

Class Notes: Thoughts on Diversity in the Classroom and in Environmentalism's Past¹

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SUMMARY

Diversity remains an ongoing experiment for environmental organizations, but efforts to achieve diversity often begin much earlier, in the college classroom. Here, too, prospective environmental professionals tend to be overwhelmingly white and affluent. This essay analyzes the connections between diversity and higher education in North America with a focus on the history of environmentalism and its antecedents. Interweaving personal experience with historical analysis, the essay concludes that creating and sustaining diverse communities of students and faculty is not enough. Educators instead need to teach how environmental problems are insoluble absent diverse disciplinary approaches, from the sciences to the arts and humanities.

KEY WORDS

Environmentalism, conservation, diversity, race, class, college, university, history, teaching, interdisciplinary, environmental studies, higher education

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It is when the silence grows uncomfortable that the learning begins.

I clear my throat and ask the question again. "So, do we save jobs or save the forest? How do we choose?"

I'm in my classroom at Bowdoin College, a small, elite liberal arts school (according to the guidebooks) facing over two dozen students sitting in a circle. They face an empty space in the middle. The question lurking in our midst is a common one for environmentalists and their opponents alike: how to protect nature without compromising human needs. While we are reading about the fate of old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest for my introductory course in North American environmental history, the topic also applies to Maine. In the late 1980s, as timber companies battled environmentalists over how best to balance logging in the national forests with protecting threatened species, like the Northern spotted owl, small towns in rural Washington, Oregon, and California saw their economies wither and die. Maine now faces a similar crisis. In the past two decades, thousands have lost their jobs here as paper companies have terminated their operations and moved to Canada, eastern Russia, or the American Southeast. This is a question that haunts environmentalists in other places, too, from the rusting automotive factories in Detroit to the empty fishing docks of Gloucester, Massachusetts, to the silent sawmills of Coos Bay, Oregon.

"What's the choice?" The first respondent is Phoebe, an idealistic sophomore who grew up in suburban Chicago, her long brown hair pulled back into a ponytail that cascades down her back. She is usually the class lightning rod, but she sounds hesitant today. "I mean, come on, once you lose the forest, you lose it forever, right?" Several of Phoebe's peers nod in silent assent. She takes a sip of water from a Nalgene water bottle festooned with stickers. I notice the one facing me: "*Every day is Earth Day!*"

"Does everyone agree with Phoebe?" I hope that someone will bite, but the majority of the students are trying to stare a hole through the floor hoping to avoid the question.

It is an early spring afternoon in Maine; the skeletal trees, devoid of leaves, hold up the leaden sky that threatens to dump snow, even in mid-April. Despite the dismal landscape, the ice is thawing and the days are lengthening. Spring is stalking the campus. I know because it is getting harder to keep the students' attention. Unfortunately, it may be a permanent winter for some of Maine's mill workers and lumbermen.

I have students who come from rural Maine. They have surnames like Pelletier, Boudreau, MacDonald, and Theberge – names that stand like blazes in the forests that blanket thousands of acres in this state. I imagine generations of French-Canadian and Scots-Irish mill workers and loggers, clad in mackinaws and hobnailed boots, slipping saws into the white pines or pressing pulp into paper beneath heavy steel rollers that can crush arms like twigs. Their grandsons and granddaughters, sons and daughters, are now in college and I'm asking them to justify their patrimony. To be the descendant of a logger in an environmental studies class is like being an Exxon-Mobil executive at a Green Party convention. The two don't mix.

There's something else at stake here. Like schools around the country, Bowdoin takes great pains to embrace racial and geographic diversity. The college actively recruits students of color – not an easy task for a small college in Maine – and takes great pride in steering them toward matriculation and graduation. It also has a longstanding tradition of bringing first-generation college students from the rural reaches of this poor state, from Fort Kent and Houlton in Aroostook County, or Machias and Calais in Washington County.

Class, however, is a trickier subject. Whether a student is from Westchester County, New York, or inner city Baltimore, everyone claims to be middle class. Everyone wants to pass as middle class, no better and no worse than their peers, and it is easy to do so for a while because class does not always manifest itself in the color of one's skin or the spelling of one's name.

The cues are subtle. Listen to where students spend their holidays and weekends, or if they have a job on campus. The gulf between the students who vacation in Bermuda and the students who remain on campus over spring break to work in the library or dining hall can be as wide as the racial and ethnic divides that occupy so much of our attention here and on other campuses.

I'm witnessing just such a rift in my classroom and I don't know how to bridge it.

