



# **Environmental Consciousness in the Rhetoric of 20th and 21st Centuries**

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# RUTGERS GLOBAL POLICY ROUNDTABLE

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# Environmental Consciousness

## in the Rhetoric of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries

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## Introduction

What drives humans to value the external world more than personal interests or convenience? How are priorities determined within civil society? Can humanity achieve a symbiotic relationship with the planet's ecosystem? How does popular consent in the context of environmental issues coexist with political legitimacy?

This paper examines how a particular historical moment has seen the development of environmental consciousness. The changing paradigm of social priorities has led to a widespread agreement in civil society to cohere around environmental issues through intellectual research, social habits and political decisions. Recently, economic activity, as deemed the fundamental national achievement, is gradually being replaced by an acceptance of environmental health as the key and necessary outcome. Environmental threats and their consequences on people's well-being have been personalized over the last fifty years.<sup>1</sup> However, the phenomenon has not been experienced in the same way in different parts of the world: "...researchers who study social movements have theorized that such mobilization tends to occur when members of a community have the right kind of political opportunity or when they have access to critical resources".<sup>2</sup> Wright and Boudet identify three main elements that determine the propensity for the realization of the goals of social movements: political opportunities, the extent of the threat, and the level of civic capacities.<sup>3</sup> The essential insight here, in the context of environmental discourse, is the importance of the socio-historical context. The popularity of an idea or an organization is not only a function of what it asserts but also of its timing. "Individuals (or individual organizations) do deeds, but society decides whether they are heroic or not, according to the mood of the historical moment".<sup>4</sup>

This research examines the main actors of the last half century who have made environmental discourse the basis of their activism, scientific theories and/or political agenda. It then explains how growing consideration of environmental concerns shape societal life in our contemporary communities. The analysis takes into account four stages of dynamism in global consciousness, which, though not necessarily chronological, have informed the growth of environmental consciousness. Thus, the ideas and actions carried out by intellectuals, civil society organizations, political parties and, finally, the international community, are brought to light. In doing so, this study is not analyzing the interconnections between these four actors, but rather the establishment of a common theory which is able to explain how communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have developed such a strong commitment to environmental consciousness and an accompanying powerful rhetoric which supports it.

Ultimately, this study also aims to identify the limits in solving environmental problems. In fact, even if environmental awareness is defined as a global ideology, it should be recognized that this process has a strong cultural dimension which originates in the global North. Nearly all forms of activism (intellectual, social, political) have been produced by actors from the global North, leading to obvious complications in the dissemination of information and the effectiveness of action.

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<sup>1</sup> Shura (2018), p. 1

<sup>2</sup> Wu (2013), p. 9

<sup>3</sup> Wright and Boudet (2012)

<sup>4</sup> Nash (1992), p. 155

## A Theory of Consciousness Raising

In her book, *Inventing Human Rights*, Lynn Hunt has illustrated the success of human rights and their evolution in society during the 18th century. Her deep and detailed explanation of the reasons that led to the determination and expansion of the concept of human rights includes two essential points which have informed the environmental awareness theory proposed in this study. Following this perspective, the first factor defined by Hunt is the feeling of empathy. Hunt demonstrates how the development of empathic sentiments in the population during the period of the Enlightenment created a new kind of understanding between humans, transcending concepts of social class, gender, and cultural origin, which led to a projection of ourselves and our own sensations on the “other”. This change of consciousness that others have a self and bodies like our own leads to feelings of empathy that eventually led to the formulation of human rights. As Hunt argues in her study, “Human rights could only flourish when people learned to think of others as their equals, as like them in some fundamental fashion.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, the concept of empathy, conceived as the externalization of self-awareness in the understanding of others, of their similar needs and concerns, was the basis for the dissemination of human rights. This concept also informs the development of environmental consciousness. A second point of inspiration proposed by Hunt is the co-dependence of transversal factors that have contributed to formulate, in a precise historical period, the development of the universality of human rights. Hunt argues that, for example, the popularization of 18th century novels that are deeply focused on the spiritual and emotional dimension of the protagonist “other”. This factor promoted the aforementioned theory of empathy leading to 18th century milestone declarations which incorporated an egalitarian dimension into the conceptualization of all humans. The timing and combination of different factors is the fulcrum for the global determination of awareness towards an innovative aspect such as human rights, both for Hunt and for the environmental concerns of this study.

