Introduction

The Uncounted Environmentalists

Why was the National Urban League, an organization created to serve urban African Americans, working on environmental issues in the late 1970s? The answer was simple, league official William Haskins told members of the National League of Cities in 1978. "The truth of the matter is that black folks and other inner city minorities are really the uncounted environmentalists. We're the uncounted environmentalists because we've been fighting for years for a better environment for our people, but we've been calling it better housing, cleaner communities, preventive health care or adequate recreation facilities for our children."[1] In this speech, Haskins was trying to promote the Urban League's advocacy of environmental issues, especially its partnerships with the Sierra Club and the Environmental Protection Agency. But he was also trying to claim the mantle of environmentalism for African Americans and other disadvantaged urban residents. He was not the first.

This book is the story of a wave of environmental activism that swept America's older, industrial cities during the late 1960s and early 1970s. During the postwar decades, American cities faced a host of problems, including deindustrialization and high unemployment, rapid suburbanization, racism and white flight, and destructive urban renewal and highway construction schemes. These were, in general, a result of America's antiurban, pro-suburban policies that caused or exacerbated a host of racial, social, and political conflicts. But these policies also had environmental ramifications. Cities were torn apart or left to rot, sometimes both. Millions of Americans did not have to deal with these issues because they had fled to the suburbs. They left behind African Americans and poor and working-class whites who usually had no choice but to stay and often lived in the hardest-hit, most-polluted neighborhoods.

As they began to understand the harm this urban destruction was causing to their children, families, and communities, residents organized to prevent these hazards and improve urban living conditions in scores of local movements in cities across the country. In the process they articulated a specific type of urban environmentalism. During the 1970s, Haskins and others would attempt to legitimize this activism at the national level, so that city residents could become part of the broader environmental movement, which had burst onto the American scene after the first Earth Day in 1970. They were unsuccessful. Instead, urbanites would be forced to give their allegiance to a new movement, environmental justice, which would attempt to address their concerns and those of other Americans whose voices were pushed out of mainstream environmentalism.

From the squalor of ancient Rome to the smoke-filled streets of Victorian Manchester, large cities have always created environmental and public health hazards. This was usually because they were massive and dense and grew quickly, with lots of people and buildings that overwhelmed the local infrastructure and environment. This book, however, explores a new environmental consciousness that emerged not from rapid urban growth but from systematic destruction. During the postwar decades, American metropolitan areas rapidly expanded, but the massive suburbanization also drained resources from the center of the city. This caused a cluster of problems, including concentrated poverty, chronic unemployment, dilapidated housing, and rising crime.

These problems, and the response to them, became known as the "urban crisis," but the meaning and definition of what the crisis was has changed over time. During the 1950s, many journalists, planners, and other urban experts considered the crisis a physical one: Cities were growing too fast or falling apart. The suburban fringe was destroying open space with tacky, wasteful tract homes, while the centers of cities had dilapidated apartment buildings, potholed streets, and smoke-spewing factories. This was a crisis of infrastructure. During the 1960s these concerns were overtaken by scores of civil disturbances in African American ghettos that killed hundreds and destroyed thousands of city blocks. As politicians and activists tried to explain why these riots occurred, and what they said about America, the definition changed. Now the crisis was a problem of poor African Americans isolated within the central city.

This second definition is what most scholars and regular Americans think about when they hear the term "urban crisis," and explanations for why it occurred have also changed over time. Early observers pointed toward discrimination by whites but also African American cultural deficiencies. Since the 1980s, historians and social scientists have increasingly used structural explanations for these problems. In the postwar era, cities simultaneously suburbanized and deindustrialized, they argued. Racism and racialized housing markets restricted black housing opportunities, while deindustrialization and entrenched racism at the work site restricted black employment options. This structural

framework has undergirded important historical studies of suburbanization, civil rights and black power activism, the decline of liberalism, and the rise of the conservative right.[2] Critics of this framework argue that it ignores cultural factors, especially within black families, and that government programs have fostered dependency and laziness in inner-city communities.[3] Other critiques have come from the opposite side of the cultural coin, arguing that in many cities the crisis was partially imagined or constructed by reformers to legitimize and fund significant urban renewal and reconstruction projects and that the type of crisis a person or community experienced was mediated by factors such as race and class.[4]

