The Hudson River and the Boundaries of Environmentalism

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The environmental movement remains an understudied aspect of modern American politics. The literature covers some aspects of environmentalism quite well, such as wilderness preservation and water pollution control, but historians have yet to adequately describe the movement as a whole. Historians are still wondering what the environmental movement encompassed. Where should we set the movement's boundaries? Various materials at the Rockefeller Archive Center recommend an inclusive definition, one that accounts for the strong connections among modern environmentalism, historic preservation, and regional planning. These connections become particularly clear in the documents gathered by the Rockefeller brothers as they pursued their interests in the Hudson River. In the post-World War II era, residents in the Hudson Valley expressed growing concern about rapid growth. This concern took the

form of multiple conservative movements: one to protect and improve water quality and recreational opportunities; one to protect and repair the region's historic landscape; and one to improve regional planning in order to accommodate economic and demographic growth without compromising the valley's spectacular aesthetic and recreational qualities. All of these together constituted the environmental movement that developed in the Hudson Valley through the postwar era.

The Hudson has been central to the history of New York State since the very moment of Henry Hudson's exploration in 1609. The valley witnessed critical Revolutionary War battles, its geography at the center of both British strategy and Patriotic defense. In the era before the railroad, the river was the state's primary commercial highway, the route to the Erie Canal and thence the nation's interior. Perhaps most memorably, through the middle of the 1800s the Hudson's highlands and nearby mountains inspired much of the nation's landscape painting, casting a sylvan aesthetic across the American culture that persists to this day. The valley has also been the home of many of the state's leading figures, from Washington Irving to Thomas Cole to Franklin Roosevelt. Not surprisingly, this long history has left the valley dotted with important places, from the Palisades, north to West Point, and up to the river's source in the Adirondacks. Although the valley saw considerable growth before the twentieth century, new economic pressures developed after World War II, threatening to permanently alter the Hudson, marring it with smokestacks, quarries, highways, and sprawling housing developments. This postwar pressure inspired a multifaceted response, one that when fully described speaks to the complexity of the modern environmental movement.

In 1946, Dr. Evarts B. Greene delivered an insightful speech at the Hudson River Valley Conference, arranged to bring together various parties interested in the region's protection. Greene, a prominent historian, discussed the long effort to preserve the historic landmarks of the Hudson Valley, beginning in 1849 with the state's acquisition of the Hasbrouck House, the home that served as Washington's Headquarters in Newburgh. Greene emphasized the diversity of organizations involved in conservation. As if to ensure that his audience understood the potential of historic preservation to support larger environmental goals, he noted, "An important part of the conservation movement has been the service of the historical societies, and notably the New York Historical Society and the New York State Historical Association." Greene also understood that protecting the area's historical resources required the protection of the Hudson Highlands themselves. "I should like to point out that here we have not only specific structures of the time – houses, public buildings or military remains – but a kind of documentation of the military scene – the physical situation in which the events of the war took place." Greene knew that the landscape itself could serve as a historical document, and he hoped to secure the preservation of the Highlands' panoramic views of wooded mountains. "Across the River here is a stretch of some twenty-five miles of notable landscapes, rich in historical associations – not only of the Revolution, but of the earlier and later periods of the river from the days of Henry Hudson, through the busy years of eighteenth-century river traffic, to Fulton and the era of stream navigation." This special role in American history, Greene concluded, required that the region should also receive special protection.

Greene also mentioned the Hudson River Conservation Society (HRCS), an umbrella group that included garden clubs, historical societies, and hiking clubs, that brought together a wide variety of people interested in the preservation of the valley's scenic and historic values. Formed in 1936, under the name of the Hudson River Society, its guiding light was William Church Osborn, one of several prominent residents concerned about new quarrying threats in the Hudson Highlands. The group raised money to purchase significant or especially threatened land, an endeavor to which the Rockefellers contributed. Among HRCS's leadership were Laurance Rockefeller and Carl Carmer, who had contributed the Hudson River volume to the American Rivers Series. Over time, the HRCS developed a diverse agenda – from protecting historic buildings, like Boscobel, to lobbying for better sewage treatment – but the organization also had a brief, seemingly focused mission statement: "to preserve in its natural state the Hudson River and its valley and to preserve the historic landmarks thereof." In 1961, the society made this statement even more specific: "To protect and maintain the beauties of the Hudson Valley; to preserve its scenic and historic landmarks; to eliminate the pollution of its waters and air; to develop its recreational values; to cooperate with industry and where necessary to seek its regulation in order to help achieve these aims." Altogether, this was a pragmatic environmentalism, comprehensive in scope but realistic in goals.

