

Environmental Groups at Middlebury College: Beyond Recycling
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HIST 222
May, 2015

In his recent book, Seeing Green, Finis Dunaway calls attention to narrow perceptions of environmentalism that have been perpetuated by media images since the early 1970's. From the crying Indian to the 1990 Earth Day special, feelings of personal guilt and individual responsibility have been associated with the environmental movement.¹ The onus has been put on the citizen to recycle instead of litter, conserve instead of pollute, and always turn the lights off when leaving the room. These ideals, and the trajectory of the environmental movement, can also be examined in smaller subpopulations—here, on the campus of a small liberal arts college. By following conceptions of environmental progress at Middlebury College, motifs that both support and struggle against Dunaway's assertions begin to come to life. The goals and membership of Middlebury College environmental groups over time reflect changing ideals in environmentalism and the scope of environmental issues.

Middlebury's first major environmental group, Environmental Quality (EQ), emerged in early 1970 out of the Middlebury Mountain Club, a long-standing student organization dedicated to outdoor recreation. The group first organized in late 1969 or early 1970 in response to an immediate threat wildlife and to non-motorized outdoor recreation (hiking) in the nearby Adirondack State Park. As the Middlebury Campus reported, the new "Environmental Quality Group," organized a petition drive to gather support for limit snowmobile recreation in Adirondack wildlife refuges and hiking areas.²

¹ Finis Dunaway, *Seeing Green*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 80-82 and 239-241

² "Snowmobiles Protested," *Middlebury Campus*, Vol 65: 12 (January 22, 1970), p.4.

This issue reflected long-standing American concerns regarding outdoor recreation in wild landscapes as a refuge from modern technology.³ However, the new EQ group's other concerns spoke to a host of new concerns distinct to the post 1965-era: water pollution in Otter Creek; college and town sewage treatment, and the upcoming National Environmental Teach-In scheduled for April 1970.⁴ This shift toward direct concern for and actions against pollution marked a much broader national shift from older concerns with outdoor recreation and conservation toward something new.

EQ's concerns and agendas in the following years reflected national sentiments of personal responsibility and changing habits in the pursuit of a cleaner environment. Records from EQ date from 1970-1996, yet throughout, the group's focus remained on students and faculty taking charge of their own environmental impact.^{5,6} EQ's commitment to recycling and their proposal of composting in 1972 particularly reflect the environmental ethos of the time—matching little triangular arrows to guilt alleviation and cleaner roadways, while continuing to consume packaged goods (as long as they were recyclable).⁷ One particularly salient example of EQ's commitment to personal responsibility is the group's recommendation to celebrate an “old-time Christmas” with “no electricity” in 1972.⁸ There is no doubt students found recommendations to: “use as little wrapping paper as possible”, give gift subscriptions to environmental newsletters, replant

³ For a broader history of U.S. wilderness protection in the face of increased motorized recreation see Paul S. Sutter, Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002).

⁴ “Snowmobiles Protested,” *Middlebury Campus*, Vol 65: 12 (January 22, 1970), p.4.

⁵ Ciddy Aring, “Environmental Quality Activist Plans Conference, Anti-Pollution Campaign,” *The Campus*, March 12, 1970.

⁶ John Maruro and Jennifer Jensen, “Members of EQ gather to march in protest of tire incineration,” *The Middlebury Campus*, March 16, 1998.

⁷ Tom Plumb, “Composting—an alternative?” *The Middlebury Campus*, Jan 28, 1972.

⁸ Tom Plumb, “E.Q. News,” *The Middlebury Campus*, Dec 7, 1972.

their Christmas tree in a trashcan filled with dirt and water, and tell snowmobilers they are “not wanted” intrusive and perhaps ridiculous. However, these notions of turning back the clock on environmental issues is largely reflective of pervasive media messages at the time.⁹ EQ itself promotes this image, citing that “49% of those questioned in a national public opinion poll...taken by the Gallup Organization said that they would prefer to handle the pollution problem by ‘living more simply’”.¹⁰

