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From Environmental Activism to Consumer Action: A Historical Analysis of the  
Environmental Movement

by

Milica Petkovic

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through Communication and Social Justice  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts at the  
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2009

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From Environmental Activism to Consumer Action: A Historical Analysis of the  
Environmental Movement

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14 September 2009

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## **Abstract**

The “going green” trend, having emerged in a society increasingly driven and defined by consumption, has helped produce a discourse that significantly aids in the conservation of capitalism while simultaneously likening the consumption of “green” products to environmentalism. Coupled with an increase in media attention, celebrity endorsement, a growing “cool” factor and cause-related marketing strategies, the combination has largely supplanted earlier understandings. Using Foucauldian discourse analysis I will examine a series of newspaper articles from the 1960s to 2008. I will trace the shifts that have emerged in popular discourse that have allowed for a connection between consumption and activism to arise. Moreover, I will also examine how this connection has altered the nature of activism, moving away from collective forms to a more individualized approach. The implications of this shift will also be discussed in relation to other social movements, highlighting social justice issues.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
CHAPTER	
I. "GOING GREEN" TREND: AN INTRODUCTION	1
A Look Back	5
The 1960s and 1970s Environmental Movement	7
i. Media Coverage & Attention: Now and Then	8
ii. <i>Silent Spring</i> 1962: A Controversial Media Favourite & Citizen Motivator	12
iii. Transformations in Activism	15
Literature Review: An Examination of Consumption	19
A New Popular Imaginary: Transforming the Discourse	23
Theoretical Framework: Post-Structuralism & Critical Marxism	25
Methodology	29
Thesis Outline	34
II. GREENING THE ECONOMY: A HISTORICAL EXAMINATION OF THE 1980S & 1990S ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT	37
News Media as an Institutional Actor	38
<i>Our Common Future</i> (1987)	44
i. Sustainable Development	47
ii. <i>Our Common Future</i> : Impact and Effects	50
Earth Summit: Rio de Janeiro 1992	51
Bridging the Economy/ Environment Gap: Individual Responsibility	55
i. The Role of Business & Advertising: Selling a "Green" Lifestyle	57
Activism with a Capitalist Twist	62
i. Positive Results & Negative Consequences of "Green" Consumerism	64
Green Consumerism: A Reflection	66
III. THE MANY SHADES OF GREEN: A HISTORICAL EXAMINATION OF THE CURRENT "GOING GREEN" TREND	68
Green Here, Green There, Green Everywhere	70
i. Cause-related Marketing: It's Good to Be Green	74
ii. Spotlight on Prominent Greens	77
News Media as a Powerful Communication Media	79
The Toyota Prius	82
i. Green Marketing: The Toyota Company	86
Consumer Activism	91
IV. THE MARK OF TIME: A SUMMARY	95
Consumption as Environmental Activism: Implications	99
Future Research Possibilities	104
BIBLIOGRAPHY	106
VITA AUCTORIS	123

## I. “Going Green” Trend: An Introduction

“Saying you're not for the environment right now is like saying you're not for education, children, world peace, Africa or a cure for cancer” (Morris 3).

The environment and the changes to it – namely global warming, the ongoing depletion of natural resources, food and water scarcity as well as pollution – are a primary concern for people in today’s society. Moreover, with the increase in media attention, celebrity endorsement, the “cool” factor and ever-escalating number of “green” products, it is no surprise that the current “going green” trend has become a major source of public dialogue. Thousands of people have begun to join in this ever-growing movement, “greening” their lives and homes with tips and advice taken from popular “green” websites like Planet Green ([planetgreen.discovery.com](http://planetgreen.discovery.com)). From beauty and fashion to work and transportation, websites such as this one, offer countless opportunities to “green” every aspect of one’s life.

Consumers are not the only ones “going green”; companies continue to introduce new “environmentally friendly” products and lines. Clorox, a company well known for its bleaches, has recently launched its “Green Works, Natural Cleaners” line. Made from “plant-based materials that clean with the power you’d expect from Clorox,” this product line constitutes one example of the many constantly materializing in grocery stores and shopping malls ([Clorox.com](http://Clorox.com)). Despite the common assumption that the creation of such products and product lines constitutes a new trend, neither are revolutionary; the 1980s and 1990s saw the beginning of a shift towards more environmentally friendly products. As Wall notes, Loblaws was one of the first retail stores to offer “its own GREEN line of environment and body friendly

products in 1989 and other manufacturers soon followed suit” (169). Thus environmentally friendly products and “green” lines are not new. What is new however is the emphasis placed on “going green.” It is no longer just a consumption choice, it has become a lifestyle; a way of living, acting, and being.

With all the hype, an exact definition of “going green” is difficult to pin down, as so many iterations exist. However, there seem to be two key, though not unrelated, aspects to this trend: lifestyle choices and “environmentally friendly” products. Examples of the first include everything from recycling, conserving energy, reducing waste, eating local produce, and becoming a vegetarian, to finding alternative means of transportation. People are encouraged to “green” their lives by making what are considered to be small but effective changes. Moreover, as Williams notes, “the public [has] turned away from the Carter-era environmental message of sacrifice” (9). With so many options available, and an emphasis on lifestyle changes that steers clear of the notion of sacrifice, it is easy to see why “consumers have [as Williams notes] embraced living green” (9).

The second aspect – “environmentally friendly products” – also helps to further the notion that consumers need not give up the luxuries they have come to enjoy. From stainless steel water bottles to clothing, jewelry, furniture, office supplies, bedding, shoes, and accessories, consumers are now able to find “green” products in every size, shape, and colour. “Going green” thus implies both an awareness and conscious decision to alter one’s consumption practices in order to help save our planet. Furthermore, these two key components also strongly encourage consumers to “think of [themselves] as environmental champions just by going



shopping” (Dunleavy C6). In a society progressively driven and defined by consumption, a discourse that contributes significantly to the conservation of capitalism while simultaneously likening the consumption of “green” products to environmentalism deserves a closer look.

Ties between consumption and activism continue to emerge in our society. There has been a decline in more traditional forms of collective social activism generally speaking, and a rise in what I am calling “consumer activism”: individual acts of consumption that, given the nature of the products consumed, have come to stand in for social-political activism. A primary example is the (RED) campaign. The official website for this campaign contains its slogan: BUY (RED) SAVE LIVES” (“joinred”). Created, in the words of the organization, to “help eliminate AIDS in Africa,” the (RED) campaign works by donating a portion of the funds from a (RED) product to The Global Fund. One hundred percent of the money obtained by this fund is then used to “finance HIV health and community support programs in Africa.” The notion is, as Bill Gates – chairman and co-founder of Microsoft – notes, relatively simple; Americans can “contribute to fighting AIDS a continent away... just by switching their cell phone or buying some of the clothing that’s part of the Red line” (Story C8). The result, as the website states, is that the consumer has a new (RED) product and has “helped save a person’s life” (“joinred”). Thus, in the discourse of this campaign, the purchase of a (RED) product is substituted for a form of activism.

The discourse of “going green” is very similar. An example of this can be found in an article for the *New York Times* entitled “A New Way to Ask ‘How Green is My Conscience?’” In the article Christine Larson outlines a new way of “greening”

one's life. Referred to as "green" upgrades," these easy solutions allow "consumers to help the environment without changing their behaviour" (Larson C3). For example, non-profit organizations like The Conservation Fund will neutralize one's carbon footprint, at a cost. Consumers need only pay and the "greening" process is taken care of for them ([www.conservationfund.org](http://www.conservationfund.org)). No fuss required. As a result, the ties between consumption and activism are becoming more and more prevalent in today's society.

Along with the notion that consumption can serve as activism, the popularity of the "going green" trend can also be attributed to several prominent members of society, notably those already in the public eye. Celebrities, politicians, environmentalists, corporations, the media, and environmental organizations and groups have helped thrust the "going green" trend into the limelight. They have also been instrumental in helping to imbue the trend with a distinct "cool" factor. Furthermore, the media and celebrity attention, along with the number of products available, have sparked interest from the "ordinary" citizen. People are joining facebook groups, acquiring advice and tips from websites, books and magazines, as well as buying "environmentally friendly" products. The popularity of the "going green" trend has become so widespread that it seems more people are a part of it than not. In turn, there is a temptation to glorify the trend as the first of its kind, thereby supplanting past environmental movements. I, on the other hand, argue that the "going green" trend has co-opted the discourse of past environmental movements, altered them, and created something that – while falling under the umbrella of environmental movements – has greatly transformed past understandings and public

dialogue of environmentalism and, more specifically, activism.

In order to fully grasp the transformation that has taken place, it is vital to examine not only the recent “going green” trend, but its predecessors as well. As a result, the following will provide the historical grounding to my argument. A key component of this historical grounding is a more general exploration of the 1960s as a period of profound social change. By pointing to the roots of social movements, the emergence of activism and the media’s role in disseminating information and producing certain knowledge, the 1960s and 1970s environmental movement will be situated in a larger, historical context. Once the essential preconditions have been discussed, an investigation of key events and social actors that marked the emergence of the 1960s and 1970s environmental movement will be more clearly delineated. This examination will focus specifically on Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*. I will ask the following research questions: how did activism emerge in the 1960s and the 1970s environmental movement? What role did activism play? And finally, what did it mean to take action or to be an activist during this period?