THE UNBEARABLE WHITENESS OF BEING GREEN

It is a rift all too familiar to many Americans and a gulf that college faculty have, until recently, tended to ignore or even unintentionally widen. American higher education is a far more diverse place today

than it was before the civil rights movement due to access to financial aid for all and the adoption of need blind admissions at the nation's more privileged schools. Public and private institutions, from big research universities like Harvard and Berkeley to small liberal arts colleges like Bowdoin and Reed, now actively recruit prospective students who bear little resemblance to the powerful men that originally endowed such places. In the face of the recent rollback of affirmative action in several states, administrators and trustees continue to push for still more diversity.

Despite such efforts the faces *in front* of the classroom remain overwhelmingly the same. According to the U.S. Department of Education, as of fall 2003, nearly 85 percent of all tenured instructors at the nation's colleges and universities were white.² Evaluating class is far more complex and even less precise. Finding data for interdisciplinary fields as diverse as environmental studies or environmental science, which embrace disciplines from all corners of campus, is virtually impossible. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that both students and faculty in such programs are mostly white and often relatively well off.

In our environmental studies program at Bowdoin, of the twenty-five instructors who regularly teach classes, women comprise approximately one third of the total and only two are faculty of color. The numbers are similar for our students. We have graduated almost 180 majors over the past five years, yet only 6 percent of those graduates were students of color — a small number, given that approximately 25 percent of Bowdoin's 1,734 students are students of color. Moreover, we have little or no information on our students' socioeconomic backgrounds beyond the subjective comments we overhear in class because Bowdoin, like so many schools of its caliber, is need blind in its admissions.³

The lack of diversity that I see in my classroom should come as no surprise for anyone who works in the environmental field, particularly the non-profit and advocacy groups that dominate the landscape. A 2002 report by Robert Stanton found that people of color comprised only 11 percent of the staff and 9 percent of the board members for

² T. D. Snyder, A.G. Tan, and C. M. Hoffman, *Digest of Education Statistics 2005* (NCES 2006-003) U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing, 2005): 392. Bowdoin fits this trend: as of the 2005-06 academic year, 8.9% of regular faculty — those on the tenure track or permanent visiting status — were African American, Asian American or Pacific Islander, or Hispanic/Latino.

natural resource organizations. Mainstream environmental groups have aggressively expanded their programming for and recruitment of diverse staff and board members in recent years, mirroring the efforts in higher education to put progressive political rhetoric relating to the need for diversity into action. Yet some activists and scholars remain skeptical and cite history as the reason why. As the authors of a recent report *The Soul of Environmentalism* stated, “modern environmentalism” was “the Elvis of 60s activism,” riding shamelessly on the coattails of the civil rights movement.⁴

That may be putting it too bluntly, but the critics of mainstream environmentalism have a point. Until recently, it has largely been the prerogative of the affluent and white.

And it is a point that does not sit well with my students.

“Why should loggers make the sacrifices?” Heads turn to face Mary, who grew up near Millinocket, a Maine timber town at the edge of the North Woods in the shadow of Mount Katahdin, whose family runs a rustic resort for tourists during the summer. She pulls the vowels through her words, lingering over them, and drops her r’s softly as she speaks. “I don’t want to chop down all the trees, but who uses paper? Who uses lumber? Why don’t other people make sacrifices?”

“But logging destroys nature,” counters Phoebe. “No trees, no forest.” “Those trees put food on my neighbors’ tables,” replies Mary. “Those trees help to send kids to college.” She sits, arms crossed, shoulders hunched beneath her wool sweater, as if she is protecting herself from an expected blow. “We want the tourists to come to our camp, sure, but we also know a lot of people who go on welfare whenever the mills shut down. Not everyone can afford to keep the forest as a playground.”

Phoebe has had it. “What? I don’t see nature as a playground!” She fiddles with a carabiner attached to her water bottle, snapping the gate open and closed, open and closed. “I mean, how can a logger have any reverence for a forest anyway?”

³ These statistics are subjective since many students today identify themselves in multiple categories, and those of mixed heritage often forego categorizing themselves by standard U.S. Census and admissions groups. Thanks to Eileen Johnson, the Environmental Studies Program manager at Bowdoin, who helped me to collect and analyze numbers.

⁴ Michel Gelobter et al., *The Soul of Environmentalism: Rediscovering Transformational Politics in the 21st Century* (August 2004): 10. Copy at <http://www.rprogress.org/soul/> (accessed February 10, 2007). The report was in response to Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, *The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World* (August 2004), copy at <http://www.thebreakthrough.org/> (accessed February 10, 2007).

