

I

Introduction

In the summer of 2014, representatives of several environmental groups in Pittsburgh began meeting to plan for local participation in the People’s Climate March to be held in New York City on September 21, 2014. The Sierra Club, 350.org, and other national and international groups were organizing the march around a United Nations (UN) meeting on climate change held in New York in advance of the Climate Change Conference in Paris in 2015. Across the country, grassroots groups, including affiliates of Rising Tide North America and the Climate Justice Alliance, were organizing to attend the People’s Climate March and to participate in a week of activities that would include a nonviolent direct action in New York’s financial district to “flood Wall Street” on the day following the main march. Radical and mainstream environmentalists alike were eager to be part of these events, and participants in the Pittsburgh meetings included a staff member of the Sierra Club and members of the Global Warming Action Team of the Allegheny Group of the Sierra Club, local anti-fracking and environmental justice groups, student environmental groups, and a community organization called Action United. In addition to organizing Pittsburgh residents to attend the People’s Climate March, their goal was to build a diverse local climate movement consisting not only of environmentalists but also unions, faith leaders, students, and residents of disadvantaged communities. On September 8, 2014, this ad hoc group held a “pre-event” with speakers, music, and refreshments that attracted a diverse crowd of people. A national organizer working with 350.org and Rising Tide came from New York to speak about the march, followed by local speakers from a student coalition, the local Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), and the Sierra Club among others. Framing of the issue reflected the diversity of the event coalition; the SEIU speaker talked about how low-income workers are “extremely affected by climate change,” and the AFSC representative talked about “climate justice”

in connection with racial justice and human rights (fieldnotes, September 8, 2014). A few weeks later, several hundred Pittsburgh residents traveled to New York in at least five buses organized by local groups.

Local organizing for the People's Climate March exemplifies both the potential and difficulties of grassroots environmentalism. The diverse group of organizers included staff members and volunteers, members of groups with different ideological and strategic approaches, and people of different class and racial backgrounds. They had resources to offer, such as subsidies for low-income participants, and network connections to many potential constituents for a growing climate movement. The organizers did some very effective local outreach to encourage people to travel to New York, but they failed to use this organizing work to jumpstart a local climate movement and build a diverse coalition. That would have required more leadership and organization, as well as ongoing strategies and tactics, than organizers were ready to provide. Some people who traveled to New York for the People's Climate March, and to an earlier demonstration against the Keystone XL pipeline in Washington, DC in February 2013, did talk together on their bus rides and eventually founded a chapter of 350.org in Pittsburgh. It was not easy, however, to build a movement of diverse participants, and it was difficult to keep up the momentum following the brief organizing campaign around the People's Climate March. Nevertheless, it was clear that many local activists cared deeply about climate change, which is strongly linked both to other environmental issues such as shale gas drilling and to concerns about social justice and inequality.

Indeed, global warming is the overriding concern of the environmental movement today, and the climate crisis makes environmentalism arguably the most important social movement of our time. The contemporary environmental movement has had an important impact, both in the United States and around the world, but it has also fallen short in many ways – most notably in failing to focus soon enough on climate change. The movement has been criticized for being overly institutionalized, consisting of large national organizations that are too limited in their strategies and tactics and too beholden to elite interests. Grassroots environmentalism and direct-action tactics are often viewed as the solution to these limitations; a contentious, visible, and persistent movement involving a large number of activists may succeed in creating change where a mainstream one consisting of large organizations with a limited range of strategies has failed. Large national and international organizations might stifle mass organizing, but the combination of grassroots activism and national and international organizations could also be a winning one. In the case of the People's Climate March, national and local groups collaborated on a very successful demonstration despite the lack of follow-up organizing in Pittsburgh. In 2017, national and grassroots activists organized another successful People's Climate March in Washington, DC and in cities across the country to protest the antienvironmental Trump administration.

