Foundations and American Environmentalism after World War Two

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Introduction

The goal of my research at the Rockefeller Archive Center in May 2014 was to answer a simple question: How does environmentalism work? Over the past thirty years, American historians have developed a relatively robust literature that examines the origins and growth of American environmentalism over the course of the twentieth century. The strengths of this literature are numerous, but one weakness is it does do not really show how actual environmental organizations were established, developed and changed over time; their role in shaping the agenda and terms of American environmental reform; and their connections with other aspects of American civil society and political institutions.¹

In order to tell that story, I believed the best place to start was to follow the money. Previous archival research has made me aware of how important funding was to all aspects of environmentalism, and money became increasingly important as environmental groups became large, sophisticated national and international organizations. Since all environmental organizations in the United States were private, nonprofit groups that received no tax dollars, an understanding of how they were funded would allow me to explore answer a number of questions: Who established environmental organizations and why? Did the need to raise funds shape their specific issues and campaigns? What was the difference, if any, between organizations funded by large donors and those who had a mass membership? Were certain types of groups more powerful, influential, and successful? Did fundraising goals and campaigns reflect current environmental concerns and crisis?
The literature on environmental philanthropy in the United States is relatively scarce. There is no thorough historical treatment of how environmental groups are funded and sustained, and why people support these type of organizations through both large and small donations. But as I combed through the general literature, I found two important patterns. The first was that the Rockefeller family, specifically the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and Laurance Rockefeller, provided a constant and significant amount of support for some of the most important wildlife and international environmental organizations from the 1940s through to the 1990s. The second was that the Ford Foundation seemed to play a significant role in providing the start up funding for a number of prominent environmental organizations founded in the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly the Environmental Defense Fund and the Natural Resources Defense Council.

These realizations led me to three weeks of research at the Rockefeller Archive Center with the goal of examining the records of the Rockefeller organizations and the Ford Foundation to gain both a specific understanding of their activities, but also a general picture of environmental philanthropy in postwar America. What follows below is a strictly preliminary assessment of certain aspects of the environmental programs of these foundations, followed by some concluding thoughts on environmental philanthropy.

*The Rockefellers and Patrician Conservation*

When it comes to conservation, the Rockefellers are best known for the establishment of Grand Teton National Park, which was created through a series of gifts of family land coordinated by John D. Rockefeller Jr. beginning in the 1920s. Although one of the most celebrated acts of private land conservation in American history, the creation of Grand Teton fit a familiar pattern. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, wealthy elites began donating large tracts of land for public use. These donations were usually made for public spiritedness, with the argument that lands like the Teton Range represented a certain American character and culture, and should be available to all citizens. But donors and their supporters also wanted to protect land from development and impose a certain vision of wilderness, whereby land was to be devoid of human settlement and most activities, except for certain types of hiking, camping and sport hunting. Although the federal government was the primary sponsor of this type of conservation through the national park system, these goals and policies were also nurtured and
supported through a series of private organizations such as the National Audubon Society, Sierra Club, Izaak Walton League, Boone and Crocket Club, the New York Zoological Society, and the American Bison Society. Each of these groups had a separate focus, but they often had an overlapping membership and reinforced each other into terms of forwarding a specific bourgeois and elite vision of American land conservation.

This type of activity is what I will refer to in this essay as “patrician conservation,” and although it has origins in the late nineteenth century, it continued well into the twentieth. After World War Two, the primary practitioner of this type of philanthropy in the Rockefeller family was Laurance Rockefeller, the fourth child of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who inherited his father’s passion for conservation. The younger Rockefeller’s entry into environmental philanthropy came from the family’s long time support of the New York Zoological Society. Laurance Rockefeller began serving on the society’s board in 1935, and it was through this activity that he became friends with society president Fairfield Osborn, Jr., who would become an important conservation mentor.

For the purposes of this essay, what is most interesting about Rockefeller’s environmental philanthropy was his early, generous and long time support of the Conservation Foundation, which was created by Osborn as an offshoot of the zoological society in 1948. During the 1940s, a number of zoo staff members had been involved in significant conservation research projects. In order to give them more autonomy, Osborn created the foundation as a think tank, with a dozen or so permanent researchers completing short and long-term research projects. But the foundation was partially a research arm of the zoo, but it also fulfilled Osborn’s broader goals in communicating the ecological problems facing American and world society in the postwar era. In 1948 Osborn had published *Our Plundered Planet*, which warned that population growth, modern technology and rapidly escalating consumption were overtaxing and polluting natural resources, destroying farmland and wildlife habitats, and in general threatening human existence. The book was a bestseller and convinced Osborn that there was a ready audience for environmental ideas, and so Conservation Foundation had an entire education division that sponsored and produced films and textbooks for adults and schoolchildren.

