

FORUM: DISCOVERING THE ENVIRONMENT

## Images, Emotions, Politics

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In 1957, SANE, the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, announced its founding with a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times*. “We Are Facing A Danger Unlike Any Danger That Has Ever Existed,” the notice warned, due to the ongoing “contamination of air and water and food, and the injury to man himself” caused by nuclear testing (Figure 1). Hoping to build a national movement, SANE hired a communication consultant to evaluate the ad’s effectiveness. He concluded that it was “too long and too wordy,” arguing “that a photo or graphic symbol would attract the attention of the general public.” Indeed, SANE’s first foray into the realm of mass communication was completely devoid of images. Lengthy text crowded the page. Even avid readers of the *Times*, the consultant explained, “had ‘missed’ the ad”—had not even noticed it was there.<sup>1</sup>

For historians of the modern United States, this episode, together with SANE’s subsequent use of images, raises important questions about how the visual media have helped popularize environmental concern. From the fear of radioactive fallout during the Cold War to global warming today, images have brought environmentalism into American public life. Pictures—despite how they are typically treated by historians—do not simply reflect some pre-existing, external reality; they do not merely act as passive mirrors to events taking place outside the frame. Images instead serve as active rhetorical agents that shape larger cultural and political fields.

Images stir up audience emotions. They provoke anxiety and fear; they instill guilt and responsibility; they inspire hope and prescribe action. Recognizing the emotional power of images is key to understanding why the visual media became a vital player in environmental politics. By making Americans care, images have both advanced and hindered the environmental cause. They have promoted environmental values. And yet in the process, they have frequently distorted the ideas of environmentalists, portraying the movement as nothing more than a green consumerist crusade to absolve the nation of its guilt.<sup>2</sup>

In their campaigns against nuclear testing, SANE leaders soon learned that success in the public sphere required more than text-based appeals. Fusing facts with feelings, reason with emotion, they began to use images to challenge the Cold War system of emotion management and the spectator democracy fostered by iconic photographs of the mushroom cloud. Following the advice of activists and advertisers, SANE eventually hit upon a visual strategy: the group sought to overcome the spectacle of the bomb blast through the counterspectacle of innocent children—to picture the nation’s youngest citizens as biological subjects whose bodies and futures were threatened by fallout. SANE matched images with texts to depict long-term dangers—to explain how strontium-90 could enter the food chain and imperil human health. The

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<sup>1</sup>SANE, advertisement, *New York Times*, Nov. 15, 1957, 15; Arno G. Huth, “Response to the First Statement issued by the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, November 15 to December 31, 1957: A Preliminary Analysis,” Jan. 1958, folder “SANE, National Office—SANE Files of Norman Cousins, 1957–1958, Huth, Arno,” box 4, subseries B-1, SANE Inc. Records (DG 58), Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, PA, quotes from 13 and 14.

<sup>2</sup>This forum essay draws on the research and argument of Finis Dunaway, *Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images* (Chicago, 2015).

# "We Are Facing A Danger Unlike Any Danger That Has Ever Existed.."

First of a Series of Statements For Americans in A Nuclear Age

**A** deep uneasiness exists inside Americans as we look out on the world.

It is not that we have suddenly become unsure of ourselves in a world in which the Soviet Union has dramatically laid claim to scientific supremacy.

Nor that the same propulsion device that can send a man-made satellite into outer space can send a missile carrying a hydrogen bomb across the ocean in eighteen minutes.

Nor is the uneasiness only the result of headlines that tell of trouble between Turkey and Syria and a war that could not be limited to the Middle East.

The uneasiness that exists inside Americans has to do with the fact that we are not living up to our moral capacity in the world.

We have been living half a life. We have been developing our appetites, but we have been starving our purposes. We have been concerned with bigger incomes, bigger television screens, and bigger cars — but not with the big ideas on which our lives and freedoms depend.

*We are facing a danger unlike any danger that has ever existed.* In our possession and in the possession of the Russians are more than enough nuclear explosives to put an end to the life of man on earth.

