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Nature in American Environmental Thought and the Era of Consensus

Dissertation Sample Chapter

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I consider this sample chapter ready for submission.



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Context of the Sample Chapter

My dissertation, titled *“What We’ve Got Here, Is Failure to Communicate”: The End of Consensus in American Environmental Policy Since The 1980s*”, provides an analysis of the environmental politics of the United States which transitioned from a fundamentally consensual topic in the 20th century to a political weapon in the 21st.

After a period of initial consensus on the issue of environmental policies, the American Republican and Democratic parties have come into conflict. In the absence of effective, widely acceptable Republican policy alternatives, government-oriented solutions prevail in environmental protection. Recognizing the polarizing nature of the topic, the opposing sides used the topic of environment and climate change as part of a political tribal war. As long as there is no will to rebuild the consensus in environmental issues, and there’s no value-based alternative acceptable to the American right, the further dominance of reversible, ineffective policies are expected on the issue.

The chapter presented here is the first one in the dissertation. It discusses the American tradition of environmental thought and its importance in American life through literary and cultural traditions. I explore 20th century environmental problems and socio-political processes that made the issue of environmental protection politically unavoidable by the early 1970s.

Chapter I

Nature in American Environmental Thought and the Era of Consensus

1.1 The Dual Perception of Nature in American Thought

In American public thought the question of the environment appeared as early as the time of the first settlers. In order to better understand the relationship between American politics and the questions regarding the environment, resource usage, and environmental protection, it is necessary to briefly review the changing attitudes towards nature and human development, as well as to explore the duality in thought that presented itself relatively early. This duality is between the pragmatic usage of the natural world as a resource and the reverence toward an untouched natural world. These two viewpoints clash in the environmental politics debate between preservation and conservation in the early 20th century.

From the classical European point of view, the wilderness of the North American continent that was first encountered by European colonizers was vastly different from what the settlers knew as “wilderness” on the European continent.¹ For example, in France and in the British Isles a proper road system and settlement infrastructure with the necessary services was in place dating back at least to the Roman times. The lack of basic amenities and services, with the image of the untamed wilderness as far as the eye can see, resulted in disappointment and frustration in the first settlers. This frustration was expressed in most records by using biblical language. Instead of a new Eden there was a wilderness that knew neither mercy nor grace for man.

¹ Kaplan, Krumhardt, and Zimmermann, “The prehistoric and preindustrial deforestation of Europe,” 3026.

According to Nash, the main reason for the negative attitude towards the environment lies in this frustration, which has found its roots in the settlers' Christian culture.² The people of this era called it a "desolate wilderness," forsaken by God.³

This attitude brings forward another, more optimistic point of view, also rooted in the Christian tradition: Man's duty to transform and exploit the natural environment through his work, for his own benefit, making it a source of his own well-being.⁴ This idea along with the references to the Book of Genesis is a topos in American environmental thinking that, as we will see in later chapters, resurfaces in the political discourses on environmental issues even in the early 21st century to frame utilitarian environmental politics.

At the same time, the mindset of the first settlers was influenced not only by the wilderness they experienced and the Christian culture they brought to the New World, but also by their own material experiences on the European continent. From the 14th century until the middle of the 19th century, Europe was hit by a local climate anomaly called the Little Ice Age, which made the weather on the continent colder and more unpredictable. These natural phenomena combined with the possibilities of contemporary technology meant not only an economic inconvenience, but regular famines across Europe. According to available records, between 1518 and 1618 nineteen major famines struck Italy, France, the Netherlands, and the British Isles, and four of these affected, to a greater or lesser extent, the entirety of Europe.⁵ Thus, the settlers who began to transform the North American environment with fervor not only did so because of their Christian culture, but also for a very pragmatic reason.

As intensive agricultural production was not possible at the time due to the lack of technology, the only option was extensive growth: cutting down more trees, creating more

² Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 8.

³ Bradford, "Hideous and Desolate Wilderness," 68-70.

⁴ Morton, "Praises the New English Canaan," 72.

⁵ Alfani and Ó Gráda, *Famine in European History*, 7-16.

pastures and arable land, accumulating more surplus as a part of preparation for times of need ahead. This utilitarian thought would also reoccur in future political debates.

