INTRODUCTION

NGOs and the Origins of "Sustainable Development"

In the summer of 1956, Russell Train, a U.S. Tax Court judge, visited East Africa in the hopes of seeing and hunting some of the region's many big-game animals (Figure 1). Two years later, Train returned to the region for a similar safari. Train enjoyed the first trip, which he had spent enthusiastically tracking leopards and pursuing a trophy elephant tusk. However, he came away startled and deeply worried from the second one. Extensive poaching by native hunters, widespread clearing of land for settlement, and the realization that new postcolonial leaders might dissolve game reserves and parks established in the colonial era alarmed Train. "With the native races assuming more and more control over the destiny of the African continent, the fate of the wildlife becomes increasingly uncertain," Train wrote to family and friends upon his return home. "The need is desperate to act now," he continued, "before this magnificent heritage which belongs to all the world is lost forever."[1] Decolonization, and in particular the loss of Western control over Africa's wildlife, seemed to imperil the continent's natural flora and fauna.

In the fall of 1960, Julian Huxley, a British scientist and former official with the United Nations (UN), took a trip similar to Train's. Huxley ventured to East Africa, where he hoped to document the state of the region's wildlife protection programs. Much like Train, Huxley came away stunned. He shared Train's fears of decolonization. Everywhere he went, he saw the transfer of power from colonial authorities to new nationalist leaders as a threat to the imperial protection arrangements.

[1] Russell and Aileen Train, "Back to Africa: 1958," 1959, box 1, Russell E. Train Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress [hereinafter cited as Train Papers].

FIGURE 1: Aileen B. Train and Russell E. Train on safari in Kenya, 1956, with a leopard shot by Russell E. Train. Courtesy of Russell Train Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

Hoping to engender widespread concern back home for these issues, Huxley penned a series of articles for a London newspaper, the *Observer*. In these pieces, he juxtaposed images of exotic animals and bucolic landscapes with hyperbolic headlines and descriptions portraying Africa's wildlife in a dire situation. "The issue is this," Huxley asserted, "whether Africa's wild life and wild nature can survive, or whether they will be destroyed or whittled down to a poor remnant by the rising tides of over-population and industrial and other 'development.'"[2] Huxley feared that leaders of postcolonial nations would soon clamor for economic development, which would make the African situation seem far more troubling.

Train's and Huxley's concerns reveal many important themes from the mid-twentieth century. Many Western conservationists looked to what observers termed the "developing world" and saw disturbing trends. Decolonization and economic development seemed to pose such a serious threat to wild flora and fauna all over the world that individuals such as Train perceived a "need" to act on behalf of the nonhuman world to help

[2] Julian Huxley, "The Treasure House of Wildlife," *Observer*, November 13, 1960, 23–4.

it survive. Underlying these notions was a belief that such exotic flora and fauna did not necessarily belong to any one nation, but as Train suggested, "to all the world." External interventions could thus be justified to protect wildlife if an individual nation failed to do so. These arguments proved to be quite powerful. Over the second half of the twentieth century such global environmental imperatives would frequently conflict with national sovereignty in a world where power was increasingly being allocated to nation-states.[3]

Additionally, beneath Train's and Huxley's statements lurked a powerful tension between economic development and environmental protection. Development, they assumed, was a linear process that necessitated a view of nature as a static entity, designed only for human exploitation. As they understood it, development meant the removal of barriers to human action and economic growth. By contrast, the kind of environmental protection they sought demanded limits on human freedom, to preserve and protect the natural world from unheeded human use.[4]

[3] Although most histories of environmentalism tend to focus on movements within national borders, this book highlights the global origins of leading Western environmental activist organizations. It expands on recent works in this vein such as Thomas Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment: Global Population Growth and the Birth of American Environmentalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012); Frank Zelko, *Make It a Green Peace! The Rise of Countercultural Environmentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Ramachandra Guha, *Environmentalism: A Global History* (New York, Longman, 2000); Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South* (London: Earthscan Publications, Ltd., 1997); John McCormick, *The Global Environmental Movement*, 2nd ed. (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1995). The literature on American environmentalism is too long to cite in full here, but excellent starting points are Adam Rome, "'Give Earth a Chance': The Environment Movement and the Sixties," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 90, No. 2 (2003), 525–4; Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Michael Egan and Jeff Crane, eds., *Natural Protest: Essays on the History of American Environmentalism* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

[4] The history of development has a rich historiography that has grown tremendously in recent years. For general studies on the origins and evolution of international development, see Michael Cowen and Robert Shenton, *Doctrines of Development* (New York: Routledge Press, 1996); Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith* (London: Zed Books, 2008); James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); H. W. Arndt, *Economic Development: The History of an Idea* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987); Joseph Morgan Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert: Agrarian Doctrines of Development and the Legacies of British Colonialism* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007); Amy L. S. Staples, *The Birth of Development: How the World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization, and the World Health Organization Changed the World, 1945–1965* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2006). On development in U.S. foreign relations, see David C. Engerman, Nils Gilman,