Despite these criticisms, "urban crisis" still has tremendous value as a way to think about the postwar American city. This study follows a hybrid definition that combines the general meaning of crisis with aspects of both contemporary understandings—the physical, infrastructural crisis and the racial, civil rights crisis. This allows us to understand the experience of the city in important ways. The common meaning of *crisis* is as a turning point, a moment in which massive change is possible or inevitable, and where people believe the outcome to that change will be highly undesirable. Starting with this part of the definition focuses attention on the mind-set of urban residents during the period when they believed cities were at that turning point, from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s. Most accounts of this period try to explain how whites and blacks struggled to adapt to the city's rapidly shifting geographies of race and class.[5] Exploring the racialization of urban space is vitally important, especially because this process often caused or reinforced environmental inequalities. Nevertheless, race is not the entire story. A full investigation of how urban residents experienced this period reveals that the physical aspects of the urban crisis did not disappear in the 1960s. In fact, they became an important part of the protests and activism that occurred in dozens of cities. To understand what these physical problems were, and how people experienced and responded to them, the tools of environmental history are extraordinarily useful.

For many years, the study of the city was a neglected child in environmental history: acknowledged as part of the family but not given much attention. As the ultimate representation of culture and human dominance over the natural world, cities were passed over in favor of rural areas, wilderness, forests, and national parks. Environmental history also favored a timeline of centuries, whereas cities often boomed and busted within a couple of decades, making it hard to show the long-term impact that nature had on human history. Nevertheless, a number of hardy scholarly pioneers have been examining city environments for years. Their early works looked at how Americans, especially in the Progressive era, responded to the environmental problems of rapid urban growth. In recent years urban environmental history has blossomed into a full-fledged subfield, with the best studies showing how nature is a vital player in shaping cities and urban history, how cities shape places and environments far outside their municipal boundaries, and how attempts to control the

natural world lead to inequalities among different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups.[6]

Environmental history can help us understand the urban crisis in a number of important ways. First, it focuses on tangible, physical change. Some of the best recent works on postwar cities are cultural histories that deconstruct the language and assumptions of urban planners and city leaders, parsing through the jargon and technical language to show how urban renewal and public housing plans were often embedded within constructs of race, class, and gender.[7] This focus on culture, however, too often ignores the material reality of the postwar metropolis. Americans were building new types of cities after World War II. This entailed a significant amount of environmental transformation on the suburban frontier but also in the center, as urban renewal and decentralization tore central city neighborhoods apart. Second, and extending from the focus on physical change, is an emphasis on lived experience. To city residents the urban crisis was tangible: more empty lots and run-down buildings; giant, seemingly never-ending construction projects; dirty air; rat-infested housing; and children sick from lead poisoning and tuberculosis. Although many, especially African Americans, understood, in an intellectual sense, the larger forces of discrimination and inequality that shaped the city, exploring environmental problems helps us understand what these individuals and groups encountered on a daily basis.

Finally, an environmental history of the urban crisis expands the narrative of postwar environmentalism to include the experiences and contributions of minority, working-class, and urban Americans, who are usually ignored.

Although it has roots in Progressive-era conservation activism, environmentalism developed as a distinct social movement after 1945 and was triggered by three broad overlapping and intersecting developments. The first was the massive expansion of the postwar middle class. Buoyed by the policies of growth liberalism, which also concentrated wealth in the center of the income scale, millions of Americans could afford single-family homes and other consumer goods for the first time, as well as have the leisure time to enjoy them. This increase in economic security, combined with the expansion of higher education, helped feed the growth of environmental anxiety. No longer worried about the day-to-day exigencies of feeding their families, many Americans began to look toward the future, the world their children would inherit, and became gravely concerned.[8] This was sparked by not only the existing problems of industrial production such as air and water pollution but also hazards and threats posed by a new generation of technologies developed during the war. This was the second major cause of postwar environmentalism. Nuclear weapons, chemical pesticides, plastics, and synthetic materials were all created in wartime laboratories. After the conflict ended, corporations were eager to cash in on research that had been government funded. The relationship of this technology to the postwar consumer economy was in many ways dialectical.

