

# Introduction

## *Green Voices in the Swelling Chorus of American Environmental Advocacy*

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As much as the environmental dilemma is a problem of ethics and epistemology, it is also a problem of discourse.

—M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline S. Palmer,  
*Ecospeak: Rhetoric and Environmental Politics in America*



Although a number of books skillfully analyze the written works of environmental activists and leaders, their spoken words remain relatively unstudied. Given Killingsworth and Palmer's epigraph about the importance of discourse in addressing the "environmental dilemma," we believe that this is an oversight. Wayland Maxfield Parrish observed half a century ago that "speeches have often been instrumental in shaping the course of history, in defining and strengthening a people's ideals, and in determining its culture."<sup>1</sup> In specific reference to the environmental movement, Alon Tal has more recently noted, "The 'oration' has been a central mechanism for galvanizing change."<sup>2</sup> *Green Voices: Defending Nature and the Environment in American Civic Discourse* aims to redress this paucity of scholarship. After all, when it comes to the leaders, heroes, and activists of the environmental movement, "There is no better way to understand their environmental vision, than through their spoken words."<sup>3</sup>

The study of environmental speeches is important for several reasons, many of which are highlighted here. We begin with the assumption that the speeches of environmental leaders are social repositories that allow us to glean reflections about then-prevailing attitudes and ideas. In addition to better understanding the contribution of environmentalists

to American intellectual and social history, the study of their spoken words also assists in appreciating the diverse and important roles of communication in human-nature relationships. As Parrish notes:

We may expect to learn from a study of the notable addresses of the past some lessons that we can apply to the preparation of our own speeches, for though the subjects of controversy that concern us may be quite different from those that exercised the talents of earlier speakers, yet the *methods* of discussion and argument remain very much the same from age to age.<sup>4</sup>

The essays written for this book address important—yet relatively unknown or unexamined—speeches delivered by famous or influential environmental figures. In other words, this collection examines the broad sweep of U.S. environmental history from the perspective of nature’s leading advocates.

Before briefly outlining the chapters of this book, a few issues that may assist the reader in better understanding our approach should be addressed. Although the words “nature” and “environment” are in the book’s title, neither we nor the chapter authors intend to imply that there is a set meaning for either term. On the contrary, as the chapters make clear, there are a variety of ways one may define “nature” and “environment.” Instead of positing a monolithic definition, we should consider the position taken by the environmental communication scholars James Cantrill and Christine Oravec: “The environment we experience and affect is largely a product of how we come to talk about the world.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, as cultural, historical, material, rhetorical, and social conditions change, so too may understandings of experienced environments. The defense of the environment has been affected by the changing perceptions of what is being defended.

No less constructed than “environment” or “nature” is the phrase “civic discourse.” Scholars have grappled with this notion at least since ancient Greece, where citizens had both a right and a duty to participate in the affairs of the polis. In his “Funeral Oration,” Pericles makes clear democracy’s need for broad participation: “We do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all.”<sup>6</sup> The impulse of civic participation that animated ancient Greek democracy has persisted to the present day. Daniel Barber argues that “citizen participation and citizen involvement are concepts that stand at the heart of the democratic process and at the center of American life.”<sup>7</sup> Rhetoric and environmental communication scholars also have emphasized the importance of civic

participation by engaging and extending the work of “public sphere” scholars such as Jürgen Habermas and others.<sup>8</sup> It is no accident that rhetoric professor and former Sierra Club president Robert Cox’s popular textbook is titled *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere*.<sup>9</sup> For civic discourse scholar Kluver:

Civic discourse serves as the defining rubric of national identity as the participants in the social order define the nature of that order as well as their places within it. Civic discourse ultimately helps to create the society of which it is a part, as it is through discursive practice that the society articulates its expectations, assumptions, and norms, and ultimately becomes its own articulated ideal, within the bounds of human nature.<sup>10</sup>

Advocates who are the subjects of the chapters in this volume each contributed in their own ways to larger conversations about the environment, nature, and national identity. Their words formed part of the fertile earth from which uniquely American environmental expectations, assumptions, and norms were grown.