Introduction

3

My goal in this book is to examine both the promise of grassroots environmentalism and the challenges facing this wing of the movement. My account draws on more than seven years of participant observation research in the local environmental movement in Pittsburgh. It examines the interactions of individuals and organizations in the local movement community and details participation in the movement by five organizations, which vary by structure and culture. Two are part of larger structures: Transition Pittsburgh was a local initiative of the international Transition organization, which promotes sustainable communities. The Allegheny Group of the Sierra Club is one of ten regional groups making up the Pennsylvania chapter of the national Sierra Club. The other three groups are local ones that were part of the movement against shale gas drilling in Pittsburgh and Pennsylvania: the Shadbrush Environmental Justice Collective, Marcellus Protest, and Protect Our Parks. In following these movement groups and activities over a number of years, I provide a detailed account of different facets of grassroots environmentalism and show why and how local residents sometimes mobilize to protect the environment and what they are able to accomplish.

Grassroots environmentalism involves a variety of movement supporters with different backgrounds and ideologies in democratic collective action. Some are long-time progressive activists who come to the environmental movement after working for other causes such as peace and feminism, dating back to the 1960s. Many experienced environmentalists become involved in campaigns that have emerged more recently, such as the battle against shale gas drilling (known as “fracking”). Other participants are much newer to movement activism in general and environmentalism in particular, becoming involved for the first time in response to threats posed by industrial activities such as strip mining and shale gas and oil drilling. Some are young people aroused by environmental outrages such as mountaintop removal, fracking, and climate change. Others are relatively apolitical green entrepreneurs who simply want to create solutions to climate change and other problems. Many retirees, some with experience in liberal causes, find environmental groups and campaigns when they look for meaningful places to use their skills and resources. The movement organizations that attract grassroots environmentalists are equally varied. They include long-standing, mainstream organizations, some with ties to national movement organizations, emergent organizations campaigning against fracking, radical collectives dedicated to environmental justice, and groups trying to create sustainable communities. In my study, some groups and campaigns tried to bring together many of these different types of grassroots activists, and individuals often drifted in and out of organizations, participating in various campaigns and collective actions.

My account of grassroots activism in Pittsburgh shows how mobilization of the local environmental community ebbs and flows. Four of the five organizations that I observed closely stopped meeting during the period of my observation, but local environmentalism persisted. When campaigns end and when

organizations disband or become inactive, the grassroots movement community may become less visible but continues to exist through networks and relationships, individual entrepreneurs, and cultural activities. Some movement organizations also survive, and new ones form in response to emerging and ongoing environmental concerns. Issues and values motivate grassroots activists, and climate change and other problems have only become more urgent over time. Environmental entrepreneurs and organizations attract many supporters persuaded by their framing of these issues, but movement organizers face two pressing needs as they try to mobilize existing and potential members of the movement community. First, they must devise strategies and tactics that will engage activists and build the movement. Second, they have to create some type of organizational structure and culture through which ongoing actions and campaigns can be planned and new activists recruited and integrated into the movement. My study not only demonstrates the importance of strategies and tactics, as well as issues and threats, to mobilization but also reveals the difficulty involved in creating ongoing campaigns that maintain momentum and organizational structures that enhance strategic capacity.

In this introductory chapter, I begin with a brief history of the contemporary American environmental movement, including the roles of both national organizations and grassroots activists in the movement. I then describe my study of grassroots environmentalism in Pittsburgh, where activists have organized around issues of national and international concern, such as fracking and climate change. The study provides a close-up look at a range of grassroots environmental groups and the challenges that they face in mobilizing participants, structuring their organizations, devising strategies and tactics, and building a movement that can make a difference. The Pittsburgh groups that I observed are not representative of any population of grassroots environmental groups, and I do not claim that the experiences of the groups in my study are necessarily typical of other participatory environmental groups. Rather, my goal is to show how grassroots groups with different structures and cultures are able to accomplish what they do and why they are limited in their capacities, thereby contributing to our theoretical understanding of the dynamics and potential of grassroots movements.

THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

The movement to protect the environment predates the 1960s and is not confined to the United States. Numerous scholars have provided histories of the movement, which, in North America, emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a conservation movement (Bosso 2005; Brulle 2000; Gottlieb 2005; Hays 1979; Kline 2011; Shabecoff 2003; Taylor 2016). The first environmental groups focused on the conservation of public lands and

The Contemporary American Environmental Movement

5

protection of endangered species. Many early conservationists were wealthy sportsmen, who embraced a frontier “manliness” and sought to ensure that game would be available for recreational hunting, which was limited by race, class, and gender (Taylor 2016). The movement expanded its goals and constituency over time, but mainstream environmental groups have remained largely white and middle class (Taylor 2014). Depictions of wilderness and green spaces have focused largely on the experiences of Euro-Americans, making the environment seem like a largely “white space,” in which African Americans and other people of color are excluded (Finney 2014:27). Environmental justice activists concerned about the “disproportionate environmental burden borne by African Americans” have challenged this lack of diversity in the environmental movement (Bullard and Wright 1992:40).

A number of organizations that emerged during the Progressive Era and the interwar period, including the Sierra Club, the National Audubon Society, the National Parks Conservation Association, the Izaak Walton League, and the Wilderness Society, experienced remarkable longevity. Some of these early organizations have expanded their agendas greatly and remain active today. After World War I, as Bosso (2005) describes, more groups originated in Washington, DC as a result of federal action on conservation, and groups such as the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society organized outings and focused on recreational activities such as hikes and bird watching. Movement expansion following World War II was fueled by concerns about pollution associated with industrialization as well as continued enthusiasm for outdoor recreation. The ongoing movement and long-time organizations provided a foundation for large-scale growth of environmentalism during the protest cycle of the 1960s (Bosso 2005:45).

The environmental movement flourished as new organizations formed and long-time organizations increased their memberships and expanded their missions in the 1960s and early 1970s. National environmental organizations developed formalized structures that allowed them to engage in lobbying and litigation, while many new groups were formed at the local level in response to federal laws that promoted public participation and court rulings that granted “standing” to citizens concerned about pollution (Bosso 2005; Longhurst 2010). Beyond conservation issues, newer concerns such as the effects of pesticides on the environment, an alarm raised by Rachel Carson (1962) in *Silent Spring*, became important in the 1960s (Dunlap and Mertig 1992:2). In addition to broadening their concerns, local activists also employed new tactics promoted by other movements of the 1960s, such as a “soot in” in New York to protest pollution, where participants sprayed black mist and distributed darkened flowers at the Consolidated Edison building (Rome 2003:544). Anti-war activists drew attention to the devastating use of napalm and herbicides during the Vietnam War, and New Leftists promoted a variety of environmental projects such as community recycling centers (Gottlieb 2005:138). The first Earth Day, on April 22, 1970, demonstrated the power of the modern

environmental movement, as huge demonstrations and “teach-ins” modeled on anti-Vietnam War events were held across the country (Rome 2013; Sale 1993).