Plastics, for example, made bottling and packaging that much less expensive and goods more affordable, while the expansion of consumers led to the development of new, cheap, disposable products at an ever-increasing rate. Nevertheless, the designers of these new materials had a poor understanding of their long-term impact. By the late 1950s, a small group of activist scientists and writers began to raise concerns about how chemical products affected nature and human health. Although Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was the most famous, a number of books, such as Barry Commoner's *Science and Survival* and Fairfield Osborn's *Our Plundered Planet*, attempted to educate the public about the known and unknown dangers of pesticides, plastics, and nuclear weapons and raise general concern about the use of technology.[9]

The combination of a massive increase in prosperity and wide-ranging, dangerous developments in technology brought about some of the most well-known environmental protests and activism of the postwar era: opposition to atomic power and aboveground nuclear testing, the wilderness and open land preservation movement, and concerns about global population growth. Taken together, these and other forms of activism by the middle class and affluent were the focus of most major environmental groups and are what most Americans think of when they think about environmentalism. This type of activism is thus often labeled "mainstream" environmentalism. It is, however, only one part of the story.

The focus of this book—the urban environmentalism of the late 1960s and 1970s—was part of the response to the third major cause of postwar environmental activism: the growth of spatial inequalities caused by the geographical reorientation of postwar America. Before the war, the Northeast and Midwest were industrialized and urbanized, the South was largely rural, and the West was sparsely populated. But wartime production and mobilization brought a flood of federal government investment into the Sun Belt cities, which continued during the Cold War, with military contractors and large bases dotting the region. Northern corporations had long taken advantage of the South's low taxes and antiunion labor policies. But postwar government investment and advances in infrastructure—particularly interstate highways and telecommunications—allowed them to move production and capital away from traditional urban centers.[10]

The other major part of this shift was the reconfiguration of American cities. Northern cities went from dense municipalities to sprawling metropolises, and the Sun Belt cities skipped a step, booming straight into amorphous, amoeba-like burbopolises. The geographic shift in people and wealth, combined with economic growth and emergence of dangerous new technologies, did not distribute environmental hazards, risks, and amenities equally. Both regionally and nationally, certain places had more air pollution, dirtier water, and denser quantities of chemical plants and toxic waste dumps. Since race and class were increasingly spatial concepts in postwar America—being poor,

or black, or both meant living in a certain neighborhood or part of town, for example—these hot spots were overwhelmingly in poor, working-class, and minority communities.[11]

The response to these environmental inequalities came in the form of local, grassroots movements all across the country, many of them in minority communities. Although this activism is relatively well known, scholars usually classify it as part of environmental justice activism, not environmentalism. As a social movement, environmental justice emerged over the course of the 1980s, as minority communities began to protest what they saw as the discriminatory placement of toxic waste dumps, chemical plants, and other hazardous industrial uses. Their use of the language of justice and attempts to create a conscious connection to the civil rights struggles of the 1960s were powerful and effective tactics, and, by the 1990s, environmental justice had become an effective frame for antitoxics campaigns among poor, minority, and working-class communities across the country.[12] Once they attained national recognition, environmental justice advocates began to argue that their movement was something new and different. However, some historians and other scholars countered that antitoxics organizing was actually the latest in a long line of activism by poor and working-class people against environmental inequalities that went back to the early twentieth century.[13]

These attempts to historicize environmental justice are important, but their impact has often been the opposite of what was intended. In recent years, environmental justice has been dehistoricized, removed from its emergence during a particular time and place. Now environmental justice does not mean a movement so much as a specific set of concepts, particularly activism by the poor or disadvantaged against the malapportionment of environmental hazards and risks. These concepts can then be applied anywhere that a particular researcher sees them. This approach is ahistorical and does a disservice to environmental justice activism by placing it in a scholarly ghetto. As it develops its own language, terms, journals, and canon, environmental justice becomes something separate and different from environmentalism. Although this has its benefits, especially for activists and scholars concerned about delineating, understanding, and rectifying contemporary environmental inequalities, it is problematic for historical analysis, because it only further encourages environmentalism as the "norm" for concern about the natural world and the human place in it. All questions of power, privilege, class, and race get pushed to the field of environmental justice, removing them from consideration in the study of environmentalism.[14]