Mary unfolds her arms and leans forward. “My brothers and father love the woods. We camp, we fish, and we hike. A lot of the loggers I know do the same. Just ‘cause they cut down trees doesn’t mean that they don’t like nature.”

“Wait a minute,” I say, “are we still talking about protecting nature or are we talking about something else?” I’m trying to steer the debate into a learning opportunity, but the students seem resistant. This is good. Sometimes my Bowdoin students are too polite, too willing to color within the lines, so I like it when they argue.

The question hangs over the class, uncomfortably. Feet shuffle and fingers fiddle with pens, notebook pages, baseball hats and hair. Eyes turn downward. No one is looking at me. I hear the clock ticking, loudly.

These are the moments that teachers dread.

THE PERSISTENCE OF THE PAST

Historians are professional gadflies. We are in the business of asking people to think about things from uncomfortable positions by thinking historically. It is hard work. Thinking historically requires seeing the past as a different place, of seeing past and present as the result of complex causes and effects unfolding through time. It does not come naturally to most Americans, who have little use for history beyond anniversaries, nostalgia, or stories to confirm their own biases. It is not easy for earnest college students who see themselves as perpetually in the making. Further, it is exceptionally difficult for my environmental studies students, so earnest and optimistic. As a historian, I face the tricky task of deflating their certitude without killing their idealism. I’ve spent the better part of a semester trying to get my class to think past the stereotype that only certain people care about nature.

This debate over logging may seem irrelevant to most of my students, but it speaks to ways in which the not-so-distant past shapes environmental politics in the present and will continue to do so in the future. Battles over power and inequality are the root of it all.

The relationship between inequality and environmentalism is a vexing one. It inheres in some of our nation’s most troublesome conflicts: efficiency versus equity, individual liberty versus the common

good, abundance versus scarcity. Environmentalists have passionately defended things endangered or in short supply, but they have rarely considered the hard truths about who benefits from saving wilderness, eliminating pollution, or halting logging and fishing. When we put a human face on the environment, the choices seem less obvious. All too often, that historical face has been poor and dispossessed.⁵

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The conflict has deep roots that historians have unearthed over the past several decades. As early as the seventeenth century, people began to confront nature's limits. Centuries of development had turned a seeming Eden into a wasteland of stumps and gullies. Immigration, the forced importation of African slave labor, natural reproduction, and a burgeoning market economy that knitted North America to Europe, Asia, and Africa had transformed the continent's flora, fauna, and landscapes into commodities with astonishing rapidity. The pace of change caught many by surprise. "Nor could it be imagined," the English colonial historian Edward Johnson wrote in 1653, "that this Wilderness should turn a mart for Merchants in so short a space."⁶

By the time the continent came of age, the Jeffersonian ideal of the yeoman farmer, feet planted firmly in the soil of his own virtuous labor, was vanishing with the forests and fields that had sustained the myth. By 1864, George Perkins Marsh, a Vermonter who had visited the denuded farmlands of Italy, warned, "We are, even now, breaking up the floor and wainscoting and doors and window frames of our dwelling." Marsh urged immediate action if the New World was to avoid the ruin of the Old.⁷

⁵ One important article that raised such questions in a public forum was William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995, 1996): 69-90. The essay originally appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* (August 13, 1995).

Why did they fight so hard to conserve and preserve? The answers offered by historians lead us into a neglected past that few environmentalists know or want to admit. Sportsmen, including some of the continent's most powerful individuals, were among the first conservationists to seek protections for what we now call environmental amenities.

The ensuing story is familiar. By the close of the 19th century, concerned citizens stood up to stop the slaughter of the bison, stay the lumberman's axe, and set aside scenic places with the help of that greatest of American inventions, the national park. Yet who were the people behind the original conservation and preservation movements? They were the upper crust or aspirants to high status, the new middle class.

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The Boone and Crockett Club, for example, founded in 1887 by Theodore Roosevelt, dedicated itself to protecting game animals and their habitat in part by taking aim at the rural poor. Roosevelt championed the "fair chase" principle of hunting game with minimal equipment and an eye on the sporting experience. His generosity toward prey did not extend to people whom he and other high-class hunters deemed unsporting. Poor whites and blacks in the southern United States shot egrets for plumes coveted by milliners and hat-loving women. Italian immigrants strangled songbirds for food.

⁶ Quotation from Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983, 2003): 167. For the environmental history of other regions, see Mart A. Stewart, *"What Nature Suffers to Groe": Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996); and Timothy Silver, *A New Face on the Countryside: Indians, Colonists, and Slaves in South Atlantic Forests, 1500-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁷ George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature*, ed. David Lowenthal (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965): 52. For more on Marsh's ideas, see Marcus Hall, *Earth Repair: A Transatlantic History of Environmental Restoration* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2005).