Environmental Quality’s relentless focus on personal conservation continued through the 1980’s. The club hosted regular blackouts in dorms, blackout dances, candlelight dinners in the dining halls, seminars on phosphate-free laundry detergents, and bike-share programs.^{11,12} Frequently, students with divergent environmental (and, with all of the blackouts, safety) concerns spoke out against the EQ crusade. One particular dissenter calls EQ out for not fostering the right approach to environmentalism on Middlebury’s campus. In preparation for the very first earth day in 1970, an anonymous student wrote: “the consumer cleans up while government and industry take another day off” and “ecological action requires drastic economic change”.¹³ Continued objection to the practices of the EQ throughout the group’s tenure at the college reflect a larger national discourse of blame and responsibility for environmental issues. In the intellectual microcosm of the college campus, these ideas began to shape curricula, student environmental conscience, and activism.

⁹ Dunaway, 80-82

¹⁰ Tom Plumb, “E.Q. News,” *The Middlebury Campus*, April 20, 1972.

¹¹ Tom Plumb, “E.Q. News,” *The Middlebury Campus*, March 9, 1972.

¹² Ciddy Aring, “E.Q. News” *The Campus*, March 26, 1970.

¹³ Anonymous, “Earth Day: Letter to the Editor,” *The Campus*, April 23, 1970.

The college's next major environmental group, Energy Council, emerged in 1977 in response to large global energy crises. Energy Council, a panel made up of students, faculty, and staff, focused on campus-wide energy use as it pertained to the greater Vermont landscape. The group marks the changing image of environmentalism in the later 1970's and early 80's, a shift from recycling and personal responsibility to a collective cutting back.¹⁴ In 1979, President Carter identified an American "crisis of confidence" due to recent political tragedies such as the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr; the Vietnam War, Watergate and finally, the energy crisis.¹⁵ In what has come to be known as Carter's "malaise" speech, he urged the American people to cut back on consumption, unnecessary travel, and to lower thermostats.¹⁶ Middlebury's Energy Council exemplified these notions of austerity as "a unity of purpose."¹⁷ The Energy Council scrutinized the college's heating and electricity data, proposing cutback measures such as shutting off heating in academic buildings over the weekend, chilling the ice rink only occasionally, closing buildings such as the field house and library earlier, and even altering the academic calendar to mitigate student energy use during the winter months.^{18,19} Middlebury's Energy Council was representative of shifting notions of environmentalism during this period—from environmentalism by personal action to environmentalism by inaction. By the time the group fizzled out in 1985, oil prices had stabilized and the Reagan

¹⁴ Dunaway, 113-114 and 180-181

¹⁵ "Carter's Crisis of Confidence Speech," Public Broadcasting Service, accessed May 12, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/carter-crisis-speech/>.

¹⁶ Jimmy Carter. "Crisis of Confidence, 15 July 1979". The Carter Center.

¹⁷ Jimmy Carter. "Crisis of Confidence, 15 July 1979".

¹⁸ Sally Johnson, "At Middlebury College, Lights Out is Not Curfew," *The Middlebury Campus*, circa 1977.

¹⁹ Minutes of the Energy Council, October 2, 1980, Hillcrest Archives, Middlebury, VT.

Administration had worked hard to present a new image of environmentalism as anti-economic growth and prosperity.²⁰

It wasn't until 1990, after the election of the self-proclaimed "environmental president" George H.W. Bush, that environmental groups at Middlebury resumed significant activity.^{21,22} In 1990, the Energy Council was resurrected as the Environmental Council—a group with a redefined focus on broader environmental issues pertinent to the college.²³ During this time period, Environmental Quality also began to reappear in *The Middlebury Campus*. Both groups showed a return to the "individual responsibility" model of environmentalism from the 1970's. EQ began a campaign to fight food waste, urging students to only take as much food as they needed in Proctor dining hall. In a 1997 article of *The Middlebury Campus*, the group wrote: "we are not asking you to single-handedly end global deforestation or repair the ozone layer or even provide sustainable development for Third World countries".²⁴ Here, EQ acknowledged that these issues of personal responsibility were flawed, but that tackling larger known environmental issues seemed overwhelming for them to take on. The Environmental Council reinforced ideas of personal responsibility with its promotion of recycling (including creating a recycling coordinator position at the college) as one of the group's central goals.²⁵ The keystone program of the Environmental Council during this time period however, was a green ticket program, where students were entered into a raffle if they engaged in environmentally conscious

²⁰ Dunaway, 191-192

²¹ Dunaway, 187-188

²² "Environmental Council Staff Appointments," Midd Points Newsletter, July 25, 1996.