The Romantic-spiritual tradition is another characteristically American philosophical trait in environmental thought. It is less rooted in the materialistic experiences of the settlers of the North American continent but more so in European art and philosophy. The roots are intellectual and its agents were the European Romantic artists and their followers in the United States.⁶ Chronologically, the trait, like Romanticism itself, can be dated to the 19th century. Its image of environment differs from the pioneer experience, as it is less driven by the struggle for survival and the desire for security of existence. This Romantic-spiritual tradition views nature and the wilderness as spiritual instruments which, like the spirit of the Enlightenment, cleanses man from the corrupting effects of civilization. Nature is no longer primarily a place of economic activity, but of self-reflection, where the individual takes a separate, inner path from his or her peers to understand itself.⁷ An iconic example of this tradition is The Hudson River School in American painting and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* in literature.⁸

It is no coincidence that Thoreau's *Walden* has become one of the greatest classics in American literature. During his exodus to nature and in his isolation from society, the protagonist represents virtues that became essential parts of the American mind over time, such as independence, self-reliance, and individualism. Isolation takes place in the context of spiritual self-reflection, in a romanticized, natural environment. This natural area is seemingly untouched, and it is presented as such throughout the text, but even in Thoreau's time it was anthropogenic nature due to the presence of the colonizer's utilitarian human activity in the last 200 years. However, *Walden*'s importance lies not only in its ties to the Romantic-spiritual tradition, but in the effects of later readings of the text.

⁶ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 44–45.

⁷ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 47.

⁸ Thoreau, "Sounds," "The Beanfield," 186–188.

Thoreau was among the first ones in American literature who stood up against anthropocentrism and against the exploitation of the natural world, a practice he called tyranny against nature.⁹ In the 1960s and 1970s, the new environmental philosophy rediscovered *Walden's* importance, as it reinforced its point of view that the recognition of harmfulness of anthropocentrism is key to redefining the relationship between man and nature, and Thoreau's once radical thought of finding intrinsic value in non-human factors became accepted among the researchers of this new environmental ethics.¹⁰ In various attempts to reinterpret the human-environment relationship Thoreau has been read in several ways since the 1960s. The biocentrist school of thought, the proponents of new individualism, and the anti-war movement all referred to the text.¹¹ Thoreau, along with John Muir and Rachel Carson, became a formative figure of environmentalism in American thought in the past sixty years.¹²

George Perkins Marsh, who was Thoreau's contemporary, may be less known, but is also an important figure in American literature, especially for the environmental movement. Marsh's work, *Man and Nature*, was published only ten years after *Walden* and in some cases, it deals with the same problems as Thoreau's work, with a smaller emphasis on individual development and ethics. Marsh considers man to be a fundamentally destructive force in nature, one that commits violence in the natural world and upsets its balance.¹³ Marsh opposes the waste of natural resources and often uses biblical language in his statements. For example, when talking about economic development and the expansion of civilization on the American continent, the author calls for an atonement of the human race.¹⁴

⁹ Cafaro, "Thoreau's Environmental Ethics in 'Walden'," 5.

¹⁰ Cafaro, "Thoreau's Environmental Ethics in 'Walden'," 3.

¹¹ Friedrich, "Walden's 'Political Thoreau'," 46-52.

¹² Friedrich, "Walden's 'Political Thoreau'," 55.

¹³ Marsh, *The Earth as Modified by Human Action: A New Edition of Man and Nature*, 41-44.

¹⁴ "These achievements are more glorious than the proudest triumphs of war, but, thus far, they give but faint hope that we shall yet make full atonement for our spendthrift waste of the bounties." Marsh, *Man and Nature*, 44.

However, his writing is not characterized by the overall pessimism toward the fate of the human-nature relationship that became inherent in environmental thought later. He speaks confidently that the human race will grow up over time, and with the help of technology it will be able to repair the damage it has done.¹⁵ Like Thoreau's *Walden*, Marsh's writings were rediscovered in the 1960s, because they fit well into the increasingly important anthropocritical narrative of the era.¹⁶ Stewart Udall, who was Secretary of the Interior in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and thus had a significant influence over the land use strategies of federal institutions, referred to George Perkins Marsh as the father of land wisdom.¹⁷

Representatives of the Romantic-spiritual tradition were in a completely different situation than the settlers of the 16th and 17th centuries. Most of them had experienced the American wilderness after a major transformation. Infrastructure and European civilization were no longer separated from them by an ocean. A typical example is that at the time of writing, only 800 meters from Thoreau's log cabin near Walden Pond, there was a railway track with regular traffic.¹⁸