Native peoples caught walleye and salmon with spears and nets. William Temple Hornaday, director of the New York Zoological Garden, called these marginal people the “regular army of destruction,” while sportsmen like him had the money and political connections to persuade state and provincial legislatures to do their bidding.⁸

Powerful men like Hornaday and Roosevelt were joined by well-heeled women, members of elite social clubs and local Audubon Society chapters, who rallied against the millinery trade in bird feathers. They mocked the poorer women who wore such fashions as the mark of distinction. It was thinly-disguised class warfare and the battles consumed men and women together.

In its original guise, conservation amounted to regulating hunting and fishing in ways that restricted poor people’s access to nature. States mandated the purchase of licenses, prohibited gear favored by people who depended on fish and game for subsistence, and restricted the spaces and times of harvest. Some measures did protect wildlife, but their intention and effect was also to reserve the best of nature for the best of people.⁹

Setting aside wildlife for the worthy to consume was only one tactic that discriminated against marginalized groups. Preserving scenic places was another. The new national parks had a simple premise at their core: wilderness was a place apart from humans. Writing in 1894, John Muir described the Miwok and Piute Indians of the Yosemite as “mostly ugly, and some of them all together hideous.” Their very presence disturbed his quest for “solemn calm” in the wilderness. They “seemed to have no right place in the landscape.” This view was widely shared among preservationists, who turned out native peoples from the very places that gave them identity. Beginning with Yellowstone in

⁸ William Temple Hornaday, *Our Vanishing Wildlife: Its Extermination and Preservation* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1913): 53. For the history of conservation and discrimination, see Louis Warren, *The Hunter’s Game: Poachers and Conservationists in Twentieth-Century America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997); Bill Parenteau, “Care, Control and Supervision: Native People in the Canadian Atlantic Salmon Fishery, 1867-1900,” *Canadian Historical Review* 79 (March 1998): 1-35; Joseph E. Taylor III, *Making Salmon: An Environmental History of the Northwest Fisheries Crisis* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999); and Douglas C. Harris, *Fish, Law, and Colonialism: The Legal Capture of Salmon in British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). For an interesting corrective on the elite origins of conservation policy, see Richard William Judd, *Common Lands, Common People: The Origins of Conservation in Northern New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁹ Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 1999): 57-110.

1872, officials often expelled Indians at gunpoint and in violation of treaty obligations to uphold the wilderness ideal. Similar skirmishes were commonplace in the founding of Adirondack State Park in New York, Glacier National Park in Montana, and in other protected spaces across the continent.¹⁰

The fixation on wilderness and wildlife also had a perverse impact on the urban poor, who like their rural counterparts, became victims of conservationists' intentions. Frederick Law Olmsted, the mastermind of the modern urban park, believed that beautiful landscapes could yield responsible citizens. He viewed cities as engines of inequality, and like other reformers, he looked askance at the masses crowded into tenements and worried what effect living in such squalor would have upon American urban life. His most famous creation, New York's Central Park, was designed to ameliorate the animosities of class and nationality through the healing properties of grassy lawns, shady trees, and open spaces. Olmsted's ideas worked too well. His parks became real-estate magnets, driving up land values and compelling local residents to push for restrictions against uncouth workmen and strangely clothed foreigners. Urban parks were inexorably cut off from the people Olmsted most wanted to reach, by "Keep off the Grass" signs and vagrancy laws. Some of these edicts are still enforced to combat homelessness today."

The intersecting boundaries of race and class did more than exclude the poor and minorities from amenities. They also inspired the modern zoning laws and technological systems that made cities more habitable by driving noxious industries such as tanneries, slaughterhouses, fish canneries, and foundries to the physical and social margins. Modern sewers saved countless lives by vanquishing the sources of waterborne diseases such as cholera and typhoid, yet waste, including smelly and noisy businesses, had to go somewhere. All too often that meant poor and minority neighborhoods. Back of the Yards in Chicago, Barrio Logan in San Diego, the Duwamish

¹⁰ John Muir, *The Mountains of California* (New York: The Century Company, 1894, 1911): 92-93. For parks and expulsion, see Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

¹¹ Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992): 58-91, 291-97; Terence G. Young, *Building San Francisco's Parks, 1850-1930* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004): 33-34, 59-60, 107-11.

Waterway in Seattle, and Newtown Creek in Brooklyn became sites where industry and poverty merged to create unholy toxic messes.¹²

Well before the mid-20th century, the color line was also the green line separating those who enjoyed clean water, beautiful parks, and fresh air from those who did not. Poor lands had become the natural home for poor people. The root biases of conservationist and preservationist politics remain central to the modern movement we call environmentalism.

