

Fear of Chemicals and Consumer Action in Middlebury Environmentalism:
From the Vietnam War to the Alar Scare to the Local Food Movement

Introduction to Environmental History

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

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Beginning in the late 1960s, Middlebury college community members concerned about environmental health have used college publications as mediums to express their views on environmental issues, spread awareness of these issues, and help others to see the value of action and the risks of inaction. Early environmentalists' writing about pesticides and war chemicals shows their fear and distrust of such chemicals harmful to ecological and human health; these writings in Middlebury publications also show a beginning use of consumer choice as an environmentalist tactic, at that time in the form of boycotts. Beginning in the early 1970s, students began to write similarly about organic food as a way to avoid feared chemicals and pesticides through consumer choice. Continuing to draw upon this view, Middlebury authors writing in the last 15 years have presented local and organic food choices as safe, natural, and trustworthy compared to foods made in unknown, far-off factories and containing unidentifiable, artificial ingredients. Perhaps even more so than Middlebury environmentalists in the 1960s and 1970s, those writing about organic and local food clearly display a sense that they belong to a united movement with definite environmental benefits.

In summary, early chemical product boycotts and more recent organic and local food movements are both environmentalist actions based on individual consumer choice and reacting to a pervasive fear of chemicals (e.g. those used in agriculture and warfare); thus these two seemingly disparate endeavors can be seen as part of the same environmentalist narrative, sharing both motive and means.

Two articles in the *Middlebury Newsletter* from the early 1970s exemplify an intense fear of chemicals and pesticides. The authors of these articles used provocative questions, visions of apocalyptic environmental futures, and the vulnerability of young

bodies to express the gravity of the environmental conditions at the time. Professors Richard Turner and Bruce Peterson writing in 1973 described how pesticides damage birds' eggshells so that they crack under the weight of their mother; the professors then asked, "“Could the same thing happen to bones in human babies? Could the rigors of childbirth break the legs and crush the skulls of calcium-deficient infants?”" ¹ Biology professor David Van Vleck wrote with a similarly intense and disturbing tone in a 1970 newsletter article on the future of environmental destruction and pollution in America. Van Vleck posed several rhetorical questions regarding how far pollution will continue before drastic and frightening damage is done, resulting in "major worldwide ecological catastrophe" including "chemical poisoning of our land." Like Peterson and Turner, Van Vleck also cited specific harms to human bodies, writing that DDT and other pesticides were linked to respiratory disease in children, mutations, cancer, and sterility. ²

Though Peterson and Turner's questions seem extremist and were no doubt intended to be provocative, these questions show a deep-seated, authentic fear and uncertainty concerning toxic chemicals and their long-term harms to human and ecological health. Van Vleck clearly expressed his belief that pollution from chemicals and pesticides forecasted an alarmingly dark environmental future. The views of these professors were very likely affected by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* published about ten years earlier, which brought to light the shocking danger of pesticides to human and ecological health. Van Vleck and his contemporaries' vision of widespread environmental destruction was also likely based on internalized, long-held fears of

¹ Bruce Peterson and Richard Turner, "Professors at Play—A Random Report on Some Faculty Hobbies," *Middlebury College Newsletter Winter 1973*, January 1, 1973, 16.

² David Van Vleck, "Only Population Stabilization Can Save our Quality of Life," *Middlebury College Newsletter Spring 1970*, April 1, 1970, 47.

nuclear fallout in the wake of World War II, nuclear bomb tests, and national studies surrounding the radioactive isotope Strontium-90. The threat of fallout had arguably become “a tacit part of the way in which people [of this time] understood their world” and Carson drew directly on public understanding of radioactive fallout to convey her message in *Silent Spring*.³

Beginning in 1968, Middlebury students writing in *The Campus* targeted individual corporations such as Dow Chemical Company and Shell Oil Company as agents of environmental destruction and pollution. In several different articles, students attacked the use of Dow’s Napalm and Agent Orange in the Vietnam War as an “‘incredible’ destruction of Vietnam.”^{4 5 6} They likewise criticized Shell for “killing and injuring workers and polluting the air and water.”⁷ In their writing about these companies’ specific practices, students did not label chemicals as an acute risk to personal health, as did the professors writing on more broad issues of pollution. However, especially in the case of Dow, students clearly perceived the intense toxicity of these chemicals to humans and the environment. Although students’ criticisms of the corporations were not based on a fear of chemicals as a health threat, these criticisms do reflect a strong, generalized distrust of industry and an assumption that corporations are widely immoral and environmentally inconsiderate.

³ Ralph H. Lutts, “Chemical Fallout: Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Radioactive Fallout, and the Environmental Movement,” *Environmental Review* 9, no. 3 (1985), accessed May 21, 2015, Jstor.

⁴ Bill Reedy in Alan Levy, “Davis and Environmental Conference and the Saving Balance,” *Middlebury Campus* (Middlebury, VT), May 13, 1971.

⁵ Jonathan Schnell, “*American Involvement in Indo-China*,” *Middlebury Campus* (Middlebury VT), March 12, 1970.