Since it was a small organization, funded almost entirely by a handful of wealthy donors, the Conservation Foundation does not receive much credit when it comes to the growth and development of the American environmental movement. But in during its roughly three decades
of activity (it was absorbed by the World Wildlife Fund-US in the early 1980s) the organization played a key role in environmental education, research, and, to a small but significant degree, social movement organizing. And every step of the way there was support from Laurance Rockefeller, both directly and through the RBF. At any one time, Rockefeller’s personal donations made up twenty to thirty percent of the foundation’s annual budget, and the total Rockefeller support was often fifty to sixty percent of the budget.

Laurance Rockefeller never appeared to place strings on his donations or meddle in the research or work of the foundation. On one level this is not surprising. The work of the foundation was in certain ways very conservative. Osborn’s concerns, and much of the research at the foundation, was based on the desire to preserve the current American industrial and consumer society, while simultaneously reconciling it to environmental concerns. But even though those were the goals of the foundation, the implication of its research programs was fundamentally radical. Projects that showed how harmful pesticides could be to both humans and animals, or those that argued urban growth was causing too much pollution and wasting land through suburbanization, were not discussions of fringe practices but struck at the heart of the America’s postwar economic growth machine, and more broadly, the American vision for how other nations around the world should order and structure their societies and economies.

But Rockefeller never questioned the work of the foundation, and continued his strong support of its work for decades. This is most interesting when considering the foundation’s only real moment of controversy. In 1965, Osborn handed the reins over to Russell Train, who moved the organization to Washington D.C. to focus its activists on policy and politics (and also because Train lived there and did not want to move). Train left in 1969 to head President Nixon’s new Council on Environmental Quality, and he was replaced by Sydney Howe. Although born of the same east coast elite stock as Osborn and Train, and educated at elite boarding schools and Ivy League universities, Howe was more interested in political engagement and social justice. Under his leadership the foundation provided key support for Earth Day, and financed a series of efforts to increase the engagement of inner city African Americans and working class whites with the emerging environmental movement. One of foundation’s seemingly innocuous, but ultimately most controversial actions, was the early funding of a series of regional environmental centers during the 1970s.
The goal of these outposts was to provide local activist groups in places like Appalachia and the Mountain West access to environmental research and expertise. As the environmental movement spread rapidly across the country, it became apparent to national leaders like Howe that grassroots organizations lacked the scientific and technical knowledge to successfully challenge large state agencies and corporations. The regional centers were conceived of as clearinghouses where local leaders could consult with scientists and technicians but also get connections to larger national organizations. In 1972 the staff of the Appalachian regional center began assisting local environmental groups in their response to the Buffalo Creek Flood. The flood had occurred when a coal slurry impoundment dam, owned by Pittston Coal, failed, releasing 132,000,000 gallons of black, toxic coal slurry on the mountain community of Buffalo Creek, West Virginia, killing 125 people, injuring over a 1,000 more, and leaving 5,000 homeless. Because of the foundation’s connections to the center, and the Rockefeller family, officials from the dam’s owner, Pittston Coal, claimed it was radicals on the “Rockefeller” payroll stirring up trouble, and the foundation was of all of a sudden in the newspaper headlines. But despite the attempt to impugn the Rockefeller family, it appears the pressure on the foundation came from the Mellon family, which had been donating hundreds of thousands of dollars per year to the Conservation Foundation since the mid-1960s through their two main charities, the Old Dominion Foundation and the Avalon Foundation. Members of the Mellon family were annoyed with the Conservation Foundation’s increased activism and the attention over the Buffalo Creek incident, and they ultimately decided to stop supporting the organization. This led to Howe being removed as executive director in 1973, and ultimately being replaced by William K. Reilly.6

