

Environmentalism in Charleston, Illinois: a Snapshot of April 1970

Katherine Unruh

An examination of the decade between 1962 and 1972 in U.S. history reveals a building concern for the state of the planet. Environmental issues such as air and water pollution, the use of toxic chemicals, depleting natural resources, and the buildup of waste permeated many aspects of U.S. society. Previous research indicates that the contemporary environmentalist movement in the United States surfaced in many areas including: popular literature, public policy, religion, and education. It did so to the point that it saturated much of American society and settled into mainstream culture, pushing many Americans to reflect on their country's negative impact on the natural world. An analysis of articles published by the *Coles County Daily Times-Courier* in April 1970 provides a brief snapshot of how environmentalism touched not only large cities but, also, smaller communities such as Charleston in rural east-central Illinois.¹ The month of April 1970 holds significance because President Nixon dedicated 22 April 1970 as the first annual Earth Day. The *Coles County Daily Times-Courier* was the primary newspaper for the 16,400 citizens of Charleston, Illinois.² Over the course of the month, the *Coles County Daily Times-Courier* published thirty-seven newspaper articles, twenty-one photographs, and three editorial cartoons on subjects related to the health of the planet. This evidence shows that concern for the environment and conservation not only reached this small community, but generated a multifaceted discussion that touched a variety of people in many ways, from farmers and agricultural practices to academic students and local politics.

In a 2003 article for *The Journal of American History*, "Give Earth a Chance': The Environmental Movement and the Sixties," Adam Rome expresses his disappointment with the lack of scholarly attention to the environmental movement thus far. According to Rome,

¹Eastern Illinois University's presence in Charleston makes the community somewhat atypical because EIU's student population accounted for about half of the city. EIU's student population numbered 8,214 in 1971. Therefore, this analysis is not representative of every rural U.S. town. "EIU University Foundations," www.eiu.edu/~eiu1111/complete%20text%2008.pdf

²Today known as the *Charleston Times-Courier*. "Demographic Data," *City of Charleston, IL*, http://www.charlestonillinois.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC={6F208E00-3AEB-4137-BD15-8B1068A18427}

The rise of the rise of the environmental movement owed much to the events of the 1960s. Yet scholars have not thus far done enough to place environmentalism in the context of the times. The literature on the sixties slights the environmental movements, while the work on environmentalism neglects the political, social, and cultural history of the sixties.³

In fact, Rome found that, “several historians of the decade fail even to mention Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* – a best seller in 1962.”⁴ Attention to the natural world and its resources appears in many phases of U.S. History, from America’s frontier mentality and westward expansion, to its growing industrialization and conservation practices under President Theodore Roosevelt.⁵ Historians traditionally view environmentalism as merely a product of the 1960’s activist climate. On the contrary, the contemporary movement forms part of a larger history of the United States’ relationship with the natural world and its resources. The topics of environmentalism, conservation, and cleaning up pollution reveal insights into a cross-section of American history: its cultural products, politics, religious beliefs, and education.

Issues such as pollution, chemical use, and strained natural resources sparked popular texts read by the wider public, such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb*. With the support of many Americans, governments formed new legislation to reduce pollution and improve the quality of air and water. All of this national attention caused environmentalism to begin seeping into social institutions such as religion and education. Religious groups participated in discussions, arrived at varying conclusions, and published articles about it in their religious periodicals. Conservation efforts also developed in the educational sphere, where children participated in Earth Day or other conservation activities in their classrooms and communities, and educators created resources for their colleges on teaching environmentalism. Overall, based on the variety of articles published on these issues in the *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, the same held true in Coles County Illinois.

National and International Political Contexts

The newspaper published a mixture of articles: some pertain to conservation on a very local level while others stretch to national and

³Adam Rome, “Give Earth a Chance: The Environmental Movement and the Sixties,” *Journal of American History* 90, no. 2 (2003): 525.

