

Environmental Protection in the U.S. from the Sierra Club to the EPA

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A winter view of Crater Lake, which was established on May 22, 1902, by President Theodore Roosevelt as one of the first national parks. Photo from National Park Service

As America became more industrial in the 1800s, many of its natural resources were destroyed. Farmers were overworking the soil, removing important nutrients. Miners were changing the shape of the land. Forests were shrinking. Wildlife was beginning to disappear.

The growth of cities brought a new interest in preserving the old lands for future generations. Dedicated to saving the wilderness, the Sierra Club formed in 1892. John Muir was the president of the Sierra Club. He worked hard to stop the sale of public lands to private developers. Most of his efforts fell on deaf ears until Theodore Roosevelt became president. Finally, Muir's voice was heard.

President Roosevelt worked to protect public land

Roosevelt loved the outdoors. He hunted, hiked, and camped whenever possible. He believed that living in nature was good for the body and soul, and he was dedicated to protecting the nation's public lands.

First, he signed a law encouraging people to inhabit lands that would be useless without irrigation systems. The lands were sold at a cheap price if the buyer took on the cost of a water project. The government then used the money to bring water to other places. Over a million barren acres were rejuvenated under this program.

Muir and Roosevelt camp in Yosemite



In 1903, Roosevelt went camping with Muir in Yosemite National Park in California. The two agreed that making efficient use of public lands was not enough. Certain wilderness areas should be left completely undeveloped.

An 1891 law let the president declare national forests and prevent land from being developed. Roosevelt used this law to preserve wilderness areas. By the time he left office, 150 million acres had been designated as national forests, protecting them forever from axes and saws.

As a result of these measures, people who lived in cities became very interested in conservation. By 1916, there were 16 national parks with over 300,000 annual visitors. The Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts formed to give children a greater appreciation of nature, and membership soared in groups like the Sierra Club.

Industrialization brought more pollution

Despite increased appreciation for public lands, the beginning of the 20th century still saw a massive increase in the country's industrialization. By the 1950s, the United States was the leading industrial power in the world, and a century of intense production in American factories and businesses had taken its toll on the environment.

Pollution into the atmosphere was creating smog in cities. Americans were producing more waste, and many felt free to litter along the sides of the roads. People started taking action to protect the planet.

Book fueled concerns about farm pesticide

Rachel Carson alerted Americans to the problem with her 1962 book "Silent Spring." Carson wrote of the damage caused by DDT, a pesticide used on many American farms. The pesticide was poisonous to birds and was killing them.



The book helped to spread public concern for the environment. President Lyndon B. Johnson responded with laws protecting animals, water and the air.

The nation celebrated its first Earth Day on April 22, 1970. President Richard Nixon supported popular environmentalist measures.

President Nixon signed law creating the EPA in 1970

In 1970, Nixon signed a law creating the Environmental Protection Agency, a federal watchdog dedicated to proper care of the planet. He stiffened standards for pollution and waste with the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts. The Endangered Species Act also provided much needed protection to wildlife.

For years, the environmentalists had two major factions. Conservationists like Roosevelt believed that the nation's natural history could be maintained through wise, efficient use of resources. Preservationists such as Muir and the Sierra Club celebrated the majesty of the landscape and preferred protection of wilderness areas.

The 1960s ushered in the ecologists, who studied the relationships between living plants and animals and their environments. Pollution was destroying this delicate balance, and the result could be health problems, extinction of species, or even planetary destruction.

Raising awareness about dangers to environment

Young Americans learned ecology in elementary school as a nationwide awareness campaign attempted to raise consciousness. Meanwhile, the United States Forest Service mascot Woodsy the Owl advised kids to "never be a dirty bird."

The 1970s brought growing concerns as nuclear power became more common. Nuclear power plants began producing hazardous waste that was difficult to dispose of safely. An accident at a nuclear power plant at Three Mile Island near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, nearly released a deadly bubble of radioactive gas into the atmosphere in 1979. Organizations mounted protests against nuclear testing by the United States, and President Jimmy Carter announced a bold initiative to develop renewable sources of energy.

Many environmentalists were disappointed that all their goals were not reached, but major changes did improve the quality of American air and water. The nation had its eyes open to the importance of protecting the planet.

Quiz

- 1 Read the sentence from the section "President Nixon signed law creating the EPA in 1970."

In 1970, Nixon signed a law creating the Environmental Protection Agency, a federal watchdog dedicated to proper care of the planet.

The author uses the phrase "federal watchdog" to mean:

- (A) the government is being protective of the environment
- (B) the government is punishing people who pollute the environment
- (C) the government is spying on people to see if they break environmental laws
- (D) the government is keeping facts about the environment secret from the public

- 2 Read the paragraph from the section "Raising awareness about dangers to environment."

The 1970s brought growing concerns as nuclear power became more common. Nuclear power plants began producing hazardous waste that was difficult to dispose of safely. An accident at a nuclear power plant at Three Mile Island near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, nearly released a deadly bubble of radioactive gas into the atmosphere in 1979. Organizations mounted protests against nuclear testing by the United States, and President Jimmy Carter announced a bold initiative to develop renewable sources of energy.

Which phrase from the paragraph MOST helps you understand how dangerous nuclear power plants can be?

- (A) growing concerns
- (B) deadly bubble
- (C) mounted protests
- (D) bold initiative

3 How does the author convey the importance of environmental conservation?

- (A) by highlighting the controversy between environmentalists and industrial leaders
- (B) by detailing how much waste was produced by American factories and consumers on a daily basis
- (C) by explaining how people did not bother to pick up their litter from the sides of the roads
- (D) by describing the changes that occurred in the environment as a result of industrial development

4 Read the following statement.

John Muir was a preservationist who believed the environment should be protected by leaving wilderness areas the way they were.

Which answer choice BEST explains how Theodore Roosevelt's perspective was different?

- (A) Roosevelt was a preservationist who believed that planetary destruction would occur if American industry developed unchecked.
- (B) Roosevelt was an ecologist who initiated studies examining the relationships between pollution and environmental damage.
- (C) Roosevelt was an environmentalist who believed that using pesticides like DDT sparingly could boost agricultural growth.
- (D) Roosevelt was a conservationist who believed that the environment could be protected through careful use of natural resources.