maintenance at national parks and other federal lands, as well as for conservation programs; while focused on public land conservation, it also was promoted as a much-needed source for jobs as part of the COVID-19 pandemic economic recovery (Argust, 2020). Meanwhile, environmental nonprofit 350.org led an effort in 2020 to articulate “Just Recovery Principles” (see: <https://350.org/just-recovery/#signletter>) and the Hawai’i State Commission on the Status of Women (2020) created a COVID-19 recovery plan that foregrounds feminist and decolonial voices. We will revisit the significance of how intertwined equity, jobs, and the economy often are in environmental discourses throughout the textbook, including addressing the Green New Deal in Chapter 8 and how this discourse links to Indigenous *regeneration* projects in the Epilogue.

ACT LOCALLY!

LOCAL RESOURCES AND ANTAGONISMS

There are undoubtedly many resources on your campus or in your community—faculty, community leaders, activists, and other professionals—who are knowledgeable about one or more of the antagonisms described in this chapter.

Invite someone with knowledge about or personal experience in one of these six areas to visit your class or interview them to learn more. Ask that person to speak about the specific antagonism you've chosen. Among the questions you might ask, consider these:

- How did you come to study (or be engaged with) this issue? What do you find most interesting?
- What progress has been made in addressing this problem, and what are the most difficult challenges remaining?
- What role has communication played in either perpetuating the problem or in finding solutions?
- What resources exist locally? How can we become more involved with this issue?

Summary

Muir famously said, “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe” (Wood, 2016). Indeed, throughout the history of environmental values and actions, antagonisms are debated over how we can grapple with the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman life, as well as that of humans and other humans. As we have seen, “the environment” is subject to redefinition as new voices and interests contest prevailing understandings. The core of these challenges is a distinctly rhetorical process, through which humans influence, question, and persuade.

One way to analyze discourses is to identify emerging antagonisms of a culture in a particular period of history. We hope this chapter has helped illustrate the ways in which we can identify these pivotal cultural moments through discourse and how a culture's prevailing values about who or what is of public value may be transformed—even to this day.

In this chapter, we have identified six key historical transformations in U.S. environmental discourse:

1. Indigenous discourses of the territories call(ed) “Turtle Island” valued *storytelling*, reflecting on one's impact on seven generations, and *interdependence* across all life.
2. European discourses from the 1700s to 1900s began to foster a more favorable relationship between colonialists and nature, including romanticism, nationalism, and transcendentalism.
3. Two discourses then created the basis for establishing public parks and national forests in the United States: a 19th-century preservationist movement that valued nature as wilderness and an early 20th-century ethic of conservation of natural resources. These discourses, as all the ones we highlight in this chapter, also are found to shape

environmental attitudes and practices internationally.

4. The global pollution of the 20th century and international diplomatic efforts gave birth to an ecological sensibility worldwide and a challenge to toxic pollution that made possible imagining a commitment to public health.
5. In the United States, a grassroots movement for environmental justice arose in the late 1970s that challenged dominant discourse of the environment as a place apart from where people work, live, learn, and play.
6. Today, global movements for sustainability, climate justice, and a just transition have begun to challenge

business-as-usual carbon economy models and make connections between social justice and environmental quality, from our backyards to our atmosphere to our jobs.

These antagonisms reveal the highly contingent nature of our understanding and viewpoints about the environment, as well as who and what we consider to be significant to public life. We hope they serve as a helpful introductory set of touchstones moving forward. Pivotal to these cultural shifts and our ability to accept, challenge, or nuance them is a powerful rhetorical process of social-symbolic communication, which we describe in more detail in the next chapter.

Suggested Resources

- The Indigenous Environmental Network articulates, networks, and amplifies the beliefs and campaigns of Indigenous environmental advocates: <http://www.ienearth.org>
- Goodwin, N. (Writer & Director). (2007). Rachel Carson's silent spring [Television series single episode]. In J. Crichton (Executive producer), *American experience*. Arlington, VA: PBS. Our students often are amazed by watching historical videos from this time. Check out this less than five-minute video: PBS Learning, 2012, "American Experience: Rachel Carson's Silent Spring," Available at: <https://rmpbs.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/envh10.sci.life.eco.silentspring/rachel-carsons-silent-spring/#.WmeTQUtG3Vo>
- Mackintosh, B. (1999). *The National Park Service: A brief history*. Retrieved from <http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/hisnps/npshistory/npshisto.htm>
- The Green Belt Movement. (2014). Wangari Maathai: Key speeches and articles. Retrieved from <http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/wangari-maathai/key-speeches-and-articles>

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Discussion Questions

- Most non-Indigenous people have learned very little about Indigenous cultures in school. Some Indigenous people have begun to create maps to remember this time period: <http://www.tribalnationsmaps.com/>. Others have created new media to circulate their *storytelling* to wider audiences. We particularly like this example from 2013 by Vision Maker Media of “Turtle Island,” which also addresses why some Indigenous land and water protectors do not identify with the labels of “environmentalist” or “activist”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABW7MVe6b8Q>. Look at these maps and watch this video. Then, if you have the chance in class, discuss: how do these Indigenous voices challenge discourses you have been taught? Do you recognize any of these lessons or values in your culture today?
- Is wilderness merely a symbolic construction? Does this matter in terms of whether or not you want to preserve it?
- European colonialists in North America initially were scared of and threatened by nature, but a love of nature arose once European colonists felt a distance from nature in their everyday lives. Do you feel more comfortable in the woods or downtown in a city? Why do you think that is so? Does your comfortability shape what you value? Do you identify more with being a part of the environment, as environmental justice discourse suggests, or being apart from it?
- Many people have become motivated to care about ecology (particularly air quality and water quality) because they have known or know someone with asthma, cancer, or another illness that is environmentally triggered. Do you or does someone you know have public health concerns that shape your relationship with the environment?
- From the first to the last discourse addressed in this chapter, how does who or what is considered “public” transform? That is, which voices matter during each historical period? And what part(s) of the “environment” become(s) imagined as part of the “public good,” which perhaps weren’t before?