The multidimensional perspective, together with the very word “empathy,” so often employed by Hunt, has contributed to formulating a new theory of environmental consciousness. Thus, the theory proposed in this paper suggests looking at the widespread melding of consciousness and the struggle for inclusion of an environmental dimension in our social life through the pillars of intellectual expertise, civil society activism and the Green political agenda. These three forces, which interact with and complement each other, have succeeded in spreading a global discourse on the environment in a new context of mutual coexistence and interdependence.

According to the Aristotelian theory regarding the effectiveness and persuasion of the spoken discourses, rhetoric is an art that must strictly follow each of its constituent parts. Even if the rhetoric is an open system, its complex and fascinating structure is composed of three parts, each having its precise purpose, but connected to that of the others and to the whole system, besides always existing in a relationship to the external environment.<sup>6</sup> In fact, in his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle indicates three fundamental pillars that must characterize communication and persuasion: Ethos, Logos and Pathos. Basing a discourse on these three factors, the proposed message will be effectively delivered and embraced by the community/audience. The essence of Aristotelian rhetoric consists of the profound consideration in each speech of the speaker, the listener and the topic developed, the lack of which cannot assure effective communication.

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<sup>5</sup> Hunt (2007), p. 58

<sup>6</sup> Matelli (2012)

Ethos indicates the credibility that the speaker (in our case a social actor) should have. Aristotle states that persuasion occurs when the speech is pronounced by a reliable and experienced speaker. This leads us to the parallelism with intellectual actor's role in the theory of environmental consciousness, which produces scientifically based theories worthy of evoking trust on the part of the listener. Ethos, therefore, is inherent in the type of speech delivered. If it exhibits competence and knowledge, it will make a speaker trustworthy and contribute to her/his ability to be persuasive. Aristotle states that Ethos will be achieved only by what is said and not by pre-existing opinions about the character of the speaker.

Pathos is the kind of discourse that arouses emotions in listeners. It has to do with feelings, therefore: who can better convey the feeling of understanding and struggle for common interests if not civil society organizations? This is the second parallelism between the art of rhetoric and the spirit of environmental consciousness. Pathos represents the empathic side of every person and everything that excites her or him. Since social mobilization promotes consciousness of the looming problems facing society, such as environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, and climate change, these problems activate the feelings of the listener. Empathy for others and for animal species contribute to creating an argument that influences the emotions of the listener and contributes to greater persuasion. This process differs from judgments which are influenced by feelings of pain or joy, of friendship or hatred.

Finally, Logos bases its effectiveness on the manner of spreading the contents of a subject of concern, through demonstration of the content itself. It is the part that makes the discourse true and meaningful, by use of an inherent logic which is grounded in empirical verification. In the case of environmental consciousness, it is the part played by the political agenda. What else if not the laws and political agitation make an issue become accepted by an entire society? Political rhetoric further legitimizes environmental concerns by employing the theories developed by intellectuals and institutionalizing them, thus promoting a further level of authoritarianism to the environmental cause.

Summarizing the terms of the proposed theory, environmental consciousness in the 21st century assumes a greater importance, and has become more persuasive, because its cause has been embraced by actors who, through their combined efforts, have contributed to creating a consistent and strong rhetoric. Although over the centuries the concept of rhetoric has undergone negative connotations, it is important to stress that the mastery of the effective dissemination of issues concerning the sustainability of our existence as a global society is key to producing the necessary change in environmental consciousness.

