DEFENSIVE ENVIRONMENTALISTS AND THE DYNAMICS OF GLOBAL REFORM

Thomas K. Rudel

CAMBRIDGE

Defensive Environmentalists and the Dynamics of Global Reform

THOMAS K. RUDEL
Rutgers University

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107030527

First published 2013

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Rudel, Thomas K.
Defensive environmentalists and the dynamics of global reform / Thomas Rudel,
Rutgers University.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-107-03052-7
1. Environmental policy – International cooperation. 2. Environmental protection –
International cooperation. I. Title.
GE170.R84 2013
363.7′0561–dc23 2012036777

ISBN 978-1-107-03052-7 Hardback

Defensive Environmentalists and the Dynamics of Global Reform

As global environmental changes become increasingly evident and efforts to respond to these changes fall short of expectations, questions about the circumstances that generate environmental reforms become more pressing. *Defensive Environmentalists and the Dynamics of Global Reform* answers these questions through an historical analysis of two processes that have contributed to environmental reforms, one in which people become defensive environmentalists concerned about environmental problems close to home and another in which people become altruistic environmentalists intent on alleviating global problems after experiencing catastrophic events such as hurricanes, droughts, and fires. These focusing events make reform more urgent and convince people to become altruistic environmentalists. Bolstered by defensive environmentalists, the altruists gain strength in environmental politics, and reforms occur.

Thomas K. Rudel is Professor in the departments of Human Ecology and Sociology at Rutgers University. He is the author of *Tropical Forests: Regional Paths of Destruction and Regeneration in the Late Twentieth Century* (2005), which won the 2008 Outstanding Publication Award from the Environment and Technology section of the American Sociological Association. He also authored *Tropical Deforestation: Small Farmers and Land Clearing in the Ecuadorian Amazon* (1993) and *Situations and Strategies in American Land-Use Planning* (Cambridge University Press 1989). Dr. Rudel won the 1995 Distinguished Contribution to Environmental Sociology Award and the 2009 Merit Award from the Natural Resources Research Group of the Rural Sociological Society for his research.

In memory of Anne Kiley Rudel, 1915–2000

[They were] country people who did not want to move and therefore got into a revolution. They did not figure on so odd a fate.

John Womack (1969, i) on small farmers
at the beginning of the Mexican Revolution

Preface and Acknowledgments

The quote from John Womack that prefaces this book captures the way in which small, defensive actions, in this instance from *campesinos* south of Mexico City, sometimes scale up to transform the politics of an entire society, as occurred in Mexico between 1910 and 1920. The potentially transformative impacts of small actions have been much on the minds of environmentalists in recent years as larger political structures have remained largely inert in the face of climate change. Of course, as the quotes that preface the first chapter make clear, activities such as eating food grown in a backyard garden or preserving a patch of woods only constitute "drops in the bucket" compared to the magnitude of the environmental reforms necessary to establish sustainable societies. In this context, it becomes important to understand better the ways in which large-scale reforms occur and the role of local environmental activities in these larger-scale efforts. This book uses historical methods to clarify how, periodically over the past half-century, local and global forces have combined to produce moments of environmental reform.

The ideas that organize this book first began to take shape forty years ago when I was a young graduate student taking courses and attending talks on subjects, such as ecology, about which I knew next to nothing. I read an article in *Science* by Eugene Odum (1969) that was ostensibly about changes in plant communities, but it seemed to me to be a good explanation for historical patterns in some human communities. As I learned more about the paths to survival in an academic world, it became clear to me that wild analogies about the similarities between natural communities and human communities did not have a place in any discipline, even one with as expansive a view of its mission as sociology.

Furthermore, the understandable revulsion at the Social Darwinists' self-justifying arguments about the biological sources for high social position had caused many social scientists to look with suspicion at any mixture of social and ecological theory. Even so, the similarities in the meta-narratives of change over time in social and ecological theory seemed too compelling to abandon entirely, so I filed them away. Occasionally, I would mention them in classes to undergraduates, who in most instances were too polite to let me see the full measure of their skepticism.

