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Climate Change on the “Environmental Campus of Choice”¹

In 2015, it is hard to imagine studying the environment without mentioning climate change. Given the widespread popular acceptance of climate change’s reality and imminent threat to modern society, one cannot disentangle conceptions of the environment from the knowledge that humans have irreversibly damaged it. At Middlebury College, however, students studied the environment for almost 30 years before the concept of climate change began to infiltrate the consciousness of the American public. Although the environmental studies curriculum has undoubtedly explored the unsustainable relationship between humans and the environment since the department’s inception in 1965, explicit references to human-induced climate change did not appear in the curriculum until the 1990s. As climate change started to take hold in the environmental studies curriculum in the late 1990s and early 2000s, debates about climate and energy issues likewise became embedded in campus culture. The period between 1993-2003 saw a trickle of classes, special events, and student conversations on climate change. However, the burst of student environmental activism that would eventually help shape Middlebury’s reputation as one of the most environmentally-conscious campuses in the country surfaced around 2004.

The topic of climate change emerged explicitly in the Middlebury curriculum in 1993. That year, physics professor Richard Wolfson, an expert on climate change and energy, taught a freshman seminar entitled “FS023 Energy and Climate.” This course marked the first climate-

¹ Popper, Juliana. “College plans earth-friendly building.” *Middlebury Campus*. (Middlebury, VT), May. 8, 1996.

specific course offered at Middlebury. In this class Wolfson developed a climate modeling exercise that he later incorporated into the laboratory syllabus of ES112, the introductory environmental studies class, when he taught the course in 1994 and 1995. Wolfson has taught two more freshman seminars dealing with climate change, including “FS036 Climate Change” in 1999 and “FYSE 1262 Energy and Climate” in 2009. Additionally, Wolfson introduced the course “ES240 The Science of Climate Change,” later named ENVS0240, in 2001. He has since taught the course in 2002, 2003, 2008, 2009, 2012, and 2014.² The course remains popular on campus to this day and continues to provide students with a scientific lens through which to understand and critically engage with climate issues.

In addition Richard Wolfson’s courses, environmental studies students have the opportunity to engage with climate issues through their group research projects in ENVS401, the department’s senior seminar course, or in their independent senior theses. In the fall of 2000, two senior projects mentioned climate change in their titles, namely: “Implications for Global Climate Change: Polar Ice Cores” and “Alpine Climate Change: Effects on Seasonal Snow Cover and Biota.”³ Meanwhile, senior thesis projects appear to have lagged behind in their dealing with climate change. Interestingly, few senior thesis titles between 1977 and 2014 explicitly reference climate change. The first mention occurs in 2006 with a thesis entitled, “Framing the Climate Change Movement—Religion, Spirituality, and Social Change.”⁴ Ultimately, despite increased opportunities to study climate change, it remains a student’s choice whether he or she will engage with climate change issues in an academic setting. A December

² Richard Wolfson, e-mail message to Kathryn Morse, April 30, 2015.

³ Program in Environmental Studies, “Environmental Studies Senior Project Archive,” *Middlebury College*, <http://www.middlebury.edu/academics/es/work/communityconnectedlearning/envs0401/archive>.

⁴ Program in Environmental Studies, “Environmental Studies Senior Thesis,” *Middlebury College*, <http://www.middlebury.edu/academics/es/work/esseniortheses>.

2001 article in *The Campus* quotes Professor Wolfson in saying: “We’re not going to require that everybody take a course on global warming. This is not a college problem; it’s country-wide.”⁵ Moreover, according to Wolfson, many people at Middlebury and in the larger global community will continue to hold misconceptions about climate change.

Nonetheless, increased representation of climate change in the academic curriculum corresponded to emerging discussions of climate issues outside of the classroom. Beginning in the late 1990s, articles dealing with climate change activism and environmental responsibility at Middlebury appeared sporadically in *The Campus*. One of the earliest mentions of climate change in *The Campus* came in an April 1996 article recapping the Earth Week celebrations that occurred on campus. The article highlights a lecture entitled “Global Warming: Is It Real and Does it Matter?” by Stephen Schneider, a climate change expert from Stanford University and the National Center for Atmospheric Research. A student quoted in the article expressed that “It was a great experience to hear one of the foremost scientists on the subject of global warming give his interpretation of the situation.”⁶ This lecture most likely marks the first time that a keynote speakers specifically addressed climate change on campus.