Our uneasiness is the result of the fact that our approach to the danger is unequal to the danger. Our response to the challenge of today's world seems out of joint. The slogans and arguments that belong to the world of competitive national sovereignties — a world of plot and counter-plot — no longer fit the world of today or tomorrow.

Just in front of us opens a grand human adventure into outer space. But within us and all around us is the need to make this world whole before we set out for other ones. We can earn the right to explore other planets only as we make this one safe and fit for human habitation.

**T**he sovereignty of the human community comes before all others — before the sovereignty of groups, tribes, or nations. In that community, man has natural rights. He has the right to live and to grow, to breathe unpoisoned air, to work on uncontaminated soil. He has the right to his sacred nature.

If what nations are doing has the effect of destroying these natural rights, whether by upsetting the delicate balances on which life depends, or fouling the air, or despoiling the land, or tampering with the genetic integrity of man himself, then it becomes necessary for people to restrain and tame the nations.

Indeed, the test of a nation's right to survive today is measured not by the size of its bombs or the range

### What You Can Do

1. What you say and what you do make public opinion. Let the people who serve you in public office know of your apprehensions and your hopes. Above all, make your ideas known to the President of the United States.
2. You can join the signers of this statement.
3. You can help make it possible for this statement and other statements like it to appear in newspapers throughout the country and the world.
4. You can talk to your friends and neighbors about the points in this message. You can discuss these matters in your church or synagogue, your club, your school, your union.
5. You can fill out the two coupons below. Send one to the President and the other to the National Committee For a Sane Nuclear Policy.

its missiles, but by the size and range of its concern for the human community as a whole.

There can be no true security for America unless we can exert leadership in these terms, unless we become advocates of a grand design that is directed to the large cause of human destiny.

There can be no true security for America unless we can establish and keep vital connections with the world's people, unless there is some moral grandeur to our purposes, unless what we do is directed to the cause of human life and the free man.

There is much that America has said to the world. But the world is still waiting for us to say and do the things that will in deed and in truth represent our greatest strength.

What are these things?

### FIRST, AS IT CONCERNS THE PEACE, AMERICA CAN SAY.

That we pledge ourselves to the cause of peace with justice on earth, and that there is no sacrifice that we are not prepared to make, nothing we will not do to create such a just peace for all peoples.

That we are prepared to support the concept of a United Nations with adequate authority under law to prevent aggression, adequate authority to compel and enforce disarmament, adequate authority to settle disputes among nations according to principles of justice.

### NEXT, AS IT CONCERNS NUCLEAR WEAPONS, AMERICA CAN SAY.

That the earth is too small for intercontinental ballistic missiles and nuclear bombs, and that the first order of business for the world is to bring both under control.

That the development of satellites or rocket stations and the exploration of outer space must be carried on in the interests of the entire human community through a pooling of world science.

### AS IT CONCERNS NUCLEAR TESTING, AMERICA CAN SAY.

That because of the grave unanswered questions with respect to nuclear test explosions — especially as it concerns the contamination of air and water and food, and the injury to man himself — we are calling upon all nations to suspend such explosions at once.

That while the abolition of testing will not by itself solve the problem of peace or the problem of armaments, it enables the world to eliminate immediately at least one real and specific danger. Also, that the abolition of testing gives us a place to begin on the larger question of armaments control, for the problems in monitoring such tests are relatively uncomplicated.

### AS IT CONCERNS OUR CONNECTIONS TO THE REST OF MANKIND, AMERICA CAN SAY.

That none of the differences separating the governments of the world are as important as the membership of all peoples in the human family.

That the big challenge of the age is to develop the concept of a higher loyalty — loyalty by man to the human community.

That the greatest era of human history on earth is within reach of all mankind, that there is no area that cannot be made fertile or habitable, no disease that cannot be fought, no scarcity that cannot be conquered;

That all that is required for this is to re-direct our energies, re-discover our moral strength, re-define our purposes.