The argument regarding the importance of the three factors in the rhetoric of environmental consciousness is outlined below, with the intention of demonstrating how each of them has played an essential role in promoting this unique and complementary process of greater concern for the environment. The lack of any one of them would have compromised the current state of world consciousness of our collective need to confront our planet's environmental degradation.

## **The Intellectual aspect of Environmental Consciousness**

### ***The Sierra Club***

In the context of intellectual support, combined with social opportunity and historical support for environmental cause, we can look to the Sierra Club which was founded in California in 1892.<sup>7</sup> The Sierra Club has not only sought to protect the natural areas of the country for conservation purposes, but to create an environmental movement rooted in national culture. Beginning with the initial propensity to adopt the concept of “conservation” as it was promoted, for example, by Theodore Roosevelt,<sup>8</sup> to mean efficient use of resources, as the driving principle behind the ethics and the work of the Club, in the post-World War II period it adopted the concept of “environmentalism”. “This was a fascinating period of popular discovery of the implications of ecology, not merely for preserving resource abundance in the interest of economic well-being, but for environmental health as well”.<sup>9</sup> This change of perspective, from a defense of the environment mainly for the preservation of its bounty and beauty, to a deeper theory based on the planet’s dependence on the healthy and lasting existence of the human race, has contributed to a growing concern over degradation of the environment caused by pesticides; air and water pollution; climate change; and nuclear waste pollution. All these issues formed part of the new, environmentalist perspective.<sup>10</sup> The essential role of the Sierra Club was to begin the spread nationally, and then globally, what had initially arisen from the defense of nature in California. This effort was the first major contribution to environmental consciousness.

The role of the Club increased in the period of the great protests occurring in the United States in the 1960s. Newspapers and publishing houses were prepared to give space to articles, books and publications on major ecological issues, such as the increase in world population, the dangers of pesticide pollution, congestion car and urban traffic, and radioactive contamination due to the explosions of atomic bombs of the nuclear-military system. In those years, some members of the Sierra Club organized the first photographic collection that was later published in a book series called Exhibit Format Series with the cause to turn public opinion towards environmental conservation: “in 1951, the Sierra Club sent a young photographer named Philip Hyde [...], to Dinosaur National Monument, on the first ever photography assignment for an environmental cause”.<sup>11</sup> Thanks to these publications, not only did the Club have the opportunity to raise awareness among experts and ordinary people about environmental disasters that were occurring, but it brought new members into the organization who embraced its cause and were willing to work together to build a greener future. Thanks to this important development in environmental activism, the movement was given another perspective. It was now more widespread, accessible to the community and widely publicized thanks to the numerous lobbying, book distribution and letter writing campaigns. The Sierra Club Exhibit Format Series galvanized public opposition to building dams in the Grand Canyon and protected many other national treasures. The Sierra Club often led a coalition of many environmental groups including the Wilderness Society, National Wildlife Federation, National Audubon Society and others.<sup>12</sup>

### ***1962 – Rachel Carson and Silent Spring***

In the years in which the Sierra Club was acquiring its significance in spreading environmental awareness, a fundamental mission was enhanced by the book of an American biologist, Rachel

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<sup>7</sup> Sierra Club, [www.sierraclub.org/about-sierra-club](http://www.sierraclub.org/about-sierra-club)

<sup>8</sup> Nash (1992), p. 158

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Hyde (2011), <https://landscapephotographyblogger.com/sierra-club-books-exhibit-format-series-1/>

<sup>12</sup> Fox (1981)



Carson, *Silent Spring*, published in 1962.<sup>13</sup> The book explained that if we persisted in using non-degradable chlorinated pesticides in agriculture, it would disperse in the soil, in groundwater, and in the sea, and would have been absorbed by the grass and by animals. Thus, the pollution would become part of the animal and human food chains resulting in the death of many birds. Thus, Spring would become “silent”. Readings and discussions of this book raised the issue of pesticide use in agriculture and led to the first forms of global protest against it. Carson’s book had a global and an intergenerational impact in spreading awareness of ecological problems. *Silent Spring* showed that the use of chemical substances penetrating the soil and dispersed in the water and in the air, have consequences not only on the population directly in contact with this environment, or with food grown by the use of pesticides, but the entire planet, assuming both inter-generational and intra-generational dimensions.<sup>14</sup>