The experience of technological development, the utilitarian mindset against nature seemed darker later on. While George Perkins Marsh and Thoreau hoped that humanity would be able to live in harmony with nature in time, a later example of the spiritual tradition paints a different picture. William Faulkner's short story collection *Go Down, Moses* (1942) addresses similar environmental problems. Notably, "The Bear" and "Delta Autumn" deal with the destruction of the natural world. In the former, the protagonist, Ike McCaslin, struggles with how to handle his inherited plantation over which he feels no real ownership. In the latter the

¹⁵ Marsh, *Man and Nature*, 46–47.

¹⁶ Gade, "The Growing Recognition of George Perkins Marsh," 341.

¹⁷ Gade, "The Growing Recognition of George Perkins Marsh," 342.

¹⁸ Thoreau, *Walden*, 115.

protagonist observes how the farmers and the logging companies pushed back nature for economic gain, bringing destruction to an area once full of life.¹⁹

Aldo Leopold's masterpiece, *A Sand County Almanac*, was the foundation of a new way of thinking in the human-nature relationship. Despite his scientific thoroughness and his methodology rooted in natural sciences, I label his work as part of the American Romantic-spiritual environmental tradition, primarily because he had arguably the greatest impact on the public actors who were inspired by this tradition. His writing became influential after its rediscovery in the late 1960s and early 1970s, together with Marsh. The original publication of *A Sand County Almanac* in 1949 (a year after his death) had little response. His sympathetic writing, ecological observations, thoroughness, and his comprehension of the living and inanimate parts of nature as a complex system, have had a profound effect on the environmental movements emerging from the world of the Counterculture. His work has become a point of reference among representatives of the new environmental ethics, environmentalism and ecocentrism.²⁰

When observing the pioneer, the Romantic-spiritual and later literary traditions, it becomes clear that Americans were preoccupied with the material and the spiritual relationship between man and nature, and all contributors infuse their own anthropocentrism and utilitarianism into their respective narratives. A different bio or ecocentric point of view would emerge first in the late 1960s-early 1970s in the Counterculture movements.

1.2 The Birth of the Environmental Debate: Hetch Hetchy and Teapot Dome

The first political clash of the environmental philosophical traditions mentioned above was the Hetch Hetchy debate under the Roosevelt administration. The utilitarian approach and the question of resource management of the United States which was on its way to become a world

¹⁹ Faulkner, "The Bear," 172–179, and "Delta Autumn," 181.

²⁰ Flannery, "Aldo Leopold Reconsidered," 148–149.

power led to the Teapot Dome Scandal which became one of the biggest corruption scandals in the 20th century.

The Hetch Hetchy debate took place between Gifford Pinchot and John Muir, who were prominent figures of the conservation and preservation movements; thus they both deserve a brief introduction.

Gifford Pinchot, – interestingly, named after a painter associated with Hudson River School, Sanford Robinson Gifford²¹ –, was the one who made the science of forestry in the United States well known. After graduating from Yale, he traveled to France and Germany to study modern European forestry.²² He was the first head of the Division of Forestry, a federal body founded in 1898, and had a close friendship with outdoor enthusiast Theodore Roosevelt.²³ His early mentor was John Muir, who later became his most relentless rival.²⁴ Pinchot's name was associated with the concept of “conservation”, which will be one of the key notions in the environmental policy debates of the 20th century. Pinchot, as a forester, thought of forestry as resource management, be it trees, wildlife, plants as resources, or nature as a resource for human recreation.²⁵ In this way of thinking, and in the concept of conservation itself, we can observe the pragmatic view of the pioneers albeit in a gentler, and more importantly, sustainable form.

John Muir, on the other hand, had a completely different view on nature, one that was quite radical in his time. He emphasized the importance of the integrity of the surviving nature free from anthropogenic influences, saying that they are not only valuable because of possibilities of human usage, but nature should be preserved for its own sake.²⁶ The thought of “preservation” does not see nature as a resource that can be exploited or exploited responsibly,

²¹ Johnson, “From a Woodland Elegy, A Rhapsody in Green; Hunter Mountain Paintings Spurred Recovery”

²² Miller, *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism*, 79-81.

²³ Miller, *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism*, 147-149.