In the following years, a few campus articles addressed issues tangential to climate change, such as the creation of an organic garden, the ecological implications of McCardnell Bicentennial Hall, and potential regulations of student cars on campus. A January 2000 article in *The Campus* marks the most direct discussion of climate change in the newspaper to date. Writing in the context of an unseasonably warm winter, the author expresses her frustration at the apparent apathy on campus towards climate change. She states, “I see little indication on

⁵ Nicha Rakpanichmanee, “Local Global Warming Coalition Convenes,” *Middlebury Campus*, (Middlebury, VT), Dec. 5, 2001.

⁶ Carri Smith, “Earth Week ’96 celebrates environment,” *Middlebury Campus*, (Middlebury, VT), April 24, 1996.

campus that people are really concerned” and asks, “Where are the students who are signing petitions asking the government to agree to Kyoto Protocol resolutions?”⁷ She believes that with organization and a sense of urgency, Middlebury students “have the power to do something to thwart these dangers.”⁸ This editorial, in conjunction with the handful of relevant articles from previous years, reveals that by 2000, awareness of climate change was widespread on campus. However, climate activism had not yet taken root in the student body—students knew the implications of climate change but did not express a significant conviction to tackle the issue. A cartoon accompanying the article appeals to students to pay more attention to the changes around them. The image presents a crying Middlebury student building a “useless ski equipment man” and a “dirt pile man” in light of the lack of snow. The caption reads: “As the traditional snowman is an impossibility this winter, Midd students are encouraged to explore other creative avenues.”⁹ By depicting Vermont’s winter, an integral component of the Middlebury college experience, as vulnerable to the effects of climate change, the image succeeded in defining climate change as an issue felt close to home. Ultimately, the article and cartoon send the message to Middlebury students that climate change does not merely affect faraway places. Climate change also exists in their own backyard, and therefore, Middlebury students have the responsibility to take action.

A few years later, the Middlebury community started to take action on climate change and environmental activism. In 2004, the Board of Trustees committed to reduce campus carbon emissions.¹⁰ In January 2005, Professor of Economics and Environmental Studies John Isham,

⁷ Amy Seif, “Seif warns against global warming,” *Middlebury Campus*, (Middlebury, VT), Jan. 12, 2000.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Middlebury College Office of Sustainability, *Middlebury College’s Path to Carbon Neutrality*, timeline, 2013, http://www.middlebury.edu/sustainability/files/node/470366/original/cn_timeline_to_2013-final.jpg.

now the director of the Center for Social Entrepreneurship, taught a class called “Building the New Climate Movement” and sponsored a three-day conference on climate change. The class became the birthplace of 350.org, an organization co-founded by four Middlebury graduates and Middlebury’s author and scholar-in-residence Bill McKibben in 2008.¹¹ January 2005 also marked the first meetings of Sunday Night Group, a student organization dedicated to taking action on climate change. In 2007, the Board of Trustees approved the initiative to reach carbon neutrality on campus by 2016 and President Liebowitz signed the American college and university presidents’ climate commitment. The next year, the biomass plant was completed, which would help the college reduce its carbon emissions by 60% come 2011.¹²

This burst of engagement with climate change issues is clearly depicted in debates and news coverage in *The Campus*. By 2005, articles about climate change became regular content in *The Campus*. In a November 2005 article, a student expressed his skepticism when initially hearing about the Sunday Night Group; he “pictured a rather smelly group of students who, fresh from rock climbing or smoking hookah, needed an extra hour to wait about the Bush administration and Kyoto.”¹³ However, after sitting in on a meeting, he commended the activities of the group, highlighting their participation in international climate conferences and marches. He concluded that “every Sunday in Chateau is a day of action...these guys walk the walk more than they talk the talk.”¹⁴ Likewise, another student writer addressed his peers who are quick to deny climate change and belittle the activities of climate activists. He urged Middlebury students to educate themselves on climate issues, saying, “your fellow classmates are an invaluable

¹¹ Sally Pollack, “350.org’s rise from Middlebury College,” *Burlington Free Press* (Burlington, VT), Nov. 6, 2014.

¹² Middlebury College Office of Sustainability, *Middlebury College’s Path to Carbon Neutrality*, timeline, 2013, http://www.middlebury.edu/sustainability/files/node/470366/original/cn_timeline_to_2013-final.jpg.

¹³ Dave Barker, “Madd About Midd Warming up to the issues,” *Middlebury Campus*, (Middlebury, VT), Nov. 17, 2005.

¹⁴ Ibid.

resource every Sunday night at 9:00 in the Chateau...the next time you feel uncertain about what global warming means to you, come join the discussion.”¹⁵ A student wrote in March 2006 that, “By altering our personal habits...each of us can address environmental injustice at its roots.”¹⁶ Overall, as student activism grew on campus, students began to applaud their peers who were galvanizing the climate movement forward and to demand more involvement from those choosing to remain disengaged.