This book attempts to serve as a corrective by explicitly bringing the history of activism by poor, disadvantaged, and minority urban groups against environmental inequalities under the broad conceptual umbrella of environmentalism. Expanding the definition of environmentalism helps accomplish a number of important goals. First, the environmental justice movement that emerged during the 1980s can be historicized and placed in its proper context,

with the particular goal of understanding the relationship between minority groups and mainstream environmentalism. This reconceptualization—that environmentalism is a big tent with lots of different types of activism going on—will also correct some of the teleology in the history of environmental activism. Too often, historians have examined the past for the origins or evolution of the movement as it exists today. This has meant a strong focus on mainstream environmentalism: middle-class and elite activists and their concerns about wilderness, animals, and the general health of the planet. Subaltern, minority, and working-class concerns about environmental inequality are ignored or confined to environmental justice. More importantly, this focus on origins has meant that historical ideas, activists, and movements are picked apart for the hints of how they might contribute to later developments and not considered on their own terms. Historians have not placed enough emphasis on the political, social, and cultural context of environmental problems and activism, and missed opportunities, false starts, alternate paths, and fringe movements and actors are rarely considered. In short, their histories often leave out or ignore anything that does not look like mainstream environmentalism.[15]

By examining people who look more like civil rights, community, or housing activists than environmentalists, this study focuses on those border areas. But instead of considering them as tramps jumping on the determined freight train that was mainstream environmentalism, it approaches them as part of the same movement.

Of course, it is easy to say that assigning the label of "environmentalist" to groups and movements that did not claim the title is perpetrating just another type of historical and teleological conceptualization. But to fully understand the history of environmental activism, we have to be willing to expand the historiographical definition. Only then will it be possible to assess environmentalism's place in the broader scope of modern American and global history. Environmental history is a vibrant field, but, as John McNeill recently pointed out, it is in danger of becoming an isolated subfield that does not speak to broader historiographical trends.[16] Most American historians acknowledge the importance of environmentalism to postwar American politics and social movements, but few efforts have made this connection consciously and directly. That is why this book looks to make direct links among environmental, urban, and social history.

One of the primary reasons urban and minority environmentalists are often overlooked is not because of their skin color or social position but because of their language. How they defined and discussed urban environmental problems was wholly different from white, suburban, college-educated environmentalists. This was partially because many of them lacked the vocabulary of more privileged greens, but was mainly because they had attained their knowledge about environmental problems in a fundamentally different way. Much of mainstream environmentalism is a politics of scientific expertise, based on

supposedly universal knowledge forged in the laboratory or through systematic observation and then disseminated through higher education, academic enterprise, or environmental organizations. This type of knowledge made it easier for middle-class people to make successful claims on the state, because regulatory bureaucracies privileged scientific knowledge. It also allowed them to take on, and then define, the label of "environmentalist." The situation was very different for poor, working-class, and minority urbanites, who lacked the education, monetary resources, and social connections to make similar claims.[17]

This is not to say that these city residents lacked environmental knowledge. Far from it. But it was a form of local knowledge, born from the experience of urban environmental problems, rather than technical expertise. Every day residents saw their communities torn up by highway and urban renewal projects, their children and grandchildren sickened from lead poisoning, and their neighborhoods befouled by acrid smoke. It was not personal experience alone that shaped the activism of these city residents—almost all grassroots environmentalism is rooted in personal experience—but their relative social and cultural position. Unlike the affluent or merely middle class, they could not relocate to a more verdant and healthier locale. Residents did not see urban environmental problems as risks or even threats that would possibly bring harm in the future, but as hazards that would cause immediate harm in the present.[18]