The environmental movement that emerged in the 1960s included counter-culture initiatives in local communities and local citizen groups concerned with air and water pollution as well as new national organizations. As the New Left declined, however, so did “its ability to influence the environmental movement at an organizational level” (Gottlieb 2005:139). The size and number of national environmental organizations, on the other hand, expanded in the 1970s. Many organizations began to professionalize, becoming institutionalized lobbying organizations in Washington. With the founding of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1970 and the passage of major environmental legislation, including the Clean Air Act of 1970, the Clean Water Act of 1972, and the Endangered Species Act of 1973, national environmental organizations became involved in intense lobbying and litigation to support legislative initiatives and implement new policies. As Mitchell (1989) shows, the “conservation movement” became the “environmental movement” with the expansion of issues addressed by long-standing organizations and the founding of influential new environmental groups. These included the Environmental Defense Fund, which took up Rachel Carson’s call to ban the pesticide DDT, and the National Resources Defense Council, which was supported by the Ford Foundation (Mitchell 1989:88–9). National environmental organizations became professionalized and needed full-time staff with environmental and management expertise to deal with legislative issues and organizational expansion (Mitchell 1989:104–5). Gottlieb (2005:182) describes the growth of “mainstream” environmental organizations and “a revolving door between staff positions in the mainstream groups and government and industry.” Bosso (2005) chronicles the growth of an “environmental advocacy community” in the 1970s consisting of organizations filling various policy niches. In the 1980s, after the election of President Ronald Reagan, environmentalists suddenly became outsiders to an unfriendly administration (Bosso 2005:87), but national organizations also expanded greatly as constituents responded to the threats with financial support (Mitchell 1989; Mitchell et al. 1992). In 1990, celebrations of the twentieth anniversary of Earth Day in 140 countries attracted some 200 million people (Gottlieb 2005:262).

National environmental organizations came in for criticism insofar as they were seen as overly institutionalized and coopted by government and industry elites. Writing at the end of the 1980s, Mitchell (1989:107) concluded that the national environmental lobby worked with “reasonable effectiveness in the face of strong opposition from traditionally powerful business and industrial interests,” but warned of “the dangers of routinization in advocacy, careerism on the part of staff members, and passivity on the part of the volunteers” associated with professionalization. Critics later dubbed mainstream national environmental organizations “big green” and offered harsher assessments of their

The Contemporary American Environmental Movement

7

effectiveness. In the 1990s, after the election of President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore, a committed environmentalist, threats to the environment seemed to subside and national organizations began to lose members and lay off staff. In his influential book on the decline of the movement, *Losing Ground*, Dowie (1995) noted various reasons for the decline of large environmental groups, including their lack of effectiveness and failure to work with grassroots organizations. In a provocative essay entitled “The Death of Environmentalism,” Shellenberger and Nordhaus (2004) added to the criticism of mainstream environmental organizations as having failed to go beyond lobbying for limited legislative proposals to effectively address major issues such as global warming. Increasingly, critics called for revitalization of the movement with a broader range of strategies and tactics and more grassroots action.

While large professionalized organizations have dominated the national environmental movement since the 1970s, the movement always included grassroots components. A number of citizen action organizations formed in the late 1960s and early 1970s in response to opportunities created by legislation that called for citizen participation as well as threats to clean air and water, land, and public health (Ferguson 2015; Gottlieb 2005; Johnson and Frickel 2011; Longhurst 2010). All of the major environmental laws of the 1970s required public notice and participation (Ferguson 2015:8), and citizen activist groups took advantage of these opportunities. Longhurst (2010) describes how citizens in Pittsburgh and other cities across the country became involved in the new wave of citizen environmentalism with the formation of local movement organizations such as the Group Against Smog and Pollution (GASP), which was formed in Pittsburgh in 1969 to address air pollution and remains active today. Ferguson (2015) examines three cases representative of the wide variety of grassroots groups in the American environmental movement: a Montana group of farmers and ranchers opposed to strip mining of coal, a middle-class, largely urban Arizona group concerned with the threats posed by dams to the Grand Canyon and other sites, and a Tennessee group of working-class people who began out of concern about strip mining and evolved into an environmental justice group. As Gottlieb (2005) demonstrates in his history of the American environmental movement, the movement is extremely diverse and complex, consisting of many grassroots campaigns as well as mainstream national organizations.