The origins for this book are found in a conversation between the two of us several years ago. The project resulted from a melding of Bernard’s longstanding interest in the study of public address and Richard’s focus on environmental rhetoric. Among the relevant books available at the time, it seemed to us that none made chapter-length analyses on environmental speeches their chief concerns, despite the potential usefulness of such a collection for students and scholars alike. *Speaking of Earth: Environmental Speeches That Moved the World* is an anthology containing brief introductions but little analysis.<sup>11</sup> Its strength lies in its international breadth and publication of primary texts. Three other mainstays of environmental communication research do an excellent job of addressing written rather than oral works: *Landmark Essays on Rhetoric and the Environment*; *Earthtalk: Communication Empowerment for Environmental Action*; and *Ecospeak: Rhetoric and Environmental Politics in America*.<sup>12</sup> Although title terms “Earthtalk” and “Ecospeak” imply a focus on speeches, this impression is not confirmed in the texts themselves. Instead, these texts operationally position speaking and talking within a broader definition. Two other books, *Green Culture: Environmental Rhetoric in Contemporary America* and *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, offer extensive analyses of environmental rhetoric and historical artifacts but discuss speeches only in passing.<sup>13</sup> The time seemed right to propose *Green Voices: Defending Nature and the Environment in American Civic Discourse*. Our intent

was not somehow to do a better job in addressing environmental communication issues than what had already been published—a virtually impossible task. Instead, we sought to publish a collection of essays that would make a new contribution to the conversation that had already begun.

We began by contacting a handful of scholars who were familiar with some of the key rhetors we wished to have in the collection. We also released a general call for chapters. Although we would like to say that this book now includes all of the green voices of importance in the American context, limitations on book length alone make this impossible. We do not pretend to have incorporated every important speaker; indeed, we believe no text could do so. However, we have done our best to include representative analyses of some of the most interesting and important environmental artifacts of our time. We hope you will agree.

Despite having in common a definitively rhetorical focus, the contributions in this book reflect a variety of methods and approaches. Some focus on a single speaker and a single speech. Others focus on several speeches. Some are historical in orientation, while others are more theoretical. Contributors were not constrained by a predetermined outline or structure. As in nature, diversity here emerges as strength. Thus, the organization of the text did not lend itself to divisions based on approach or number of artifacts. Instead, given the historical importance of many of the speeches, the chapters are arranged in a roughly chronological manner. We believe this helps the reader to perceive the historical arc of U.S. environmentalism as it unfolded in the pages of great and influential speeches.

The collection begins with two chapters that analyze speeches delivered during the mid- to late nineteenth century. The first, by Michael J. Hostetler, examines the rhetorical appeals of Charles Sumner. The young Republic was less than a century old, and citizens of the 1860s still grappled with the enormity of their relatively new homeland. For Hostetler, Sumner's 1867 efforts serve as "a distinct example of how Americans sought to come to grips with the size of North America's environment." After all, how could a nation call itself a democracy given the problem of enormous scale? Hostetler interprets Sumner as arguing that "by promoting a vision of a unified nation both occupying a huge continent and grounded in republican virtue," that nation could be both immense in size and democratic.

Although Michael Hostetler chose to focus on several artifacts, the second chapter, by the book's editors, focuses on a single speech delivered by the "father of preservationism," John Muir. More than any other advocate, Muir's writings and speeches echoed through the ages.

Perhaps it was because the enormity and wildness of nature did not frighten Muir. Instead, Muir thought sublime settings, like his beloved Yosemite, should be enjoyed by all. However, we point out that Muir was keenly aware of the dangers inherent in inviting more people to indulge in outdoor activities; the very rhetoric that produced a desire to protect the most sublime locations simultaneously could despoil those very destinations irrevocably.

Chapters 3 and 4 analyze artifacts from the early 1900s. By the turn of the century the Progressive movement had taken hold. Disenchanted with politics as usual, many orators tapped into the public's disdain of corruption and desire for reform. Theodore Roosevelt characterized the reformist spirit of the times. Leroy Dorsey analyzes Roosevelt's rhetoric in light of the unbridled enthusiasm for governmental action to promote social change: Roosevelt "employed the arguments of the Progressive movement to undergird conservation and to reconcile the movement's contradictory arguments in a way that promoted environmental concerns and helped to create a more receptive audience for his platform." A collection on environmental speeches would be incomplete without an appreciation for what Roosevelt accomplished to protect the environment and give importance to conveying from one generation to the next the legacy of unspoiled public lands.

Anne Marie Todd's chapter focuses on several speeches delivered at the See America First Conference. Although Dorsey sees Roosevelt working within the context of a Progressive movement upset with politics as usual, Todd identifies a different kind of contextual disappointment informing the conference. For Todd, the See America First gathering allows scholars to understand how appeals to "American exceptionalism" were used to bolster tourism in the Western states. Upset that U.S. citizens were spending tourism dollars abroad, advocates attempted to convince the general public that they should keep those dollars at home because there were grander sites to be seen in the West.

In chapter 5, Melba Hoffer turns the reader's attention to the early twentieth century's most important environmental ethics writer, Aldo Leopold. Best known for writing *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold's contributions to contemporary understanding of environmental ethics are virtually unmatched. His ideas regarding "land health" and the "land ethic" are now part of the canon in environmental studies courses everywhere. Hoffer illustrates how Leopold "pressed the cause of environmentalism with a firebrand orator's intonations and a philosopher's moral sensibilities."