### SIGNERS

- MICHAEL AMBINE  
Senior Broker
- CLEVELAND ANNETT  
Author, "The Peace Revolution"
- ROGER A. BALDWIN
- DR. JOHN C. BOWETT  
Vice-Chief of Staff, Union
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- HARRY A. BULLIS  
Chairman of the Board, General
- "HUMAN COINGS"  
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- THE REV. GEORGE B. FORD  
Pastor, Union Church, New York
- THE REV. HARRY MURKIN FORD  
Pastor, American Reformed Church, New York
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- DR. WILLIAM F. MURPHY  
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Chairman, Department of Physics,
- JOHN VOYLES  
Executive Director, Conservation

(The signers of this statement are acting in their individual capacity and not as representatives of organizations or as members of the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy. Names preceded by an asterisk indicate members of the organizing committee.)

NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR A SANE NUCLEAR POLICY  
202 East 44th Street New York 16, N. Y.

**CLIP AND MAIL TO:**  
PRESIDENT DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER  
THE WHITE HOUSE, WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

Dear Mr. President:

I respectfully urge you to go before the United Nations and propose:

That nuclear test explosions, missiles and outer-space satellites be considered apart from other disarmament problems.

That, as there is no agreement in principle on the need for supervision and inspection necessary to verify a cessation of tests, all nuclear test explosions by all countries be stopped immediately and that the U. N. then proceed with the mechanics necessary for monitoring this cessation.

That missiles and outer-space satellites be brought under United Nations-monitored control, and that there be a pooling of world science for space exploration under the United Nations.

Now, more than ever before, mankind waits for some sign that it can be released from the terror of sudden attack and the grip of armaments. We look to you to give form and direction to that aspiration.

Sincerely,

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_

**CLIP AND MAIL TO:**  
NATIONAL COMMITTEE  
FOR A SANE NUCLEAR POLICY  
P. O. BOX 1750  
NEW YORK 17, N. Y.

Note: Make contributions to "Sane Nuclear Policy".

I am enclosing \$\_\_\_\_\_ as my contribution toward advancing the work of the Committee and in helping to place this message in other newspapers and cities throughout the United States and the world. (This statement is available for reprint in your local paper.)

I wish to know if a group to forward these ideas exists in my community.

Send me further information about the Committee and its program.

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 1. "We Are Facing a Danger." SANE advertisement, 1957. Courtesy of SANE Inc. Records, Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

group's most influential and widely circulated advertisement featured Dr. Benjamin Spock, the respected child expert (Figure 2). A photograph of the pediatrician with a toddler dominates the ad space. "Dr. Spock is worried," the caption proclaimed. Brooding over the dangers of fallout, Spock appears unsure how to protect the child. "I am worried," Spock explained. "As the tests multiply, so will the damage to children." Many people wrote letters to praise the group for this ad, including one who observed: "The Dr. Spock advertisement is the greatest SANE has ever published. It represents a sure-fire way of reaching people who would otherwise not be touched by even the most logical approach."<sup>3</sup>

While SANE sought to depict the long-term, accretive risks of radiation, other activists took advantage of the media's focus on sudden violence and immediate danger. By harnessing the power of media spectacle, they garnered mainstream attention and encouraged audiences to care about environmental devastation. In the 1970s, Greenpeace made its anti-whaling crusade highly visible through the circulation of carefully choreographed images of activists confronting Soviet whaling ships off the California coast. When these images were broadcast on national TV news and other media outlets, they triggered an outburst of public emotion, generating widespread concern about the plight of whales. In this case, media spectacle lent legitimacy to the environmental cause.<sup>4</sup>

During oil spills and other moments of crisis, the visual media have made caring about the environment an easy—some might say too easy—thing for Americans to do. Spectacular catastrophes, such as the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, led to emotion-saturated media coverage: newspapers, magazines, and TV screens filled with pictures of oil-soaked otters and birds—poignant images of innocent wildlife suffering and dying. Corporate officials, sometimes joined by conservative commentators, charged the mainstream media with focusing too much attention on such disasters and duping the public into accepting the alarmist claims of environmentalists. Yet some environmental thinkers argued instead that the media fixation on sudden catastrophe made it more difficult to foster public understanding of slow-motion calamities like climate change. "When you look at pictures from Alaska," Bill McKibben argued a few months after *Exxon Valdez*, "remember this: The ship that is our planet has a gaping hole in its side, too, and carbon dioxide is pouring out." Images attracted momentary public attention and elicited outbursts of audience emotion. But could they help Americans imagine and create a sustainable future over the long term?<sup>5</sup>