As a distinct cultural and political phenomenon, environmentalism did not emerge until the Cold War, when North Americans living in the shadow of atomic warfare and facing rising levels of traffic and pollution began to fear the loss of the continent's remaining open spaces. By the first Earth Day in April 1970, mainstream environmentalism found its full-throated voice and persuaded even President Richard Nixon, eager to snatch suburban voters from the Democrats, to support the Endangered Species Act and the Environmental Protection Agency. It helped that the mainstream media had pushed the environment onto the stage through made-for-television crises such as Cleveland's burning Cuyahoga River and flocks of oil-smeared birds along Santa Barbara beaches.¹³

Once again, it was mostly white, middle class Americans who aligned with the movement. Only rarely did issues transcend racial and class lines. César Chávez's famous produce boycotts, launched to protect Chicano farm workers from pesticide exposure and unsanitary conditions, was the exception that proved the rule. More typical was environmentalists' flat-footed response to the furor over Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*. Ehrlich, a Stanford biologist, was repelled by the "hellish aspect" of slums during a visit in Delhi, India, and later proposed limits on population, including sterilization of all males with families of three or more children in the so-called Third World.

¹² The literature on urban environmental history is a burgeoning one. Three key works among many include: Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Race, Class, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Martin V. Melosi, *The Sanitary City: Urban Infrastructure in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); and Harold Platt, *Shock Cities: The Environmental Transformation and Reform of Manchester and Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

¹³ An excellent overview of American postwar environmentalism is Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Another superb survey, with added attention to race, class, and gender, is Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2005).

Against the backdrop of the civil rights and Black Power movement, Ehrlich's arguments read like a modern-day version of the eugenics and scientific racism supported by earlier conservationists such as Roosevelt and Hornaday (and later by writer Edward Abbey and ecologist Garrett Hardin). Although some environmentalists tried to defuse Ehrlich's rhetorical bomb by pointing to over-consumption in the developed world, David Brower and others fanned the fires by celebrating Ehrlich as a brave man who spoke unpleasant truths.¹⁴

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Thus environmentalism's own troubled history contributed to the fractured political landscape we see today. In cities and among communities of color during the 1970s and 1980s, another movement emerged. While the mainstream nonprofits and political groups focused on wilderness and endangered species, environmental justice activists concentrated on largely urban and industrial problems such as pollution, heavy metals, toxics, unsafe food and water, illegal waste disposal, and dangerous working conditions. Meanwhile, rural residents in the western United States built a funhouse mirror version of environmental justice. Fed up with environmentalists and government agencies, the Wise Use movement turned green rhetoric inside out, claiming that local farmers, ranchers, loggers, fishers, and miners knew best how to care for the land because they had worked it longest. When environmentalists dismissed Wise Users as dupes of corporate interests, they once again bared their ignorance of the countryside's pent-up resentment toward meddling urbanites and weekend warriors.¹⁵

¹⁴ Paul R. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York and San Francisco: Ballantine Books and the Sierra Club, 1968): 15.

Ultimately, what I try to teach my students is that North Americans of all backgrounds have lived with nature in mind even if their beliefs and actions may seem repellent. My job is to critique the icons of environmentalism – John Muir and Marjory Stoneman Douglas, David McTaggart and Paul Watson, David Brower and Rachel Carson – and add some new names to the canon – Alice Hamilton, crusader against lead poisoning and pioneer in occupational health, or Lois Gibbs, the housewife-turned-activist who fought to save Love Canal. I call this good teaching and sound scholarship, but there is a political aim at work here as well. So long as the mainstream stories of the powerful and affluent remain foremost in my students' minds, they will be the stories my students may take as the truth. It is a history in need of revision.

I restate my question: "OK, are we still talking about protecting nature or are we talking about something else?" The students are dodging my interrogation. I glance at the clock. It reads ten to four. Five minutes left. I feel the learning moment slipping away and the students leaving angry and confused. This is not a good way to conclude.

"So what is at the root of this debate? What's at stake?"

Mary crosses her arms again and answers bluntly: "Those who can afford to lock up the forest and those who can't afford to, I guess."

I see an opening and plunge in. "So are environmental issues, then, about more than protecting wilderness or saving biodiversity? Not that those aren't important, but are they the only things on the table?"

Phoebe looks down, fiddles with her water bottle, and looks at Mary. "It's easy for someone like me to criticize logging. I've never really thought about where my paper or wood comes from." She fiddles with her water bottle again. "Or who makes these things. I know it's a total cliché, but there's no such thing as a free lunch, maybe."