²³ "Environmental Council Staff Appointments," Midd Points Newsletter

²⁴ Sarah Borch and Nicole Lanthiner, "Students defend purpose of 'Weigh Your Waste'," *The Middlebury Campus*, 1997.

²⁵ "Environmental Council Staff Appointments," Midd Points Newsletter

behavior.²⁶ The green ticket program was notable for the way it promoted the notion of environmentalism as largely individual and domestic. Environmental Council rewarded students for turning off lights, taking the stairs, or using refillable mugs in the dining hall—while other forms of environmentalism, particularly activism, were not behaviors rewarded as part of this perception of “going green”.²⁷

Post-2000, new environmental groups at Middlebury largely abandoned the “individual responsibility” model of environmentalism in favor of more assertive action on larger global issues. Spurred by growing media coverage of concerns about climate change, including Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*, environmentalists began to shift their goals to match the much larger impact they felt would be necessary to mitigate global climate devastation.²⁸ These changes marked a shift from environmentalism being perceived as recycling in the context of established social practices to sustainability and combating those practices. This shifting paradigm is reflected on Middlebury’s campus in the transitioning from “recycling coordinator” to “director of sustainability” during this time period.²⁹ Along with the changing title of that post, responsibilities and perceptions of which tasks fell under this person’s jurisdiction began to grow rapidly in scale and importance.

In 2005, students and Middlebury scholar-in-residence, Bill McKibben, formed the Sunday Night Group (SNG) as a vehicle for organizing large groups of students nationwide

²⁶ “What is a green ticket?” Email correspondence from Holly Cookis to all faculty and staff, Feb 17, 1995, Hillcrest Archives, Middlebury, VT.

²⁷ “What is a green ticket?” Email correspondence from Holly Cookis to all faculty and staff

²⁸ Dunaway, 260

²⁹ “Recycling help,” Email correspondence from Holly Cookis to all faculty and staff, June 23, 1995, Hillcrest Archives, Middlebury, VT.

around issues of climate change.³⁰ According to current director of sustainability at Middlebury, Jack Byrne, the group modeled its approach off of the civil rights movement, favoring large peaceful protest and civil disobedience. From early on, the group was met with reservations. Yet through activism and charged, “new” environmentalism, major events and changes (i.e. 2005 UN Change Conference in Montreal, commitment to carbon neutrality on campus in 2007, founding of 350.org in 2007) proved the group’s capacity to incite action. “You can shrug off the group as a bunch of twenty-first century hippies,” wrote a skeptical student in late 2005, “but until you sit in on a meeting, watch your mouth. These guys walk the walk more than they talk the talk”.³¹ From this response, and record group membership, SNG marked a shift at Middlebury that is still taking place in national environmental discourse today—a shifting focus from personal guilt and responsibility to environmental justice, activism, and rallying around issues too big to solve with simply a three-arrow schematic.

In the twenty-first century, Middlebury has striven to secure its reputation as one of the nation’s most environmentally forward-thinking institutions, and its student organizations reflect that spirit. Built on decades of work shaping what the scope of environmentalism on a college campus is and can be, today’s collegiate environmental organizations set their gaze on global issues in the context of our rural Vermont setting. A divestment movement built on using Middlebury’s endowment to model sustainably responsible investing for peer institutions, as well as a large real food movement are current issues gaining momentum on campus. It is clear that conceptions of

³⁰ Viviana Altamirano, “Climate Action Group Reunites,” *The Middlebury Campus*, January 21, 2015.

³¹ Dave Barker, “Madd About Midd Warming up to the issues,” *The Middlebury Campus*, November 17, 2005.

environmentalism are ever-changing and influenced by greater national sentiments, but Middlebury's unique hotbed for action has made it a phenomenal place to ask questions and push the limits of the environmental status quo.

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I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized first name followed by a small 'w' and a stylized last name.