The vision of the planet as a closed system that has to be preserved was highlighted in the same year that Carson published her book, 1962, by the American economist Kenneth Boulding, who wrote in *The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth* that our planet should be considered a spaceship.<sup>15</sup> Boulding argued that the inhabitants of this spaceship can only draw air, water, and food and material goods from inside it, and only in its interior can they dispose of the waste gas, liquids and solids of their life. Boulding argued that the resources that this spaceship, the only home we have in space, are large but not unlimited, just as its capacity for waste is limited. Carson and Boulding’s books, together with those of other environmentalist theorists, reflected an economic system that was becoming dominant in the world, highlighting the importance of assessing whether industrial food productivity and capital accumulation are worth all the negative impacts that consumers could suffer, both now and in the future.

Carson’s book was one of the starting points for the ecological revolution that would take place in the 1970s. Several years before Paul Ehrlich (*The Population Bomb*, 1968) and Barry Commoner (*The Closing Circle*, 1971) predicted the threat to humanity through overpopulation and resource exploitation, *Silent Spring* led to a new environmental awareness and a vision that translated into tangible political action.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, the observation of the global character of ecological dangers and the projection of their effects into the future opened two new categories which needed to be considered: air, water, and pollution know no state borders, and the idea that humanity can be saved only if it is united, regardless of political regime, skin color or religious belief.

Rachel Carson’s book “helped ignite widespread environmental awareness, and in the ensuing decade not only led the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to ban the domestic use of DDT, but also led to the founding of the EPA itself, the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, and Earth Day.”<sup>17</sup> Due to its global character, the international inspiration that this book brought to environmental awareness, resulted in the decision to establish the celebration of Earth Day around the world. Ultimately, it was recognized by the United Nations, the organization that in the second half of the twentieth century would become the international leader for the protection of human rights, but would also develop the ecological theme as one of the main action plans for the future

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<sup>13</sup> Carson (1962)

<sup>14</sup> Nebbia (2015) in Falchetti and Carovita (2005), p. 2

<sup>15</sup> Barbier and Burgess (2017)

<sup>16</sup> Culver et. al. (2012), p. 7

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11



development of the nations of the world. On March 21, 1971, United Nations Secretary-General U Thant spoke of a spaceship Earth on Earth Day, hereby referring to the ecosystem services the earth provides us, and hence our obligation to protect them.<sup>18</sup> Earth Day is now coordinated globally by the Earth Day Network,<sup>19</sup> and is celebrated in more than 175 countries every year.

## **Societal Activism in Environmental Consciousness**

The introductory section of this essay emphasized the importance of social movements in mobilizing consciousness about socially relevant problems, and the capacity of these movements to influence in different ways the political, economic and individual practices present within nation-states. As Paul Wapner observes, “civil society is that arena of social engagement which exists above the individual yet below the state. It is a complex network of economic, social, and cultural practices.”<sup>20</sup> These movements have had a fundamental impact on social mobilization. Due to their commitment and professionalism, the cause pursued by associations such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Amnesty International, to name a few, has not only led to shaping national political decisions, but has also contributed to strengthening the values they advocate within the larger society of which they are a part.

