

# VOICES FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

## A CENTURY OF BAY AREA ACTIVISM

THE BANCROFT LIBRARY GALLERY  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY  
OCTOBER 6, 2023–NOVEMBER 15, 2024



David Brower at Endangered Earth rally, David Ross Brower photograph collection, BANC PIC 2001.211, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

This activity guide was created to accompany The Bancroft Library Gallery exhibition *Voices for the Environment: A Century of Bay Area Activism* and can be used as an educational resource to learn more about events and historical materials featured in the show.

# VOICES FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

## A CENTURY OF BAY AREA ACTIVISM

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout the twentieth century, environmental issues came to occupy a prominent place in American society. No state spearheaded that development more than California, and perhaps no region witnessed and guided the evolution of environmentalism like the Bay Area. Long before climate change became an urgent topic, environmental loss and degradation in the previous century inspired Bay Area residents to organize and take action. In charting the evolution of environmentalism, the exhibit spotlights three significant periods of this activism over the century.

This exhibit features audio segments of oral history interviews, in addition to historical photographs, pamphlets, documents, and posters. Oral histories record people's reminiscences, accounts, and interpretations of the past in their own words. They record individuals' direct experiences and recollections of events that they witnessed or lived through. Oral histories are conducted through interviews and are preserved in audio and video recordings, and in written transcripts. As a research tool, the practice of oral history has significantly expanded our understanding of the past by including a greater number of perspectives, communities, people, and events in the historical record.

In 1953, the Oral History Center, or OHC, was established to conduct interviews with residents of California and the West. Over the decades, the OHC has conducted more than 5,000 interviews on a wide variety of topics, compiling at The Bancroft Library one of the largest publicly accessible oral history collections in the nation. Transcripts of the vast majority of these interviews are available online.

Visit the OHC at [ucblib.link/OralHistoryCenter](https://ucblib.link/OralHistoryCenter) (case sensitive)

### FEATURED HISTORICAL EVENTS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Sierra Club, c. 1892

1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire

Hetch Hetchy Valley and Reservoir, debated 1908–1913

Save the Redwoods League, c. 1918

Save San Francisco Bay Association, c. 1961

San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC), c. 1965

Earth Island Institute, c. 1982

West County Toxics Coalition, c. 1984

Urban Habitat Program, c. 1989

First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, 1991

APEN (Asian Pacific Environmental Network), c. 1993

Presidential Executive Order on Environmental Justice (E.O. 12898), 1994

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### ENVIRONMENTAL TERMINOLOGY

**Ecosystem** – The interacting community of plants, animals, and other organisms with their physical environment in a specific region.

**Degradation** – The process through which the health and quality of an ecosystem and its physical environment are diminished.

**Pollution** – The harmful human impact on an ecosystem. This can range from trash and waste to the toxic by-products of modern technology, such as discarded batteries, chemicals, and motor exhaust.

**Bay fill** – The act of dumping dirt and other substances into a bay to replace the water and create a foundation upon which a structure can be built.

**Natural resources** – The plants and animals, as well as other natural elements from the physical environment, that are deemed valuable by society. This value can be a market value and/or a social value.

**Preservation** – A form of environmental protection that seeks to severely limit, and in some cases outright prohibit, human impact on an ecosystem. For example, a designated wilderness is a preserved ecosystem that is managed to remain relatively free from the signs and impacts of modern society such that natural processes occur without significant human influence.