### **A Look Back**

The Sixties were “a time of rebellion, a defiance of authority, acting out of hopes and dreams. It was a time of reconsidering the way we lived, the way we behaved toward people in [the United States] and abroad” (Zinn ix). Several factors contributed to this, including the relative economic prosperity that had emerged in many parts of the United States towards the end of the 1950s (Farber 24). For some citizens this change was viewed in a fully positive light; others however, were struck by how much more obvious economic disparities within the United States became

(Farber 24-25). This factor is strongly tied to two other important aspects. The first is that of an increased level of general education across the United States. As Farber notes, “more students were going to college than before World War II, creating a concentration of concerned and educated” citizens (38).

The second component is that of an “emerging national culture that linked all Americans more closely than ever before” (Farber 49-50). Television – and the media more generally speaking – largely contributed to this “emerging national culture” as it allowed citizens to witness and learn about events taking place in other parts of the country and around the world. Together these aspects stirred dissatisfaction with the ways things were; citizens, increasingly more educated and more exposed to various social ills and inequalities within their own country began to question and challenge the status quo. Such critiques were, as Zinn points out, channeled into a “democratic vision; a belief that all people should be full members of society, that individuals become empowered through meaningful social participation, and that politics ought to be grounded on respect and compassion for the individual person” (xi). In this manner, a new notion of the citizen – one that assumed the “individual has the capacity to manage social affairs in a direct, ethical, and rational manner” – emerged (Morgan 10). As a result, “in place of isolation, powerlessness, meaningless work, and lives defined as production, ownership and consumption of commodities, [citizens] demanded community, love, creativity, and power in their own lives” (Morgan 14). This power came to be derived through direct action that reinforced one’s “personal commitment to work for justice” (Morgan 19).

Personal activism in the 1960s came to be closely tied to collective forms of

social activism. This connection is, in large part, a result of the various significant social movements that emerged during this era. For the purpose of this research, the civil rights movement will serve as a key example. This movement challenged segregation and discrimination, pointing to an insistence on “universal citizenship” and equal rights for all (Morgan 10). It motivated citizens to stop relying on the government and instead take action into their own hands. Through protest marches, boycotts, and sit-ins, individual black American citizens combined their own personal commitment to justice with many others, strengthening their voices and subsequently, their cause. Instead of waiting for change, citizens were encouraged to actively participate in the creation of the reform they desired; echoing John F. Kennedy’s now famous words: “ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country” (“Kennedy”). As the civil rights movement achieved success, it simultaneously encouraged the use of collective forms of activism in other emerging social movements including, but not limited to, the student movement, the anti-Vietnam war movement, the women’s movement and the gay rights movement (Morgan 5-10). The environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s was also strongly influenced by the civil rights movement, other social movements, and more generally, the nature of the era. <sup>1</sup>

### **The 1960s and 1970s Environmental Movement**

To be sure, concerns about the environment have been longstanding; dating back to ancient civilizations. However, given the profound social changes that

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the environmental movement was not the only significant movement of this period. Moreover, many social movements during this time shared values, fought for common social justice causes and created alliances with other movements. Eco-feminism is a prime example as women took on a particularly important role in highlighting and protesting against a wide range of environmental concerns.

marked the 1960s, this time period also constituted a defining moment for environmental apprehensions and action. Research conducted for this thesis has consistently pointed to this time period as the birth of the environmental movement as a social movement. For the first time, several important factors – including widespread media attention and participation, celebrity status ascribed to authority figures, and the mass involvement of ordinary citizens – merged, generating a common understanding of environmental concerns. These interconnected aspects continue to play an important role in the “going green” trend. In the 1960s and 1970s however, they were new and thus not only distinguish this time period from previous ones, but also render it significant to the history of the environmental movement.

#### **i. Media Coverage & Attention: Now and Then**

Given the media saturation that marks today’s society, it is largely understood that the media, generally speaking, plays an active role in generating information and knowledge about the world. News media specifically has long been a “privileged site for the construction, contestation, and criticism of issues and problems [given its] leading role in establishing which local and international events will be selected for attention and how they will be inflected with meaning and made salient” (Greenberg and Knight 154). Moreover, as Greenberg and Knight state, “it has become almost a truism to note that news media may not tell readers what to think, but they have a particularly powerful effect on encouraging readers to think about certain issues and to do so in certain ways” (154). The influence of the news media and media coverage in general, has extended to the construction of social movements. As Motion and Weaver note, media coverage of social movements is an important part of “promoting

an organization's public profile, gaining credible publicity [and] circulating particular knowledge in order to raise public awareness, influence public opinion, and gain support for interests and causes" (246). The authors continue on to state that, "media coverage may serve to legitimate the particular knowledge or views being promoted" (246). Over the span of forty decades, media coverage, and specifically news media coverage, has been involved in the construction of knowledge about environmentalism. Coverage has focused on particular issues, highlighted key individuals, downplayed events, and echoed public concerns.

In *What a Book Can Do*, Priscilla Murphy points to the steady rise of media as a source of information during the 1960s and 1970s. Though television, and more specifically television documentaries, acquired a great deal of public support, "reading – of books as well as newspapers and magazines – was still a primary means of receiving communication" (12). Echoing the concerns expressed by citizens, newspaper and magazine publications began to call attention to "materialism and other troubling aspects of contemporary American society" (12). These aspects stem from what both Priscilla Murphy and Kirkpatrick Sale describe as a foundation of unease during this era. As Murphy notes, while the American population was "enjoying unprecedented wealth, literacy, and general education," people were also beginning to feel disillusioned (10). The initial triumph of the "postwar boom" was diminishing and as a result, more and more individuals began to turn a critical eye toward the government and public life (Sale 6). Members of society were also beginning to express concerns about the environment, both in relation to their health and their survival. Combined with the "widening use of media overall...the general

public was becoming more aware and more involved in social issues; and the media themselves were turning attention to public affairs in new ways” (Murphy 11).

In her dissertation, Marcy Ann Darnovsky outlines a similar understanding. She notes that citizens were beginning to rethink the advantages of a society increasingly driven by consumption. John McCormick furthers this view, stating, “more and more people turned to count the mounting costs of unbridled economic growth and sought to reassert non-material values” (49). Materialism and consumption were only two of many issues critiqued in the news media. Others included war, inequality, the state of the environment, and discrimination. This newfound level of public criticism – thanks in part to the media’s increased attention and the people’s interest and openness to it – profoundly affected the social and political nature of this era. It arguably helped to spark the rise and support of various social movements, and greatly furthered the notion that “citizens could, and should, take action” (Murphy 12).

The news media’s role in furthering social movements is a particularly powerful one. Though, as Gamson and Wolfsfeld note, “each side in the media-movement transaction is dependent on the other,” the level of dependency is not an equal one (115). As the authors note, movements “are generally much more dependent on media” for three main reasons. The first is that of mobilization. Gamson and Wolfsfeld state that in regards to mobilization, “most movements must reach their constituency in part through some form of public discourse” (116). Though discourse is generated in various forms, including through the movement’s own publications, “media discourse remains indispensable”; it is through this medium that



movements gain access to a mass audience (116). This reliance on the media to convey the movement's message to the public signals the movement's need for "validation," the second reason outlined by Gamson and Wolfsfeld (116). Gaining significant media attention means that the movement matters, that it is "an important player" with newsworthy ideas and messages to convey (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 116). This reason ties into the third and final one, that of "scope enlargement" (116). For a movement to broaden its scope, it often requires the media. The media not only has the means to highlight a particular movement's message, ideas, and values, but also to render it – through more extensive coverage and support – a more powerful movement in comparison to others. Furthermore, movements also depend on the media to "generate public sympathy for their challenges" and their causes (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 116).

Though social movements are more dependent on the media, the media can, as Gamson and Wolfsfeld note, also derive benefits from this relationship. Social movements provide the media with "drama, conflict and action" (116). The more dynamic the movement's cause, the more newsworthy the movement as a whole is rendered. For the environmental movement specifically, the emergence of Rachel Carson's influential book, *Silent Spring* caught the news media's attention. Coverage and interest subsequently set the stage for a public dialogue about the environment and environmental issues. As a result, Carson's book, her work, and the news media's role in creating a buzz about the environment will be discussed in the following section in order to outline the features of what is now known as the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

## ii. *Silent Spring* 1962: A Controversial Media Favourite & Citizen Motivator

Having emerged amid the recent growth in media attention and public criticism, *Silent Spring* was “greeted by a population already acquainted with the idea of dangers in the environment” (Murphy 13). The cranberry scare of 1959 was still fresh in the public’s mind, and newspaper articles had already begun to outline various environmental issues.<sup>2</sup> For example, Murphy notes that the *New York Times* covered the issue [of pesticides] substantially before *Silent Spring*” was released (15). As a result, Carson’s book was able to speak to what Sale has deemed “a ready audience” and thus generated further public dialogue about the environment (7). Moreover, Carson’s book had the added benefit of receiving considerable media attention even before its full release. The Houghton Mifflin book appeared in the *New Yorker* as a serialization, three months prior to its mass distribution. The effect was a “vigorous public controversy” that garnered attention from the news media, government agencies, pesticide producers, environmentalists, scientists and, perhaps most importantly, everyday citizens (Murphy 1). Referred to by Max Nicholson, head of the British Nature Conservancy, as “probably the greatest and most effective single contribution to informing public opinion on the true nature and significance of ecology,” *Silent Spring* was, and continues to be seen as much more than a critical look at the use and harm of pesticides (4). It was a rallying “cry to the reading public” that not only motivated change, but inspired action (Milne and Milne 303).