Including social movements within the study of environmental consciousness is essential even though their actions have often been seen as unconventional and rather aggressive, producing political disapproval. Their purpose, therefore, led them to go beyond mere political opposition to engage in lobbying effectively in political decision-making at the national level.<sup>21</sup> Environmental groups have played an outsized role in establishing global civil society. Non-governmental organizations and the movements which they created have assumed the role of “political actors in their own right.”<sup>22</sup>

If we look at the development of environmental movements over the course of modern history, we see that these movements became more visible and widespread only in the 1970s. The second half of the twentieth century was the era of social protest. Beginning with the civil rights movements in the United States, and then moving on to the student, pacifist, feminist and gay movements, and eventually embracing environmental causes, civil society became a part of international politics. In the post-Cold War era, civil society was fueled by anxiety over existing economic and political leadership in the wake of communism’s collapse and inspired by concern with global democratic developments. Globalization tended to entrench its global reach. The action of environmental movements has to be situated in this global context: first, post-WWII environmental negligence constitutes a threat that is increasingly manifesting itself; second, this threat goes beyond the national level where protests have the space to arise and take on a global dimension; third, democratic consolidation in many countries throughout the world improves governments and society embracing environmental causes; and fourth, globalization, thanks to the widespread of ideas, grants international status to activist environmental organizations.

We can measure the impact of civil society throughout the global North by the following examples. One is the celebration of the first Earth Day and the “conversion” of President Richard Nixon to

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<sup>18</sup> Secretary-General - U Thant (1971)

<sup>19</sup> For more information visit the website <https://www.earthday.org>

<sup>20</sup> Wapner (1995), p. 312

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 339

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 312

support the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency. In 1987, European Year of the Environment proclaimed by the Council of Europe. During 1970s, the first Ministries of the Environment were established in Great Britain, Denmark, France, Norway and Austria. The success of the protests for protecting the environment, peaceful in nature and supported by scientific publications of the academic community, can be seen in the growing criticism of the elites and of the authorities for their prolonged neglect of the environment. This paper argues that social movements, rather than governments, were the driving force in promoting environmental awareness. But it is also important to note that the two components, differing in their nature and purpose, developed a synergy which promoted each other in their respective efforts and led in a single direction, namely spreading a widespread environmental consciousness.

### ***1971 – Greenpeace***

Begun as a small association of people who believed in the power of reporting harmful acts against nature, Greenpeace's first success was to make public the news of the US nuclear bomb trials on the Aleutian island of Amchitka in 1971. The tell-tale photographs, and the testimony of journalists regarding the site of the nuclear experiments, marked the launch of new NGOs in the field of environmental protection. Among the issues championed by Greenpeace was the defense of whales, leading activists to block the passage of whaling ships using fragile rubber dinghies. Greenpeace created a widespread support network because of the publicity it attracted for environmental justice, thus establishing the largest environmental movement in the world. Its success today goes beyond the work of activists, as Greenpeace has become a significant player in world media, through photographic publications, articles promoting policy ideas in newspapers and magazines, and videos and advertising posters circulated in forty countries.<sup>23</sup>

This significant investigative work had a profound impact in the context of global consciousness, showing the raw facts and thus bringing to global public's attention environmental problems which were previously unknown. By focusing on the uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources, organizations like Greenpeace have taken a decisive step in showing that the world economy and global politics are incapable of achieving sustainable growth under the current circumstances. They have shown to the public the imminence of an environmental catastrophe and the consequences that this is having globally. The ultimate goal of Greenpeace, and other environmental civil society organizations, is to change the public perspective through which society views the actions of powerful economic actors: "Instead of small boats and giant whales, giant boats and small whales; instead of courage killing whales, courage saving whales; David had become Goliath, Goliath was now David; if the mythology of Moby Dick and Captain Ahab had dominated human consciousness about Leviathan for over a century, a whole new age was in the making."<sup>24</sup>

Greenpeace and its work in making public every act that violated environmental conservation was not only carried out with the intention of changing the environmental legislative framework in countries around the world, but to foster a profound awareness campaign for all influential actors, both in the legislative sphere and among the general public. This empathic aspect promoted by the group reaffirms the concrete need to rethink the very nature of human beings, not as a species above nature's law, but as subject to it. This consideration makes the case for an agenda for environmental justice that nature has in itself and the limits of human action on the plundering of