How Train and Huxley responded to these concerns was also indicative of a significant trend in the postwar era, the growth of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Both men helped to found NGOs: the African Wildlife Leadership Foundation (AWLF) in Train's case, and the more influential International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in Huxley's. Environmental activists such as Train and Huxley believed that national governments had not effectively pursued environmental protection or were simply unwilling to do so, and thus they needed new institutions to pressure governments to adopt environmental policies. Moreover, decolonization and development were global problems; nations across the world strove for self-determination and rapid economic growth. Train and Huxley figured that it was necessary to form NGOs that were global in scope and purpose. Their subsequent activism transcended national borders and covered much of the world.[5]

Mark H. Haefele, and Michael E. Latham, eds., *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development, and the Global Cold War* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 2003); Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Vernon Ruttan, *United States Development Assistance Policy: The Domestic Politics of Foreign Aid* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Amanda Kay McVety, *Enlightened Aid: U.S. Development as Foreign Policy in Ethiopia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Michael E. Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). This book pushes the history of development in new directions by elucidating the environmental critique of development and showing how lending institutions transformed as a result of environmental NGO lobbying efforts from the 1970s and beyond. In so doing, it integrates insights from diplomatic and environmental history. On this point, see *Diplomatic History*, Special Edition on Environmental History, Vol. 32, No. 4 (September 2008), 407–673.

[5] The environmental NGOs discussed in this book took the entire globe as an object of governance, moved freely across borders, filled their staff rosters with cosmopolitan elites from many nations, sought to use supranational or transnational institutions to establish global standards for development practice, and attempted to reform foreign aid and development policies of all regions and nations. By focusing on such actors, their ideas, their actions, and the extent to which their activism reshaped national and international institutions, this book presents one way of writing a history of transnational activism that keeps an analytic eye toward both non-state actors and state policy. For other recent works on non-state actors and international politics, see Sarah B. Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (Cambridge University Press, 2011); Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational*

As NGOs attempted to promote environmental protection worldwide over the ensuing decades, the tension between environmental and development objectives emerged as a major theme of international politics. From the late 1960s onward, controversies raged over how development policies should integrate environmental protection measures. When the developed countries proposed international agreements over environmental problems, developing countries fired back with claims of neo-imperialism and calls for financial compensation and increased development aid. When developing countries demanded their right to unfettered economic growth, developed countries claimed that the "Global South" was selfishly scuttling international cooperation. All the while, NGOs advocated for the United States, the World Bank, and the United Nations to promote development projects that emphasized ecological limitations. These debates all revolved around a single question: What kind of development policies would reconcile the desire for economic development with the necessity of environmental protection?

Of Limits and Growth explores how some of the largest and most influential international and U.S. based NGOs endeavored to answer this question over the second half of the twentieth century. This book begins by uncovering how concerns about decolonization and a global push for economic growth in the developing world motivated Western reformers to form international environmental NGOs. Many of these groups sought to continue colonial era protection arrangements, and many of them emerged to replace imperial authorities in postcolonial game reserves and national parks. However, as the allure of development captivated many leaders in these countries, and as Western countries increasingly offered foreign aid for economic development in the hopes of winning allies in the global Cold War, environmental issues received little attention. NGO officials struggled to convince nationalist leaders to adopt environmental protection policies during the 1950s and 1960s.

Movement to End the Cold War (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Akira Iriye, *The Global Community: The Role of International Organizations and the Making of the Modern World* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2002); Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Erez Manela, "Reconceiving International History," *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (March 2009), 69–77; Erez Manela, "A Pox on Your Narrative: Writing Disease Control into Cold War History," *Diplomatic History* Vol. 34, No. 2 (April 2010); Matthew Hilton, *Prosperity for All: Consumer Activism in an Era of Globalization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

Following their early difficulties to promote environmental protection in the so-called Third World countries, NGOs refocused their activism on the lenders of development aid, particularly the United States, the World Bank, and the United Nations. Environmentalists believed that existing development approaches used by major donor governments, such as the United States, and international development agencies, such as the World Bank, would wreak havoc on the nonhuman world. After all, it was becoming clear that Western industrial development over the previous century had wrought tremendous environmental consequences. By the mid-twentieth century, air and water pollution, excessive resource exploitation, rapid population growth, and many more issues threatened ecosystems around the globe. To minimize such destruction in the developing countries, prominent NGOs – such as the IUCN, the WWF, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), Friends of the Earth International (FOEI), Volunteers in Technical Assistance (VITA), the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), and the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) – attempted to reform existing international development policies in a number of ways. They advocated for the use of small-scale, "appropriate" technologies; the incorporation of environmental reviews in the lending process; the adoption of development planning models on the basis of ecological principles; and international cooperation around environmental issues at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 and the Rio Earth Summit in 1992.