I look at the clock. Five to four. That will have to be the closing comment for today. I remind the students to push the desks back into rows and collect their trash, a small gesture to the College's busy housekeeping staff. A few drift forward to make appointments to discuss their upcoming papers, and then I'm left alone, done for the

¹⁵ For one take on the politics that gave rise to the "Wise Use" movement, a topic that requires further historical study, see Karen R. Merrill, *Public Lands and Political Meaning: Ranchers, Government, and the Property Between Them* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). The literature on environmental justice is broad and extensive. One good overview of the movement's origins is Giovanna Di Chiro, "Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice," in *Uncommon Ground*: 298-320.

day. I cross the quadrangle, still covered with snow and ice, throw my backpack in the front seat of the car, crank the engine, and point the hood towards home. I take a right turn out of campus, out of Brunswick, and into the Maine of stereotype and ridicule.

It is a drive that I do several days a week, leaving behind the quaint Federal-style homes and shiny new subdivisions filled with split-levels and ranches for the tumbledown chaos of saltboxes, doublewides, and mobile homes that vie for space alongside the occasional Cape Cods. A rusted pickup with one broken mud flap bounces on the pothole-filled road in front of me. A sticker on the bumper states the driver's political allegiance: "Restore Boston! Leave the North Woods for Jobs!" This is when I know I'm no longer in seemingly progressive Brunswick, with its Volvos and Saabs and Subarus plastered with any number of progressive political statements. Well, I think, so much for keeping my work and home life separate.

As I take the left onto the road to my house twelve miles and twenty minutes from campus, lobster traps and boats on blocks become commonplace, along with the two or three bombed-out cars parked in front of every third house or so, dusted with snow and tinged with rust. Even here, the landscape is more complex than one of simple poverty. Among the dilapidated residences, there are the large vacation homes, built by newcomers, complete with two-car garages and manicured front yards. There are foreign cars and liberal bumper stickers. If you take houses and automobiles as your measure, the class divides in Harpswell, the small coastal town where I live, seem even wider than on campus. Chevy and Ford half-ton trucks fill the parking lot at the local general store on Orr's Island, disgorging large men covered in mud and blood, dressed in denim and corduroy, dirty from a day of shrimp or scallop fishing, stepping inside for coffee and conversation. It is not the view from the Bowdoin Quad.

I'm an outsider here. In Maine parlance, I'm "from away." I'll always be "from away." Even if my wife and I have kids here, we would still be "from away." It's nothing personal, I know, but that's the way it is. I'm not from a lobstering family, I don't build boats, I don't log, and I don't fish. My car, a new Subaru Outback, is just one giveaway. My accent, or lack of one, is another. I'll never be from Maine. As I pass the lobstermen's homes, crossing the causeway onto an island ringed by rocky shores covered in pines, I review today's discussion.

In shaping and controlling nature, we are really dominating others with nature as our instrument.

The land suffers because, in part, people without power suffer. It is unfortunate that nature is often the victim of social dilemmas, yet there is a learning moment in such conflicts. Often, those who suffer as a result of other people's desires to save nature can teach those who do not. They can explain how forests are living things that can and do regenerate, given time, or how fishing or ranching is an honest day's work that can bring dignity to humans and nature alike. We cannot condemn those who supply us with what we need unless we think about how our own desires, for wood, meat, paper, coal, and fish, are the products of our own privilege. We are what we consume more than we'd like to admit. And class, sometimes together with race, other times separate from it, shapes how we interact with nature and with each other.

In shaping and controlling nature, we are really dominating others with nature as our instrument.

Staring at the icy road, I now realize a certain irony about my own career thus far as an environmental historian, as a teacher. I had to come to Maine to understand how class is the unstated problem in environmental politics. I had to teach at an elite private school to understand that social privilege usually dictates who gets to make the choices about protecting nature and who suffers when we degrade the environment. I had to come to Maine, the whitest state in the union, to find another facet of diversity so lacking in environmentalism today: class.

TEACHING AND PRACTICING DIVERSITY IN THE CLASSROOM

How do I get my students to see diversity as central to the past, present, and future of environmentalism when my classes, my campus, and my state seem so homogeneous? Small town Maine may not be as diverse as Los Angeles in terms of race, but there is diversity here, too. Brunswick is home, at least for a few more years, to a U.S. Naval Air Station and the town consists of prosperous college faculty and attorneys commuting to Portland or Boston living alongside Mainers of more modest means

who repaint boats or dig for clams. This is a poor state, as poor as New Mexico or West Virginia in its own way. Class matters here. That is one reason why the phrase “from away” carries such a sting. It is a defensive reflex against the hordes of tourists and prospective vacation homebuyers that inundate the state when the ice and snow melt.