Influential grassroots mobilizations included a toxic waste movement that emerged in the late 1970s in response to the Love Canal disaster (Szasz 1994). Other toxic waste sites, such as a landfill in Warren County, became the focus of protest led by African Americans, including civil rights leaders who worked to build alliances with poor white residents (McGurty 2007). An expanded anti-nuclear power movement also emerged in response to the 1979 Three Mile Island nuclear accident (Walsh 1988). Local activists opposed hazardous waste landfills and incinerators as well as nuclear facilities near their homes and workplaces (Walsh et al. 1997). Critics labeled such groups NIMBYs (not in

my back yard), and some began with limited goals of preventing what came to be called LULUs (locally unwanted land uses). However, many groups expanded their consciousness and began to address a broad range of issues and to adopt a “not in anyone’s back yard” (NIABY) perspective (Freudenberg and Steinsapir 1992; Gottlieb 2005; Pellow 2007; Szasz 1994). In some communities, “citizen-worker” groups organized around LULUs and issues such as the destruction of wetlands (Gould et al. 1996).

Many grassroots activists became part of an environmental justice movement that grew rapidly in the 1980s to address the racial, ethnic, and class inequalities associated with a variety of environmental issues (Bell 2013, 2016; McGurty 2007; Mohai et al. 2009; Szasz 1994). Environmental justice groups challenged mainstream environmental organizations to expand their agendas from issues such as the conservation of wilderness areas to the class and racial injustices associated with environmental hazards (Bell 2016; Bullard 1990, 1993; Finney 2014). The toxic waste movement and other community-based environmental campaigns attracted a broader constituency than mainstream national groups, bringing working-class residents and people of color into the movement. Grassroots groups typically focused on the impacts on human health associated with issues such as the siting of toxic waste dumps, which directly affected people in their workplaces and communities. The concept of “environmental racism” began to be used to connect environmental issues with issues of social and racial justice (Bullard 1993; Cole and Foster 2001; Freudenberg and Steinsapir 1992). African Americans became involved in protesting the siting of highly toxic materials in many communities, including those in the southern United States, and civil rights leaders became involved in protests against toxic waste and other environmental hazards that disproportionately affected black communities (Bullard 1990; Bullard and Wright 1992; McGurty 2007). National organizations, including the National Toxics Campaign and the Citizen’s Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste, were formed to work with grassroots groups fighting toxic waste in their communities (Freudenberg and Steinsapir 1992:29).

Radical environmentalists formed grassroots groups such as Earth First! and the Rainforest Action Network (RAN) in the 1980s to engage in militant tactics and promote the “deep ecology” perspective, which was first put forward in the early 1970s as a critique of industrial society and its anthropocentric bias (Devall 1992; Woodhouse 2018). Radical groups such as the Earth Liberation Front and the Animal Liberation Front proliferated in the 1980s and 1990s as a result of increasing environmental threats, frustration with the mainstream movement, and the influences of other social justice movements (Pellow 2014). In the 1990s, a new wave of grassroots environmentalism emerged in the form of biodiversity groups working to protect wilderness and wildlife through litigation and other tactics (Bevington 2009). New Earth First! groups also formed as part of the environmental justice movement. In 2000, a coalition called Rising Tide North America was organized to bring together radical

grassroots groups around climate change and other environmental problems (Brulle 2015). These and other groups, including 350.org and its local affiliates, became part of a growing fossil fuel resistance movement (McKibben 2013). The climate change movement includes a wide variety of organizations using different frames and tactics, including mainstream national organizations, new groups formed to address the crisis, and radical groups (Brulle 2015). Radical environmentalists promoted “climate justice” in recognition of the greater impacts of climate change on people in poorer communities and countries who are the least responsible for causing the crisis. They stressed the need for a “just transition” away from fossil fuel dependency that would not put the burden on the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people. In recent years, the climate justice movement has become an increasingly global movement involving many grassroots activists as well as national and international environmental organizations (Mohai et al. 2009; Schlosberg 2007; Spears 2020).

