

With a new
epilogue
by the author

EARTH RISING

American Environmentalism
in the 21st Century



► Philip Shabecoff ◀

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American Environmentalism
in the 21st Century

♣ Philip Shabecoff ♣



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Preface

This book is dedicated to my grandchildren and their contemporaries, who, if all goes well, will live through most of the 21st century. Their happiness and well-being will depend on many things, but nothing is more basic than the health of the physical world they will inhabit.

The environment—the land, the air, the water, and all that fills them—is the foundation of all life on earth. The welfare of individual humans and human societies depends ultimately on the solidity of that foundation. There is no subject of more crucial importance.

In the 20th century, as a result of human activity, deep cracks appeared in that foundation. Human numbers, economics, and technology began to put insupportable pressure on the systems that support life.

The 20th century also witnessed, however, the rise of modern environmentalism in response to the growing knowledge of the dangers into which we are thrusting ourselves. The rise of the environmental movement is, I have long believed, one of the most significant cultural developments of our time.

This book brings together what I have learned from more than two decades of thinking and writing about the environment and related subjects as a reporter for the *New York Times*, as publisher of *Greenwire*, the environmental news daily, and as the author of two books on environmental subjects. The earlier books were about the history of the American environmental movement and about the international effort to build an environmentally sustainable, socially equitable global economy. It seemed to me that an examination of the future of American environmentalism would be a useful contribution as we enter a new century and a new millennium.

Although my subject is environmentalism, I found when I had fin-

ished writing my first draft that I had also written what is, in essence, a critique of American society at the turn of the century. It is not possible, it seems, to discuss environmental problems and their solutions without addressing politics, economics, science, and social relationships. Those in the environmental movement, I concluded, will also have to involve themselves in the repair of these building blocks of our society far more deeply than they do today if they are to carry out their mission of preserving our physical habitat.

This book draws on a large number of interviews with environmentalists at the local, regional, and national levels; with scholars, politicians, and current and former civil servants; and with other activists who see environmental problems as issues of justice and community. Wherever direct or indirect quotations appear in the text without sources identified in endnotes, they are drawn from these interviews. I have conducted a partial review of the extensive and growing body of literature on contemporary environmental issues. The book is also based on my own sympathetic but detached observation and analysis of the movement. It reflects, therefore, both my own understanding and opinions and the understanding and opinions of a broad spectrum of thoughtful and informed people within and without the environmental movement. This is their book as well as mine.

What I have found suggests that in the waning years of the 20th century, the environmental movement, despite its great achievements, had not yet adequately prepared itself to meet the current and coming challenges, to transform a future that now seems to be filled with danger.

What follows is a close examination of the American environmental movement at the turn of the century: what it now is, where it stands in our society, how it is regarded by its friends and critics, what it is doing and not doing to meet the new challenges it faces both in the United States and globally, and, finally, what it must do if it is to continue to be a force for safeguarding the natural world and those who inhabit it in the next hundred years. Because some knowledge about the past order is needed to discuss the present and future, I begin with a brief summary of the movement's history.

Newton Center, Massachusetts
July 1999

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At my request, Josh Reichert also took the time to read the manuscript and to offer valuable suggestions. So did Stephen Viederman of the Jesse Smith Noyes Foundation. Susan Edelmann, former director of the liberal arts program at New York University's School of Continuing Education, gave the manuscript a sophisticated and meticulous reading. My wife, Alice Shabecoff, as she did for my previous books, not only carefully read the manuscript and offered much-needed advice but also assisted me in many other ways, including giving me a cram course on community economic development. The help of all these individuals has made this a better book than it otherwise would have been. Whatever errors of fact or judgment remain are mine alone.

I am very grateful to the nearly one hundred women and men—environmentalists, scientists, scholars, community and labor union activists, businesspeople, government officials and political professionals, journalists, foundation officers, and others whose names are listed

at the back of this book—who submitted to long, sometimes arduous interviews. Their knowledge, experience, and, I hope, spirit, permeate this work.

My special thanks to John Adams, executive director of the Natural Resources Defense Council, who first suggested that I write about the future of the environmental movement, and to Peter Raven, director of the Missouri Botanical Garden, who provided provocative ideas and suggested sources for fleshing those ideas out.

Finally, I want to express my appreciation to Joan Martin-Brown of the World Bank, a pioneer of American and international environmentalism, whose wisdom, assistance, and friendship I have valued for many years.

Praise for *Earth Rising*

"One of the most thought-provoking and insightful books I've read in years. If you are interested in the environmental movement, this book is for you . . . As an activist, I was inspired by the book's concluding argument: that by working together we could have a real chance of saving the earth and bringing about justice for all."

—LOIS GIBBS, *Orion Afield*

"Shabecoff's tour de force enlightens our understanding of the past, present, and future dynamics of American environmentalism. *Earth Rising* is simultaneously an engaging and probing analysis of the environmental movement as well as a passionate, provocative, and informed challenge to anyone who cares about reason, justice, democracy, and future quality of life.

'Environmentalism is about alternatives . . .,' Shabecoff writes, ' . . . about transforming the future.' *Earth Rising's* holistic, knowledgeable, and eloquent treatment enables and informs a transition toward a 'brighter, more rational, and secure future'—toward a sustainable biosphere."

—DR. JANE LUBCHENCO, Distinguished Professor, Oregon State University, and former president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science

"For the last couple of decades, people seeking to understand the American environmental movement could do no better than read Phil Shabecoff's latest book. He has done it again. *Earth Rising* is full of provocative observations about the challenges and opportunities facing environmentalists as they enter the twenty-first century."

—DENIS HAYES, international chair of the Earth Day Network and author of *The Official Earth Day Guide to Planet Repair*

"This book captures the reality of the chasm dividing those most impacted by environmental injustice—represented by the Environmental Justice Movement—and mainstream environmentalists. It shows how we can all benefit from a movement that successfully integrates an environmental and a social agenda, one that can ultimately help redefine and reshape environmentalism to include 'a vision of what community can be'."

—PEGGY SHEPARD, executive director, West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc.

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