⁴Rome, “Give Earth a Chance”, 525.

⁵Benjamin Kline, *First Along the River: A Brief History of the U.S. Environmental Movement*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 51.

international scopes. Most of the latter articles focus either on whole political parties or specific newsworthy events taking place across the nation.

Beginning April 8, John Chamberlain's "These Days" column called for a "non-partisan Earth Day."⁶ He reminded readers that besides a few professional ecologists, "the most fervent environmentalist in the State of California is none other than Republican Governor Ronald Reagan."⁷ In the late 1960s, many politicians believed environmental issues resonated with a variety of Americans and as a result both Republicans and Democrats competed to pose themselves as environmental leaders.⁸ In his article, "The Environmental Movement and the Sixties," Rome creates a context for the movement by examining it through liberal politics, the activism of middle-class women, and the student counterculture. He describes the movement as liberal in some ways and conservative in others, "Though liberal Democrats argued for environmental protection . . . the cause attracted Republicans too."⁹ The progressive Democrats in the 1960s wished to protect the environment in order to maintain the biodiversity of life and live in harmony with the planet. More conservative Republican Americans, who also supported environmentalist causes, tended to do so because they viewed nature as a valuable commercial or recreational commodity and wanted clean neighborhoods that reflected their middle class values.¹⁰ For example, many Americans increasingly favored government controls on pollution. Surveys from 1965 and 1970 documented that the number of American citizens who wanted the government to reduce air and water pollution rose from seventeen percent to fifty-three percent over those five years.¹¹ From a political perspective, environmentalism appealed to a wide variety of Americans, even if they expressed concern for different reasons.

However, some generational miscommunication existed. Chamberlain's column returned to conservation a week later when he lamented how young members of the environmentalist movement failed to give "homage to the ecological pioneers" of an older generation who first started generating awareness to problems.¹² He reminded readers

⁶John Chamberlain, "These Days: A Non-Partisan Earth Day," *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, 8 April 1970.

⁷Chamberlain, "These Days", *Coles County Daily Times-Courier* 8 April 1970.

⁸Thomas Robertson, "Environmentalism," *Postwar America*, vol. 2, edited by James Ciment. (New York: Sharpe Reference, 2007), , 500.

⁹Rome, "Give Earth a Chance" 554.

¹⁰Kline, *First Along the River*, 73.

¹¹Kline, *First Along the River* 80.

¹²Chamberlain, "These Days: Homage to the Ecological Pioneers," *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, 14 April 1970.

that “the fight for a clean environment wasn’t born yesterday” and pointed out disconnections where high school and college students ignored the “veterans” of the ecology field.¹³ Despite conflicts, environmentalism still appealed to a growing number of Americans.

Perhaps in response to such increased support, the U.S. government investigated issues such as pollution. In one instance, the *Coles County Daily Times-Courier* reported that President Nixon signed an executive order creating the Industrial Pollution Control Council, a group of fifty-five “top businessmen” to make recommendations and help coordinate how large businesses approach pollution.¹⁴ This underlines just one small example of how the government involved itself with environmentalism. The newspaper also referenced an international perspective to environmentalism. While running for the United States Senate, Illinois Treasurer Adlai E. Stevenson III, “proposed a new international league of nations to promote conservation and control pollution.”¹⁵ In all, the *Coles County Daily Times-Courier* incorporated articles that set the movement within national and occasionally international political contexts.

Defining the Problem

“Environmentalism” and its close cousin “conservation” encompass a wide variety of subjects. Likewise, Americans framed their discussions about it in everything from scientific terms on energy use to religious questions of morality and good stewardship of the earth. The thirty-seven articles in the *Coles County Daily Times-Courier* mirror the United States at large. They approached the subject from almost every conceivable angle: energy use; concern for the conservation of wildlife; discussions over the earth’s booming population; as a law enforcement issue; as a biological health and safety risk; and, of course, as a pollution problem.