Although the first five chapters may be said to analyze some of the "early roots" of U.S. environmentalism, the next five arguably capture

the sentiments of what many have called “mainstream environmentalism.” Chapters 6 and 7 analyze a variety of speeches delivered from the 1950s through the 1970s. Brant Short focuses on the oratory of Sigurd Olson, former president of the Wilderness Society and the National Parks Association, while Elizabeth Lawson turns to the “grandmother of conservation,” Margaret Murie. What Short and Lawson make clear is the way both Olson and Murie infused their rhetoric with personal inspiration drawn from three decades of experience. In the chapters by Short and Lawson, both Olson and Murie finally receive the kind of attention they deserve, attention that is usually reserved for other well-known advocates like Rachel Carson.

Best known for writing *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson is perhaps the most influential U.S. environmental writer since John Muir, with many considering her book a marker for the birth of mainstream environmentalism. However, Carson’s efforts to draw attention to the negative effects of industrial pesticide use drew the fire of the corporate sector like no one had before. Michel Haigh and Ann Marie Major’s chapter analyzes two of Carson’s speeches. They illustrate how Carson continued her political efforts “to encourage grassroots involvement and bring scientific knowledge to the American public” beyond the written pages of books like *Silent Spring*.

Chapter 9 features the second president to appear in this volume: Jimmy Carter. However, unlike other chapters that examine instances of successful rhetoric, Terence Check analyzes a series of Carter’s energy speeches delivered in the late 1970s to understand their failure. For Check, these texts can be read as a fragmented jeremiad, one where Carter hoped “to communicate successfully the scope of the energy crisis to the American people.” However, “Carter’s appeal to civic sacrifice had several limitations, given constraints posed by public perceptions of fairness and reciprocity.”

No less well known than John Muir or Rachel Carson is Lois Gibbs, the speaker who is the focus of chapter 10. Unlike Muir or Carson, Gibbs did not decide to be an environmentalist because of a long-held conviction. Her career as an environmentalist resulted from a personal and public crisis. A housewife turned environmental activist, Gibbs has often been labeled the founder of the antitoxins movement. In considering Gibbs’s 1979 congressional testimony, Katie Gibson argues it was Gibbs’s ability to “voice an ethic of care” that allowed her to overcome much of the sexist vitriol preventing substantive environmental action in the Love Canal community of New York. For Gibson, it is an ethic of care that “legitimizes the voices of everyday citizens in public decision-making and bolsters the significance of grassroots citizen action.”

Despite her reservations about speaking in public, few were better than Gibbs at emphasizing the importance of “compassion, inclusion, and community.”

By the 1980s, mainstream environmentalism had taken a firm hold: Earth Day, the Environmental Protection Agency, and several pieces of environmental legislation had existed for over a decade. The final five chapters of this volume analyze how mainstream environmentalism continued to develop in the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first, as well as how other perspectives began to challenge and complement earlier environmental efforts.

In the wake of the accomplishments of mainstream environmentalists, some advocates in the 1980s adopted more moderate positions in their conservationist efforts. One important political figure during this time was U.S. Senator Frank Church, whose oratory “saved” the River of No Return Wilderness, an area that Ellen Gorsevski notes is bigger and no less beautiful than other well-known areas such as Yellowstone National Park. In chapter 11, Gorsevski identifies in Church’s speeches an effective “light green” rhetoric. It was through his moderate posturing that Church was able to protect so much of the land that fellow residents of Idaho had grown to love.

In contrast to Church’s moderate approach, the early 1980s also saw the popularization of a more “radical” environmental rhetoric. Beyond the halls of Congress, groups such as the newly formed Earth First! organization staged “image events” to engage and outrage the public.<sup>14</sup> Derek G. Ross turns to Edward Abbey’s speech at the first protest performance of Earth First!, arguing that the “desert solitaire” embodied his multitudinous roles of “anarchist, activist, philosopher, and the spiritual founder of the environmental movement.”

The 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of legendary environmental characters such as “Cactus Ed.” However, as Ross Singer makes clear in his analysis of Robert F. Kennedy Jr.’s rhetoric, melodrama has also never been more popular than in recent years. Building on the work of Steve Schwarze, Singer argues that Kennedy’s effectiveness was attributable to his melodramatic “modeling of moral character through personal testimony and his polarization of ‘crony capitalism’ as immoral enemy.” In short, Kennedy believes that one needs to pick a side and dramatize that choice.