This experiential knowledge drove urban activism. But to make successful claims about environmental harm, residents could not simply say that the air smelled or their children were sick. They needed evidence—from lab and field tests, surveys, or testimony from trained experts—of the hazard's material existence. Only with this data could they successfully make appeals to city politicians and other local, state, and federal bureaucrats. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the residents discussed here were able to do this because they had access to technical expertise through various governmental bureaucracies and social movement groups, especially the programs associated with the federal government's War on Poverty and various aspects of the civil rights movement. Across the country, communities of poor and marginalized Americans used the resources of these institutions to advocate for environmental improvement.[19] Nevertheless, improving local democracy also meant getting access to local bureaucracies. Since trained experts designed and managed these bureaucracies, thus setting the terms of access, Great Society programs and social movement institutions provided city residents with the technical information necessary to successfully deal with these powerful, but often obscure, engines of local politics.

Residents built their movements on the knowledge forged by the experience of specific hazards created by metropolitan change. They also successfully transferred that experiential knowledge into scientific and technical terms to receive recognition, and remediation, from both local government and private businesses. This further reinforced environmentalism as a knowledge politics, an arena in which the control of specific types of knowledge set the terms and

outcome of the debate. But it also offered an alternative path, in which those who did not have the privilege of advanced education, financial resources, or middle-class social standing could also claim the mantle of environmentalism.

Because urban environmental knowledge was specifically local, and not universal, this book is built around case studies of urban activism in Baltimore, Chicago, and St. Louis. These were chosen primarily because they were part of America's older industrial belt in the Midwest and Northeast states, and thus experienced the transition from centralized industrial city to decentralized, postindustrial metropolis more severely than newer cities in the South and West. Each study examines activism by specific demographic groups in response to a specific set of environmental problems caused by the urban crisis.

In St. Louis, rapid population loss and housing discrimination exposed African American families to poor housing conditions in the city's north-side ghettos, leading to inordinate levels of childhood lead poisoning among the city's most vulnerable residents. Activists and residents seized upon this epidemic as proof that slums kill and engaged in a spirited campaign to eradicate lead poisoning and improve housing for the city's poorest black residents. In postwar Baltimore, civic leaders attempted to modernize this old port city with an ambitious urban renewal and highway construction plan. However, political and economic factors placed the burden of these projects on African American and, to a lesser degree, working-class white neighborhoods. In response to not only the threat of highway overbuilding but also the physical process of condemnation and demolition, Baltimoreans formed a citywide, interracial coalition that helped defeat major sections of the city's highway plan. Chicago's manufacturing economy declined in the postwar era, but the city retained pockets of heavy industry and coal-fired power plants that the municipal government was hesitant to regulate. In response, white working-class communities formed a citywide coalition, the Campaign Against Pollution, that got the city to enforce pollution laws and went on to fight city leaders on a number of urban environmental issues.

To place this activism in context and connect it to larger trends, the case studies, in Chapters 2–4, are bookended by two nationally focused chapters. Combining a national story with multiple local studies helps avoid some of the limitations of each method. A national focus often allows scholars to pick and choose aspects of the story that fit their narrative or conceptual framework. This is particularly prevalent in environmental history, in which writers can easily find examples and stories that suit their preconceived notion of what environmentalism is. A case study allows a more detailed and nuanced look at the variety of local political, economic, and social forces, actors, organizations, and institutions that shape specific forms of activism. Much of postwar urban history has followed this method, with detailed examinations of various cities. The problem with using only case studies is that environmental issues are often only a blip, one part of the larger narrative of the decline or metropolitanization

of the postwar city. Chapter 1, which explores urban America from the 1920s to the 1960s, is the entry point for the local studies. It begins with a discussion of the structural factors that brought about the significant urban changes of the postwar decades and concludes with a focus on the environmental manifestations of the urban crisis and how these were perceived by urban elites and then, through activism, by residents themselves. Chapter 5 is the exit point, examining how urban issues were an important part of the national discussion about what the environmental movement would look like during the 1970s. The book's conclusion covers how this urban environmentalism was eventually pushed to the side, leaving room for the emergence of a new movement, environmental justice.