Interestingly, energy use did not receive a lot of attention in any of the articles. However, Chase McDenough, a ComEd engineer, spoke at an EIU Earth Week event.¹⁶ He admitted that the company polluted the air with coal burning generators to produce electricity, but also described the ways ComEd curbs pollution and investigates alternative

¹³Chamberlain, “These Days,” *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, 14 April 1970.

¹⁴ *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, “55 ‘Top Businessmen’ On Pollution Council,” 10 April 1970.

¹⁵United Press International, “Adlai Proposes New Conservation League,” *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, 23 April 1970.

¹⁶Jim Jones, “ComEd Engineer Speaks at ‘Earth Week’ Kickoff,” *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, 21 April 1970.

energy sources. Aside from this article, none of the others focused exclusively on energy use.

Concern for the conservation of plant and animal wildlife appeared in the newspaper. Kearney Bothwell's article from San Bernardino, California pinpointed the cause for sick and dying Ponderosa pine forests in the west. Forest service researchers realized that the lingering smog in the area damaged the 1.3 million Ponderosas.¹⁷ The newspaper's editors even highlighted one conservation issue from as far away as Africa. David Creffield's article discussed wildlife poaching in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.¹⁸ In one instance a group of poachers poisoned a water hole and collected the skins and hooves of 255 zebras.¹⁹ Interestingly, this conflict tied in with Tanzania's economy; while the poachers profited, their activities also removed the animals that attracted tourists. On a more local level, a small article from Charleston announced Mrs. Oglesby's re-election as president of the Wildlife Society, a group going on nine years. The Wildlife Society also presented Mr. Stoltz with a membership, "for his connections and contributions to wild life and conservation."²⁰ In these and other instances, the newspaper clearly frames environmentalism in terms of wildlife protection.

Another piece from Chamberlain's "These Days" column brought up population, famine, and agricultural practices. As in his other articles, Chamberlain made a distinction between his point of view and those of others. In this case, he trusted genetically modified crops to feed the growing global population. He supported "slowing down our population growth," "for I like room in which to move about," but for Chamberlain, "the first priority is to push back socialism so that we shall have time to master the problem of 'too many people.'"²¹ Chamberlain's attention to population and agricultural production mirrored similar discussions taking place around the same time. For example, Paul Ehrlich's 1968 text, *The Population Bomb*, underlined the world's ever increasing population as the largest threat to a sustainable earth.

¹⁷Kearney Bothwell, "Smog Killing Stately Trees in California," *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, 21 April 1970.

¹⁸David Creffield, "Wildlife Slaughtered by Poaching Gangs," *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, 21 April 1970.

¹⁹Creffield, "Wildlife Slaughtered," *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, 21 April 1970.

²⁰*Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, "Mrs. Oglesby Heads Wildlife Society," 16 April 1970.

²¹Chamberlain, "These Days: The World Could Feed More People," *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, 21 April 1970.

Ehrlich, a Stanford biologist, expressed grave concern for the sustainability of humanity given the booming population and the limited capacity for agriculture to feed everyone.²² His book sold more than three million copies and added the surplus population to the growing list of environmental issues.²³

By April 1970, taking some responsibility for the planet included enlisting the help of law enforcement. Sheriff Mike Curtis and State's Attorney L. Stanton Dotson "jointly declared a crackdown" against dumping trash on public and private property without permission.²⁴ Law enforcement planned to take people caught dumping trash to the County Jail and fine them \$25 to \$500.²⁵ A similar story appeared in Texas. A small excerpt on "Litter Cost," told that Texas spent \$1.9 million a year cleaning up litter along its roads, despite campaigns against littering and laws against throwing trash out of vehicles.²⁶ These stories reveal that not all Americans expressed a high level of commitment toward not littering, but Coles County law enforcement found it worthwhile to announce their continued pursuit on illegal dumping.