I could not let go of these ideas in part because I kept running into inexplicable anomalies in the fieldwork that I did on human transformations of landscapes. In particular, the environmentalism that I heard expressed by citizens arguing for restrictions on suburban real estate development did not fit comfortably into prevalent ideas about environmentalism. The anti-growth advocates were too self-interested to be true environmentalists, but they spoke with passion about defending the environment. To see their comments as nothing more than opportunistic rebranding seemed too dismissive. Eventually, I came to regard these people as "defensive environmentalists," people primarily concerned with ensuring the quality of environments close to their homes. They contrasted with "altruistic environmentalists," who pursue goals for the larger society and seem most active during transformative political moments. The defensive environmentalists did things that many other nest-building creatures do, so a mix of ecological and social theory seemed likely to offer persuasive explanations for their behavior. The altruistic–defensive environmentalist binary captured an essential element in the local–global dynamic in movements for environmental reform, so this analytic approach seemed to have promise for explaining the political circumstances in which environmental reforms occur. With this promise in mind, I began to work on this book in 2007.

The work has been made much easier by a great deal of help, much of it unacknowledged until now. The intellectual atmosphere in the Department of Human Ecology, my primary place of employment during all of these years, has proven to be very good for nurturing ideas about relations between society and the natural environment. A small group consisting of Andrew P. Vayda, Bonnie McCay, George Morren, Brad Walters, and Kevin Flesher endorsed intellectual trespassing between the natural and the social sciences and did first-rate field research on environment–society relationships in diverse locales. My second home at Rutgers, the Sociology Department, through its "woodshed workshop," provided a friendly

venue for trying out the ideas presented here. On other occasions, audiences in Human Ecology and at the American Sociological Association meetings offered insights that clarified my thinking.

At various points when I was stuck on one or another aspect of the argument, people went out of their way to help me with data or with the substance of an argument. Bonnie McCay and Teresa Johnson helped me understand the dynamics of fisheries. Alan Rudy offered some interesting insights on Andy Szasz's inverted quarantine argument. The late Allan Schnaiberg inadvertently suggested the title for this book in one of his typically trenchant comments about the environmental movement. Samantha MacBride pointed me in the direction of a wealth of data about recycling. Clare Hinrichs shared her knowledge about the food movement in the United States. Norman Uphoff graciously responded to a series of questions about the Gal Oyo irrigation project in Sri Lanka. The members of the Metuchen, New Jersey Environmental Commission helped to gather the recycling data reported in Chapter 7. Bradley Walters, Diana Burbano, Kevin Flesher, and Bonnie McCay read through and commented on the entire manuscript. Diana Burbano graciously allowed me to use a photo from her fieldwork in the Ecuadorian Amazon for the cover of the book. Robert Dreesen and Abigail Zorbaugh from Cambridge University Press and Shana Meyer from Aptara Corporation guided the manuscript and me through the evaluation and production processes at Cambridge University Press. Thank you for your efforts. Three anonymous reviewers read through either the entire manuscript or chapters from it and made comments that improved it substantially. Ellen Dawson remade many of the graphics in the book, improving each one that she touched.

A year-long sabbatical from Rutgers University in 2007 and 2008 gave me the time to organize the argument, gather the empirical materials to evaluate it, and write initial drafts of the chapters. I want to thank Susan Golbeck and Daniel Rudel for putting up with the reclusive lifestyle that I seem to need in order to write a book. Finally, I dedicate this book to my mother. Although she never wrote a book, she loved books and the life of the mind.

Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

1

Introduction

> Not only do I think [that] individual efforts are *a drop in the bucket* – but that the cumulative effect of most environmental movement organizations is extraordinarily limited. What I think we need is a far MORE political effort, culminating in enduring political organizations and coalitions, to provide a predictable set of political incentives and penalties for political representatives who preach environmentalism and practice the expansion of production.
>
> Allan Schnaiberg (2007)

> Voluntary limits on consumption [produce] little more than "*a drop in the bucket*" compared to the huge flows of resources . . . [produced] by [changes in] public policy.
>
> Fred Buttel (2003, 330)

Introduction: The Emotional Burdens of Global Environmental Change

These are emotionally difficult times for people who care about global environmental conditions. Report after report provides new evidence of global warming. Greenhouse gas emissions spew forth at accelerated rates from tailpipes all over the world. The prospect of global collective action seems conceivable, but very distant. A sense of frustration, and even despair, at the lack of action creeps into communications by concerned people. "Are words worthless in the climate fight?" asks Andrew Revkin (2007). Myriad reports end with the statement "Technically, it can be done. It is a question of will power" (Kerr 2012). Others talk about the "environmental endgame" (Nadeau 2006). College students characterize their environmental studies courses as "depressing." Plainly, the

ominous projections about global environmental change place an emotional burden on people who attend to them.