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<sup>2</sup> Shortly before Thanksgiving of 1959, Arthur S. Sherwood – Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare – called a press conference to inform the public that northwestern cranberries may have been tainted by the weed killer aminotriazole (which reportedly caused cancer in rats). Citizens were advised to avoid cranberries until tainted ones could be distinguished from untainted ones. The cranberry industry suffered greatly and citizens, as Murphy notes, learned that “pesticides could harm humans” (11).

Completed after four-and-a-half years of preparation, *Silent Spring* was the fourth and final book written by the marine biologist and writer. Like its predecessors – *Under the Sea Wind* (1941), *The Sea Around Us* (1951), and *The Edge of the Sea* (1955) – *Silent Spring* dealt predominantly with a strong environmental theme. Unlike the past works, widely praised for their poetic language and beautiful imagery, *Silent Spring* took on a more pointed tone (Lee 87). Comprised of 297 pages, the book centers specifically on the negative effects of DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloro-ethane) – a synthetic chemical whose ability to stamp out insect-borne disease overnight was praised for winning the farmers’ war against crop destroyers (Carson 20). *Silent Spring* also spoke of the “increasing use of [other] chemical poisons in a generally unsuccessful effort to eliminate insect pests and the extent to which we are, in the process, subjecting ourselves to the hazard of slow poisoning through the pollution of our environment” (“Rachel Carson’s Warning” 28). In this sense, Carson took an environmental issue and made it personal to the public; revealing the extent to which citizens were asked, in her words, “to assume the risks” of indiscriminate pesticide use (“The Silent Spring”). In the 1963 Columbia Broadcasting System’s television series, “C.B.S. Reports,” Carson – in a special dedicated to her work – stated that “the public must decide whether it wishes to continue on the present road, and it can do so only when in full possession of the facts” (“The Silent Spring”). By carefully documenting scientific facts in fifty-five pages of citations and references, it seemed a primary goal of *Silent Spring* was less to spark controversy, and more to generate public awareness (Atkinson 30; Milne and Milne 303).

Along with attention paid to a variety of the most dangerous poisons, the

inclusion of quotes from leading authorities, descriptions of alternative practices and the assertion that the ongoing indiscriminate use of pesticides constitutes nothing short of an invasion of human rights, Carson outlined an underlying notion that was central to her argument in *Silent Spring* (Milne and Milne 303; Barnes “No One” G11); it also became a key part of the discourse of environmentalism during the 1960s and 1970s. Carson believed that drastic changes were needed in our relationship to nature. In her view, we had yet to

become mature enough to think of ourselves as only a tiny part of a vast and incredible universe. Man’s attitude toward nature is today critically important simply because we have now acquired a fateful power to alter and destroy nature. But man is part of nature and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself... this generation, must come to terms with nature, [as] we’re challenged as mankind has never been challenged before to prove our maturity and our mastery, not of nature, but of ourselves (“The Silent Spring”).

Through the expression of a connection between humans and nature – not only in her work, but also in the countless interviews and public appearances that helped Rachel Carson achieve a kind of celebrity status – she established a sense of collective responsibility for the environment. The vigilant use of “we” underscored Carson’s strong belief that citizens, now more aware of the facts, must join together and assume responsibility. More importantly, citizens were urged to “do something about the situation” (Milne and Milne 303). Assuming responsibility was, in Carson’s view, only the first of many necessary steps. Action was also required. Action that spoke against the ongoing indiscriminate use of pesticides; that called more attention to the environment and citizen health; that demanded change and achieved it through collective social action. The kind of collective action that Carson hoped to inspire in her many readers is now a marker of the 1960s and 1970s environmental movement.

The publication of *Silent Spring* itself had not only set off a nationally publicized debate and placed a billion-dollar industry on the defensive, but led to the implementation of several studies, and the establishment of the Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge (“Rachel Carson Dies”<sup>1</sup>; Barnes C12). Following the death of the author in 1964, more organizations were formed, acts passed, and laws created. Increased media coverage and attention had not only generated new understandings of environmental issues but also transformed the nature of activism.

### **iii. Transformations in Activism**

As Sale states, the 1960s and 1970s environmental movement sought to increase awareness about the environment as well as bring about positive social and political change. Individuals were motivated to join together and work collectively for the betterment of the planet. And they did; through the employment of “sit-ins, demonstrations, [and] protest marches” community action groups helped – among other things – to tackle the nation’s garbage, and overturn government plans that were considered both harmful to the environment and non-conducive to reducing the use of natural resources (Cray F17; Cerra 34). The result was a “new style of citizen activism” – understood in this context as a way of exercising the civic rights one possesses for the betterment of oneself and greater society (Sale 12). Citizen activism not only garnered substantial media attention, but also led to the creation of numerous organizations, groups, and funds (Sale 12). A few examples include Friends of the Earth (1968), the Environmental Defense Fund (1967), Greenpeace (1971), and Earth First! (1979). These organizations sought to increase public awareness, advance the concept of environmental rights, and preserve the well being of the planet for both

existing and future generations (Sale 21). Their work, combined with the collective public action and media coverage that marked this era, further contributed to the successful passing of laws and government acts. In 1964 for example, President Johnson signed a bill that set aside “9.1 million acres of forest and mountain vastness to be forever protected from the encroachments of civilization” (“President Signs” 31). The bill marked the end of a long battle between conservationists and big business. It also signaled a growing concern for the environment and the rising influence of environmental groups and advocates. Further examples include the Air-Pollution Aid Bill (1963), the National Environmental Policy Act (1970), the Water Pollution Control Act (1972), and the Resource of Conservation and Recovery Act (1976).

Citizen activism, as noted, also played a crucial role in preserving media interest and coverage for the growing environmental movement. The sheer number of people involved in demonstrations and protests, coupled with the enthusiasm and dedication they expressed, convinced media gatekeepers that the environment was an issue worthy of ongoing coverage (Croteau and Hoynes 248). Earth Day 1970 exemplifies this notion. Months of planning in the making, Earth Day was part of a week-long celebration that employed various schools, citizens, environmental groups, and the media to draw attention to a variety of environmental issues. According to Denis Hayes, the national coordinator, the week was also meant to be “a tool – something that could be used to focus the attention of a society on where we are heading. A chance to start getting a handle on it all; a rejection of the silly idea that somehow bigger is better, and faster is better, world without limit, amen” (“Earth

Week” A20). Thus, participating groups were encouraged to develop various strategies for improvement. Some were simple – “declaring war on non-reusable bottles” for example – others, like joining in lawsuits against polluting industries, required more effort (“Earth Week” A20). Despite the range, “ten to twenty million people across the United States [came out to] participate in rallies, teach-ins, and other activities,” rendering Earth Day the largest demonstration ever organized to protest the degradation of the environment and highlight the problem in our relationship to nature (Environmental Action staff; Bird 1). It was, in the words of Sale, a “demonstration of the depth of feeling about environmentalism at that time”: revealing the extent to which people were concerned about the environment (25).

Newspaper coverage during this time reveals that the news media did more than simply cover major events; it also reflected and helped construct the changing public dialogue that was emerging. Moreover, it highlighted the growing scope of issues that were being tied to the environmental movement and environmentalism more generally. A primary example is that of animal rights. In *Diet For A New America*, John Robbins discusses the connection between what we eat and the “nature of this impact, not only on our health but in addition on the vigor of our society, the health of the world, and the well-being of its creatures” (xiv). He aims to uncover the “truth” of the food industry, revealing to consumers the deplorable conditions in which animals live and how our food is often tainted with pesticides, hormones, and antibiotics. Robbins’ hope, like that of Carson’s, was to inform the public and subsequently inspire action. News media coverage further reflected such ties; the fashion press, for example, “toned down its display of spotted furs” as various

conservation groups and active citizens protested the murder of animals for the sake of style (Taylor 28). Other articles announced that Earth Day, and the ongoing activism that marked the 1960s and 1970s, was the beginning of a “new wave of environmental concern, the crucible in which a new national consciousness was created” (“Yes, there WAS” B2). This new consciousness was reflected in the continued growth of environmental groups and supporters, regular media coverage, and the inclusion of environmental concerns in various aspects of public life. By 1971 for example, virtually all colleges and many high schools had environmental courses and enrollment figures in these programs exceeded even the highest expectations (“Yes, there WAS” B2).