⁶ Tom Plumb, “E.Q. News,” *The Middlebury Campus* (Middlebury, VT), March 7, 1974.

⁷ Tom Plumb. “E.Q. News.” *The Middlebury Campus* (Middlebury, VT), April 19, 1973.

Students' reaction to this destruction reveals their conception of effective environmentalist action. In both cases, students chose to combat the corporations' destruction with consumer choice, using boycotts to send their environmentalist message to these companies and turn them toward more environmentally responsible practices. In these boycotts, students avoided the few products that Dow made for direct consumption (such as saran wrap and oven cleaner) as well as gasoline from Shell. In his 1973 Environmental Quality News column, Tom Plumb targeted Shell as the largest pesticide producer in the U.S. and told readers that "if you must drive a car, don't buy Shell gasoline."⁸ Here, Plumb's use of the imperative mood and the pronoun 'you' clearly singles out the individual consumer as an agent for environmentalist action. His confidence in this method of environmental stewardship is evident in his statement that "consumers can effectively boycott" a number of specific products from these companies.⁹

This consumer-based environmental action is similar to that which became more widespread after the Alar pesticide scare several years later in 1989. In this case, the environmentalist group National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) proposed a logic of green consumerism which asserted that "consumers could redirect production decisions by choosing to buy or not to buy particular items" (even though this was not consumers' intention, as most decided to avoid Alar out of a fear of its toxicity to their health). Like the Middlebury boycotters, NRDC also singled out an individual chemical and product (apples) as the most harmful and contemptible, in this case the most carcinogenic, and

⁸ Plumb, "E.Q. News," 1973.

⁹ Plumb, "E.Q. News," 1973.

therefore that which consumers should avoid.¹⁰ Furthermore, NRDC acted on anti-corporate sentiments similar to those expressed by Middlebury environmentalist boycotters; one critic described NRDC as believing that “industry is poisoning the public in order to make a profit,” which might accurately describe Middlebury students’ views as well.¹¹

Around 2000, the organic and local food movements gaining consumer support at Middlebury and across the country seemed to draw strongly on the empowerment of consumer action, like that employed during the Alar scare and Dow and Shell boycotts. However, as it began to first take hold at Middlebury in the early 1970s, the organic food movement primarily relied on a public fear and distrust of chemicals. Organic food offered a way for consumers to avoid chemical pesticides, which were increasingly seen as a threat to human health, especially after the publication of *Silent Spring*. In an anonymous 1972 column titled “Vitaman”, one activist provided a definition for organic food, describing it as food grown without pesticides, fertilizers, preservatives, hormones, or antibiotics. Though there were other elements to this definition, much of it revolved around that which organic food is (ostensibly) not: industrial, chemical, and toxic to human health.¹² This definition, which continues to survive today in the minds of consumers and activists alike, is evidence that the emerging organic food movement (and later the local food movement) were largely responses to early environmental fears of

¹⁰ Finis Dunaway, *Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2015), 215.

¹¹ Kerry Rodgers, “Multiple Meanings of Alar after the Scare: Implications for Closure,” *Science, Technology, and Human Values* 21, no. 2 (1996), Accessed May 22, 2015, Jstor, 187.

¹² No author, “Vitaman,” *The Middlebury Campus* (Middlebury, VT), October 12, 1972.

pollution, chemicals and pesticides.¹³ Elaborating on the harmfulness of these chemicals, the author described organic farming as a way to grow food “without subjecting people to poison sprays which can... increase allergic reactions, and even cause cancer.”¹⁴ The author’s designation of pesticides as posing an intense, acute threat to human health echoes Professor Van Vleck’s earlier words about the pesticide DDT also designed to inspire action; both represent environmentalist tactics motivated largely by a fear of chemicals.

However, here the “Vitaman” writer put the fear of pesticides and their health effects in a new context, as students have found a way to act on this fear through consumer choice. The author of this column emphasizes individual consumer action similar to that evident in Plumb’s imperative ‘you.’ The writer concluded his piece with the assertion that higher prices of organic foods are justified by “the fact that you will find no pesticide residues in them, [and] no artificial fertilizers where they were grown...”¹⁵ Though she or he did not explicitly tell the reader to take action, the author clearly aimed to convince others of the value of purchasing organic food, which lies in its perceived safety and naturalness, opposite to the industrial toxicity of Dow and Shell. This intention to inspire consumer action is evident in the writer’s use of ‘you’ as a direct address to the reader and the convincing argument that the safety of organic foods is worth their high price. Additionally, recipes included in the column contained organic ingredients and encouraged cooking with these products. Still, this author’s columns on organic food lack a feeling of political empowerment in that she or he clearly does not

¹³ Gary Blumenthal in Pierre Desrochers and Hiroko Shimizu. *The Locavore’s Dilemma: In Praise of the 10,000-Mile Diet* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012), 149.

¹⁴ No author, “Vitaman, 1972.