This book shows that through these reform efforts NGOs gave rise to the concept and discourse of "sustainable development" in the 1980s as a way to link developmental aspirations with environmental concerns. *Of Limits and Growth* argues that the origins of the sustainability idea can only be understood by examining how environmental NGOs transformed the practices of major development lending institutions – particularly the U.S. government, the World Bank, and the United Nations – during the 1970s and 1980s. Organizations such as VITA and the WWF seized on opportunities created by shifts toward privatization in foreign aid, as they earned government support to carry out development projects. FOEI, the EDF, and the NRDC became potent lobbying groups that swayed congressional opinion and mounted effective legal campaigns against governing institutions. The IUCN and the IIED leveraged personal connections and professional expertise to shape the agendas and outcomes of major conferences. From the time of Train's and Huxley's trips to East Africa through the rise of sustainable development discourse in the 1980s, these

civil society groups dynamically coevolved with leading development institutions, altering both the content of foreign aid policies and the nature of NGO advocacy strategies.[6]

These reforms exposed both the possibilities and the limitations of focusing on institutional changes within development lenders. In so doing they raised critical questions about the role of NGOs in international politics. In reforming development policies, leading environmental groups created a variety of legal and political mechanisms to make lending agencies accountable for the ecological consequences of their projects. The new relationships forged between environmental advocacy groups and governing institutions ensured this accountability. Yet the slow implementation of new environmental protection measures, coupled with the close relationship between major NGOs and centers of power, led some development experts and activists to wonder whether the accountability

[6] This book focuses closely on the dynamic interactions between governing institutions and private actors. It looks *within* the U.S. Agency for International Development, the World Bank, and the United Nations as much as "beyond the state" to investigate the personal and structural relationships formed between large institutions and NGOs in the sphere of development policy. By highlighting institutions as venues where private activism and public power meet, this book demonstrates how NGOs reformed public policy, how the institutionalization of the environmental movement into large NGOs altered its tenor and character, and how the close ties with governing ultimately shaped the meaning of "sustainable development." My approach draws on insights from American Political Development (APD) and International Relations (IR) scholarship on institutional change, advocacy networks, and environmental NGOs. See, for instance, Edmund P. Russell, "The Strange Career of DDT: Experts, Federal Capacity, and Environmentalism in World War II," *Environmental History*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Oct. 1999), 770–96; Brian Balogh, *Chain Reaction: Expert Debate and Public Participation in American Commercial Nuclear Power, 1945–1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Paul Pierson and Theda Skocpol, eds., *The Transformation of American Politics: Activist Government and the Rise of Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); McGee Young, *Developing Interests: Organizational Change and the Politics of Advocacy* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2010); Andrew Hurrell and Benedict Kingsbury, eds., *The International Politics of the Environment: Actors, Interests and Intuitions* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1992); Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Paul Wapner, *Environmental Activism and World Civic Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996). On the need to look "beyond" the state in diplomatic and international history, see Matthew Connelly, "Seeing Beyond the State: The Population Control Movement and the Problem of Sovereignty," *Past & Present*, Vol. 193, No. 1 (December 2006), 197–233. This book is not a comprehensive history of all environmental NGOs worldwide, nor does it focus on local environmental NGOs in the Global South that organize around developmental issues. On environmentalism activism around the world, see, for instance, Guha, *Environmentalism: A Global History* and Guha and Martinez-Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism*.

achieved came at the expense of more open access and democratic representation in major development institutions.

Likewise, the rise of the sustainability discourse came through a process of negotiation and compromise that left some wondering whether or not the concept offered a truly new approach to development. As many environmentalists have celebrated, sustainable development planning provided for the incorporation of ecological science into public policy.[7] Yet sustainable development also derived from a process of political accommodation in which officials in leading environmental NGOs consciously sought to include the concerns of intellectuals and other elites from the developing world. By the late 1970s, leaders in the environmental community came to support poverty eradication, the pursuit of socio-economic equality between countries, and economic development as a political right for developing nations to a far greater extent than when Train and Huxley first made their trips to East Africa and largely focused on maintaining imperial protection programs. Environmental thought incorporated developmental aspirations as much as development thinking and practice addressed ideas of environmental protection. NGOs used the phrase "sustainable development" to encapsulate this intellectual compromise.