²⁴ Miller, *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism*, 125-127.

²⁵ Meyer, “Gifford Pinchot, John Muir and the Boundaries of Politics in American Thought,” 269.

²⁶ Meyer, “Gifford Pinchot, John Muir and the Boundaries of Politics in American Thought,” 276.

but as a “temple” where the work of creation can be experienced firsthand. Muir’s views are akin to Thoreau’s romantic-spiritual position, but it should be mentioned that Muir was not insensitive to the needs of human well-being and development. He merely stated that certain works of nature are irreproducible wonders which should not be sacrificed for short-term human goals.²⁷ His Sierra Club was ready and willing to use the political clout of its members to advance the cause of preservation for the benefit of Hetch Hetchy.

In the first decade of the 20th century, the growing population of the San Francisco Bay Area brought forward the need for a sustainable and cheap water supply. There were multiple options, but the cheapest and easiest way was to block the nearby Hetch Hetchy Valley, thus turning it into a reservoir. According to plans, the reservoir would serve as a settling basin, and so certain processes in water treatment could be spared, and this water would be brought 167 miles (269 kilometers) west via tunnels and aqueducts, generating a significant amount of hydroelectricity *en route* as well. The only problem was that the valley was located in the previously established, therefore already protected, area of Yosemite National Park. The plan needed approval from the US Congress. John Muir and Pinchot were on opposing sides, but, contrary to popular belief, their views were only differing on the reasonability, not the necessity of the Hetch Hetchy Project.

As Pinchot wrote to President Roosevelt,

I fully sympathize with the desire . . . to protect the Yosemite National Park, but I believe that the highest possible use which could be made of it would be to supply pure water to a great center of population.²⁸

From this quote one can see that Pinchot’s conservation can be interpreted as a modification to Bentham’s utilitarian maxim. Pinchot argued, “Conservation means the greatest good, to the greatest number for the longest time.”²⁹

²⁷ Meyer, “Gifford Pinchot, John Muir and the Boundaries of Politics in American Thought,” 268.

²⁸ Meyer, “Gifford Pinchot, John Muir and the Boundaries of Politics in American Thought,” 273.

²⁹ Meyer, “Gifford Pinchot, John Muir and the Boundaries of Politics in American Thought,” 270.

In the meantime, John Muir called for resistance on the pages of the *Sierra Club Bulletin* using highly emotional Biblical language,

These temple destroyers, devotees of ravaging commercialism, seem to have a perfect contempt for Nature, and, instead of lifting their eyes to the mountains, lift them to dams and town skyscrapers. Dam Hetch-Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man.³⁰

The Sierra Club built up a serious media alliance and tried to gain public support for protecting Hetch Hetchy before the vote. To do so, they mobilized various NGOs for the cause via their members' contacts. The struggle went on for seven years after the introduction of the initial plans, and before the vote in Congress countless organizations, sometimes controlled by similar interest groups, tried to influence the vote.³¹ Despite all the efforts by the Sierra Club, the legislators voted for the Hetch Hetchy Project in 1913.³² Although resistance to development has failed, its impact has not passed without a trace. Hetch Hetchy's example has shown that NGOs, with the support of the media, have a strong public discourse-shaping power.

The issue of resource management also emerged as the United States ventured onto the global stage as a potential challenger to European great powers in the early 20th century. The primary beneficiary of these aspirations was the US Navy, whose need for oil led to one of the biggest corruption scandals in United States history just after two decades the original thought was born. The case of the National Petroleum Reserve projects shows that issues of resource management and environmental protection were to remain with Washington on the global stage.

³⁰ Muir, "The Hetch Hetchy Valley"

³¹ The following organizations campaigned against the damming of the valley: Graffort Club of Portsmouth, NH (Drafted by the General Federation of Women's Clubs), Citizens of Merced and Stanislaus Counties, American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, Society for the Preservation of National Parks, University of Oklahoma, Massachusetts State Federation of Women's Clubs. While among the supporters we see the following groups: Hypatia Women's Club of San Francisco, Widows and Orphans and Mutual Aid Associations, Inc. of the San Francisco Fire Department, Executive Board of the San Francisco District of the California Federation of Women's Clubs, Augusta, Hallowell and Gardner Central Labor Union of Maine, San Francisco Council No. 615, Knights of Columbus, San Francisco Swedish Clubs. The Center for Legislative Archives, "Hetch Hetchy Environmental Debates"