One answer is to get the students out of the classroom into the community. Service learning is quickly becoming a popular technique here to pop what is commonly known as the “Bowdoin Bubble.” Service learning meshes nicely with Bowdoin’s commitment to the common good as expressed by its first president in his inaugural address. “It ought always to be remembered,” the Rev. Joseph McKeen said in September 1802, “that literary institutions are founded and endowed for the common good, and not for the private advantage of those who resort to them for education.”¹⁶ Even when the statement is stripped of its nod to class privilege, it still resonates for students today.

Another kind of diversity matters, too, something that McKeen also extolled to the first generations of Bowdoin students – a grounding in the liberal arts. We take this mission seriously at Bowdoin. In our three intermediate core courses in environmental studies – one in the sciences, another in the social sciences, and my course in the humanities – we require students to work with local community partners on a range of environmental issues. The students conduct and interpret the research, then give their findings to their partners, which have included the Nature Conservancy of Maine, the Bayside (Portland) Community Association, Maine Coast Heritage Trust, Friends of Casco Bay, Maine Department of Environmental Protection, and numerous local town governments. Students fan out into the archives and into the community, where they interview residents on any number of topics, ranging from water pollution to changes in hunting and fishing regulations.

The results have often been surprising for students and partners alike. For example, the Bayside Neighborhood Association in Portland wanted students to identify sources of potential lead and heavy metal contamination in their predominantly minority and working class district. What was initially proposed as a series of door-to-door interviews became a semester-long project where students blended

¹⁶ Joseph McKeen, *The Inaugural Address, Delivered in Brunswick, September 9th, 1802 . . . With an Eulogy* (Portland, Me: T. B. Wait and Co., 1807): 7. The actual date of the address was September 2, 1802.

oral histories with archival research. They found fire insurance maps, zoning laws, and historic photographs to document the presence of metal plating shops, paint factories, and railroad switching yards — all likely sources of endemic contamination. Their work is now part of ongoing efforts to compel public and private agencies to provide needed toxic remediation for the neighborhood.¹⁷

Another goal is to get our students to think beyond seeing environmental studies as simply the scientific study of nature and its political salvation. This strikes at the heart of longstanding debates over the content and purpose of environmental studies in higher education. Some have argued that environmental studies programs are fractured beyond repair. They lament the persistent critiques of environmentalism as damaging to the causes of the movement, or alternatively claim that political ideologies distort scholarly rigor. Additionally, they claim that natural science is at odds with social science and the humanities, and that environmental studies should rightfully be environmental science. Science and science alone, the most ardent of these advocates claim, is the highest and most useful branch of human knowledge. These debates mirror the larger arguments that consume environmentalism today and they are just as shortsighted and parochial. Just as environmentalism can be strengthened by an attention to social diversity, environmental studies can be reinforced by an attention to disciplinary diversity. The very complexity of environmental issues invites, even demands inquiries from all corners of the academy. It also requires a diversity of social perspectives.¹⁸

At Bowdoin, we try to model the best in interdisciplinary scholarship. Our introductory course is co-taught by a philosopher, a political scientist, and a biologist or chemist. Traditional disciplines still matter, and students cannot major in environmental studies alone; we require a coordinate degree so students can get a strong grounding in another discipline. The coordinate degree programs run the gambit, including disciplines like physics, English, or economics. Students cannot earn their environmental studies degree without strengthening their knowledge in another area outside of their explicitly environmental focus. Geology coordinate majors take

¹⁷ One model of community based service learning useful for me as a historian is Michael Lewis, "Reflections: 'This Class Will Write a Book': An Experiment in Environmental History Pedagogy," *Environmental History* 9 (October 2004): 604-19.

courses in the humanities and social sciences, and the same is true for those in French or psychology.

A final answer to why diversity matters is to explore how social diversity has long been part of the environmental movement and its antecedents. We now discuss environmental justice and persistent chemical toxins in our introductory course alongside more conventional topics like the Clean Air Act or biodiversity. Several instructors now offer courses on nearby places, like the future of Maine's Northern Forest communities, or classes that address the global environment from the perspectives of government, sociology, anthropology, or history.

In our new environmental chemistry course, a colleague demonstrates that scientific accuracy and attention to social justice are complementary. Moreover students have joined in our efforts to broaden and diversify our curriculum and extracurricular offerings. Several years ago, students organized and held a conference on race, justice, and the environment that attracted scholars and activists from Mexico, the United States, and Africa. Future Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai, founder of Kenya's Green Belt Movement, was the keynote speaker. Building upon the success of that conference, we are launching a new program where we hope to bring visiting scholars from non-Western nations to teach and study at Bowdoin.