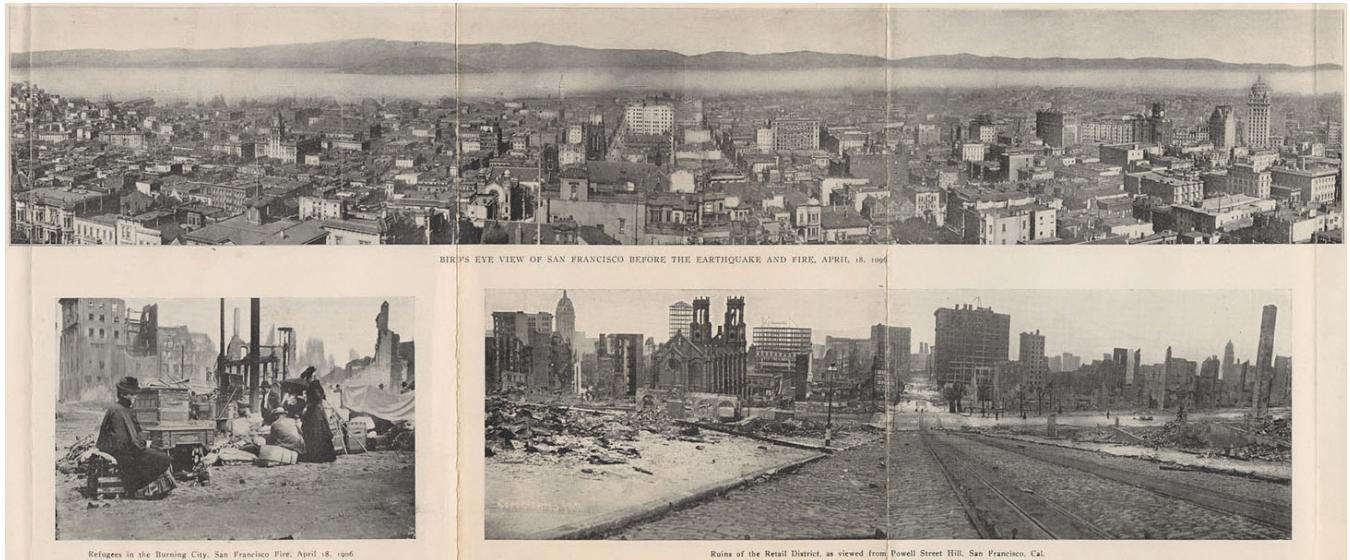
**Conservation** – A form of environmental protection that seeks to regulate human impact and use of an ecosystem. Instead of prohibiting human activities, conservation seeks to create a balance between use and protection of the ecosystem. For example, a city park conserves open space while also having designated areas for human activities, such as picnic tables, playgrounds, sports fields, and music venues.

**Environmental justice** – The equal treatment and meaningful involvement of all people in environmental decision-making with respect to environmental laws, regulations, and policies, including access to clean and safe natural areas. In many respects, environmental justice addresses the disproportionate burden of hazard and harm historically placed on marginalized communities of color from sources of environmental pollution and degradation.

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### A PRESERVATIONIST SPIRIT (1900–1920s)



*San Francisco Before and After the Fire* (Rieder Cardinell Co., 1906). 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire Digital Collection, xF869.S3.93.S165: no. 04, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

The first section of the exhibit highlights the environmental tensions that arose after the 1906 earthquake and fire in San Francisco. With 80 percent of the city destroyed, the effort to rebuild targeted the state's ancient redwood trees and a reliable water source in Hetch Hetchy Valley, which was then preserved within Yosemite National Park. These actions caused an outcry among residents who valued environmental preservation over economic development. Use the questions below to further explore these events and what they meant for environmentalism in the Bay Area.

Listen to the oral history recordings of those who witnessed the 1906 earthquake and fire in San Francisco. While listening, examine the before and after photos of the city on the following page.

What emotions resonate with you about the 1906 earthquake and fire?

What were the ramifications of the 1906 earthquake and fire on the surrounding environment of the Bay Area in the years that followed?

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### A PRESERVATIONIST SPIRIT (1900–1920s)

How do you see the concept of preservation developing, from Save the Redwoods to Hetch Hetchy? Why is it seen as important?

How is the concept of preservation discussed in the oral history recordings about Hetch Hetchy Valley?

Compare the before and after photos of Hetch Hetchy, below. In what ways do the oral histories illuminate what you see in the photos?



Hetch Hetchy Valley [left] and Hetch Hetchy Reservoir [right], M. M. O'Shaughnessy photograph collection, BANC PIC 1992.058, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

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### TIDES OF CONSERVATION (1960s–1970s)



Save The Bay pamphlet, Save San Francisco Bay Association Records, BANC MSS 87/29 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

The second section in the exhibit highlights the Save San Francisco Bay movement and the creation of the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission, or BCDC. With the rise of another development boom in the Bay Area after World War II, activists organized against plans to fill in large segments of the bay. Their movement eventually led to the creation of BCDC by the California state government. This marked two important steps in the evolution of Bay Area environmentalism. First, it gave environmental considerations a permanent place in state government. Second, it signified a balanced approach between economic development and environmental conservation. Use the questions below to further explore these events and what they meant for environmentalism in the Bay Area.