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<sup>23</sup> Greenpeace International; for more information visit <https://www.greenpeace.org/international/>

<sup>24</sup> Hunter, Greenpeace; in Wapner (1995), p. 322

natural resources. Consequently, “governments will, activists hope, take measures to protect the environment. When the ideas have more resonance outside government, they will shift the standards of good conduct and persuade people to act differently even though governments are not requiring them to do so.”<sup>25</sup>

## Political Action in Environmental Consciousness

The third component of global environmental consciousness, politics, has the role of crafting public policy with respect to environmental standards. This paper argues that governments and political parties have attempted to formulate a logical and systematic structure in defining the relationship between the environment and socio-economic policy. It is, so to speak, the public sphere that takes into consideration scientific research and the social mobilization agenda and creates a code of conduct, both at a private economic level and in public management.

Tackling the environmental issue in the context of national politics shows how the values of society, in relation to the environment, are a reflection of political parties which both lead and reflect the views of the electorate. As a result, in the 1970s, bolstered by scientific research and galvanized by the protests of environmental groups, “green” parties were born. The study conducted by Facchini, Gaeta and Michallet analyzes the evolution of political parties, together with the main factors that influenced this popularity. The authors argue that the parties advocating for environmental protection reflect the level of economic development in the nations in which they operate. In wealthy societies, post-materialistic values take on greater importance in national politics. This is demonstrated by the geographic distribution of green parties globally in the early 1970s. The drivers behind these green parties were the developed states of Oceania (Australia and New Zealand, 1972), to be followed by the European countries, where the German Greens (1993) and the Finnish Greens (1995) were able to enter into national governing coalitions. In particular, “the German Greens developed the four pillars of the Green movement, which are now the core values of the Green parties around the world: ecology, grassroots, democracy, social justice and non-violence.”<sup>26</sup>

Environmental parties have been associated with the parliamentary left, because environmental conservation policies and, consequently, public spending on environmental protection and regulation of private economic activities, required greater public intervention in the economy. Given that green parties saw their growth during the Cold War years, their association with the left created a political polarization on environmental issues and weakened the possibility of achieving political consensus on environmental protection. Even though the Cold War ended a generation ago, the world continues to suffer from a polarization of environmental politics, though scientific evidence is clearly moving the needle towards conservation in public consciousness, particularly in the global North.

Facchini, Gaeta and Michallet also argue that society becomes more inclined to elect a government that responds to its environmental concerns when it come into close contact with the negative influences of environmental conditions. Indeed, the New Environmental Paradigm (NEP) claims that environmentalism is motivated by a common and objective perception of environmental degradation.<sup>27</sup> What is seen from this global perspective affirming green parties, is that

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Warnock (2004), p. 10

<sup>27</sup> Facchini et al. (2017), p. 202

environmental disasters and excessive exploitation of natural resources have been strongly concentrated in the global South. However, the national policies of these governments have not been focused on environmental issues. This fact puts a premium on action by local civil society to become an effective actor in the political process - political opportunities, threat and civic capacities - that was analyzed above.

Awareness of environmental degradation, with its trans-national and all-encompassing impact on the sustainability of human life, has transcended national policy to reach global prominence. The work of organizations like Greenpeace in multiple countries and the globalization of the world economy, has contributed to the need to develop a common plan in the international political sphere. The environment has become a common issue for all nations and, therefore, its preservation no longer depends only on local habits and state regulations, but on a concrete global project which takes into account scientific knowledge, values social mobilization, and requires coordinated national legislative action. This common global trajectory has to overturn the old way of viewing the environment, no longer grounded in its exploitation, but on a system of sustainable development based on environmental protection. In executing this global project, the world has to take into account the concerns and difficulties of poorer countries, many of which have seen a limited growth of popular environmental consciousness.

