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978-1-107-03052-7 - Defensive Environmentalists and the Dynamics of Global Reform

Thomas K. Rudel

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Defensive Environmentalists and the Dynamics of Global Reform

As global environmental changes become increasingly evident and efforts to respond to these changes fall short of expectations, questions about the circumstances that generate environmental reforms become more pressing. *Defensive Environmentalists and the Dynamics of Global Reform* answers these questions through an historical analysis of two processes that have contributed to environmental reforms, one in which people become defensive environmentalists concerned about environmental problems close to home and another in which people become altruistic environmentalists intent on alleviating global problems after experiencing catastrophic events such as hurricanes, droughts, and fires. These focusing events make reform more urgent and convince people to become altruistic environmentalists. Bolstered by defensive environmentalists, the altruists gain strength in environmental politics, and reforms occur.

Thomas K. Rudel is Professor in the departments of Human Ecology and Sociology at Rutgers University. He is the author of *Tropical Forests: Regional Paths of Destruction and Regeneration in the Late Twentieth Century* (2005), which won the 2008 Outstanding Publication Award from the Environment and Technology section of the American Sociological Association. He also authored *Tropical Deforestation: Small Farmers and Land Clearing in the Ecuadorian Amazon* (1993) and *Situations and Strategies in American Land-Use Planning* (Cambridge University Press 1989). Dr. Rudel won the 1995 Distinguished Contribution to Environmental Sociology Award and the 2009 Merit Award from the Natural Resources Research Group of the Rural Sociological Society for his research.

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In memory of Anne Kiley Rudel, 1915–2000

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[They were] country people who did not want to move and therefore
got into a revolution. They did not figure on so odd a fate.

John Womack (1969, i) on small farmers
at the beginning of the Mexican Revolution

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The quote from John Womack that prefaces this book captures the way in which small, defensive actions, in this instance from *campesinos* south of Mexico City, sometimes scale up to transform the politics of an entire society, as occurred in Mexico between 1910 and 1920. The potentially transformative impacts of small actions have been much on the minds of environmentalists in recent years as larger political structures have remained largely inert in the face of climate change. Of course, as the quotes that preface the first chapter make clear, activities such as eating food grown in a backyard garden or preserving a patch of woods only constitute “drops in the bucket” compared to the magnitude of the environmental reforms necessary to establish sustainable societies. In this context, it becomes important to understand better the ways in which large-scale reforms occur and the role of local environmental activities in these larger-scale efforts. This book uses historical methods to clarify how, periodically over the past half-century, local and global forces have combined to produce moments of environmental reform.

The ideas that organize this book first began to take shape forty years ago when I was a young graduate student taking courses and attending talks on subjects, such as ecology, about which I knew next to nothing. I read an article in *Science* by Eugene Odum (1969) that was ostensibly about changes in plant communities, but it seemed to me to be a good explanation for historical patterns in some human communities. As I learned more about the paths to survival in an academic world, it became clear to me that wild analogies about the similarities between natural communities and human communities did not have a place in any discipline, even one with as expansive a view of its mission as sociology.

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Furthermore, the understandable revulsion at the Social Darwinists' self-justifying arguments about the biological sources for high social position had caused many social scientists to look with suspicion at any mixture of social and ecological theory. Even so, the similarities in the meta-narratives of change over time in social and ecological theory seemed too compelling to abandon entirely, so I filed them away. Occasionally, I would mention them in classes to undergraduates, who in most instances were too polite to let me see the full measure of their skepticism.

I could not let go of these ideas in part because I kept running into inexplicable anomalies in the fieldwork that I did on human transformations of landscapes. In particular, the environmentalism that I heard expressed by citizens arguing for restrictions on suburban real estate development did not fit comfortably into prevalent ideas about environmentalism. The anti-growth advocates were too self-interested to be true environmentalists, but they spoke with passion about defending the environment. To see their comments as nothing more than opportunistic rebranding seemed too dismissive. Eventually, I came to regard these people as "defensive environmentalists," people primarily concerned with ensuring the quality of environments close to their homes. They contrasted with "altruistic environmentalists," who pursue goals for the larger society and seem most active during transformative political moments. The defensive environmentalists did things that many other nest-building creatures do, so a mix of ecological and social theory seemed likely to offer persuasive explanations for their behavior. The altruistic–defensive environmentalist binary captured an essential element in the local–global dynamic in movements for environmental reform, so this analytic approach seemed to have promise for explaining the political circumstances in which environmental reforms occur. With this promise in mind, I began to work on this book in 2007.

The work has been made much easier by a great deal of help, much of it unacknowledged until now. The intellectual atmosphere in the Department of Human Ecology, my primary place of employment during all of these years, has proven to be very good for nurturing ideas about relations between society and the natural environment. A small group consisting of Andrew P. Vayda, Bonnie McCay, George Morren, Brad Walters, and Kevin Flesher endorsed intellectual trespassing between the natural and the social sciences and did first-rate field research on environment–society relationships in diverse locales. My second home at Rutgers, the Sociology Department, through its "woodshed workshop," provided a friendly

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venue for trying out the ideas presented here. On other occasions, audiences in Human Ecology and at the American Sociological Association meetings offered insights that clarified my thinking.

At various points when I was stuck on one or another aspect of the argument, people went out of their way to help me with data or with the substance of an argument. Bonnie McCay and Teresa Johnson helped me understand the dynamics of fisheries. Alan Rudy offered some interesting insights on Andy Szasz's inverted quarantine argument. The late Allan Schnaiberg inadvertently suggested the title for this book in one of his typically trenchant comments about the environmental movement. Samantha MacBride pointed me in the direction of a wealth of data about recycling. Clare Hinrichs shared her knowledge about the food movement in the United States. Norman Uphoff graciously responded to a series of questions about the Gal Oyo irrigation project in Sri Lanka. The members of the Metuchen, New Jersey Environmental Commission helped to gather the recycling data reported in Chapter 7. Bradley Walters, Diana Burbano, Kevin Flesher, and Bonnie McCay read through and commented on the entire manuscript. Diana Burbano graciously allowed me to use a photo from her fieldwork in the Ecuadorian Amazon for the cover of the book. Robert Dreesen and Abigail Zorbaugh from Cambridge University Press and Shana Meyer from Aptara Corporation guided the manuscript and me through the evaluation and production processes at Cambridge University Press. Thank you for your efforts. Three anonymous reviewers read through either the entire manuscript or chapters from it and made comments that improved it substantially. Ellen Dawson remade many of the graphics in the book, improving each one that she touched.

A year-long sabbatical from Rutgers University in 2007 and 2008 gave me the time to organize the argument, gather the empirical materials to evaluate it, and write initial drafts of the chapters. I want to thank Susan Golbeck and Daniel Rudel for putting up with the reclusive lifestyle that I seem to need in order to write a book. Finally, I dedicate this book to my mother. Although she never wrote a book, she loved books and the life of the mind.