Moreover, news media coverage during this era also points to a change in lifestyle choices. Unlike today’s “going green” trend, these lifestyle choices often required sacrifice. Vegetarianism and veganism were two such examples. As Mayer noted, “since 1960, vegetarianism has become the way of life for countless young people” (G5). Sacrificing what has long been seen as the “typical red-blooded American” diet, vegetarians and vegans used their eating habits to “protest against what [many] considered to be the dehumanizing practice of giant agribusiness” (G5). Many citizens, following the example set by President Jimmy Carter, also worked to conserve energy, turning down their thermostats as they donned extra layers. Recycling was taken more seriously, and clothing that involved animal cruelty was largely abandoned, or seldom worn. Though sacrifice was applied to various lifestyle choices, heavy emphasis was placed on what was seen as “the biggest villain,” consumption (Aarons A20). During this time it was widely acknowledged that



“Americans consume more, per capita, than any other country [and thus] have the worst impact on the planet’s life-support system.” As a result, consumption was widely viewed as part of the problem. A primary goal became “living with nature rather than exploiting nature” (A20). The key word of the time, as noted by Ecology Action’s founder and Berkeley ecologist Clifford Humphrey, thus became “frugal” (Aarons A20). Citizens were encouraged to be more selective about their purchases, make more environmentally sustainable choices, and curb their love affair with consumption. In other words, citizens were asked to consider taking action by doing more with less; though an emerging discourse of individual responsibility was implied, it was coupled with the sense that responsibility meant sacrifice.

The following section more closely examines the ways in which consumption has been understood in the past and how it is currently understood in today’s society as part of the “going green” trend. This shift not only alters the public’s perception of consumption – from a negatively contributing factor to a key, and more significantly, positive part of “going green” – but also highlights how such understandings have influenced the ways in which the public comprehends their role in the preservation of the environment.

### **Literature Review: An Examination of Consumption**

While the discourse of the “going green” trend encourages a positive view of consumption, the opposite view was, as noted, widely held in the 1960s and 1970s. This view has also been cited extensively in various works of academic literature. Taylor and Tilford for example, strongly believe that unless we can restrict our consumption habits, the environment will continue to suffer. They state that, “since

1950, the industrialized world has been on an unprecedented consumption binge, consuming more goods and services than the combined total of all humans who ever walked the planet before us” (463). While they point out that an increase in the “standard of living” has meant that the middle class can now afford products once considered to be luxuries reserved for the rich, it has also created an “ecological disaster” (463-4). Furthermore, the authors also discuss how continuing to focus on “immediate and tangible needs and outcomes fails to account for...the long-term effects” (471)

Schor offers similar insight into the problems posed by consumption on the environment. She states that, “consumption-induced environmental damage remains pervasive, and we are in the midst of widespread failures of public provision” (447). She also explains certain myths about consumption, illustrates how consumption is tied to “our sense of social standing and belonging” as well as discusses the inequalities that are associated with consumption (448). Schor states that this inequality is generated in part by, what she has deemed “competitive consumption”: “the idea that spending is, in large part, driven by a comparative or competitive process in which individuals try to keep up with the norms of the social group with which they identify” (448). Part of the problem is that the social group has become, more often than not, the “upper middle class and the rich” (448-9). Schor also touches on the ways in which certain key aspects of products, namely the damage caused to the environment, are omitted from their price or information (458). Thus consumers are rarely reminded of the often-harmful process required to produce the items they love and consume.

The work of Heather Rogers is also useful to my research. Focusing on the role that garbage plays in our day-to-day lives, she highlights another key issue that is often overlooked by individuals, consumers, and the media. Though not explicitly about consumption, Rogers does discuss the creation of an elaborate public relations campaign by the organization Keep America Beautiful. This campaign “generated a popular narrative about garbage that shifted responsibility from industry to the individual” (232). This shift in responsibility has been noted in the 1980s and 1990s environmental movement and has arguably, been furthered in the “going green” trend. As Rogers notes, “for capitalism to continue to grow – as it must – consumers are obliged to keep buying, which means they are destined to throw ever more materials into the trash pile” (231). This understanding not only touches on the importance of consumption to the capitalist system, but the ways in which the ongoing production and consumption process generates more waste, affecting the environment in a negative manner.

Despite these concerns, consumers in today’s society are increasingly relying on the consumption of “environmentally friendly” products to stand in for environmental activism. The beginning of this transformation can be traced back to the 1980s and 1990s environmental movement. During this time, the focus shifted from collective forms of social activism to a widespread effort to bridge the gap between the economy and the environment. While attention continued to be paid to a wide variety of environmental issues – by both the media and the public – this era was also marked by a shift in responsibility. The individual, and more specifically, individual behaviour, fell under heavy critique (Wall 250). Constantly reminded of

their role in a “highly wasteful society,” individuals were encouraged to change their attitudes and behaviour (Wall 174). Through a series of events and shifts in discourse, lifestyle choices were presented as a solution to environmental problems. As individuals, people could make healthier choices for both the planet and themselves by purchasing “green” products. This notion led to the emergence of “green consumerism.”

The current “going green” trend has not only furthered the notion of “green consumerism,” it has also created what I am calling “consumer activism.” Marked in part by lifestyle changes, small steps, individual and global benefits as well as a connection and responsibility for nature, consumer activism has once again transformed the nature of activism. The work of Todd is useful here as the author provides insight into why consumers are “greening” their lives. She describes effective marketing strategies that emphasize “self-improvement,” and discusses the notion of “responsible consumption” – a way of “empowering consumers to feel good about their consumption choices” (Todd 89, 94). Building upon Todd’s work, I will also focus on a notion that I call the “feel-good” factor, one often associated with the consumption of “green” products.

The marketing of “green” products has also become an important aspect in the “going green” trend. Along with promoting the benefits of environmentally friendly products to consumers, numerous companies have discovered that in today’s green-obsessed society, it pays to be seen as “environmentally responsible.” Companies like Toyota – a well-respected “green” company given its successful marketing of the “first commercially produced” hybrid vehicle – have begun to alter the public’s

perception of consumption (Hartmann and Ibanez 677). Once scorned for its negative impact on the environment, consumption is now widely used in marketing campaigns as a solution to environmental issues. Choosing the right – in this case “green” – product can, in this discourse, actually make a difference. Consumption no longer needs to be considered harmful; in fact in this view, consumers are encouraged to perceive consumption as quite the opposite; as being beneficial to both themselves and the environment. As Todd notes, “green consumerism offers a lens into the transformative potential of human consumption” (92). It is this “transformative potential” that I feel distinguishes the contemporary “going green” trend from its predecessors.

### **A New Popular Imaginary: Transforming the Discourse**

The “going green” trend has capitalized upon the economy/ environment connection creating a consumer activist. Individuals are encouraged to continue the same aspect of the capitalist agenda as before only this time the discourse endorsed emphasizes environmental benefits. In regards to this thesis research, I am interested in the development of a new popular imaginary that has not only transformed earlier understandings and public dialogue regarding the environmental movement, but has also successfully linked lifestyle changes and consumption choices to environmental activism. I will focus on the popular dialogue that has been generated as a result of ongoing media attention – specifically in relation to news media in the form of newspaper articles. I will also explore the transformations in activism from the 1960s to the present day.

Newspaper articles have been chosen as the primary tools for investigation as

news media coverage played a particularly important role in disseminating knowledge and constructing the discourse of environmentalism and environmental activism during the 1960s and 1970s. As a result, I am interested in tracing its influence up to the current millennium in order to examine the ways in which the news media has continued to play a role in the construction of environmentalism. I have also chosen to incorporate websites in the exploration of the contemporary time period as a way to highlight the increasing scope of the media's role in generating public knowledge and altering understandings of activism.

The research problem this thesis will examine is how the “going green” trend appropriates and disarticulates the discourse of past environmental movements. In turn, environmental activism has been rearticulated as acts of consumption, supporting and sustaining capitalism, not challenging it. One key consequence of this rearticulation, I suggest, has resulted in an altered notion of activism that once challenged the role of capitalism in discouraging sustainable practices. In order to explore this problem two main research questions shall be employed. The first asks how have transformations in public dialogue regarding the environmental movement allowed for consumption to be identified as environmental activism? The second asks how has newspaper coverage aided in this transformation?

A historical investigation of how we have arrived at the “going green” trend from past environmental movements will be undertaken. In the preceding pages, I have established the historical grounding for a powerful linking between activism and the environment, and the role of the media in establishing it. In what follows, I will track the transformation of this linkage through the 1980s to the current millennium.