³² Davis, "San Francisco – Hetch Hetchy Valley Connection"

Anticipating the future importance of crude oil as a natural resource, key actors in the U.S. government proposed that, following Pinchot's footsteps in forestry strategy, the government should also develop a crude oil-related resource strategy.³³ As has been mentioned, the primary beneficiary of this was the Navy, which would initially count on oil and its derivatives as lubricants, and later, from the First World War onwards, as fuel. Crude oil, along with other mineral resources, fell under the General Mining Act of 1872, but this scheme meant that potential crude oil deposits would be easily bought up by private investors, forcing the government to pay market prices for a resource under previously owned federal lands without any compensation.³⁴ In an executive order dated September 27, 1909, President Taft acquired significant territories in California and Wyoming. The Elk Hills and Buena Vista Hills in California and the Teapot Dome in Wyoming so became the first strategic resource deposits.³⁵

The federal government did not want to be directly involved in the extraction business itself, so in the Mineral Leasing Act of 1920 extraction rights were granted to oil companies operating on a market basis, in return for leasing rights, fees and royalty payments. Initially, the reserved areas belonged to either the Navy or the Department of the Interior, until finally, in 1922, the administration of the territories was transferred to the DOI.³⁶

The political turmoil caused by the Teapot Dome scandal in 1923 is related to the DOI's territory management policies. This scandal reinforced the image of the oil industry's corrupting effect in U.S. political life. Secretary of the Interior Albert Bacon Fall was revealed to have handed over the leasing rights of the Navy Reserve oil fields to private oil companies in exchange for \$400,000 in bribes.³⁷ Fall was the first U.S. politician to receive a prison sentence for accepting bribes, and the Republican Party did not face more serious political

³³ Epstein, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to The Politics of Oil*, 130–131.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ellis, *The Development of the American Presidency*, 301.

³⁶ Epstein, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to The Politics of Oil*, 132.

³⁷ In2013dollars.com, "Inflation Calculator," The amount would be \$6,694,000 in 2022 dollars.

consequences only because of President Harding's death. It has become clear that U.S. public opinion would not tolerate the misuse of natural resources, especially when it happens in a troubled economic situation such as the one the U.S. experienced after the First World War.³⁸

Preservation and the restoration of the environmental values of the areas reserved by and for the purposes of the federal government continued to play a key role in land management.³⁹ Even today, these areas are the laboratories of how the effects of industrial processes can be reversed in an anthropogenic area.⁴⁰ In terms of securing crude oil as a strategic resource, there was no particular shift from the leasing model until the late 1970s, but the energy crisis resulting from the Yom Kippur War and the Iranian crisis were the first steps to upset the fundamentally utilitarian environmental consensus in American politics, thanks in part to the Department of Interior of the Reagan Presidency which are discussed in the third chapter.

1.3 Environmental Problems and The New Deal

The first set of environmental disasters, other than the annual tornadoes, hurricanes, and flooding of the Mississippi-Missouri, with a nationwide impact in the United States were the Dust Bowls of the Great Depression era.⁴¹ This environmental crisis had a significant effect on the American attitude towards the environment through its representation in the media and in literature. It also bore the mark of irresponsible human activities leading to environmental disasters which became more and more common in the latter part of the 20th century.

In the first decades of the century farmers on the more arid parts of the Great Plains started to use deep plowing techniques hoping to achieve higher yields. However, this type of

³⁸ Bates, "The Teapot Dome Scandal and the Election of 1924," 304.

³⁹ Naval Petroleum Reserves, Office of Fossil Energy and Carbon Management, "About NPR"

⁴⁰ California Resources Corporation, "Elk Hills Fields"

⁴¹ It is quite telling that two important examples of American art can be tied to these phenomena. Woody Guthrie's *Dust Bowl Ballads* were worthy to be included in the Smithsonian's Folkways Project, while Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* is still read today in American high schools making it an unavoidable text in American literature. These works of art penetrated the American cultural memory deeply. The Big Read, "The Grapes of Wrath- Preface," Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, "Dust Bowl Ballads – Woody Guthrie".

