

Civic Environmentalism

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By Sarah Conolly Hokenmaier

Definition

Civic environmentalism is a type of social action where citizens come together to solve environmental problems as a means to improve their communities. The goal is to ensure a sustainable community for future generations through participation in democratic processes.

A **sustainable community** is achieved when communities can meet their needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own and are environmentally, economically and socially sound. It addresses issues as interconnected parts to a whole, rather than as individual components (Knopman, Susman and Landy 1999).

Citizen participation is a key component to civic environmentalism. To solve environmental problems, all interested parties have to discuss options together in situations such as town meetings (Montague 2001). This allows ordinary people to get involved, share their local knowledge and let their voices be heard. It also allows environmental issues unique to a local area to be addressed by those most affected by the environmental issue.

Limited government is the major difference between civic environmentalism and other environmental initiatives. This American tradition defines the limits of government regulation (Landy and Rubin 2001). Civic environmentalism embraces this idea, encourages citizens to take ownership of their environment and not to expect the government to solve environmental problems on its own.

Community planning is a tool of civic environmentalism. This is a process by which the community identifies their issues and assets, decides what they want in the future and how they will succeed (Nonprofit Good Practice Guide). Citizens, businesses, nonprofits and local governments can complete this planning process together, addressing environmental issues such as urban sprawl and pollution. This process allows citizens to engage in social action, while working with their community to solve environmental problems.

Historic Roots



Civic Environmentalism is a recent movement that developed when environmental protection efforts of the past were no longer effective. The National Environmental Protection Act of 1970, along with other legislation such as the Clean Water Act of 1972, spurred interest in the environmental movement. However, there was no room for citizen involvement in this hierarchical method of regulation. By the 1980s, federal mandates for citizen participation accompanied most environmental laws, but outcomes were still poor due to a lack of experience with such participation (Sirianni and Friedland 1995). Additionally, laws of this era were focused on specific problems of the Industrial Revolution. These laws were somewhat successful in dealing with problems of that time, but did not address more recent concerns such as non-point source pollution, invasive species and endangered species on private land (Knopman, Susman and Landy 1999).

During the 1990s civic environmentalism began to emerge. The participation of citizens in policy issues was not a new idea. In fact, social thinker of the mid 1800s, Alexis de Tocqueville, argued that civil participation was the very foundation for a healthy democratic society (Shanin 2003). However, such participation by citizens had never been fully instituted into the environmental movement. When civic environmentalism began to develop, nonprofit organizations appealed to everyday citizens and a vibrant grassroots community started to come to life (Salamon 1999). Coalitions were formed to urge citizens to become involved in their local communities and work within them to solve problems, instead of relying on the past model where federal legislation dictated the management of environmental issues. Today, civic environmentalism is in a state of emergence, but it has begun to be more widely implemented throughout the country. To fulfill its potential and achieve success, it will need the support of local, state and federal governments. Active programs that encourage, cooperate and assist communities with civic environmentalism will help to achieve success (Landy and Rubin 2001).

Importance

Civic environmentalism holds the promise to be a significant vehicle for engaging communities with environmental issues. This is an important method for healing the environment and for developing thriving communities with active citizens. Hopefully, this new method of environmental action will be more productive than earlier forms, and will be able to improve the current environmental situation, especially issues that are uniquely local in scope such as non-point pollution and regional ecosystem protection (Ibid.). National and state regulations for these problems will not lead to workable solutions.



A more localized approach is necessary. For this reason, civic environmentalism has sparked hope for finding solutions to these new challenges.

Along with being a viable solution for improving environmental quality, civic environmentalism spurs the building of communities. It will increase individual awareness and allow ordinary people to escape the feeling of being overwhelmed by huge problems they cannot control, and actually help to solve local issues that matter to them (Shanin 2003). It is hoped that this will help move the U.S. toward a system of real democratic participation, which has generally been limited to "paying taxes and occasionally voting" (Montague 2001, 1).

Ties to the Philanthropic Sector

Civic environmentalism exists, in part, because of philanthropy. Dollars from the philanthropic sector to foundations and nonprofit environmental organizations have allowed them to motivate citizens towards environmental issues.

As an example, the Sand County Foundation, an organization in Wisconsin, uses philanthropic donations to find solutions to environmental problems by combining social forces with land ethics. In 2001, the Snake River was deteriorating due to old dams, which were on privately owned property. Instead of lobbying for an overarching law that might not apply to other situations, the Sand County Foundation worked with the landowners, other environmental organizations as well as local, state, and federal governments to buy the dams and remove them. This solution proved successful in restoring the river. It was also successful for the community which found a way to work together to solve a problem locally (Landy and Rubin 2001). This example is an early success story for civic environmentalism and one that could not have come to pass without the philanthropic sector.

Key Related Ideas

Ecological place is a concept related to civic environmentalism. It is the idea that people are attached to their place or immediate habitat, which is a portion of the greater environment. The feelings of ownership attached to their place are what bring community members together and motivates them to become democratically involved to make their place a sustainable community (Shanin 2003).

Environmental education goes hand in hand with civic environmentalism. Its goal is to educate youth about environmental issues so they will grow up respecting their place in



nature, being able to make informed decisions about protecting the natural environment (Environmental Protection Agency). With proper environmental education, citizens may feel more comfortable and interested in civic environmentalism, since they will have basic knowledge of the issues being addressed.

Environmental justice is also closely related to civic environmentalism. It is the idea that everyone, regardless of race, income, ethnicity or gender, deserves a healthy environment within which to work and play (Montague 2001). For example, factories emitting pollution should not be placed only in low-income areas, nor should the people living in those areas be denied the opportunity to become involved in that decision. Civic environmentalism strives to include everyone in environmental decisions, thus promoting environmental justice.

Important People Related to the Topic

Because civic environmentalism is still developing, its main contributors have been individuals who have conceptualized it in literature as a new way to approach environmental issues.

- **John Dewitt:** Dewitt is the director of the Environmental Studies program at Bowdoin College. He has authored many books and publications on civic environmentalism which have helped shape the movement.
- **Archon Fung and Charles Sabel:** Fung and Sabel authored a book called *Beyond Backyard Environmentalism*. This publication focuses on the successes of self-organization and cooperation gained by citizens when engaging in civic environmentalism. It has been a key piece of literature discussing the gains to civic life because of this movement.
- **Debra Knopman:** Knopman is the associate director of the Rand Corporation, a nonprofit organization working to improve policy and decision-making. She was formerly the director of the Center for Innovation and the Environment at the Progressive Policy Institute, and has published several articles and reports highlighting civic environmentalism as a new policy solution to environmental problems.
- **Marc Landy:** Landy is a professor of political science at Boston College, and a part of the Civic Environmentalism Working Group at the George C. Marshall Institute. His many publications on the topic, along with his work at the Marshall Institute have been and continue to inspire this developing area.



- **William Shutkin:** Shutkin, the president of New Ecology, Inc., is a leading voice for civic environmentalism. His publications have encouraged the furthering of this movement and his work with local, state, and national organizations and governments have helped to bring these ideas into reality.

This paper was developed by a student taking a Philanthropic Studies course taught at the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University. It is offered by *Learning To Give* and the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University.