In the following chapter – which examines the 1980s and 1990s – public dialogue surrounding the World Commission on Environment and Development’s publication *Our Common Future* (1987) will be examined. I will ask, what happens to activism during the 1980s and 1990s? Does it change form? The third chapter will focus on the years 2000 to 2008 with specific emphasis on the Toyota Prius. The research questions that will be addressed for this site are as follows: how is activism currently understood? And what are the implications of a consumer-oriented environmental movement?

### **Theoretical Framework: Post-Structuralism & Critical Marxism**

Environmental activism and consumption, despite lacking an inherent connection, have been linked. In order to investigate how this association has emerged, this thesis will employ key theories that fall under the theoretical framework referred to here as post-structuralism and critical Marxism. The first is that of capitalism as outlined by Karl Marx. Capitalism, according to Marx, is a way of understanding our consumer society and the importance of the commodity. As Marx states, a commodity is “an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another” (125). Marx further expands on the notion of a commodity by delineating its two key components: “use-value” and “exchange-value” (126). Marx states that the “usefulness of a thing makes its use-value” (126). He continues on to say that, “use-value becomes a reality only by use or consumption” (Marx 126). Exchange-value, on the other hand, is a more conceptual aspect of the commodity. As Marx states, it reflects the amount of labour-time the commodity requires to be both produced and subsequently marketed (128-131).

Moreover, exchange-value is often perceived as the distinguishing factor between two commodities with identical use-value and quality.

It is important to note here that given several factors – including the rise of industrialization and the production line, as well as the further development of capitalist societies – that the labour embodied in a commodity is no longer widely known. Given that most of today's commodities are now mass produced, the labourer and the consumer alike have been largely, if not completely, separated from the work, time, effort, and skill that have gone into the production of a commodity. This alienation process is furthered through what Marx deems “commodity fetish.” This concept refers to the “mythical character of the commodity” that is separate from its use-value (Marx 164). In other words, the value of the commodity seems to be inherent to the commodity itself rather than its use or the labour-time (exchange value) required for its construction. The relationship between humans and objects is thus further disconnected; the producer, who may only see part of the final product, is detached from the consumers who will ultimately use the product. Similarly, consumers are largely unacquainted with the production process that went into the product they have purchased. Thus, neither the producers nor consumers are fully conscious of the political and social positions they occupy.

“Green” products can be viewed as part of this commodity fetish process. They, like most products available to consumers, disconnect the producer from the consumer. The true production costs of these products also remain hidden. However, given the “green” label, these products are often thought to be much better for the environment. Despite a continued separation from the production process, the label is



often viewed as enough proof of the products consideration for the environment. As a result, consumption – which helps drive capitalist society – continues unfettered. Unlike past critiques of the harm done to the environment by excessive consumption, “green” and “environmentally friendly” products are viewed in a different, more positive light.

Another vital concept that shall be employed in this research is that of representation. Stuart Hall suggests representation “us[es] language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people” (15). Hall continues on to state that representation works in tandem with hegemony, ensuring that we interpret the dominant ideology in similar ways and therefore view such understandings as “natural and inevitable” (21). However, dominant ideologies are not fixed; they change over time and as a result so do the meanings associated with certain terms as well as our understanding of the world. As Hall states, “every shift alters the conceptual map of the culture, leading different cultures, at different historical moments, to classify and think about the world differently” (32). This notion is a key part of my thesis research, as it will help to shed light on the transformations that have taken place across several decades, altering the public dialogue that surrounds the environmental movement.

Along with this general understanding of representation, I will also be focusing more specifically on mediated representation as a way of addressing the news media’s role in generating knowledge about the environmental movement. As Hall states, the media both reflect and contribute to popular consciousness (44). The media, in this view, plays an active role in “shaping cultural representations” by

“drawing on the common stock of knowledge in society” and actively participating in the production of knowledge (Hall 53-4). Through the use of newspaper articles, I will examine the ways in which the news media has not only drawn upon existing public knowledge, but how it has played a role in producing certain understandings about the environmental movement over the course of forty decades.

The final concept that shall be implemented is that of articulation as outlined by Jennifer D. Slack, J.M. Wise, and Stuart Hall. Articulation, as Slack notes, “provides strategies for undertaking a cultural study, a way of ‘contextualizing’ the object of one’s analysis” (112). The “object” of this analysis is the environmental movement and the transformations that have shaped public dialogue over the course of several decades. Articulation, in this case, “can be understood as the contingent connection of different elements that, when connected in a particular way, form a specific unity” (Slack and Wise 127). These elements include “practices, representations, and experiences [as well as “words, concepts, institutions, and affects]” (Slack and Wise 126-7). Contingency, as Slack and Wise state, is a significant part of this definition as it “implies that these articulations or connections are not necessary, and [that] it is possible that they could connect otherwise” (127).

To highlight this point Slack and Wise cite a noteworthy example by Hall that employs the image of a truck: when broken down into two parts, “a cab and trailer” these two components form the articulation commonly known as “truck” (Hall 141; Slack and Wise 127). However, as Slack notes, “we could disconnect (disarticulate) and reconnect (rearticulate) cabs in a different order to constitute a new identity” (26-27). This new identity, though modified continues to be called “truck.” This example

highlights the changing nature of articulations. As Slack and Wise point out, “identities are... dependent on the articulation of particular elements that could change, thereby changing the composition of the identity” (127). In other words, there is nothing inherent or fixed about what we define and identify as a “truck.”

Hall further expands on articulation by stating; “an articulation is thus the form of the connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time” (141). Moreover, Hall also poses a key question that shall be implemented in my own research. He asks, “under what circumstances *can* a connection be forged or made?” (141). In my own research I am interested in examining how a connection between environmental activism and consumption has been made. This connection did not emerge at the start of the 1960s environmental movement and has not, in the past, been a necessary or inherent component. Over the course of time however, a connection has, in the words of Hall, been forged. Articulation shall thus be implemented as a way to examine how the disarticulation and rearticulation process has affected the environmental movement over a chosen period of time.

### **Methodology**

Given that this thesis seeks to examine how newspaper coverage has helped transform public dialogue of environmentalism resulting in the identification of consumption as a form of activism, the analysis of newspaper articles is a key element of this research. As Wall notes, “the ways environmental issues have been framed have had consequences, pursuant to which questions have been asked,

solutions have been considered, and relations of power have emerged” (250). With this in mind, the sources chosen for this study include the two aforementioned sites as well as historical, and more recent, newspaper articles. These articles will be derived from two newspapers: the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Both newspapers were not only accessible through the University of Windsor and Factiva, but also covered various environmental topics and issues more extensively than other newspapers examined during preliminary research.

Each newspaper will generate thirty articles for each time period resulting in a total of ninety newspaper articles per paper with a combined total of one hundred and eighty newspaper articles. As a result, both newspapers will serve as primary material that speaks directly to each of the three time periods. Moreover, the inclusion of newspaper articles from the 1960s to the present day will serve to join the three time periods together. In short, the newspaper articles will be employed as a way of exploring dialogue that has been both historically and more recently generated, forming what Wall calls a “collective consciousness” about the environmental movement (253).

In order to help direct the proposed newspaper analysis, Michel Foucault’s work on discourse analysis shall be employed. By discourse, Foucault is referring to a group of statements which provide a language for talking about a particular topic within its fragment of history (131). Hall adds to this definition by noting that for Foucault, “discourse...constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about” (44). Key components of Foucault’s work shall be implemented in

this research. These components include the historical nature of discourse as well as the related concepts of power and knowledge.

For Foucault, discourse is marked by the historical context in which it emerges. In other words, Foucault sees history as contingent. The emergence of an event is, in this sense, not necessary, but is rather one possible result of a whole series of complex relations between other events (Foucault 35-54). This understanding of contingency is similar to that outlined by Slack in regards to articulation. As a result, the methodology will work with the theoretical framework outlined above in order to investigate the transformations that have led to the current “going green” trend. It is my intention to show that preceding environmental movements – which were themselves affected by the “historical context” in which they emerged – have influenced this recent trend. The 1960s and 1970s form the first period of the environmental movement in this body of research. The particular discourses produced during this time are the result of the specific “historical context” which involved increased social critique, a desire for change, public awareness, and the media’s coverage of important events. The 1980s and 1990s mark the second period which, given the political climate and greater awareness of environmental concerns, produced a new discourse – namely one which tied the economy to the environment, generating an early phase of green consumerism. I hope to demonstrate that the events and public dialogue that marked the 1960s/ 1970s and the 1980s/ 1990s environmental movements have not only been influential in their own individual “historical contexts,” but that they have also played a role in shaping the nature of the current “going green” trend.

Central to Foucault's understanding of how discourse works is its production of knowledge. As Hall states, for Foucault, "what we think we 'know' in a particular period about, say, crime has a bearing on how we regulate, control, and punish criminals. Knowledge does not operate in a void. It is put to work..." (49). Replacing crime with environmentalism, one can begin to see how this concept is applicable to the research outlined above. What we currently think we know about environmentalism, about what needs to be done to help save the planet, affects what we actually do and equally important, what we expect should be done in order to achieve these goals. Moreover, our knowledge about the environment and the environmental movement has also been influenced by past knowledge. By examining newspaper articles, I plan to trace the shifts that have occurred in public dialogue regarding the environmental movement. These shifts have helped to construct our knowledge over time, resulting in the current "going green" trend.