¹⁵ No author, “Vitaman,” 1972.

focus on organic food purchases as a tactic of environmentalist action toward broader change. Plumb and other boycotters showed a sense of empowerment in their belief that individual consumer choices would “signal their environmental concern to corporations” and demand more environmentally virtuous actions from these corporations, for example “forc[ing] Dow to reconsider its position on Napalm.”^{16 17} A certain form of green consumerism, with a concomitant sense of empowerment and optimism, is evident in later student writings on the organic food movement, and the local food movement which joined it and grew from the same values. Arguably more so than with Plumb’s Shell boycott, proponents of local food clearly envision their actions as contributing to environmental improvement.

Beginning seemingly in the early 2000s, writings in *The Campus* reflect that the consumption of local and organic foods represented an empowered environmentalist act for these authors more than it did for the “Vitaman” writer. For example, an anonymous author wrote in *The Campus* in 2010 that purchasing products such as organic yogurt which are less environmentally harmful than mainstream alternatives “ramp[s] up the pressures on other careless corporations.”¹⁸ Though other products are mentioned, the consumption of organic food is evidently an essential part of modern green consumerism; this political act is meant to send an important message to powerful, otherwise irresponsible companies. With the writer’s reference to “careless corporations,” this student clearly borrows from the strong distrust and scorn for corporations that earlier Middlebury environmentalists such as Tom Plumb expressed toward Dow Chemical and

¹⁶ Dunaway, *Seeing Green*, 190.

¹⁷ Petranek, Steve, “Dow Sticks with Napalm,” *The Middlebury Campus* (Middlebury, VT), November 21, 1968.

¹⁸ No author, “The Customer’s Always Right, Right?,” *The Middlebury Campus* (Middlebury, VT), November 21, 2010.

Shell Oil. Journalist Samuel Fromartz even traces the anti-corporate sentiment behind organic and local food movements to 19th century Romantics, who used alternative consumption and dietary choices to voice their opposition to increasing industrialization.¹⁹

Writing in 2001, student Oren Frey reinforced the idea that the local food movement, like the organic food movement, drew much of its strength from feelings of fear and uneasiness toward pesticides and other chemicals. He wrote (in a mistaken generalization) that “local growers use far fewer evil pesticides than large commercial farms” and that their products are also free of waxes, ripening agents and “mysterious carcinogens.”²⁰ With the word “carcinogens,” Frey framed chemicals as a threat to human health, as did Van Vleck and the “Vitaman” writer before him. The case he made for local food purchasing is compelling in large part because of its basis in health and safety. Frey’s use of the word “mysterious” also shows the widely perceived uncertainty inherent in products of “commercial” origin. Counter to these commercial foods, food produced locally or organically is to this day seen as a safer product of more certain origin and content. One student writing a column titled “The Pragmatist” in 2010 addressed this perceived certainty in a direct, imperative message to consumers: “Buy local because you know exactly what you are getting.”²¹ Consumers at Middlebury across the country were and are motivated by this certainty, which they obtain through certain purchasing decisions.

¹⁹ Samuel Fromartz, *Organic, Inc.: Natural Foods and How They Grew* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2006), 150.

²⁰ Oren Frey, “Environmental Opportunities at Dinner,” *The Middlebury Campus* (Middlebury, VT), November 14, 2001.

²¹ No Author, “The Pragmatist,” *The Middlebury Campus* (Middlebury, VT), September 8, 2010.

These writers' decisions were also backed with a strong sense that they were contributing to a superior environmental future. This confidence and optimism are evident in Frey's assertion (and similar ones from other students) that "supporting locally grown foods can greatly reduce [] air pollution, acid rain and global warming-causing fossil fuel emissions."²² Importantly, the sense that consumer choices amounted to measurable environmental benefits seems greater here than in any earlier Middlebury environmentalism examined, as does students' self-identification within a clearly named movement and community.²³ Still, this sense of empowerment, based in an optimistically perceived ability to bring about real positive change, is similar to that which Tom Plumb and other environmentalists felt in boycotting the products of Shell and Dow.

Thus, though Dow's Napalm and the organic and local food movements may seem completely disparate, they are truly part of the same narrative, the same history of empowered individual consumer action as a means toward larger eco-political goals based on deep-seated distrust of corporations and fear of chemicals. Opposite to commercial and chemical products, the perceived safety of organic foods is evident today in the spikes seen in organic sales following food safety scares such as Alar.^{24 25} And although other emotions and influences are no doubt at work, the extremely pervasive and long-held fear of chemicals as a threat to human health (which came from American experiences with the nuclear bomb, chemical warfare, and pesticides) compels many individuals to purchase organic and local foods. This fear, especially as it applies to

²² Frey, "Environmental Opportunities at Dinner," 2001.

²³ Andrea Glaessner, "Localvores Chew on Kingolver's New Book," *The Middlebury Campus* (Middlebury, VT), February 21, 2008.

²⁴ Fromartz, *Organic, Inc.*, 4.

²⁵ Pollan in Dunaway, *Seeing Green*, 218.

foods, is perhaps best represented in the following eerie rhyme from activist groups of the 1950s and 1960s:

Oh where, oh where has the fallout gone,

Oh where can the poison be,

Why right in the milk and the other things

That the milkman brings to me.²⁶

²⁶ Lutts, "Chemical Fallout," 214.

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