Moreover, the winters of 2005 and 2006 both saw unseasonably warm temperatures and low snowfall, prompting students to question the fate of Vermont’s climate. In a January 2005 article entitled “Middlebury College gets tropical, Warm temperatures cool winter fun,” the author uses the growing scientific evidence for climate change to justify the unusual weather. He asks, “Is global warming engulfing us, or is this just a single fluke occurrence in the weather pattern?”¹⁷ A year later, a student wrote an article entitled “Fight global warming and save broomball.” The author laments about the fate of broomball, warning that, “this great Middlebury tradition is being swept into the dustbin of history by the broom of global warming.”¹⁸ He cites Bill McKibben’s warning that global warming may replace Vermont’s winter with a five-month mud season. Referencing Middlebury’s quintessential winter traditions, the author urges his peers: “If you love broomball, skiing, ice fishing or any other winter sport, join your fellow students in this noble cause. Broomball needs you.”¹⁹ Writing a few months later in 2006, another student said to his peers: “To those who deem climate change a lie...I encourage you to open your eyes. Forget the papers for now—the media, the politics, the

¹⁵ Peter Viola, “Global warming exists, and you can help stop it,” *Middlebury Campus*, (Middlebury, VT), Mar. 9, 2006.

¹⁶ Trista McGetrick, “Thinking Green,” *Middlebury Campus*, (Middlebury, VT), Mar. 16, 2006.

¹⁷ Tristan Hayes, “Middlebury College gets tropical, Warm temperatures cool winter fun,” *Middlebury Campus*, (Middlebury, VT), Jan. 13, 2005.

¹⁸ Jamie Henn, “Fight global warming and save broomball,” *Middlebury Campus*, (Middlebury, VT), Jan. 26, 2006.

¹⁹ Ibid.

campaigns. Instead, look outside. Feel the thaw...Our world is changing.”²⁰ Unsurprisingly, as the effects of climate change became more and more visible, students found motivation to take up the fight against it. Students appealed to the fleeting natural wonders of Vermont’s seasons in order to galvanize their peers into action.

In addition to student activists, Professor Richard Wolfson and scholar Bill McKibben continued to spark conversations about climate issues in the Middlebury community. Bill McKibben gave the keynote talk at the 2005 Clifford Symposium entitled “Renewal: Perspectives and Possibilities in an Age of Climate Crisis.” He “applauded the current efforts being made on campus” and called on Middlebury to serve as a model for other institutions with regards to its carbon reduction initiatives.²¹ In March 2006, McKibben wrote an article for *The Campus*, responding to and challenging a student editorial entitled, “Think about it, global warming does not exist.”²² In this way, Bill McKibben remained intimately engaged with the climate discussions on campus and played an integral role in shaping the trajectory of the student climate movement. Likewise, Richard Wolfson wrote an opinion piece for *The Campus* in November 2008 entitled “Green’s quantitative side.” In it Wolfson urges environmentalists at Middlebury to employ quantitative analysis when addressing climate change. He argues that “Being an authoritative environmentalist means being able to grapple with quantitative issues.”²³ For example, one cannot effectively campaign for hybrid cars without the hard numbers justifying the energy saved in switching from traditional vehicles. Therefore, an environmentalist

²⁰ Lynee Zummo, “Open your window and see,” *Middlebury Campus*, (Middlebury, VT), Mar. 9, 2006.

²¹ Katherine Washburn, “Symposium enlightens faculty, students,” *Middlebury Campus*, (Middlebury, VT), Sept. 29, 2005.

²² Bill McKibben, “Challenging scientific data needs honest reporting,” *Middlebury Campus*, (Middlebury, VT), Mar. 9, 2006.

²³ Richard Wolfson, “OP-ED Green’s quantitative side,” *Middlebury Campus*, (Middlebury, VT), Nov. 20, 2008.

must know how to both develop and evaluate quantitative models of the tradeoffs involved in environmental decisions.

The emergence of a strong climate consciousness at Middlebury stems from multiple factors—the introduction of climate change into the academic curriculum by interested faculty, the community’s responses to Vermont’s changing climate, and student engagement with national and international climate movements. According to coverage in *The Campus*, interest in the climate movement peaked on campus between 2004-2008. Today, while organizations such as Sunday Night Group retain a strong presence on campus and rally for new continued progress through divestment, most students take for granted the past campus activism that solidified Middlebury’s legacy as environmentally-friendly college. Although the environmental studies program is as strong as ever in 2015, a clear divide now exists on campus between those who prioritize environmental activism in their academic and extracurricular learning and those who passively acknowledge it.

*I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment.

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