Mid-century challenges to the Hudson Valley thus sparked historic preservation, increasing public ownership of land, and lobbying for more effective government regulation of pollution. Increasingly, however, concerned citizens also began to understand the importance of regional planning in the Hudson Valley. In 1966, with the

support of Governor Nelson Rockefeller, Congress created the Hudson River Valley Commission, to bring together New York, New Jersey, and the federal government in the planning process. The law set out several goals, including the rather ambitious objective of encouraging "all beneficial uses of the lands and waters of the Hudson Riverway including, but not limited to, commercial, industrial, and other economic development consistent with the preservation and rehabilitation of the natural, scenic, historical, and recreational resources of the Hudson Riverway." In other words, the commission would encourage any development that wouldn't alter the Hudson Valley. By May 1967, the commission was at work, based on Iona Island, by then part of the Palisades Interstate Park. The commission's primary objective was to provide leadership in developing a comprehensive plan for the Hudson River Valley. In addition, the commission was empowered to review any project within one mile of the shore of the river or visible from the Hudson and within two miles of the shore. Any project that would destroy historic or recreational resources or change the appearance or use of the water in the Hudson River or the surrounding land would be subject to review and public hearings. The parameters of the commission reveal a scenic approach to conservation, not an ecological one.

Not strictly an environmental body, the commission was designed to be a conservative force in the valley. After two years Nelson Rockefeller praised the commission's work along environmental lines: "The accomplishments of the Commission represent proof of the State's commitment to protecting and improving the quality of our environment. Its pioneering efforts in analyzing the relationships between man and the world he inhabits are providing national leadership in comprehensive environmental planning and decision-making." The interdisciplinary staff of the

commission revealed the complexity of its task and the complexity of modern environmentalism's goals. On staff were urban and regional planners, architects, landscape architects, engineers, geographers, economists, an ecologist, an organic chemist, a sociologist, and specialists in public administration and municipal finance. As with Greene's speech twenty years earlier, the commission's composition recognized the diversity of threats facing the valley and the equally diverse skills that would have to be brought to bear against them.

Not everyone agreed with the notion of a comprehensive environmental policy, one designed to enhance historic, recreational and scenic resources. Robert Moses, Chairman of the State Council of Parks and the quintessential modernist, expressed a very different philosophy in a speech before the National Conference of State Parks, held at Bear Mountain in 1947. Moses explored in detail "The Philosophy of the New York State Park System," which, of course, was his own philosophy. Moses thought state parks should be dedicated to recreation and divorced from the mission of historic preservation. Although he claimed otherwise, Moses was one of the nation's great planners. He planned for growth with a purposefulness few could match. And then he built. Throughout New York, he built parks and parkways that transformed the state. In 1947, however, he went on at length about the inappropriateness of "the mansion where Washington slept" being a state park. Moses wanted to keep historic preservation and the provision of outdoor recreation separate. "Long and painful experience has taught state park commissioners and executives that in most cases the only sensible thing to do with a mansion with stables and outhouses in a real state park area, is to tear them down before you are trapped into conversions and adaptations to public use," he said. "You can't turn

a Chippendale dining room into a successful cafeteria or a boudoir into an office for a park foreman." [The success of Glen Iris Inn in Letchworth State Park reveals the limits of this thinking.]

Moses had a very dim view of wilderness preservation, as well, and he complained bitterly about the ongoing effort to prevent recreational development in the New York State Forest Preserve in the Adirondack and Catskill Mountains. Moses sponsored a "Recreational Amendment" to the state constitution, which had protected Forest Preserve lands as "forever wild" since 1894. Moses's amendment would have allowed the construction of closed buildings in the preserve for recreational purposes. As Moses declared, "The average city family cannot live in any comfort in a leanto or hut, and a few days of rain and cold on the bare ground make them sick and miserable." Moses wanted the Forest Preserve opened to a greater number of New Yorkers, not kept remote and useless for all but "a handful of fanatics." As the proponents of wilderness preservation made clear, however, protecting wild lands meant the preservation of critical historic landscapes – unaltered forests and wetlands – even if most people never made use of them.

Moses lost his battle against wilderness preservation, and the New York State parks system continued to acquire and protect historic resources. In the expansive environmental movement of the 1970s, wild, historic, and recreational resources all garnered protection. In environmental policy, there was room for the regional planning of men like Moses, the historic preservation of men like Greene, and the natural resource conservationism of men like Osborn.

In the early 1970s, the Rockefeller Foundation initiated a three-year study of environmental issues in the Hudson Basin. Unlike the Hudson River Valley Commission, which had a purview limited by sightlines, this study took an ecological approach and considered the entire watershed. The final report of the Hudson Basin Project, released in 1976, listed the ten most urgent environmental issues facing the region, the diversity of which once again spoke to the complexity of the problems and the interdisciplinary approach that would be needed to address them. Interestingly, the list began with "the rehabilitation of the inner-city environment and the control of urban sprawl." In addition to the expected concerns for protecting air and water quality, the report also recommended "the reduction of health hazards in the work and home environments." Two different recommendations centered on planning – one concerning transportation and another on land-use regulation. In the Hudson Valley, like the rest of the country, some environmental goals – such as improving water and air quality – required aggressive action. But much of the environmental movement involved conservative action, action designed to prevent adverse change in the face of economic and demographic growth. As was especially clear in the Hudson Valley, both regional planning and historic preservation were underappreciated components of that broader environmental movement.