Howe’s ouster could be chalked up to how the social radicalism of the period was so pronounced that it seeped into a boutique environmental think tank. And of course, after the passage of the 1969 federal tax act, private charities were even more sensitive about being associated with any sort of political activism. But what the episode also lays bare is that once the full implications of environmentalism played out, they were bound to cause major rifts in American society and politics. The Mellon charities had been become heavily involved in conservation in the 1960s, but their money went towards purchasing large tracts of threatened land to protect it from development. For example, it was mostly Mellon money that led to the preservation of the North Carolina coast, which was then donated to the federal government for
the creation of the Cape Hatteras and Cape Lookout National Seashores in the 1950s and 1960s. To the Mellon family, environmental philanthropy still meant patrician conservation. But as it evolved over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, environmentalism moved into a much more radical direction from conservation. What had made conservation so appealing to a broad swath of Americans during the first part of the 20th century was the argument that nature protection was not only valuable for its own sake, but also to help preserve the existing system. If Americans cut down all of the trees, then they can’t make any more money from cutting down trees. Environmentalism implied that the system itself, in any form, might not be sustainable.7

The conundrum then, for environmental philanthropy, was how to reconcile environmental management and reform to the current American social, political and economic system. Although he continued to support the Conservation Foundation and other environmental organizations, this was not a question that Laurance Rockefeller attempted to answer in the 1970s. That work would be left up to the Ford Foundation.

The Ford Foundation and the Environmental Civil Society

Compared to their other more famous programs in the 1950s and 1960s, the Ford Foundations Resources and the Environment Program, as it was known, was relatively small. Its most intense period of activity was from 1966-1973, during which it disbursed about $5 million a year in grants. Moreover, it only supported a handful of organizations and programs, focusing on the development of interdisciplinary graduate training in environmental studies and the seed money for public interest law firms and other citizen’s groups. But these modest numbers do not begin to tell the story. The timing of the Ford Foundation’s environmental programs, as well as their hands-on management of the grants, played a tremendous role in the American environmental movement, and ultimately, the formation of the environmental management state.

The impetus for Ford’s foray into environmental concerns came in 1962, through the series of discussions that culminated with Directives and Terms of Reference for the 1960s, a foundation planning report. Directives only contained a small mention of conservation and environmental issues, but this glorified bullet point was actually the result of lobbying by a number of board members that the foundation address environmental issues.8 After the release of Directives, Ford staff began a two year research period to become acquainted with environmental
concerns and consider how the foundation could best make an impact in this area. Two mundane bureaucratic decisions were key here. The first was the hiring of Gordon Harrison, a historian, writer and journalist with a PhD from Harvard who began working full time for the foundation in 1964 and would go on to be the primary environmental program officer for almost ten years. Although he was a novice to environmental issues in the beginning, Harrison was a quick study, and hit the field at the perfect moment, becoming an expert in the newer ecological ideas that were then permeating the various environmental sciences and public discussions of environmental issues. At the moment when the field was rapidly changing, Harrison was on the forefront of current thinking, and was not influenced by older concepts of environmental philanthropy. Related to this was the foundation’s decision to host a symposium of thirteen major environmental thinkers in 1964. The papers they presented and the discussions they had were disparate, but there was one theme that ran throughout: If Ford really wanted to address environmental concerns, it was not just about preserving land or improving forest yields. The science of ecology was showing that all human actions on the planet were connected, and any sort of development – building a road or a factory, setting off an atomic weapon – had far reaching, and often times unknown consequences. Thus these issues were complex, the experts argued, and the country would need increased capacity in the various environmental sciences, as well as educated and sophisticated advocates for environmental issues.¹⁹

The first major decision Harrison and other Ford executives made was that they would avoid the patrician conservation of the Rockefellers and Mellons and not spend any money on large land purchases for conservation. In an internal report, the Resources and Environment staff argued that significant land purchases – the tens of thousands of acres needed to create a new national park, for example – were wildly expensive, and would only show an impact in one or two regions of the country. Even with Ford’s overflowing coffers, they believed the money was best spent elsewhere. This decision was not popular. A number of Ford board members evidently lobbied president McGeorge Bundy to reconsider land preservation purchases. Eventually the staff compromised, providing two large grants to The Nature Conservancy (TNC), a primarily volunteer run group that was looking professionalize and expand its land purchases and conservation programs.¹⁰