## **An International Agenda for Environmental Consciousness**

### ***1972 – The Club of Rome and The Limits of Growth***

The Club of Rome was created in 1968. Its purpose was to bring together in a single discussion group, a network of entrepreneurs, diplomats, scientists and economists to produce reports and resolutions, based on scientific evidence, with a global vision of spreading understandings regarding the interdependence of all components of the environment. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) presented the Meadows Report, commissioned by the Club of Rome and entitled *The Limits to Growth*.<sup>28</sup> It contained a scientific analysis of environmental concerns and made certain recommendations. The Club of Rome's task was to bring the subject of environmental awareness to the public and to encourage decision-makers to incorporate environmental perspectives into national public policy. The multidisciplinary nature of the participants in this project showed that environmental threats had to be resolved through collaboration of scientists, entrepreneurs and public figures.

Its report highlighted the unsustainability of unlimited material growth in a world of finite resources. To write its report, the Club investigated five key areas of global concern: accelerated industrialization, rapid population growth, widespread malnutrition, depletion of nonrenewable resources, and the deterioration of the natural environment. The report concluded that, if developments continued unaltered in the five fundamental sectors (population, industrialization, pollution, food production, consumption of natural resources), humanity would reach the natural limits of development within a hundred years. This research thus authoritatively began to pose the problem of "limits" to growth and the need to develop a society that minimizes resource consumption in its rate of development by achieving what was termed "zero growth".

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<sup>28</sup> Meadows et al. (1972)

The considerable contribution of the Club of Rome to the environmental movement was to project its voice and the theories of coexistence between man and nature into the international political sphere. The Report, in fact, is the first policy proposal for national decision-makers, dealing not only with the global scale of environmental problems, but more essentially with their interconnections: “each [of the five issues] interacts constantly with all the others. [...] Population cannot grow without food, food production is increased by growth of capital, more capital requires more resources, discarded resources become pollution, pollution interferes with the growth of both population and food.”<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the conclusions that *The Limits of Growth* draws, emphasize not only the inefficiencies of and environmental harm caused by the capitalist industrial system, but also evokes a fundamental dilemma by noting that, “The industrial capital stock grows to a level that requires an enormous input of resources. In the very process of that growth it depletes a large fraction of the resource reserves available. As resource prices rise and mines are depleted, more and more capital must be used for obtaining resources, leaving less to be invested for future growth.”<sup>30</sup> The report contributed to the growing awareness that the means of production and consumption must necessarily be changed if a decent life is to be guaranteed for future generations.

### ***1987 – The Brundtland Report: Our Common Future***

After the Club of Rome’s reports, other cycles of international summits and negotiations were launched by the United Nations. In 1983, under the mandate of the UN General Assembly, representatives of 21 countries debated and drafted the report, *Our Common Future*, in 1987. Known as the Brundtland Report, after its chairperson, former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, it did not subscribe to the “zero growth” formulation but called for a new concept of development, framed as “sustainable”. This approach would address new environmental problems such as global warming, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and disposal of toxic wastes. The report introduced a unique and innovative connection between the environment and poverty. The observation of the close correlation between the two problems affirmed the need to rethink the world development system and link environmental protection with the need to alleviate world poverty. In this sense, the Brundtland Report brought environmental awareness to a broader and deeper economic level. Whereas during the early period of environmental agitation, environmental problems were seen as a threat to the future, the Brundtland Report linked capitalism, poverty and the environment as interconnected concepts.

The Brundtland Report thus introduced the concept of sustainable development by incorporating environmentalism into poverty reduction and poverty reduction into environmentalism in a single formula. It also advocated for the first Earth Summit which would be the UN Conference on Environment and Development held at Rio de Janeiro in 1992.<sup>31</sup>

### ***1992 and 2012 – The Rio Conferences: Agenda 21 and The Future We Want***

The next step in building global environmental consciousness as well as incorporating the principle of environmental protection in the global development agenda was the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The key product of the conference was the Declaration on Environment and Development and its Action Plan called

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<sup>29</sup> Club of Rome (1972), p. 89

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125

<sup>31</sup> Cayley (n.d.), p. 4

*Agenda 21*, an instrument that has had considerable impact on Governments and on the United Nations.