For very good evolutionary reasons, people tend to focus on the "here and now," and problems of climate in their most acute form have not had immediate effects on most of us. Temporally, "the sting is in the tail," decades from now when average temperatures will have risen two degrees or more (United Kingdom 2006). Spatially, scale mismatches buffer most humans from the consequences of their own actions. Human activities in the densely populated middle latitudes contribute to global warming, which manifests itself most forcefully in the sparsely populated high latitudes, thousands of miles away. Natural scientists refer to these links between physically separated activities as "teleconnections" (Philander 1990). Even when people acknowledge the connections between their daily activities and a changing global climate, the scale of the problem and the magnitude of the necessary transformations discourage people from taking action. As Tom Lowe writes (quoted in Revkin 2007),

> A common reaction to this stand-off is for risk communicators to shout louder, to try and shake some sense into people. This is what I see happening with the climate change message. The public are on the receiving end of an increasingly distraught alarm call. The methods used to grab attention are so striking that people are reaching a state of denial. This is partly because the problem is perceived as being so big that people feel unable to do anything about it.

Given the prevalent human focus on the "here and now," we often react to large problems only when they present themselves in our daily lives, and then we react by thinking about what we can do, either personally or locally, to counter the effects of these problems. In one observer's words, "there aren't global pathways of progress, but there is incessant local improvement" (Dennett 1995, 308). David Brower has tried to capitalize on this tendency in human behavior with his call to "think globally, but act locally." Many of these local actions, such as fighting to preserve a patch of woods or strengthen a school recycling program, represent efforts to preserve or clean up personal environments. When someone says, "I care about issues that are close to home; I care if it affects me personally; I care if it affects my children" (Eliasoph 2002, 130), she or he expresses defensive environmentalist sentiments. Defensive environmentalists participate in activities that benefit their immediate environment and sometimes the larger world. Do these activities address global environmental changes in efficacious ways? Brower's slogan would suggest that the answer is yes, but the pessimistic assessments cited above say no. This book says "maybe yes," but only when defensive environmentalists

combine with more altruistically oriented activists to produce moments of environmental reform.

Many people already have answers to questions about the global effects of local actions. The many scholarly efforts during the past two decades to understand the workings of local common property institutions testify to the potential that social scientists see in local environmental governance (Ostrom 1990, 2009). Paul Hawken (2007) estimates that worldwide there are now over one million local groups devoted to achieving a more socially just and environmentally sustainable future. Collectively, these groups constitute "global civil society." Federations of local groups exist in some instances, but in other instances group members are not organized beyond the level of the community. They do not profess a single ideology. Rather, they come together around practical ideas that promise to improve the local environment and, more questionably, to provide for social justice. Hawken believes that the members of these groups will in the near future transform our institutional logics in a more sustainable direction.

Lester Brown acknowledges the efforts of local groups but draws a different conclusion. In his words (Brown 2006, 265), "We have won a lot of local battles, but we are losing the war." Vigorous debates about the efficacy of local, voluntary responses fill e-mail inboxes. In an interchange on an environmental sociology listserv during the fall of 2007, several writers, somewhat diffidently, argued for the importance of local, voluntary actions, whereas others asserted, as in the quotations prefacing this chapter, that local actions usually represented a "drop in the bucket" in terms of what needs to be done to stem global environmental change. People of this persuasion argued that, given the existence of a world capitalist system that despoils the environment, only a concerted international effort to rein in global capitalism through reform or revolution could possibly achieve the magnitude of change necessary to address meaningfully the challenges of global warming, fisheries depletion, and biodiversity losses (Roberts 2007; Zavestoski 2007). Taken together, these debates paint a picture of some sustainable localities or practices set in an unsustainable global structure.