Unlike previous analyses, Beth Waggenpack and Matthew VanDyke engage in a bit of stargazing in chapter 14 when they consider Ashley Judd’s environmental rhetoric. Although celebrities have often lent their names to a range of environmental causes, few have been as articulate or committed as Ashley Judd, for whom stopping mountaintop coal

mining in her home state of Kentucky became a passionate obsession. Waggenpack and VanDyke approach Judd's speeches from the perspective of metaphoric criticism and Cox's understanding of the "rhetoric of the irreparable." They argue that Judd "uses metaphors to constitute her environmental identity, establish audience perspectives on mining practice, and mobilize the audience toward action." By stressing the irreparable nature of mountaintop removal coal mining, Judd encourages her audiences to see the urgency of the current moment and to take action to stop these mining practices.

The collection comes to a close with chapter 15, written by Richard Leeman. Turning to the rhetoric of Benjamin Chavis Jr., speaking at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991, Leeman explores the concepts of environmental racism and environmental justice. Indeed, "While mainstream environmentalists deplored the universal harms caused by institutional neglect and greed, Chavis and his fellow attendees highlighted the discriminatory nature of such environmental ills, noting the human cost of pollution that systematically targets populations based on their race, color, or ethnicity." Although the chapters were arranged primarily in a chronological order, this is the one chapter that violates that pattern. Concluding with a chapter about justice seemed appropriate to us because, as Leeman notes, many environmental justice activists ask us to think about our discourse in terms of "the world it seeks to change, the people who seek to change it, and the rhetorical path by which they seek to do so."

Although environmentalism is unquestionably political, the environmental voices represented here are less often politicians than unelected advocates speaking to influence society and those who held the reins of power. These ordinary citizens typically are extraordinary in their vision and resolve. Even as they represent groups and interests, environmental voices invariably stand out as unique and individual in challenging normative thinking and social inertia. Their rhetoric is also highly individual, exemplified by paeans of the American landscape, passionate pleading, closely reasoned argument, and abrasive objection. Although most environmentalists speak with the humility of those who recognize the limits of one person's ability to effect change, the scale of their cause invariably lends poignancy and gravity to their words. Veracity rather than style is the most consistent source for their eloquence, although some like Muir attempt in words to match the grandeur of their subjects. While great causes often attract and create larger-than-life personalities such as Theodore Roosevelt, some environmental advocates such as Lois Gibbs begin as reluctant actors on an expansive stage whose plaintive refrains are eventually heard despite concerted efforts to suppress them.



Early advocates who were derided in their own time as irritating cranks rubbing against the grain with unwelcome warnings of looming disaster are later lauded as pathfinders and patriots. Others continue to annoy those who callously deny the importance of their cause. Some were driven by ideology as much as a desire for the health and survival of their families and their communities. Whatever their labels or motivations, we are reminded of Philip Wander's now well-known advice to rhetorical critics: We should acknowledge "the existence of crisis" when we see it and "situate 'good' and 'right' in an historical context."<sup>15</sup> We hope this collection has, as Wander graciously says, captured "the efforts of real people to create a better world."

## NOTES

1. Wayland Maxfield Parrish, "The Study of Speeches," in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Carl R. Burghardt (State College: Strata, 2000 [1954]).
2. Alon Tal, *Speaking of Earth: Environmental Speeches That Moved the World* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), xv.
3. *Ibid.*, xx.
4. Parrish, "The Study of Speeches," 1.
5. James Cantrill and Christine Oravec, *The Symbolic Earth: Discourse and Our Creation of Environment* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 2.
6. Pericles, "The Funeral Oration," in *A Synoptic History of Classical Rhetoric*, ed. James J. Murphy, Richard A. Katula, and Michael Hoppmann (New York: Routledge, 1991), 216.
7. Daniel Barber, *Citizen Participation in American Communities: Strategies for Success* (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1980), vii.
8. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois*, trans. Thomas Berger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).
9. Robert Cox, *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere* (New York: Sage, 2012).
10. Randy Kluver, "Elite-Based Discourse in Chinese Civil Society," in *Civic Discourse, Civil Society, and Chinese Communities*, ed. Randy Kluver and John Powers (Portsmouth: Greenwood, 1999), 11–12.
11. Tal, *Speaking of Earth*.
12. Craig Waddell, *Landmark Essays on Rhetoric and the Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Star A. Muir and Thomas L. Veenendall, *Earthtalk: Communication Empowerment for Environmental*

- Action* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 1996); Killingsworth and Palmer, *Ecospeak*.
13. Clark G. Herndl and Stuart C. Brown, *Green Culture: Environmental Rhetoric in Contemporary America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996); William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996).
  14. Kevin Michael DeLuca, *Image Politics: The New Rhetoric of Environmental Activism* (New York: Routledge, 2001).
  15. Philip Wander, "The Ideological Turn in Modern Criticism," in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Carl R. Burgchardt (State College: Strata, 2010), 92.