cultivation technique showed their indifference to, or insufficient knowledge of, the local soil and ecosystems. Deep plowing destroyed the root structures of the native flora that weaved through the upper layers of the soil which helped to stabilize the topsoil and retained some water in times of drought. Soon enough this loose soil became clouds of dust due to the drought periods of the 1930s and the Aeolian processes of the area. The economic and health effects of the dust storms were felt throughout the United States.⁴² This new type of large-scale anthropogenic environmental disaster required a new kind of environmental policy response. The federal government under FDR embarked on a large-scale soil protection and reforestation program.⁴³

The Soil Conservation Corps, which sought to protect areas exposed to wind erosion with forest strips (the Shelterbelt Project) and soil-binding plants, later became part of a larger, more comprehensive public works program. The Civilian Conservation Corps was established in 1933 to reduce unemployment caused by the Great Depression. In addition to his civic education goals, the emphasis was on preserving American natural values and making them accessible to the public.⁴⁴ Members of the Civilian Conservation Corps built hiking trails, service buildings, supply roads, and also carried out fortification, flood and soil protection work, as well as wildlife conservation projects. The size of the program is well indicated by the fact that about 5% of the American male population according to the 1940 census participated in the program in some way.⁴⁵

Among the government programs to alleviate the effects of the Great Depression we find the Federal Art Project. Through publicly available contemporary American art, the project

⁴² McDean, "Dust Bowl Historiography," 119–120.

⁴³ The planting of dusty soil conserving plant species were a well known method at the time. A similar process was the introduction of the acacia plant (lat. *Robinia Pseudoacacia*) to the soils of Hungarian Great Plain by Sámuel Tessedik. Also: Orth, "'The Shelterbelt Project': Cooperative Conservation in 1930s America," 334–338.

⁴⁴ Fechner, "The Civilian Conservation Corps Program," 129–135.

⁴⁵ Bass, "The Success and Contradictions of New Deal Democratic Populism: The Case of Civilian Conservation Corps," 251–252.

broadened the view of citizens living in various states including the environmental and natural heritage of the U.S. Both the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Federal Art Project indirectly formed the American view on nature as participants of the Civilian Conservation Corps felt responsibility for the natural heritage of the country they worked for, and the Federal Arts Projects brought the said heritage closer to everyday life.⁴⁶

An important success story of the New Deal's environmental policies are the infrastructural projects of the era. The federal government was determined that the planned job creation schemes should bring development to the rural areas affected by the Great Depression. The infrastructure projects like the building of the Hoover Dam on the Colorado River and the foundation of the Tennessee Valley Authority brought cheap, sustainable energy, flood control, and jobs to the less developed areas.⁴⁷

Another New Deal project was the Indian New Deal which intended to be a panacea to all the problems Native American communities on reservations experienced in the United States. Due to growing population and the increased agricultural production of the Native Americans, overgrazing soon became a problem on the bad quality lands they were given previously. The Indian New Deal set up a new legal and land management structure in which Native Americans were able to become rural farmers, make their own resource management decisions via the Tribal Councils, and maintain an ownership over the land they were using for grazing. However, the project failed as it ignored the actual needs of the various Native American tribes and ignored the underlying cultural differences between the two worlds.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Bass, "The Success and Contradictions of New Deal Democratic Populism: The Case of Civilian Conservation Corps," 258.

⁴⁷ Armstrong, "Patronage and Building Types," 62.

⁴⁸ Parman, "New Deal Indian Agricultural Policy and the Environment: The Papagos as a Case Study," 28–32.

1.4 The Growing Importance of the Environment: 1950s and 60s

After World War II, the American industry experienced a growth period never seen before. The booming war industry combined with the destruction of industrial capacities in Europe and Asia gave American capital unprecedented opportunities. Between 1938 and 1945 the GDP of the United States grew by 84% percent, which means an average yearly 12% GDP growth. Also the US GDP amounted to 52% percent of the Allied and Axis powers' GDP combined. This economy, as it transformed materials to consumer goods again, meant a change in lifestyle and a changing way of consumption.⁴⁹ Americans who had lived under the military ration system for the last three years of World War II were now ready to convert their money into consumer goods and services. Wartime developments in light construction technology and the automobile industry made cheap suburban homes accessible to many, and the exodus from the crowded city centers (which first took place during the 1920s) resumed.⁵⁰ However, growing industrial production, the necessity of urban-suburban commuting, growing consumption, and the process of suburbanization itself placed new burdens on the environment.