Power constitutes another key aspect of Foucault's work. For Foucault, power can be negative, but "it is also productive" (119). Foucault elaborates on this idea by stating that power "produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge and produces discourse" (119). Power, in this sense then, "operates at every site of social life" (Foucault 119). Thus for Foucault, power is strongly tied to knowledge. The two concepts, working together, assume the "authority of 'the truth'" (Foucault 27). Since knowledge and power are perceived to generate "the truth" then the two affect the ways in which people understand the world. In this way, knowledge, power and discourse work together, generating central concepts, ideas, and notions that govern our ways of thinking and acting. These concepts will be used in relation to the

newspaper analysis in order to explore the history of the environmental movement and the transformations that have taken place.

Along with the key concepts outlined above, six elements – derived from Foucault’s work and noted by Hall – will also be implemented to guide the analysis. The first element is concerned with statements “which give us a certain kind of knowledge about these things” (Hall 73). In this case the statements will include descriptions of environmentalism in each time period, obtained through the use of both historical and more recent newspaper articles. Specifically, the articles will be examined to determine what aspects of the environment have, and are currently, focused on. The second element deals with “the rules which prescribe certain ways of talking about these topics and exclude other ways – which govern what is ‘sayable’ or ‘thinkable’ about [environmentalism] at a particular historical moment.” For this element the dominant themes in each time period will be drawn out. The third element pertains to “‘subjects’ who in some ways personify the discourse... with the attributes we would expect these subjects to have, given the way knowledge about the topic was constructed at that time.” The subjects that will emerge include activists, environmentalists, celebrities, politicians, and ordinary citizens. The fourth element revolves around the ways in which “knowledge about the topic acquires authority, a sense of embodying the ‘truth’ about it; constituting the ‘truth of the matter’ at a historical moment” (Hall 73). The “truths” in each of the time periods will largely be delineated in relation to the news media’s coverage of various events and key actors. The news media has long ago acquired authority and thus has greatly influenced public dialogue and understanding of environmentalism in each of the three eras.

The fifth element deals with “the practices within institutions for dealing with the subjects whose conduct is being regulated and organized according to those ideas” (Hall 73-74). This element will correspond to the consumers and the public, as discussed in the news media. Finally, the sixth element concerns the “acknowledgement that a different discourse will arise at a later historical moment, supplanting the existing one, opening up a new discursive formation, and producing, in its turn, new conceptions” (Hall 74). It is, in part, my intention to show through the use of both historical and more recent newspaper articles that the discourse surrounding environmentalism has been transformed. The “going green” trend and the discourse constructed has largely supplanted past discourses. Overall, I will make use of key concepts pertaining to Foucault’s discourse analysis, along with the six elements outlined above as a way of investigating the newspaper articles. My goal is to show that the news media has played an active role in constructing the public’s knowledge about environmentalism and the environmental movement.

### **Thesis Outline**

This thesis will explore and examine the development of a new popular imaginary that has not only transformed earlier understandings and public dialogue regarding the environmental movement, but has also successfully linked lifestyle changes and consumption choices to environmental activism. While this transformation has allowed for the unfettered continuation of capitalism – advantageous to numerous organizations and corporations – it poses a problem for the very environmental issues it claims to undertake. Moreover, the rearticulation of environmental activism as acts of consumption plays into citizens’ desire to make a



difference. Encouraged to feel good about consumption practices that require little in terms of sacrifice, this altered notion of activism not only sustains capitalism, but also presents consumption (or capitalism) as a viable solution to environmental issues. The goal of this thesis is thus to gain a better understanding of the popular dialogue that has been generated as a result of ongoing media attention – specifically in relation to the news media in the form of newspaper articles. I am interested in examining how newspaper coverage has aided in the transformation of public dialogue, allowing consumption to be identified as environmental activism. Through the historical investigation of three designated time periods this thesis will map how discourses have changed throughout the years, generating in turn, new understandings of citizen activism.

The following chapter will center on the 1980s and the 1990s. An overview of the political climate – with a focus on the environment – will be provided through the use of historical newspaper articles. This information will provide a foundation for a discussion of the World Commission on Environment and Development’s publication, *Our Common Future*. It was through this work that key concepts, namely of sustainable development, figured into public dialogue. This work also linked the economy to the environment, a move that greatly shaped the 1980s and 1990s environmental movement. As a result, this work and the concepts it generated will serve as the first site of investigation. In relation to this site, the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro will also be discussed. This event acquired a great deal of media attention and also furthered the notion of a necessary connection between the economy and the environment. Furthermore, the emergence of “green consumerism” will also be

discussed in this chapter.

The third chapter will focus on the most recent time period from 2000 to 2008. A historical overview will again be provided through the use of newspaper articles in order to summarize key issues, events, and actors in relation to the environment. This chapter will then examine the Toyota Prius. The novelty of the car, the appeal – sparked in part by celebrity endorsement and media coverage – as well as its “cool” factor will be discussed. The attention garnered and public dialogue that emerged will also be delineated in this chapter. The Toyota Prius will thus be used as a catalyst for a discussion of consumer activism. The self-identity of “green consumers” will subsequently be outlined, along with the emotional connection consumers feel when making such purchases.

The final chapter will serve as the conclusion. It will summarize what has been examined and discuss how consumption has come to be tied to environmental activism in the current “going green” trend. I will also comment on the social significance of this shift and explore the implications for the future of our planet. Furthermore, I will speak to a bigger picture: one which examines not only the social implications of an altered view of activism for the environmental movement, but for social movements in general.

## **II. Greening the Economy: A Historical Examination of the 1980s & 1990s Environmental Movement**

This chapter will highlight the ways in which the news media assumed an active role in both reflecting and contributing to popular dialogue and public knowledge regarding the environmental movement. As Wall notes, by the 1980s and 1990s a “foundation for a major shift in popular concepts of... the environment” had emerged (122). According to Wall, this was due in part to the fact that “the portrayal of environmentalists in the media changed, both as environmental groups became more numerous and more established, and as economic issues became more predominant in environmental discourse” (124). The media not only began to focus on “issues such as global warming, ozone depletion, and decreasing biodiversity,” but it also began to present such issues as “urgent and dire, and the discourse associated with these issues lent itself to both increasing public concern, and to a more global understanding of environmental issues” (Wall 147).

Research of news media coverage during this time also highlights the imbalanced relationship between social movements and the media. As Gamson and Wolfsfeld note, “the fact that movements need the media far more than the media need them translates into a greater power for the media in the transaction” (117). Though the news media continued to cover major events – notably Earth Day celebrations, and conferences among nations – it also played a role in reshaping the messages and values conveyed to the public. As a result, the news media is treated as an actor in this chapter, affecting the discourse of the environmental movement while simultaneously altering the public’s understanding.

By the end of the 1970s, the environmental movement had become a nationwide success. From humble beginnings to the Earth Day celebration that drew millions, the 1960s and 1970s environmental movement had not only witnessed the creation of numerous groups and organizations, but had, through protests and demonstrations, also generated a popular understanding of social activism. In doing so it earned the attention of policy makers and government officials. Moreover, it captured the interest of the media and became ingrained in the minds and hearts of many American citizens. All of these aspects led Colman McCarthy to comment on the “strength and depth of the environmental movement” which, he argued, “shouldn’t be called a movement at all. It is in place, *firmly*” (M8). But would it remain in place? At the dawn of a new decade in the United States – and in an era faced with economic hardship and a changing political climate – could the highly publicized environmental movement continue to live up to its previous accomplishments? Would citizens remain as committed to collective forms of social activism?

### **News Media as an Institutional Actor**

Early news media coverage in the 1980s reflected a growing shift in many American citizens’ attitude toward the environmental movement. The coverage of Earth Day 1980 is a primary example. Though the celebration was, much like its predecessors, successful in drawing a large crowd, highlighting environmental concerns as well as generating more publicity and community awareness, it also proved unsettling. As Joanne Omang noted, “many Americans have given up: the problem is too big, it’s too late to do anything” (A1). Such feelings of hopelessness

were considered to be the result of what Eugene Kennedy, a psychology professor at Loyola University in Chicago, described as the “so-called ‘me-decade’ of self concern [being] faced with the troubling realization that there are limits” (A1). The earth cannot continue to support lifestyles of excess and overindulgence. This “awareness of trade-offs and an understanding that a risk-free society is impossible” is, as Omang states, “perhaps the major legacy of 10 years of the environmental movement” (A1). The public had become acutely aware that change was no longer simply recommended: it was required. This realization, though encouraging to some, was beginning to prove equally demoralizing to others. As the news media pointed out, the notion of sacrifice was challenged by many and in a number of cases, hope had given way to hopelessness. This shift in attitude was however, only the beginning of a series of changes that would mark news media coverage during the 1980s and 1990s. Other cultural, economic, and political aspects – such as the looming recession, growing concerns about President Reagan’s economic policies, and an increasing emphasis on the individual (and more specifically individual responsibility) – must also be taken into account. Together these aspects altered the “historical context” of the time, thereby transforming the discourse put forth by the news media in relation to the environmental movement.