In some cases the newspaper articles framed environmental issues in terms of health and safety hazards to humans and animals. One article highlighted a government report finding that non-persistent pesticides could cause accidental deaths. Although the non-persistent chemicals "may help clean residues out of man's environment and food," the article explained that the newer chemicals were highly toxic to bees and warm-blooded animals.²⁷ In addition, they caused a number of human poisonings, some fatal. In "Ecological Group Holds Community Cleanup," university and high school students worked to clean up a huge dump on Sleepy Hollow Road. Among the thousands of broken glass bottles and rusty tin cans they found, "Several refrigerators, discarded washing machines, food scraps . . . [and] the remains of several animals."²⁸ They also located more dead animals along a creek

²²Paul R. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (Cutchogue, NY: Buccaneer Books, 1968), 5.

²³Robertson, "Environmentalism," 499.

²⁴*Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, "Dumping Crackdown Declared," 18 April 1970.

²⁵*Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, "Dumping Crackdown Declared," 18 April 1970.

²⁶United Press International, "Litter Costs," *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, 21 April 1970.

²⁷*Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, "Non-Persistent Pesticides Could Cause Deaths," 27 April 1970.

²⁸*Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, "Ecological Group Holds Community Cleanup," 30 April 1970.

that drained into Lake Charleston, “the only source of drinking water for Charleston.”²⁹ Unsurprisingly, the newspaper commented that “the stench...was hardly bearable.”³⁰ Both of these articles linked environmental issues to the health and safety of humans and wildlife.

Last but not least, the newspaper discussed pollution. It mentioned water, air, land, and thermal pollution throughout the month. However, water pollution, by far, received the most attention especially in Coles County itself and the surrounding area. Within the larger mid-west region, Nixon called for the halt of pollution in the Great Lakes.³¹ Closer to home, the Soil Enrichment Materials Corporation (SEMCO) applied 90,000 gallons of diluted sludge from Chicago to a farmland test plot near Humboldt, Illinois. Although SEMCO intended to recycle the sludge as fertilizer and eventually establish a market for it in Douglas County, it ironically created problems when runoff from the field started draining into a Coles County culvert.³² Later in the month, the *Coles County Daily Times-Courier* ran a United Press International article from New Orleans, Louisiana, “Pollution Hits Shoreline.” It illustrated an incident where fisherman and pilots spotted two oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico.³³ In addition to these and other articles, the paper published photos of soapsuds in the Embarrass River, a polluted stream in Lakeview Park, and oil pollution in Riley Creek (north of Mattoon). Based on what the newspaper published, people in Coles County expressed much concern over water pollution.

In conclusion, the April publications from *Coles County Daily Times-Courier* generate insight into how Charleston defined environmentalism. Here, as in the rest of the U.S., people portrayed it in a multitude of ways. To those living in Charleston, environmentalism and conservation pertained to energy, wildlife, global population, law enforcement, health and safety, and most often pollution. Most of the time, the newspaper illustrated this in stories that applied directly to local situations and immediate community involvement.

²⁹ *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, “Ecological Group Holds Community Cleanup” 30 April 1970.

³⁰ *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, “Ecological Group Holds Community Cleanup” 30 April 1970.

³¹ United Press International, “Nixon Calls for Halt in Pollution of Lakes,” *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, 16 April 1970.

³² *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, “Sludge Being Spread on Douglas Farmland,” 23 April 1970.

³³ United Press International, “Pollution Hits Shoreline,” *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, 27 April 1970.

The Community Takes Action

In response to the national attention environmentalism received and the slew of issues that appeared to affect Coles County, Illinois, the *Coles County Daily Times-Courier* shows how people started taking action. Over the course of the month youth participated in projects, Eastern Illinois University scheduled educational events, and people cleaned up dumpsites, and organized petitions.