The Rio Declaration builds on both an anthropocentric and a holistic perspective based on the unity and interdependence of humanity's place on the planet. Unlike the reports that preceded it, the conference produced a resolution of environmental problems from an economic perspective, specifying how the global system must move to achieve environmental sustainability.

The Declaration calls for planning actions which need to be taken at the global, national and local levels by the United Nations, governments and appropriate organizations in all areas where a human presence has had a negative impact on the environment. The international community is asked to consider development and environmental protection not only as indispensable tools for the elimination of poverty (and vice versa), but also as an inherent right of all human beings and as a necessary condition for the fulfillment of the need for environmental sustainability and assured development for future generations. The number "21" that accompanies the word "Agenda" refers to the 21st century, as priority themes of this program are the climate-environmental and socio-economic emergencies that the beginning of the third millennium has placed on the entire humanity.

Agenda 21 introduced a concrete map of action for states, based on key concepts such as co-responsibility, continuous improvement, governance, transversality, shared vision and partnership. The environmental movement had thus become a key component of decision-making in social and economic policies globally.

Twenty years later, the United Nations convened a follow-up meeting in Rio to review and elaborate on its environmental policies. The 2012 conference produced, *The Future We Want*, report highlighting the success of environmental movements in shaping the work of the entire international community. "Environmental concerns, from climate change to biodiversity, were no longer the obsessions of green pressure groups and charities like Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund. Global solutions were now being sought by world governments."<sup>32</sup>

While progress has been made, it was left to Jeffrey Sachs, professor of economics at Columbia University's Earth Institute, to note that it was far too soon to claim success: "Twenty years ago, the world tried to address these realities through treaties and international law. The agreements that emerged in 1992 at the first Rio summit were good ones: thoughtful, far-sighted, public-spirited, and focused on global priorities. Yet they have not saved us. Those treaties lived in the shadow of our daily politics, imaginations and media cycles. Diplomats trudged off to conferences year after year to implement them, but the main results were neglect, delay and bickering over legalities. Twenty years on, we have only...failing grades to show for our efforts."<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

This essay has analyzed the evolution of environmental consciousness, in particular, the awareness of the danger of environmental degradation. Environmental consciousness emerged because three actors contributed to the spread of a powerful global rhetoric. The key years for the development of a vision of the poor environmental conditions, and therefore the incorporation of the environmental

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<sup>32</sup> Montague (2012)

<sup>33</sup> Sachs (2016)

perspective within the realm of scientific, social and political thinking, were the 1970s. The movements of social unrest have had an increasingly strong voice, first in its diffusion by civil society (with the Sierra Club and *Silent Spring*), then agitation by non-governmental organization led by Greenpeace, and finally, in the political and economic circles of some nations of the global North (Green Parties in Europe and Oceania, the international agenda spearheaded by the Club of Rome, and the work of the Nations United).

A North/South dimension entered the debate on protecting the environment leading to the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. This global dimension has allowed environmentalism to become more universal and dominant political theme in contemporary society. Nevertheless, skeptical groups have arisen paralleling the process of environmental consciousness raising. Often these groups identify with conservative political parties and business groups, which underline the negative impact of environmental policies on traditional economic growth. Some of them argue that the Earth is not fragile and that it has been able to maintain and heal itself long before the appearance of man on it.<sup>34</sup> Others focus their analysis on the indispensability of creating jobs and meeting the needs of this generation, as the next does not yet cast a vote. But even with this contestation, ecological perspectives have become part of everyday life of most people. Environmental protection has been politicized in the best sense of this word, based on the conviction that political solutions to environmental threats must be developed globally.

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<sup>34</sup> Baggini (2016)



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