Images exert material and political effects on the world. From the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty and the flurry of legislative activity that accompanied the first Earth Day in 1970 to the banning of specific pesticides, the increasing public distrust of nuclear power, and the dramatic expansion of recycling programs nationwide, pictures helped spark environmental change. Yet too often popular images propose quick fixes and promulgate consumer fantasies of environmental hope. Like activists involved in civil rights, feminism, and other social movements, environmentalists have found that the visual media offer a double-edged sword. Pictures

<sup>3</sup>On photography, the emotions, and modern public culture, see also Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago, 2007). On spectator democracy and popular imagery of the mushroom cloud, see Scott Kirsch, "Watching the Bombs Go Off: Photography, Nuclear Landscapes, and Spectator Democracy," *Antipode* 29, no. 3 (July 1997): 227–55. SANE, advertisement, *New York Times*, Apr. 16, 1962, 30. The final quotation is from an unnamed letter writer quoted in Nell Lee Litvak, form letter to SANE members, Apr. 21, 1962, copy, folder "Politics, SANE, Memoranda, Gen-1963," box 54, Benjamin Spock Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries, Syracuse, NY.

<sup>4</sup>Frank Zelko, *Make It a Green Peace! The Rise of Countercultural Environmentalism* (New York, 2013), ch. 9.

<sup>5</sup>Bill McKibben, "The Exxon Valdez as a Metaphor," *New York Times*, Apr. 7, 1989, A31. On the representational challenges posed by slow-motion calamities, see Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA, 2011). On visual depictions of oil spills, see also Kathryn Morse, "There Will Be Birds: Images of Oil Disasters in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *Journal of American History* 99, no. 1 (June 2012): 124–34.



helped them bring their ideas into the mainstream, but they often elide, marginalize, or even denigrate their more far-reaching proposals for change.<sup>6</sup>

The producers of popular environmental images have often obscured race, class, and other inequalities, foregrounding middle- and upper-class whites as the prime victims of environmental problems and the central subjects of the environmental cause. SANE's Dr. Spock ad, like others, sold environmentalism in this way, centering on the figure of the innocent white child as an emotional emblem of ecological risk. Throughout the history of modern environmentalism, this widespread emphasis on white children has worked to create a picture of universal victimhood, portraying all Americans, no matter where they live, no matter their race or class, as equally vulnerable to environmental dangers. From pictures of white women and children wearing gas masks around the first Earth Day to more recent campaigns, white bodies have often stood in for the nation, signifying the idea of universal vulnerability. These images have nurtured support for environmental protection, but at the same time have masked the ways in which pollution and other hazards have impacted some groups far more than others.

Beginning with the first Earth Day, mass media outlets have also frequently emphasized the notion of individual responsibility, suggesting that all Americans were equally culpable for causing the environmental crisis. Environmental activists have urged Americans to adopt more ecologically responsible actions; they wanted individuals to understand how their daily lives and consumer decisions were enmeshed in larger ecological systems. Yet many of these same activists became enraged when they realized that the media embrace of individual action let corporations off the hook. They rejected the message of the popular cartoon character Pogo the Possum, who declared in an Earth Day poster, "We have met the enemy and he is us." They castigated the Crying Indian, who appeared in a 1971 anti-litter public service announcement sponsored by beverage and packaging corporations—a campaign that blamed individuals for ruining the environment and deflected attention away from industry practices. Many activists argued that the discourse of individual guilt shielded corporate polluters from scrutiny and shifted environmentalism from the political to the personal.<sup>7</sup>