On January 4, 1981 in an article for *The Washington Post*, William Greider wrote that, “as a nation, we are only at the beginning of fundamental changes in our values.” He went on to state,

we are approaching a clarifying interlude of political collision and debate on the environmental issue. What exactly do Americans want? Clean air or jobs? Whose values should be served? The wine-and-cheese liberals with their wilderness fantasies or the blue-collar workers who depend on

belching smokestacks for their livelihood? (B1)

This quote highlights a central division that began to receive attention from the news media in the 1980s, and continued to gain notice throughout the 1990s – one that pitted the environment against the economy. Long believed to be two disconnected entities, the gap between environmental and economic concerns seemed to be widening. Indeed, it was hard for many to consider the environment when doing so seemed to jeopardize the economy. Moreover, siding with the environment often felt like a privileged choice; one only a precious few could afford to make. Such thinking resulted in what Greider referred to as “a flavor of class bias” (B1). Coupled with a newly elected President who, according to a *New York Times* article, seemed “much too eager to sacrifice a decade of environmental achievements,” it appeared as though the environmental movement had reached a turning point (“The Environment” A30).

President Ronald Reagan was, in many ways, at the forefront of the economic division. His economic policies – which came to be known as “Reaganomics” – were focused primarily on boosting the economy. In order to do so he advocated tax cuts, which in 1981 culminated in the passing of the Economic Recovery Tax Act. While beneficial to a select group, namely large corporations and the upper class, the act negatively affected those with a more modest income. Along with tax reductions, President Reagan also cut back government spending on various social programs as well as promoted unrestricted free-market activity through the deregulation of industries and the lessening of government limitations previously in place. As an article for the *New York Times* noted, President Reagan was adamant in his view that the imposition of “unreasonably stiff standards [came] at a great cost to the nation’s

economy and energy production” (“The Environment” A30). Environmental regulation was, in this sense, seen as interfering too much in private business and thus impairing growth and competitiveness (Fiorino 46). As a result, “the goal...during this period was less to reform environmental regulation than to dismantle it” (Fiorino 46). In order to succeed in this endeavor, President Reagan played upon growing public concerns by linking strict adherence to environmental regulations to a loss of jobs. Moreover, he appointed a new head to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) – Anne Burford – who, like himself, greatly opposed many regulations initially designed to improve air quality and limit the ongoing depletion of natural resources. Overall, the main objective was, in the words of William A. Niskanen – chairman of the Cato Institute and former member of President Reagan’s Council of Economic Advisors – to “increase saving and investment, increase economic growth, balance the budget, restore healthy financial markets and reduce inflation and interest rates” without concern for the environment (“Reaganomics”).

The news media made a point of highlighting the almost exclusive focus President Reagan paid to the economy in part because it overshadowed the spotlight that had been placed on environmental issues and concerns in the previous era. As one *New York Times* article stated, President Reagan displayed great “haste to grab at anything that might debunk concern for the environment” (“The Environment” A30). Despite a concerted effort on President Reagan’s part, environmental concerns were not entirely abandoned. As Fiorino notes, “the effort [to suppress environmental discourse] failed. It was true that many people were unhappy with the more onerous aspects of environmental regulation...but people cared about environmental quality”

(46). Moreover, as the “long-predicted recession” took hold of the economy, the public began to express doubts about President Reagan’s economic plans (Friedman 31). The growing impact of the recession, as Thomas Friedman points out, had not only begun to “sap the strength of consumer and business spending” but had also resulted in the unemployment of “some 8.5 million Americans – the highest level since the end of the 1974-75 recession” (31). As the recession curbed support for President Reagan’s economic action plan, it simultaneously “put new life into the environmental movement” (Schwab 138). As Schwab notes, “membership and funding for environmental groups expanded in the early 1980s in [direct] response to the threat posed by the Reagan administration” (138).<sup>3</sup> Newspaper articles further reflected this shift, noting that “concern for the environment has become more and more ingrained in the social and political fabric” of the country (Carney J6).

By the mid 1980s, it was clear that the discourse regarding the environmental movement was “moving increasingly into the mainstream of economic and political life” (Shabecoff D28). Having described a loss of hope, followed by economic challenges and the environmental movement’s renewed strength, the news media began to focus once again on environmental concerns and events. Though Reaganomics had threatened to render the environmental movement a “nonevent” – thereby greatly reducing its ability to have any positive influence in regards to sustaining public dialogue and “mobilizing followers” – the news media had helped to ensure, through continued coverage, that this was not the case. The examination of

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<sup>3</sup> Similar views were expressed in the following three articles: Douglas P. Wheeler, “Why America Fell Asleep Over the Environment,” The Washington Post, 11 September 1988, C1., Cass Peterson, “Bidding Reagan a Bitter Farewell,” The Washington Post, 18 January 1989, A21, and “Environmental Ads Attack President’s Record,” The Washington Post, 30 August 1984, A12.



newspaper articles reveals that sustained coverage was mutually beneficial to both the environmental movement and the news media. For the environmental movement it meant the public's renewed environmental commitment and for the news media, an increasingly more powerful role in shaping the discourse.

As an article for the *New York Times* stated

even politicians had to take notice when they saw a *New York Times*/ CBS News poll (taken earlier this year) reporting that two-thirds of the respondents agreed that “protecting the environment was so important that requirements and standards cannot be too high, and continuing environmental improvements must be made *regardless of cost*” (Oakes A23)

Political leaders, as the news media later pointed out, were not the only ones taking notice; corporations and businesses were also beginning to discover that attention to environmental regulations and concerns produced a positive result. It earned them the respect of consumers, and often helped increase their profits. As awareness of the advantages spread, environmental business continued to grow, generating new career opportunities which in turn, furthered the scope of the environmental movement (Reinhold B5). While some viewed the burgeoning connection between the economy and the environment as a testament to the latter's strength, others like Greider, remained unconvinced stating, “saving the bird is not the business of America; the business of America is business” (B1). Greider felt strongly that the environmental concerns expressed by corporations and businesses were “really rooted in capitalistic self-interest” (B1). Mixed views on the economy/ environment dichotomy subsequently marked much of the news media coverage during this time. It appears as though the news media, like the public, government, and big business, was trying to make sense of the changes taking place. Part reflection and part construction, the

news media began to analyze the economy/ environment divide. Could the two opposing views be united? Could this union be beneficial to the economy while simultaneously ensuring the continued preservation of the environment? Such questions began to dominate much of the news media's discourse regarding the environment during the 1980s and 1990s.

Answers to these questions were, in large part, put forth by the World Commission on Environment and Development's report entitled *Our Common Future*. Much like the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, the publication of this report proved highly influential to the discourse and public understanding of environmental concerns and issues. *Our Common Future* marks the first official document to propose a new relationship between the economy and the environment. By popularizing the notion of sustainable development, calling for a balance between the consumption patterns of both the industrialized world and the Third world, *Our Common Future* advocated the union of the environment and the economy on a global scale. In turn it signaled a shift in the direction of the environmental movement and a significant transformation in the previously dominant environmental discourse. Moreover, the report also garnered substantial news media coverage, subsequently furthering the media's role as a major site for the disarticulation and rearticulation of the economy/ environment dichotomy. As a result, the key concepts outlined in this report, along with the impact and effect the publication had marks the first site of investigation.

### ***Our Common Future (1987)***

Established "as an independently funded body loosely linked to the United

Nations” the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) was asked to formulate “a global agenda for change” (“World Ecological” A18). More specifically, the Commission was charged with the task of addressing growing concerns “about the accelerating deterioration of the human environment and natural resources and the consequences of that deterioration for economic and social development” (“Report of the World”). The goal, as the report states, was thus to generate “long-term environmental strategies for achieving sustainable development by the year 2000 and beyond” (ix). The work of the 21- member commission – made up of representatives from 19 countries, one vice chairman and headed by Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland – was compiled into a 383-paged report entitled *Our Common Future* (“World Ecological” A18). This report, “drawn up after hearings on five continents,” not only warned of environmental dangers but also suggested that “related problems of poverty, hunger, rapid population growth, the excessive outlays on arms and the inequitable distribution of wealth that afflicts much of the world” must also be taken in account (Shabecoff B12).

In Chairman Brundtland’s foreword, she notes that, “the environment does not exist as a sphere separate from human actions, ambitions, and needs...[rather] the ‘environment’ is where we all live, and ‘development’ is what we all do in attempting to improve our lot within that abode. The two are inseparable” (xi). Thus, as Philip Shabecoff notes, the commission “concluded ‘sustainable human progress’ can be achieved only through a system of international cooperation that treats environmental protection and economic growth as inseparable.” The expression of such views marked “the first major international study on the global environment to deal with

economic development as an essential ingredient for saving the earth's biological support systems" (B12). In essence, *Our Common Future* highlights the ways in which the economy and the environment could be thought of as working together, hand-in-hand. It not only furthered the notion of "sustainable development" – which as Wall notes had enjoyed "a long history in other circles" – but gave it shape given the nature of the policies proposed (254). Subsequently, the notion of "sustainable development" became a key part of the discourse generated by the news media.