The recent history of recycling programs illustrates both the social logic that underlies a localized, defensive environmentalist posture and the overall pattern of environmental conservation. Mandatory municipal recycling programs have spread across a wide range of American communities during the past twenty years. At the same time, cities in China and Japan have begun recycling materials. In most of these instances, governments made recycling mandatory because they had run out of

space in the local landfills. The alternative to recycling, long-distance transport of waste to distant landfills, costs more money. People may have begun to recycle during the 1970s out of a generalized concern for the larger environment, an altruistic concern that would not produce personal benefits, but they continue to recycle in part because it removes waste from their houses and saves their communities money. From the twentieth to the twenty-first century recycling changed from an altruistic to a defensive environmentalist practice.

Do defensive environmentalist practices such as recycling move us in a sustainable direction? The answer to this question is not so clear in New Jersey. Many communities in the state ship their recycled cans and bottles to China for sorting. The recyclables go so far because, otherwise, the ships that bring Chinese manufactured goods to the northeastern United States would have nothing to take back to China. Recyclers in New Jersey are defensive environmentalists, but the routes followed by their recycled goods reflect the larger, unsustainable economic structure in which they are embedded.

To some degree, the naysayers in debates about the efficacy of local environmental actions must be right. If local, environmentally friendly actions were quite common and did scale up to address global environmental problems, then we would not be worrying about global environmental changes in the first place. The magnitude of these changes exceeds the remedial capacities of individuals and local groups. This conclusion does not, however, mean that local efforts are insignificant in the global arena. The successful scaling up of some local efforts may suggest effective strategies for environmental stabilization in other times or places. In this sense, a description of the historical circumstances in which local efforts do and do not scale up into significant reform efforts in the global arena has potentially important implications for political action. This book attempts to provide a preliminary accounting of the historical circumstances in which these local-to-global links occur. To do so, it draws upon the two lines of theorizing that run across the divide between natural and social sciences, one concerned with modular changes in the immediate environments of individuals and the other concerned with systemic changes in larger, coupled natural and human contexts.

Theoretical Approach to Understanding Local and Global Changes

Any explanation for environmental reform must navigate the treacherous theoretical waters of the nature–society binary. A long line of Social

Darwinist theorizing, stretching back into the nineteenth century, has ignored the divide between nature and human societies, most notoriously using theories of natural selection to explain stratification in human societies (Hofstadter 1944). More recently, and in part in response to Social Darwinist thinking, social scientists have erected disciplinary divides between nature and humans, insisting implicitly, if not explicitly, that humans are so exceptional that ecological processes do not apply to them. Environmental social scientists have countered that it would be more accurate to regard human societies as a special case of nature (Catton and Dunlap 1978). Viewed in these terms, environmental reforms could conceivably be understood as both social changes and ecological changes. The theoretical tools for explaining environmental reforms might, by extension, come from both social and ecological theories.

Despite the frequent assertions about the gulf that separates natural scientists from social scientists, many of them share a common intellectual point of departure in their research. They think, as Darwin did, in terms of variations across populations and through time (Mayr 1959; Sober 1980; McLaughlin 2012). To explain these differences in populations, scientists typically refer to genetic changes across generations or cultural shifts over shorter periods of time (Richerson and Boyd 2005). These similarities between social and ecological thinking about populations can be exploited heuristically for theoretical gains. A case in point involves waste. Social theorists have next to nothing to say about it, whereas ecological theorists have much to say about it. This discrepancy could mean that there are some important but overlooked social issues in this domain.

The following arguments about defensive environmentalists, altruistic environmentalists, and environmental reforms have two theoretical sources: the much-maligned grand narratives of the twentieth century and coupled natural and human systems theory. The grand narratives have teleological tendencies. They attribute purposive behavior to higher-level aggregates, so societies "progress" and ecosystems "mature." Despite these dubious assertions, the classical theorists deserve credit for asking important questions about the origins of readily observable historical changes such as fertility decline. How, then, do we explain the cluster of historical changes in humans and other organisms as their communities have become more populous and larger in scale over time? One explanation for many of these "close-to-home" changes could lie, broadly, in the growth in the volume of human activities. Put differently,