Amid the triumph of neoliberalism in recent decades, this lopsided faith in individual responsibility has dominated popular portrayals of the movement. The media and corporations have framed environmentalism as a form of therapy—a way to cope with the distressing news of environmental crisis. The plastics industry has proven particularly adept at manipulating consumer desire by exploiting images of sustainability to shore up an unsustainable agenda. In the late 1980s, the industry altered the original recycling logo—developed in the aftermath of Earth Day 1970—by placing numerals representing different grades of plastic in the center of the symbol (Figures 3 and 4). Even though the rates of plastics recycling never came close to keeping pace with the manufacture of new plastics, the recycling logo signified environmental hope. The logo proclaimed that the ravenous use of resources could continue: as long as consumers remembered to close the recycling loop, the three chasing arrows would cycle on and on. This popular environmental icon thus helped legitimate the continued expansion of plastics production.<sup>8</sup>

By encouraging Americans to shop their way to ecological salvation, media images have promoted short-term, consumerist solutions to long-term, systemic problems. In an age marked by rising rates of economic inequality, green consumerism catered to the affluent and obscured

<sup>6</sup>On media framings of American social movements, see, among others, Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York, 1994); and Martin A. Berger, *Seeing through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (Berkeley, CA, 2011).

<sup>7</sup>On the production and reception history of the Pogo poster and the Crying Indian commercial, see Dunaway, *Seeing Green*, chs. 4 and 5. The Pogo poster was created by Walt Kelly in 1970. The Crying Indian commercial was produced by the Advertising Council for the anti-litter organization Keep America Beautiful in 1971. It can be viewed on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7OHG7tHrNM>.

<sup>8</sup>See also Heather Rogers, *Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage* (New York, 2005).

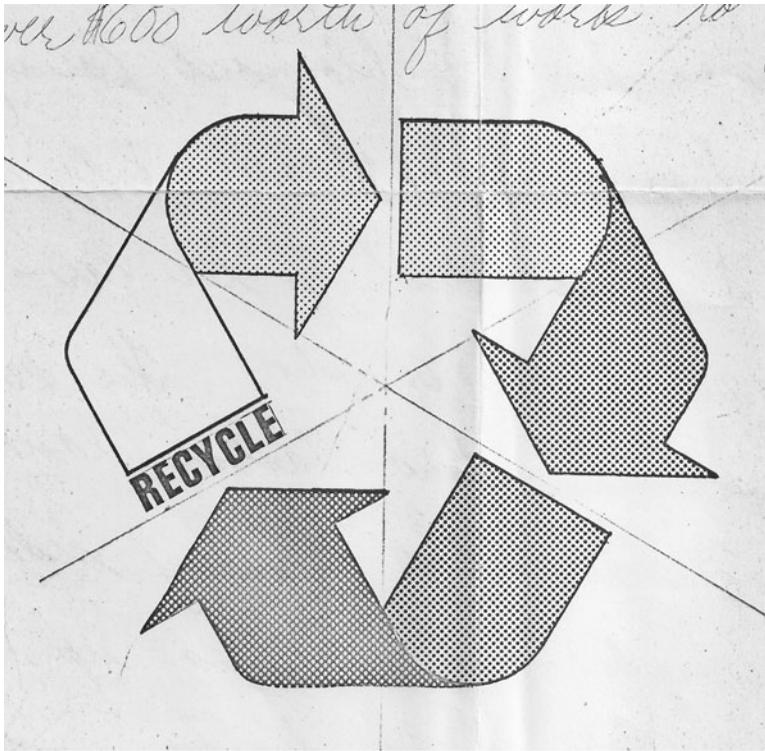


Figure 3. Recycling logo prototype by Gary Anderson, 1970.