Although the phrase only became widely used in the 1980s, there is a long history behind sustainable development ideas and practices. Historians have pointed to the early twentieth-century conservation movement that stressed the "wise use" of natural resources to serve the greatest number of people for the greatest amount of time and to the mid-twentieth-century idea of "maximum sustained yield" that allowed for resource use within a given ecosystem's regenerative capacities. Still others have gazed further back, finding "sustainable" thinking and practices in traditions as diverse as eighteenth-century German soil science and medieval Christian theology.[8]

[7] The United Nations' World Commission on Environment and Development made this point clear in its popular 1987 report, *Our Common Future*: "The ability to anticipate and prevent environmental damage requires that the ecological dimensions of policy be considered at the same time as the economic, trade, energy, agricultural, and other dimensions. They should be considered on the same agendas and in the same national and international institutions." [Online] Available: http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-ov.htm. Accessed August 18, 2014.

[8] For scholarship that addresses the meaning and origins of sustainable development, see Sharachchandra M. Lele, "Sustainable Development: A Critical Review." *World Development*, Vol. 19, No. 6 (1991), 607–21; Charles V. Kidd, "The Evolution of Sustainability," *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1992),

Such accounts, however, do not explain why or how the concept "sustainable development" emerged in the 1970s, or why the phrase became so popular in the 1980s and beyond. *Of Limits and Growth* argues instead that it gained traction because it offered a way to reconcile the deep international tensions over development and environmental protection that had proliferated after World War II. The sustainability discourse took hold because it allowed leaders to acknowledge general environmental imperatives while also sanctioning aspirations for continued economic development. By the 1980s the phrase had acquired multiple definitions, and many national policy makers used it to suggest the compatibility of environmental protection with a growth-oriented, market economy. Infused with this optimistic meaning that elided calls for greater resource transfers from the wealthy countries to the Global South – which many NGO officials believed was a necessary component for realizing sustainable development plans – the sustainability discourse did little to persuade leaders in powerful countries to alter the balance of power in international politics. Although talk of sustainable development pervaded the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, decades-old debates between developed countries and the Global South over foreign aid levels, the virtues of increased regulation, and who should bear the costs of environmental protection still bedeviled negotiations over global agreements such as the emerging United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

By the 1990s, environmental NGOs could celebrate their role in compelling many changes in the practice of international development, but they also had to confront the ongoing and serious challenges to environmental protection worldwide. NGOs' activism reshaped the lending policies and strategies of the United States, the World Bank, and the UN system. Environmentalists also introduced the language of sustainability into international politics. The environmental movement, however, remained trapped between developing countries' emphasis on national sovereignty and economic growth and the continued refusal of the developed world – and the United States in particular – to invest the substantial financial resources necessary to protect the global environment.

The story told here recounts many discussions and debates over ideas about both economic growth and ecological limits, but it also emphasizes

1–26; John Robinson, "Squaring the Circle? Some Thoughts on the Idea of Sustainable Development," *Ecological Economics*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (2004), 369–84; Paul Warde, "The Invention of Sustainability," *Modern Intellectual History*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2011), 153–70; Thomas Ebben, "The History of Sustainability: Tracing Back a Legal Concept," unpublished paper in author's possession.

the growth of environmental NGOs and, ultimately, the limits of their influence. Recapturing this history of environmentalists' engagement with international development is significant, because it helps to illuminate a perplexing dilemma. Over the past forty years the environmental movement has strengthened, diversified, and seen tremendous institutional gains. Yet the state of the global environment remains as precarious as it did decades earlier.[9] *Of Limits and Growth* helps to explain why, after the rise of sustainable development discourse, this is still the case.

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This book is comprised of three parts. The first part consists of three chapters that explore the origins of the postwar global environmental activism and its relationship to decolonization and international development policy through the early 1970s. Chapter 1 uncovers the origins of the IUCN and the WWF in the late 1940s and shows how their efforts to promote environmental protection conflicted with the rise of foreign aid policies for economic development and early theories of economic growth. Chapter 2 moves from offices in Fontainebleau and London, the founding sites for the IUCN and the WWF, to East Africa, where NGOs officials made their most concerted effort to sell the conservation cause in the developing world. Although their efforts to promote environmental protection in postcolonial states foundered, many reformers learned from their mishaps. By the end of the 1960s they began to target the sources of development aid – lending agencies in the United States, Western Europe, and international institutions. Chapter 3 explores the growing connections between environmental protection, foreign aid, and international politics by analyzing the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. Many activists hoped the event would spark a worldwide commitment to environmental protection, yet debates between the Global South and the United States and Western European nations over responsibility for bearing the costs of environmental protection thwarted many environmentalists' aspirations for generating deep and lasting international cooperation between all countries. As a result, NGOs redoubled their own efforts to reconcile aspirations for economic growth with environmental limits.

In Part II, *Of Limits and Growth* explores a single question: How have NGOs attempted to reform international development policy and practice

[9] James Gustav Speth has also stressed the importance of recognizing this dilemma. See James Gustav Speth, *Red Sky at Morning: America and the Crisis of the Global Environment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 8–9.