

Bookshelf: The Troubled History of Environmentalism

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Bookshelf, Series

By **Bob Wilson**

The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-In Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation

by Adam Rome

The Light-Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960-2000

by Michael Bess

Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images

by Finis Dunaway

Why have Americans been unable or unwilling to address climate change? Given the dire threat of global warming, why has it taken so long for a political movement to tackle climate change to emerge in the United States? These are some of the questions that have guided my project at the RCC about the development of the American climate movement, in many ways, an offshoot of the environmental movement. Yet there is another related question: What happened to American environmentalism? A robust, popular environmental movement should have been able to respond to climate change and activists should have been able to pressure their government to take measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and cope with the consequences of a warming world. But until recently, that has not happened. Why?

Three books about the history of environmentalism provide an answer: Adam Rome's **The Genius of Earth Day**, Michael Bess's **The Light-Green Society**, and Finis Dunaway's **Seeing Green**. They chart the birth of American environmentalism almost 50 years ago and its troubled fate since then. Rome's book examines American environmentalism during the time of its greatest triumphs, when activists organized the first Earth Day, a day of teach-ins, demonstrations, and cleanup campaigns held in April 1970. As Rome shows, the first Earth Day gave voice to Americans calling for ecological reform, especially to address waste and pollution. An unusual coalition demanded these changes: youth, scientists, conservationists, and middle-class women. Due to their efforts, and the political pressure they generated, Congress enacted sweeping legislation—the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, and Endangered Species Act, among others—to address these problems. While Rome acknowledges the limitations of the movement of the time, he praises 1970s environmentalism for creating what he calls “the first green generation” (xi).

Bess's *The Light-Green Society* is a thorough examination of what this green generation achieved and its mixed legacy. Although mostly about the development and effects of environmentalism in France, Bess argues that the story he tells has broad similarities to what happened in other industrial democracies like the United States. From our twenty-first century vantage point, environmentalism in France and elsewhere seems beset by failures. Despite some of the grandiose claims of environmental activists in the 1970s, they were unable to usher in a more sustainable society. Yet the decades since have witnessed a proliferation of “eco” consumer products, green business initiatives, and many, if halting, attempts by governments to curb the most serious environmental consequences of new technologies and rampant growth. The result was a half-revolution, what Bess calls a “light-green society,” where almost everything is touched by environmental concern “but modestly, moderately, without upsetting the existing state of things too much” (5). The light-green society is one where people pay lip service to sustainability, but seem unwilling to make the deeper, structural changes needed to contend with climate change and other environmental ills.

Like Bess, Dunaway also sees post-1970s environmentalism as fraught with half measures. But in his book *Seeing Green*, Dunaway offers a more biting analysis of why this happened. He analyzes the images produced by environmental activists and how the media has portrayed environmental problems. While environmentalists, documentarians, and journalists used images to alert people to ecological crises, they did so in ways that suggested small, and ultimately insignificant, solutions to these deep-seated problems.

From the famous “Crying Indian” anti-littering commercials to Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*, the way to solve these problems apparently lay with individual solutions to address the crisis such as recycling or changing light bulbs. This consumer-oriented approach to change dovetailed with the rise of neoliberalism, a political philosophy that espouses deregulation and privatization and fostered a suspicion of government-led solutions to environmental problems. Such measures are a weak set of tools with which to address the large-scale environmental problems of the day, such as climate change, which will require massive alterations to the United States’ and the world’s fossil-fuel dependent energy system.

Except for Dunaway’s *Seeing Green*, and then only briefly, none of these books discuss global warming in any depth, focusing instead on other environmental problems, such as pollution, that engaged earlier generations of activists. Yet I have still found them essential as I try to understand the formidable obstacles that American environmentalism—like the climate movement that has sprung from it—has faced in trying to address global warming. *The Genius of Earth Day* shows the necessity of developing broad, multi-faceted coalitions to push for environmental reform, something the climate movement has sought to do. Social movements like environmentalism are not necessarily successes or failures. Sometimes they can be both, a contradiction Bess explains artfully in *The Light-Green Society*. Finally, images both reflect and reinforce dominant ideological and political views, especially related to environmental matters, an insight Dunaway explores in depth in *Seeing Green*. He forcefully shows how important images were to the development of the early environmental movement, so as I have studied the more recent climate movement, I have paid close attention to the images it has produced and how they circulate.

Together, these three books show the barriers environmentalism has faced over the past 40 years and suggest what political movements might need to do to surmount them as our climate continues to change.