Despite these achievements, we recognize that there is much more work to be done. We need to hire and retain more faculty of color and we need to reach more first generation students and students of color. In our efforts we continue look to other institutions for inspiration and guidance because today's universities and colleges are interconnected. Model programs at peer institutions include Middlebury College's deep commitment to facing the social and ecological challenges of climate change through engagement of all people, or Occidental College's program in urban and environmental policy, which engages Los Angeles as both its laboratory and its partner in studies of environmental justice, food security, and pollution control. The former program is broadly international in scope, the latter

¹⁸ For example, see the following exchange: Michael E. Soulé and Daniel Press, "What is Environmental Studies?" *BioScience* 48 (May 1998): 397-405; and Michael F. Maniates and John C. Whissel, "Environmental Studies: The Sky is Not Falling," *BioScience* 50 (June 2000): 509-17. Neither group of authors discusses the problem of social diversity in the classroom or faculty of environmental programs.

drawing upon the diverse populations of Southern California. There are other colleges doing great things, in addition to the many research universities whose scale and resources provide even more opportunities to connect diversity to research and pedagogy.

Ultimately, the reason for insisting upon diversity, in our curriculum as well as in our ranks, is calculated and simple: our graduates will likely become the next generation of environmental leaders. Blessed by historical circumstance with the fruits of privilege, my Bowdoin students may later attend graduate school and enter the academy, or chair the board of the Natural Resources Defense Fund, or run a local land trust. If I have done my job, they will be unable to see environmental issues as strictly scientific or technical concerns requiring like-minded solutions. They will step back and ask who sits at the table, makes the decisions, and lives with the consequences. Further, I hope they will realize that the most valuable benefit of a historical education is to embrace complexity and diversity, no matter how uncomfortable it may feel.

If environmentalism is to remain relevant in a diverse nation and an interconnected world, it must shed its blind faith in pure solutions and pure believers. As historian Thomas Dunlap argues wryly, environmentalism is akin to a secular religion with its own sacred texts and cherished rituals.¹⁹ This fervor has been its greatest strength, but it has often led to doctrinal and political orthodoxy over time, a tendency that I recount to my students every time I teach. The community of environmentalists has too often defined itself by who stands within the church rather than how the church might reach into the world. Seen this way, the historical exclusion of the poor, minorities, and those in the developing world is not so surprising. To continue the religious metaphor, faith is a living process and can change over time. Witness the effort by so many major organizations, from the Sierra Club to the National Wildlife Federation, to bring the once excluded into their ranks.

Yet the allegiance to purity is more than a social problem. It is an intellectual one as well. The environmental challenges facing our planet now, like climate change, are not merely technical problems requiring scientific solutions. They never have been. Their origins and

¹⁹ Thomas R. Dunlap, *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).

consequences are historical and aesthetic, ethical and political, and they require the insights that only the humanities and social sciences can provide. Science yields vital information, but we will not stop rising temperatures by science alone.

Like so many environmental problems, but perhaps more so than any other, confronting climate change demands building community, and building community means embracing diversity.

I know a little of what my students may face in the future because I'm still learning these lessons myself. Every time I teach my class on North American environmental history, I have held many more debates on the premises of environmentalism. Every time, I've had to step back and question my own assumptions, my own sense of entitlement, and my reasons for insisting that my students learn to think historically. In the end, it comes down to the reason why I still, if reluctantly, call myself an environmentalist: we and the places we make are interconnected. I cannot see my fate as separate from the migrant laborers who harvested the apples that sit on my desk, the loggers who felled the trees that became the paper you hold in your hands now, or the factory employees who built the computer that I used to write this essay.

Like so many environmental problems, but perhaps more so than any other, confronting climate change demands building community, and building community means embracing diversity.

We are all connected in time, in history. Knowing this, I cannot teach or write about anything else.

As I turn onto the rutted dirt road that will take me home, I mull over my day. Teaching is nerve-wracking and after I finish a lecture or discussion, I feel a little like an actor after a long performance, spent and filled with self doubt. Today, those feelings are unusually strong.

I pull the car into the old barn, kill the engine and walk outside, closing the garage door behind me. Overhead, Orion is pushing off with his left heel from the pine trees ringing the meadow. In the distance, I hear the lumbering motor of a fishing boat, steaming to

port for the night. I look up, watch my breath swirl in the cold nighttime air, shuffle my feet and think.

It is when the silence grows uncomfortable that the learning begins.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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