As part of the fossil fuel resistance movement, grassroots activists have engaged in a variety of tactics such as demonstrations and divestment campaigns, and they have mobilized on a number of fronts. In the coal fields of Central Appalachia, local residents initiated the struggle against strip mining, including mountaintop removal coal mining, a highly destructive form of surface mining that expanded in the 1990s (Bell 2016). Groups such as Mountain Justice joined the fight against mountaintop removal, organizing young people to travel to Appalachia and support local residents with annual events such as Mountain Justice Spring Break and Mountain Justice Summer Camp. In Pennsylvania, the Center for Coalfield Justice (CCJ) has battled against destructive coal mining practices, including longwall mining, which can create extensive environmental damages such as the destruction of water supplies. Under the leadership of Veronica Coptis, the CCJ joined with the Sierra Club in filing a lawsuit against a mining company for damages to a state park (Griswold 2017). Grassroots activists have also targeted the oil and gas industries for their construction of pipelines such as the Keystone XL pipeline and the Dakota Access pipeline, mobilizing a large number of activists to engage in civil disobedience and other demonstrations. The anti-fracking movement has organized grassroots actions across the country to publicize the dangers of fracking and to support bans on the practice (Ladd 2018).

Numerous studies point to the accomplishments and promise of grassroots activism, including its impact on social consciousness, public policy, and movement mobilization and coalitions. The massive Earth Day demonstrations in 1970 had multiple, long-lasting effects, including the growth of grassroots movements, media coverage, the stimulation of educational programs in schools, and the strengthening of national political efforts (Rome 2013). The toxic waste movement raised public awareness of the issue, created media coverage, forced the cleanup of some sites, and prompted corporations to consider the environmental impacts of their actions, among other results (Freudenberg and Steinsapir 1992:33–5; Szasz 1994). Movements against

practices such as mountaintop removal and fracking have raised public consciousness and resulted in a number of municipal and state bans as well as other legislative actions (Ladd 2018). In framing issues and devising tactics, grassroots groups affect the growth of the movement. For example, by focusing on health issues, some grassroots groups were able to frame issues in ways that allowed them to form coalitions with labor unions (Mayer 2009).

In short, grassroots environmental groups have played a key role in the history of the American environmental movement. Large national organizations have also been important to the movement, and one key question is the extent to which professionalized and grassroots groups can work together or support one another. While grassroots groups are often seen as the solution to an overly institutionalized national movement, few studies examine in detail the challenges and accomplishments of such groups over time. This book assesses the promise and limitations of a sample of grassroots environmental groups in Pittsburgh. Although the study focuses on activism in one city, trends in the local movement reflect developments in national and international environmentalism, such as fossil fuel resistance. My study of the Pittsburgh movement provides a close-up look at the nature of grassroots environmentalism and its potential contributions to the larger environmental movement.

STUDYING ENVIRONMENTALISM IN PITTSBURGH

Once known as the “smoky city” owing to pollution from its formerly vibrant steel industry and the burning of bituminous coal, Pittsburgh has a long history of environmental organizing to mitigate the effects of air and water pollution in the city (Longhurst 2010; Tarr 2003). This industrial legacy, along with long-term environmental problems related to coal mining and more recent problems arising from shale gas drilling in Pennsylvania, makes Pittsburgh a good place to study environmentalism. The city has a rich history of environmental activism: Pittsburgh-area author Rachel Carson raised public consciousness about unseen pollutants with her best-selling book, *Silent Spring*, published in 1962. The 1960s and 1970s were an “environmental era” of movement expansion that generated many new organizations as well as growth in existing ones such as the Sierra Club (Bosso 2005). GASP was part of the wave of citizen activist movements of the period, and the Allegheny Group of the Sierra Club was founded in 1970. More recently, environmental groups have organized to work on issues such as the dangers associated with hydraulic fracturing for shale gas, and Pittsburgh was the first American city to ban fracking. Environmentalists in Pittsburgh have advocated for numerous sustainable practices and changes in the infrastructure needed to make the city more resilient in the face of climate change (DeMarco 2017).

My study of local movement organizations shows how grassroots groups have mobilized activists and carried out collective actions and how they struggle to maintain ongoing organizations and campaigns. On the one hand,