

# Environmentalism: 19th- and 20th-Century Environmentalists

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we're going to cover the topic of environmentalism and explain the difference between environmentalism and environmental science. We will discuss the history of key environmental writings and figures and end with a discussion of environmental organizations. Specifically, this lesson will cover the following:

## 1. Environmentalism Versus Environmental Science

There's a distinct difference between environmentalism and environmental science. All scientific disciplines have the goal of objectivity, and environmental science seeks to do so in its study of humans and their relationship with the natural world.

Environmentalism takes what environmental science discovers and makes a subjective appraisal of what is good or bad in those interactions. Environmentalism is essentially an ethical movement evaluating how humans impact, or are impacted by, the natural world.

In the end, environmentalists often use the findings of environmental scientists in their arguments, but that does not mean that every environmental scientist is an environmentalist.

### IN CONTEXT

Let's consider a single topic and how each group might approach it.

#### **U.S. Population and Global Greenhouse Emissions**

Environmental scientists might say that, as of 2008, the U.S. population makes up about 5% of the world's total and produces approximately 19% of global greenhouse gas emissions.

On the other hand, an environmentalist might say that, as of 2008, the United States only makes up 5% of the world's population, yet produces almost one fifth of global greenhouse gas emissions, and they would argue that this is a problem that needs to change.

### Carbon Dioxide Emissions

An environmental scientist might say fossil fuels used for electricity generation accounted for about 38% of carbon dioxide emissions in 2012.

An environmentalist might say that we must reduce the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere from its current level by 25%.

## 2. 19th- and 20th-Century Environmentalists

The modern environmental movement in the United States was largely inspired by written works in the 19th and 20th centuries by authors concerned with human impact on the environment. The table below lists some of these authors and their contributions.

19th-Century Environmentalists	
Thomas Malthus	In 1798, Thomas Malthus wrote <i>An Essay on the Principles of Population</i> . He warned of famine and disease caused by overpopulation.
Henry David Thoreau	Henry David Thoreau lived from 1817 to 1862, and he is thought of as one of the founders of the modern environmental movement. He sought to address many environmental issues, advocating in particular for wildlife areas to be protected.
John Muir	1838 to 1914 spanned the life of John Muir, who is the author and founder of the still-present Sierra Club. Muir was an environmentalist who argued that the environment had inherent value beyond human use, and he advocated for its protection.
Gifford Pinchot	Gifford Pinchot lived from 1865 to 1946, and he was the first chief of the U.S. Forest System. He advocated for forest protection and management that would protect economic interests into the future. He called for efficient and sustainable extraction and use of resources.
20th-Century Environmentalists	
Aldo Leopold	In 1949, Aldo Leopold published <i>A Sand County Almanac</i> , which was a collection of nonfiction essays arguing that humans must protect the natural world as a system, not just as individual parts. He said that humans are a part of what would eventually be called ecology, and they must protect it for their own survival, as well as for ethical reasons.
Rachel Carson	Attempting to generate awareness around the negative environmental impacts of agricultural chemicals, Rachel Carson published <i>Silent Spring</i> in 1962. Her publication spurred a national environmental movement and led to laws regulating the use of agricultural chemicals.
Paul Ehrlich	In 1968, Paul Ehrlich wrote <i>A Population Bomb</i> . In it, he discussed the potential impact of population growth, such as food shortage, war, disease, and environmental damage.
E.O. Wilson	E.O. Wilson produced his book <i>On Human Nature</i> in 1979. He loved to study the interaction between living beings, including humans. In doing so, he bridged the gap between biology and social sciences by examining societies from an evolutionary standpoint.

### 3. Environmental Organizations

Throughout the 1960s, a national environmental grassroots movement grew. By April 22, 1970, the first annual Earth Day was announced in the United States and has been celebrated ever since.

Environmental organizations are typically formed to design or implement environmental initiatives or to advocate and promote a particular cause. They tend to focus on protection, research, and policy on a wide range of environmental issues.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Such an organization would be the Nature Conservancy, which is a nationwide American nonprofit dedicated to protecting wilderness areas and natural life. Another organization, 350.org, is an international organization dedicated to slowing climate change worldwide.



Environmental organizations appear at every scale.

- **Neighborhood:** The PROUT Institute is an organization in Eugene, Oregon, and it focuses on various socioeconomic and environmental issues at the neighborhood level.
- **Regional:** Heal the Bay is a regional organization, based in Santa Monica, California, which is trying to protect and restore the health of the bay's ecology.
- **National:** The Sierra Club is a national-scale environmental organization attempting to protect the planet within many arenas. The World Green Building Council is an international organization trying to promote green building practices worldwide.

Environmental organizations vary in approaches, using tactics such as research, creating awareness,

education, lobbying policymakers, funding projects, protesting, and even extreme acts of personal harm and/or property damage.



## SUMMARY

In this lesson, we talked about **environmentalism and how it is different from environmental science**. We discussed the history of **19th- and 20th-century environmentalists**, as well as some **environmental organizations**.

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