Young people ranging from Girl Scout Troops to university students became involved. In one article, "Buzzard Students Study Pollution," two classes from Buzzard Laboratory School said they learned about pollution concerns on television and decided to start their own extracurricular initiatives.³⁴ The article included a photo of the class and recounted that they made posters about pollution for one of their projects and distributed them to local businesses in the downtown square to put on display. Just before Earth Day, class 9B from the EIU Laboratory School published an article in the paper listing all the environmental problems impacting Charleston and possible solutions.³⁵ The students used the newspaper as a means for sending out a call to action. A captioned photo showed a Girl Scout Troop cleaning up garbage along the lakefront at Lakeview Park. Their efforts resulted in several dozen bags of garbage.³⁶ Just after Earth Day, EIU students staged an antipollution march on April 24.³⁷ In each of these instances students promoted a cleaner local environment and encouraged the rest of their community to get involved.

The state sponsored opportunities for students and public audiences to learn about conservation through workshops and Eastern Illinois University's sponsored Earth Day events. "Conservation Workshops Offered by Universities" advertised a summer program for high school students across Illinois to learn about conservation and the professional careers available in the field.³⁸ The EIU Ecological Study and Control Board held meetings, a teach-in on April 20, and a cleanup day on April 25. The group's purpose "is to fight the spreading menace of air and water pollution," by organizing days to "clean up the illegal dumps in

³⁴*Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, "Buzzard Students Study Pollution," 14 April 1970.

³⁵Class 9B EIU Lab School, "Pollution Here? Class Finds It," *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, 21 April 1970.

³⁶*Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, "Girl Scout Troop 91," 21 April 1970.

³⁷*Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, "EIU Students to Stage Antipollution March," 24 April 1970.

³⁸*Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, "Conservation Workshops Offered by Universities," 13 April 1970.

Coles County.”³⁹ In celebration of Earth Day, EIU also hosted a full day of speakers to discuss the state of the planet.⁴⁰ These examples illustrate how EIU and the State of Illinois sponsored educational opportunities for Charleston and the surrounding areas.

A number of cleanup projects took place in and around the city during April. Besides some of the Girl Scout Troops, the *Coles County Daily Times-Courier* published a photo of a biology class from Charleston Junior High School who cleaned up debris from their school grounds.⁴¹ On April 25, EIU’s Ecological Group held a cleanup day for “one of the many illegal roadside dumps in the Charleston area.”⁴² This constituted the largest effort of all the cleanups documented by the newspaper. Two donated trucks made a total of thirteen trips to the Ferrier Land Fill in Lafayette Township, the only legal landfill in the county. The group coordinated with the landfill, which agreed to remain open four extra hours to accommodate the all-day operation.⁴³ In anticipation of Earth Day a Senior Editor of United Press International, David Smothers, made the comment: “No one can seriously come out against a clean environment.”⁴⁴ Likewise, none of the articles in the Charleston newspaper reported anyone upset by EIU’s Earth Day events or by the various cleanup projects around town. All the cleanup efforts appeared successful, if only for a short period of time.

In addition to picking up trash, local parks also received attention in the newspaper. Besides briefly mentioning the official dedications of two local parks, the *Coles County Daily Times-Courier* followed a story on construction plans for the nearby Fox Ridge State Park.⁴⁵ A group of people sent in petitions protesting plans for constructing sixty campsites and electricity poles at Fox Ridge. The Coles-Moultrie Electric Co-op promised to run the wires for free if they installed them above ground. To the dismay of some citizens and students, that required cutting a thirty-foot right-of-way path through the forest.⁴⁶

³⁹ *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, “Pollution Topic of EIU Group,” 8 April 1970.

⁴⁰ John Tracy Jr., “Earth Day Comes to Coles County,” *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, 23 April 1970.

⁴¹ *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, “The Biology Classes,” 24 April 1970.

⁴² *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, “Ecological Group Holds Community Cleanup,” 30 April 1970.

⁴³ *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, “Ecological Group Holds Community Cleanup,” 30 April 1970.

