Multimedia Primary Source Discussion Set
The Modern Environmental Movement

URL: https://americanarchive.org/primary_source_sets/environmental

Teaching Tips
This source set consists of audio and video clips that document the evolution and fragmentation of the modern environmental movement between 1962 and the present. The sources cover watershed moments in the early decades of the movement, as well as the differing motives and tactics of environmental activist in response to human-engineered environmental degradation. Global warming and the politically divided response to the planetary crisis are the focus of the last few sources in the set.

Background Information
Before engaging with this resource set, students should possess the following:
- Postwar affluence, the Interstate Highway system and the growth of suburbia
- The convergence of environmental politics with the New Left and the antiwar movement
- The founding of the EPA and growth of environmental regulations
- Ronald Reagan’s election and Republican anti-environmentalism
- The controversy over global warming and climate change

Essential Question
What has motivated the environmental movement since the 1960s and how has our political system responded to the movement and the environmental challenges facing the planet?

General Discussion Questions
- What role do you think large scale environmental disasters like the steep decline of many bird species, oil spills, and nuclear reactor meltdowns played in expanding the ranks of the environmental movement?
• How did grassroots activism shape the larger environmental movement?
• How are the oil consumption habits of Americans related to the history of the environmental movement?
• How do industrial practices and policies affect the environment and to what degree is the government responsible for regulating industry to preserve the planet for future generations?
• Are sustainable practices such as moving to EV’s or solar energy compatible with progress toward reducing the nation’s reliance on fossil fuels or cooling global temperatures?
• What factors have advanced or limited the successes of the environmental movement?

Classroom Activities
1) Topic: The Strategy and Tactics of Environmentalists

Ask the students to watch the following sources:
• Three Mile Island Accident Exposes the Risks of Nuclear Power (1979)
• Greenpeace and the Tactics of Civil Disobedience (1982)
• Eco-Terrorism: The Earth Liberation Front (2011)

The past: Compare and contrast the agenda and tactics of the environmentalists featured in the clips. What events moved individuals or organizations to action? Can students identify a common denominator in these protest movements? What differentiates them? Which approach do you feel was most effective and why?

The path forward: Organize an environmental summit devoted to launching a new “Earth Party.” Assign students to the featured environmental groups in the sources (anti-nuclear, Greenpeace, environmental justice, and ELF) or others you identify. Their goal is to create a party platform stating the Earth Party’s beliefs, priorities and policy goals as well as the practical steps required to achieve these goals.

2) Topic: The Politics of Climate Change

Ask students to watch the following sources:
• The Threat of Global Warming: An Inconvenient Truth (2006)
• The Presidential Candidates Disagree on Climate Change (2016)
• Electric Vehicles and President Biden’s Climate Agenda (2021)

NASA first identified global warming in 1988, and An Inconvenient Truth, both the book and the documentary, came out in 2006. Ask students: Why did Donald Trump
dismiss climate change as a hoax in 2016 while Hillary Clinton called it an urgent threat? To what extent was the Republican party’s anti-environmental agenda good for sectors of American industry, particularly the coal and gas companies? How did President Biden’s climate agenda differ from that of his predecessor? Even if a political party accepts the scientific evidence about global warming and climate change, what factors complicate the transition to cleaner forms of energy?

Follow-up activity: Screen An Inconvenient Truth (see link in related resources) for students. Ask them to read this 2016 Science News article that evaluates the accuracy of its central claims. What facts did Gore get right and which did he exaggerate? Why do you think the film was so widely acclaimed, despite its inaccuracies?

Follow-up activity: Electric vehicle owners can typically expect to drive 250 miles on a single charge. Ask students to plan a road trip driving an EV, using the Department of Energy’s current map of electric charging stations in the United States. Is it possible? Convenient? What would it take to convince you or your parents to invest in an EV?

3) Topic: Dependence on Fossil Fuels

Ask students to watch the following sources:
- The Santa Barbara Oil Spill Exposes the Costs of Offshore Drilling (1970)

Although fossil fuels are a finite, non-renewable resource, petroleum has historically been the largest major energy source for total annual U.S. energy consumption. The U.S. uses petroleum products to propel vehicles, to heat buildings, and to produce electricity. In the industrial sector, the petrochemical industry uses petroleum as a raw material to make products such as plastics, polyurethane, solvents, and hundreds of other intermediate and end-user goods. In 2021, the United States consumed 18.7 million barrels of oil daily and had the highest oil consumption in the world, a trend that continues today.

Both the Santa Barbara oil spill and the Arab oil embargo exposed the risks of U.S. dependence on oil as a source of energy. More recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 diminished the availability of crude oil and led to a rapid spike in oil prices, driving gas prices 42% higher in the U.S. Why do you think the United States ignored these early warning signs? What factors contributed to the failure to invest in alternative sources of energy after the energy crisis of 1973-74? What factor do you think will be most important in driving the shift away from fossil fuels—scientific evidence of global warming or geopolitical issues that lead to disruptions in the fuel supply?