Figure 4. Recycling logos with resin identification codes, developed in 1988 by the Society of the Plastics Industry.

power relations. The assault on the ecosphere continued; the release of greenhouse gas emissions escalated; the poor and racial minorities experienced higher levels of ecological risk. All of this happened while recycling programs expanded across the United States, while green consumer products promised to shelter the affluent from harm, and while other individual lifestyle changes addressed powerful consumer desires for ecological redemption.<sup>9</sup>

The challenge for many environmentalists, therefore, has been to move beyond the media's emphasis on easily digestible images of short-term disaster and therapeutic framings of environmental hope. In recent years, 350.org—a climate activist group co-founded by Bill McKibben—has turned to social media and YouTube videos to depict the escalating danger of climate change. Rather than urging consumers to change their light bulbs, 350.org envisions environmentalism as a collective effort to challenge the power of the fossil fuel industry and reimagine the future.<sup>10</sup>

Understanding the remarkable durability of certain environmental issues—and the lack of traction of others—requires looking closely at the kind of work iconic images can and cannot do. But it also requires paying attention to the circulation of non-iconic images that have nurtured support for letter-writing campaigns and other forms of political action. Consider the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a remote area in northeastern Alaska that has become the most high-profile, frequently recurring public land debate in modern U.S. history. Pitting environmental and Indigenous activists against proponents of oil drilling, this struggle has been waged on Capitol Hill and across the national media landscape. Yet beyond the beltway and beyond mainstream channels of communication, activists have cultivated long-term support for refuge protection through traveling slide shows and other forms of grassroots outreach. These images helped create an alternative vision of environmentalism: an environmentalism that combines wilderness preservation with social justice, that merges human rights with the more-than-human world, and that sees the refuge as entangled with broader questions of sustainability and survival. In Arctic Refuge campaigns and in many other struggles, grassroots forms of image circulation mobilized public feelings, encouraged audiences to become political agents, and challenged mainstream views of the environmental cause.<sup>11</sup>

The history of environmentalism is often told as a story of legislative battles or protest actions or scientific writings. But it is also a story of how images, emotions, and politics became interwoven in the modern United States. Pictures made it easier to sell certain forms of environmental protection: they created visual symbols for problems that could not be seen; they elicited concern for the well-being of innocent children and threatened species; they made viewers feel connected to distant places. Producers of popular images, though, narrowed the scope of the environmental cause: they downplayed social and ecological inequities; they over-emphasized individual responsibility; they peddled green consumerist nostrums that made shopping seem synonymous with politics. Images provide portals into the achievements and

<sup>9</sup>For various takes on the history of green consumerism, see Andrew Szasz, *Shopping Our Way to Safety: How We Changed from Protecting the Environment to Protecting Ourselves* (Minneapolis, 2007); Ted Steinberg, "Can Capitalism Save the Planet? On the Origins of Green Liberalism," *Radical History Review*, no. 107 (Spring 2010): 7–24; Thomas Jundt, *Greening the Red, White, and Blue: The Bomb, Big Business, and Consumer Resistance in Postwar America* (New York, 2014); and Andrew N. Case, *The Organic Profit: Rodale and the Making of Marketplace Environmentalism* (Seattle, 2018).

<sup>10</sup>Robert M. Wilson, "Faces of the Climate Movement," *Environmental History* 22, no. 1 (Jan. 2017): 128–39.

<sup>11</sup>On the grassroots production and circulation of images in social movements—the civil rights movement and Arctic Refuge campaigns, respectively—see Leigh Raiford, "'Come Let Us Build a New World Together': SNCC and the Photography of the Civil Rights Movement," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (Dec. 2007): 1129–57; and Shirley Roburn, "Beyond Film Impact Assessment: *Being Caribou* Community Screenings as Activist Training Grounds," *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 2520–39. On the need for more attention to non-iconic images and more studies of the materiality and agency of the visual record, see Gregg Mitman and Kelley Wilder, eds., *Documenting the World: Film, Photography, and the Scientific Record* (Chicago, 2016).

failures of American environmentalism; they reveal the constraints of the past and conjure glimpses of other historical possibilities.

**Finis Dunaway** is a professor of history at Trent University in Canada and serves as the Gallery and Film Forum Editor for *Environmental History*. He is the author of *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform* and of *Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images*, which received the John G. Cawelti Award from the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association, the History Division Book Award from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, and the Robert K. Martin Book Prize from the Canadian Association for American Studies. He is currently working on a book about the history of environmental and Indigenous campaigns to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.