⁴⁴ David Smothers, “Nation is United for ‘Earth Day,’” *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, 14 April 1970.

⁴⁵ *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, “Charleston Parks Dedicated,” 20 April 1970.

⁴⁶ John Tracy, Jr., “60 Camper Spaces Scheduled for Construction at Fox Ridge,” *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, 18 April 1970.

The petitions of 100 Charleston citizens and EIU students cited “potential damage to wildlife and vegetation” among their concerns for plans to clear the trees.⁴⁷ They also questioned the necessity for constructing campsites. The state eventually agreed to run the wires underground, a procedure that would not disturb the trees, but expressed the need to continue the plans for campsites. As it turned out, Fox Ridge desperately needed the designated campsites to help contain human activity within the park. The visitation nearly doubled in just five years; the park’s 1965 annual visitation rate of 100,000 jumped to almost 200,000 by April 1970.⁴⁸

Overall, the citizens of Charleston and students of all ages definitely participated in the environmental movement by cleaning up trash and negotiating better plans for Fox Ridge. “On April 22 or any other day we, in Charleston, must begin to clean up our environment,” concluded students from the EIU Lab School, “We must start NOW.”⁴⁹ Based on evidence from their local newspaper, members of the Charleston community made a considerably positive effort.

Conclusion

Concern for the environment and conservation not only reached rural Charleston, Illinois, but generated a multifaceted discussion that touched a variety of people in many ways, from farmers and agricultural practices to academic students and local politics. Between 1 April 1970 and 30 April 1970, the *Coles County Daily Times-Courier* printed thirty-seven articles, twenty-one photographs, and three political cartoons highlighting pollution, Earth Day, or other conservation issues. These articles covered environmentalism on multiple levels by including news stories that reached national and international scopes as well as regional and local events. These documents mirrored the many facets of environmentalism found on the national level and, likewise, defined the problem in many different ways by looking at it from angles such as energy, wildlife conservation, increasing population, law enforcement, as a health and safety risk, and pollution.

A rapid burst of concern for the environment infused itself into many aspects of life in the United States between the 1960s and early 1970s. Sparked, in part, by the awareness generated with popular texts,

⁴⁷ *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, “Petitions Sent Protesting Fox Ridge Construction,” 22 April 1970.

⁴⁸ *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, “No Overhead Wires for Fox Ridge Project,” 28 April 1970.

⁴⁹ Emphasis in the original. Class 9B EIU Lab School, “Pollution Here? Class Finds It,” *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, 21 April 1970.

such as Rachel Carson's bestselling *Silent Spring*, the environmental movement produced new government legislation for regulating pollution and monitoring environmental change. Although new conservation laws, alone, did not guarantee continued public support, they did legitimize some of the concerns expressed by environmentalists. In doing so, it pushed more Americans to grapple with what they sometimes portrayed as an ethical struggle that lay behind human beings' relationships with the planet. Environmentalism also manifested itself in the educational sphere. There, EIU sponsored speakers as part of their Earth Day events and students of many ages participated in cleanup activities around Charleston.

Historians traditionally identified the environmental movement as one of several protest groups present in the turbulent 1960s. On the contrary, the United States's relationship with the natural world and its resources packs a more complex story. As historian Benjamin Kline stated, "The environmental movement found its place in every part of American life – political, economic, generational, urban, and rural."⁵⁰ The same holds true for Charleston. An Eastern Illinois University class summed up the history well when they wrote, "Our environment is becoming unhealthy. This is a problem that affects everyone, including the citizens of Charleston, Illinois."⁵¹ By the end of April 1970, concern for the state of the planet reached this small city in rural, east-central Illinois and convinced its people to take action.

⁵⁰Kline, *First Along the River* 82.

⁵¹Class 9B EIU Lab School, "Pollution Here? Class Finds It," *Coles County Daily Times-Courier*, 21 April 1970.