On one level the grants to TNC were some crumbs thrown to the members of the board who retained the patrician conservationist view of environmental philanthropy. But they were
also done in such a way as to fit with the staff’s view of how Ford could shape environmental organizations. Ford was not simply interested in funding a few environmental causes, but in building permanent, dynamic organizations that could sustain themselves in the long run. With TNC, this came in the form of an “administrative support” grant. The grant sounds mundane and pedestrian, but to Ford, administrative support actually meant completely remaking the organization from top to bottom. Before Ford came in, TNC had no full time executive staff. Evaluations of land to purchase and actual transactions were conducted entirely by a national network of volunteer lawyers, scientists and committed conservationists. Ford only provided the $600,000 grant once TNC leaders showed they had a detailed plan to transform their group into a modern, corporate style organization. This included installing a full time executive director and professional staff, and crafting an ambitious fundraising plan. Once the grant was made, grantees were in constant contact with Ford officials, who provided advice and networking contacts; submitted annual written reports and detailed financial data concerning expenses and fundraising; and were subject to candid outside reviews, where experts on contract to Ford would visit the groups offices for weeks at a time, interviewing all staff members and sitting in on meetings to evaluate how the organization was working. 

What Ford did for TNC, and a number of other environmental organizations, was provide the money, expertise and guidance to transform them from grassroots, volunteer efforts that subsisted on scattershot fundraising, to modern, bureaucratic organizations with large professional staffs and much larger budgets. A discussion of the environmental law program helps illustrate the point. By 1968, Harrison and other program officials believed helping to create public interest environmental law firms would be a good investment for Ford. These would provide citizen’s groups and activists with the legal expertise necessary to make successful claims against corporations and the state. They also followed Ford’s general foundation philosophy was that the best way to solve social problems was to provide outsider groups with a voice and a stake in the system, which was often best done through giving them access to the courts. Hence Ford’s funding of civil rights litigation; millions of dollars in grants for various national and local legal aid organizations; and the establishment of public interest law firms, especially to address environmental issues.

Ford provided funding for what would become America’s two largest environmental law firms: the Environmental Defense Fund and the Natural Resources Defense Council. The EDF
had already been around for a few years before they approached Ford for an “administrative support” grant similar to the TNC grant. EDF leaders met with Harrison and other Ford officials multiple times to discuss changes that needed to be made to their organization in order to qualify for Ford funding. These included appointing experienced management staff and having a long-term set of litigation and fundraising goals. Ford wanted an organization that was professionally run, stable and well organized. An organization that looked a lot like Ford.

Unlike the EDF, the NRDC was created from scratch, by Ford. In 1968, Harrison went to Yale University to meet with a group of law students who were interested in starting a public interest environmental law group. Harrison was intrigued by the idea, and over the next year these students worked with Ford staff to develop their idea, eventually merging their group with a similar legal organization that had been created out of the efforts to prevent construction of the Storm King hydroelectric plant along the Hudson River Valley. When a formal grant application was made, Ford agreed to provide a general support grant of $1 million to help the organization, now named the Natural Resources Defense Council, establish itself over the next few years. The NRDC was well placed to take advantage of the legal provisions within the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act and the National Environmental Policy Act, and in its first few years won a string of legal victories and quickly established itself as one of the most respected public interest law firms in the country. Ford had originally said they would cut off funding by 1975, but they continued making general support grants until 1981, when the council finally established a solid self-sufficient funding model. All told, in eleven years Ford provided $4.35 million in general support for the NRDC.¹³

Just like with the EDF and TNC, Ford intensively managed the grant to the NRDC, with constant meetings and correspondence between Harrison, Ford staff and council members (it was structured as a non-hierarchical, equal partnership), and regular evaluations and reviews of NRDC cases and finances. Once the council had established itself as a respected and successful public interest law firm, Ford’s primary interest was in making sure it was financially self-sustainable. A significant amount of correspondence was about fundraising plans, grant applications to other foundations, and ideas about how to extract legal fees from environmental lawsuits. The council was not as successful at fundraising as the EDF, which had a robust direct mail program, but finally hit upon the idea of establishing an endowment that would be initially
funded by several large donors. Ford’s last grant to the NRDC was actually a $1 million contribution to the endowment.

By this time, however, the heyday of Ford’s environmental program was over. After Harrison left, the program was subsumed into another division, and although it continued a significant amount of grant making in the interdisciplinary environmental sciences and for energy programs through the 1970s, these did not match the impact of its earlier interventions.