Listen to the oral history recordings of Save The Bay founders Esther Gulick, Catherine “Kay” Kerr, and Sylvia McLaughlin.

What issues led to the Save The Bay movement?

What aspects of their stories resonate with you? Explain why.

How do their stories highlight residents’ activism and the role of women in environmentalism?

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Stop Bay Fill bumper sticker, Save San Francisco Bay Association Records, BANC MSS 87/29 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

Listen to the oral history recordings of BCDC's Melvin Lane and Joseph Bodovitz.

How did government regulation of the bay work?

What surprised you about the work of BCDC?

Was BCDC needed for the bay? Explain why or why not.

What similarities and differences do you notice between the preservation work of the Sierra Club in section 1 and the conservation work of BCDC in section 2?

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### ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOR ALL (1980s–2000)

The third section of the exhibit explores the rise of environmental justice in the Bay Area. Communities of color have long confronted environmental racism—the disproportionate burden of hazard and harm placed on marginalized communities from sources of environmental pollution and degradation. By the late twentieth century, residents organized to situate the protection of people and communities—not just landscapes—within the environmental agenda. Use the questions below to further explore these events and what they meant for environmentalism in the Bay Area.

After listening to the oral history recordings in the third section, how would you explain the concept of environmental justice?

What aspects of environmental justice resonate with you?

How would you compare and contrast environmental justice with the kinds of environmental activism covered in the previous two sections, about preservation and conservation?

Which of the Principles of Environmental Justice resonates with you the most? Explain why.

What aspects of environmental justice do you see illustrated in the APEN poster on the following page?



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## ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOR ALL (1980s–2000)



Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) is working with intergenerational and Laotian refugee community members in Richmond, CA on a vision of building a healthy and sustainable city. They are pursuing a just transition from the pollution-based economy of the Chevron refinery and crude oil trains towards a healthy living economy that supports the well-being of our families, empowers our people, cleans our environment, and creates safe neighborhoods.

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### REFLECTIONS ON ORAL HISTORY

This exhibit features oral history recordings on a variety of events and issues. How did hearing about history, in the voices of people who lived through it, offer a different experience from reading a text or looking at pictures and artifacts?

How does oral history serve as a unique kind of historical source, as compared with written text, images, or physical objects? Is one source more valid than another? If so, why?

What contributions did the oral history recordings make to your understanding of the historical events covered in the exhibit?

How might the identities of the people interviewed impact how they remembered their experience of the past?

Oral history can be used to document the history of a community, a specific event, or someone's life and career. If you had the chance to conduct an oral history interview today, or go back in time to conduct an interview in the past, who would you interview, and what would be the focus? Explain why.

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## WORKBOOK CREDITS

Produced by Todd Holmes and Roger Eardley-Pryor  
Designed by Alison Wannamaker  
Edited by Tor Haugan

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Visit the *Voices for the Environment* exhibit website for more information and resources [ucberk.li/VoicesExhibit](https://ucberk.li/VoicesExhibit) (case sensitive)

- Full transcripts of the oral histories featured in the exhibit
- Full audio podcasts (and transcripts) created for the exhibit
- Related projects and collections

## ABOUT THE ORAL HISTORY CENTER

The Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library preserves voices of people from all walks of life, with varying political perspectives, national origins, and ethnic backgrounds. We are committed to open access, and our oral histories and interpretive materials are available online at no cost to scholars and the public. You can find our oral histories by using the search feature on our home page. Search by name, keyword, and several other criteria. Keep in touch with us by signing up for our monthly newsletter, which features think pieces, new oral history releases, podcasts, Q&As, and oral history news.

**CONTACT US** 510-643-4787 | [ohc@berkeley.edu](mailto:ohc@berkeley.edu)

**LEARN MORE** [ucbib.link/OralHistoryCenter](https://ucbib.link/OralHistoryCenter) (case sensitive)

**GIVE ONLINE** [ucbib.link/OHC-donate](https://ucbib.link/OHC-donate) (case sensitive)

## ABOUT THE BANCROFT LIBRARY

The Bancroft Library is the primary special collections library at the University of California, Berkeley. One of the largest and most heavily used libraries of manuscripts, rare books, and unique materials in the United States, Bancroft supports major research and instructional activities, and plays a leading role in the development of the university's research collections.

**CONTACT US** 510-642-3782 | [bancroft@library.berkeley.edu](mailto:bancroft@library.berkeley.edu)

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