The first sign of this was the biting air and, to lesser degree, water pollution in urban and industrial areas, which also spilled over into the newly built residential areas. Incidents like the Donora smog in Pennsylvania in 1948⁵¹ forced the federal government to face the issue of air pollution relatively early. Under Eisenhower's presidency, the Air Pollution Control Act was enacted in 1955, which, contrary to its name, was not primarily about regulation, but provided research funding to explore air pollution problems.⁵²

At the outset of the 1960s, John F. Kennedy and Secretary of the Interior Steve Udall also perceived the existing environmental problems and the political opportunities in them.

⁴⁹ Harrison, *The Economics of World War II: Six Great Powers in International Comparison*, 27.

⁵⁰ Baker, Hermsen, *UXL Encyclopedia of US History*, 1498–1501.

⁵¹ Bouissoneault, "The Deadly Donora Smog of 1948 Spurred Environmental Protection- But Have We Forgotten the Lesson?"

⁵² Air Pollution Control Act

During Kennedy's presidency, issues of preservation, conservation, as well as utilitarian and spiritual environmental protection were partly intertwined.⁵³ The utilitarian tradition of the New Deal reached a consensus with the environmental NGO-s, but not without clashes.⁵⁴ The idea that the aesthetic beauty of a clean, natural environment free from human intervention serves recreational purposes while infrastructure development in a balanced manner improves urban and suburban living conditions appealed to a wide range of voters who could directly experience the consequences of government action in improving their quality of life.

One example of maintaining a balance between the utilitarian and aesthetic viewpoints on nature was the issue of the Echo Park Dam. Similarly to Hetch Hetchy, this was also an infrastructure project, which was to take place in the scenic area of Echo Park District in Dinosaur National Monument in Colorado. It was met with fierce opposition from preservationists, and Kennedy eventually brokered a deal between the developers and the environmentalists: The Echo Park area remained untouched, but a hydroelectric capacity was built in Glen Park, which was perceived as less important at that time. However, later the preservationist groups stated that the Glen Park area had an even more important aesthetic value than Echo Park, and David Brower said that accepting the deal was the worst mistake of his life.⁵⁵

The Echo Park story demonstrates the existence of a political will to build and maintain consensus, so that development could go its own way and nature would not suffer irreversible damage. In this regard, both Kennedy and Udall – especially the latter, who was a keen naturalist – were active on environmental issues, and managed to build a unified, national consensus: American natural resources are national values to which everyone should have access, just as a healthy environment is a rightful claim of all Americans.

⁵³ Thomas G. Smith, "John Kennedy, Stewart Udall, and New Frontier Conservation," 329.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 338.

⁵⁵ David Brower was the first Executive Director of the Sierra Club between 1952 and 1969. Barnum, Martin et al. "Sierra Club Legend Dies / Environmentalist was uncompromising steward of the planet"

To support this idea and alleviate the anxieties of the middle class which were heightened by the Cuban Missile Crisis and the possibility of a Nuclear Holocaust, the Kennedy administration began to develop the Clean Air Act. Its regulatory aspects were based on the research funded by the Air Pollution Control Act of the Eisenhower administration. After the JFK assassination, the government's environmental vision was carried on by the Johnson administration. The Clean Air Act came into effect in 1963, and the Clean Water Restoration Act, which regulated water quality, was passed in 1966. Udall played a major role in the preparation of both laws.

Despite the threats of the Cold War, resource extraction and the subsequent environmental problems were not as threatening as during the Great Depression. America was rich in resources, especially oil, but the main factor behind this was trade, not just production. The Petroleum Reserves' production did not increase significantly, as Kennedy used the trade of oil and other resources as diplomatic tools, to gain more allies against the Soviet Union, and stabilize the United States' positions in South America, especially Venezuela.⁵⁶

The social turmoil of the 60s did not disappear without a trace. The increasing tensions within society led the American people towards a new type of leadership promised by the Republican Richard Nixon. Nixon promised law and order to the people backed by the "silent majority" of Americans who were not part of the counterculture and not participated in the perceived dismantling of the American way of life. Nixon's ideas on how the government should operate, and how New Federalism should work promised big changes in American political life and within it environmental policy. Despite this, the Nixon presidency not just continued but exceeded the work of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations in environmental protection, which is discussed in the next chapter.

⁵⁶ Zeiler, "Kennedy, Oil Imports, and the Fair Trade Doctrine," 5.

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