And, when considered in total, that impact was significant. The Ford Foundation provided vital funding for the establishment and/or professionalization of the three major organizations discussed here – TNC, the EDF and the NRDC – but also provided similar grants to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, headquartered in Switzerland, and the American branch of the World Wildlife Fund. It would not be too much to say that Ford played a major role in the development of the American model of environmental reform and management. The goal of the EDF and NRDC, and, to a lesser extent, TNC and WWF-US, was to help reconcile the state and corporations to environmental issues. Lawsuits would be filed to force the federal government to consider an endangered species before building a dam or highway, or to improve a corporation’s waste disposal practices. Through the courts, people with environmental concerns, and indirectly, nature itself, would get a voice. But the fundamental structures and institutions of American society – corporate capitalism, private property, a federalist regulatory and governance system – would not be upset. This attempt at reconciliation would eventually be challenged from the left and the right, beginning in the late 1970s. From the left was the counterculture and later, radical environmentalists, who argued that simply “greening” the existing system did nothing to stem the tide of existing destruction. On the right came those who believed that the liberal environmentalism of the NRDC and the EDF went too far, or that it was actually a smokescreen for radical eco-warriors.14

Conclusion

This research report is only the first step in a larger project on American environmental philanthropy. Nevertheless, I believe it provides a useful exploration of how philanthropy can shape reform movements, but also the changing place of environmental activism and reform in American society during the second half of the twentieth century.
The tenor and type of support that the Rockefellers provided for the Conservation Foundation and other causes shows that in the immediate postwar years, environmental concerns were not considered radical by American elites. Much of this has to do with long time elite support for land and wildlife conservation activities, both private and state run. Thus for many foundations and individual wealthy donors, funding groups like the Conservation Foundation was just part of a continuing pattern. But this support continued even as the research began to question corporate capitalism, the very system that had produced personal and foundation wealth in the first place. I need to explore this point more fully, but it appears that as long as those revelations were confined to laboratories, reports and scientific journals, and were discussed in the abstract, than they were not as threatening. When it became part of the larger critique of American society in the late 1960s by environmentalists and the counterculture, and also manifested itself in specific activism that targeted individuals, corporations and the state, then certain foundations and donors became queasy about their support. Laurance Rockefeller never wavered from his support of environmental causes, even if he did take positions (support of the Storm King electrical project, for example) that did anger certain greens. Other wealthy donors did begin to line up against the environmental movement over the course of the 1970s. This issue also needs more in-depth examination, but I believe it has a lot to do with the changing geography of American wealth and politics. Many who were lining up against the environmental movement were westerners who depended on a pro-development American state that built dams, encouraged mining and was perfectly fine with clear-cutting forests. But when state policies began to change in the 1970s, they blamed environmentalists and rediscovered the language of private property rights and adopted an anti-state, and anti-green, agenda.

The case of the Ford Foundation is different because instead of representing certain wealthy individuals or their families, the foundation in many ways represented the liberal establishment at-large. To this establishment, environmental concerns were legitimate in the 1960s, and Ford’s goal was to try and reconcile them to American institutional life. Hence, their focus on building respectable environmental organizations that could serve as intermediaries between citizens, the state and corporations. Another point that I need to explore more is that Ford officials did not seem to understand the apparent contradictions of emerging environmental thinking, that it challenged the very social and economic structure that made America’s corporate-industrial system, and philanthropic largesse, possible. Or if they did see this potential,
they believed that, like other radical movements of the time (most notably Black Power) the radicalism could be co-opted, and that ultimately it was just a matter of greening existing institutions and modifying individual behaviors. Ford officials certainly did not see environmentalism as an outsider movement in the late 1960s. One of the reasons they were so excited about funding the NRDC was that it was made up of some of the “best and the brightest” from Yale law school, and in general they showed a preference for those with elite credentials who exhibited a high level of white collar professionalism.\textsuperscript{15}

Ultimately environmentalism was a challenge to America’s existing way of life, and the Ford funded groups, especially the NRDC and EDF, played a role in this challenge, and were a key part of the country’s environmental regulatory institutions by the end of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Many questions, remain, however, and my research at the Rockefeller Archive Center was an important step in this research project.


7 Wing, *Philanthropy and the Environment*.


11 The Ford Foundation, Grant 06600066, Ford Foundation Records, RAC.


13 The Ford Foundation, Grant 07000643, Ford Foundation Records, RAC.