Research of newspaper articles during this time reveals that sustainable development was discussed as well as critiqued and challenged throughout the late 1980s and well into the 1990s. However, it was also frequently supported and praised. As a result, the news media not only actively popularized the notion – through its extensive coverage – but also garnered for it, much public sympathy.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the WCED's report was praised for its ability to provide members of both sides with what seemed to be a win-win situation; ensuring the continuation of capitalism and the economy, while simultaneously offering reassurance that the environment would be looked after at the same time.

The opening chapter of *Our Common Future* acknowledges that a radical change has taken place since the 1960s and 1970s. In the past, "rapid economic growth was seen as an ecological threat. Now it is recession, austerity, and falling living standards" (70). President Reagan's emphatic focus on the economy, coupled with the early 1980s recession, had momentarily proved what the report deemed to be

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<sup>4</sup> While a comparison of the number of articles that contain the search term "sustainable development" between the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post* revealed that the former had a great deal more articles (188 compared to 55), a further comparison revealed that this term appeared in both newspapers more frequently than the following two search terms: "our common future" and "world commission on environment and development."

a fact: that “conservation always takes a back seat in times of economic stress” (70). Fortunately the work of environmental advocates, media coverage, and ongoing public support played a significant role in ensuring that environmental concerns were once again part of the social and political agenda. The report states that

there has been a growing realization in national governments and multilateral institutions that it is impossible to separate economic development issues from environment issues; many forms of development erode the environmental resources upon which they must be based, and environmental degradation can undermine economic development (3).

As a result, the commission not only advanced the notion that the environment and the economy were “becoming ever more interwoven – locally, regionally, nationally, and globally” – but “came to see that a new development path was required” (4-5). Being, as the report states, “concerned [first and foremost] with people – of all countries and all walks of life” the commission was determined to outline an action plan that “sustained human progress not just in a few places for a few years, but for the entire planet into the distant future” (23; 4). In order to do so, the commission noted that a key part of this process would be “changes in human attitudes” (23). The report states that “we act as we do because we can get away with it: future generations do not vote: they have no political or financial power; they cannot challenge our decisions” (8). This view led to the notion of “sustainable development” which, in many ways, can be considered the WCED’s main focus.

#### **i. Sustainable Development**

*Our Common Future* defines sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (43). This definition is then broken down into two key

concepts: that of “needs” and “limitations.” The first refers to “the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given” (43). The second refers to the limitations imposed on the environment by social organizations and technology which not only restrict the “ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities” but also hinder the earth’s ability to meet both present and future needs (8). As a result, the definition of “sustainable development” is, according to the report, applicable to both developing and developed countries. Though *Our Common Future* recognizes that a country’s ability to adopt “sustainable development” will vary, the report stresses the importance of a global effort, with each country doing their part.

Moreover, *Our Common Future* also outlines the difference between “essential [or basic] needs” and “perceived needs” which are “socially and culturally determined” (44). These perceived needs are more prevalent in developed nations where, as the report states, “many of us live beyond the world’s ecological means” (44). By striving to meet the basic needs of the world’s population as opposed to perceived needs, sustainable development seeks to extend to all the opportunity to satisfy their aspirations for a better life. In order to achieve these goals, the concept of “sustainable development” entails “the promotion of values that encourage consumption standards that are within the bounds of the ecological possible and to which all can reasonably aspire”(44). The division between essential and perceived needs marks one of the key aspects of “sustainable development.” As the report indicates, economic disparities between developed and developing nations cause extreme environmental stress. On the one hand, “poor people are forced to overuse

environmental resources to survive from day to day, and the impoverishment of their environment further impoverishes them, making their survival ever more difficult and uncertain” (27). On the other hand, people living in industrialized nations often over-use natural resources, not simply for survival, but rather as a way of life. This imbalance of wealth is considered to be “a major cause and effect of global environmental problems” (3). As a result, *Our Common Future* stresses the fact that “it is futile to deal with environmental problems without a broader perspective that encompasses the factors underlying world poverty and international inequality” (3). In this way, the report acknowledges that environmental problems are not isolated affairs; they are affected by social issues – such as inequalities in wealth and ongoing divisions between developing and developed nations – and in turn, create social dilemmas of their own.

*Our Common Future* also focuses on economic growth. Though recognized as a prospective contributor to harmful changes in the earth’s ecosystem, economic growth is considered to be an essential part of “sustainable development.” As the report delineates, “meeting essential needs depends in part on achieving full growth potential... by increasing productive potential and by ensuring equitable opportunities for all” (44). Thus, when used in a manner that limits the harm done to “the natural systems that support life on Earth – the atmosphere, the waters, the soils and the living beings” – economic growth is seen as aiding in the process of achieving the goals outlined in *Our Common Future* (44- 45). The revitalization of economic growth is further promoted as a means of averting “economic, social and environmental catastrophes” – so long as the constraints of the environment are taken

into consideration (89). Thus, *Our Common Future* advocates a break from past patterns. In order to achieve results, the report notes that change will also be required in attitudes and objectives. No longer can economic and ecological concerns be viewed in opposition. No longer can gains in one area be met at the expense of gains in the other. They must instead, be viewed in a new light: one which binds them together. This new connection sought to not only unify the economy and the environment and render them mutually beneficial to one another, but also aimed to establish their unification as a necessary component in the ongoing preservation of the environment. United, both the economy and the environment would be able to prosper. As a result, the key ideas outlined in *Our Common Future* marked a significant shift in understandings of a once opposed dichotomy.

## **ii. *Our Common Future*: Impact and Effects**

As the 1980s drew to a close and the 1990s began, the role of “sustainable development” in the preservation of the planet continued to be a topic of discussion. *Our Common Future*, much like Rachel Carson’s publication *Silent Spring*, sparked a great deal of news media coverage, public dialogue, and as a result, considerable controversy. Newspaper coverage during this time reveals that much of the controversy centered on the idea that the developed world should accept “serious compromises in levels of comfort for the sake of global environmental balance” (Gore C1). Though the report clearly stated that both developed and developing nations would have to transform their views, beliefs and economic policies, more emphasis had been placed on industrialized nations.

Moreover, the report had also stated that developed and developing nations



would be required to work together; a concept that, as the news media pointed out, proved “surprisingly difficult to expand... in terms useful to policy makers” (Mathews A21). Such views dominated coverage, particularly during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. This event, according to the news media, illustrated the complexity of reaching global agreements on the implementation of sustainable practices. Held in Rio de Janeiro from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 1992, the conference aspired to build upon the 1972 Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in order to establish “a new and equitable global partnership through the creation of new levels of cooperation among States, key sectors of societies and people” (“Rio Declaration”). Moreover the conference hoped to work towards “international agreements which respect the interests of all and protect the integrity of the global environment and developmental system” (“Rio Declaration”). In essence, the 1992 conference sought to put the concepts outlined in *Our Common Future* into action, making it a significant event in the 1990s.

### **Earth Summit: Rio de Janeiro 1992**

Representatives of 178 countries gathered to reflect and discuss “sustainable development”; the new dogma of environmentalism (Mathews A21). As the conference wore on, the news media noted that delegates had begun to discover how hard it was to reach a unanimous decision. Optimism was quickly replaced by hard realism as “differences between the rich countries of the industrialized world and the poor ones of the developing world” emerged as a primary obstacle (Stevens C4). These differences stemmed in large part, from the widespread belief that the

industrialized and developed world's patterns of production and consumption were "the principal cause of the threat facing the global ecosystem" (Havel A21). As Jeane Kirkpatrick noted, "the obligations of the developed countries are heaviest because those countries 'place special pressures on the global environment' and also because they command large financial and technological resources" (A21). The expression of such views during the Earth Summit resulted in a further polarization between developed and developing countries.<sup>5</sup> Many developing countries felt strongly that developed nations should "accept substantial blame for environmental degradation" not just in their own nations, but in Third World nations as well (Havel A21). As a result, it was expected that developed countries should "limit production and consumption, share the newest technologies, adopt environmental legislation such as a limit on energy consumption and understand that less should be asked of less-developed countries" (Kirkpatrick A21). In other words, a view emerged that assumed that the "Third World has mainly rights and the developed world mainly obligations" (Kirkpatrick A21).

Such views not only generated a rift between developed and developing nations, but also contributed to the isolation of the United States. Once considered to be the "cradle of the environmental movement [having] spawned a new way of looking at the world," the powerful country had strongly rejected two of the most significant summit issues – biodiversity and climate change – prohibiting the achievement of global agreements (Schneider E1). While all other industrialized

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<sup>5</sup> This polarization has also been referred to as one between northern (developed) and southern (developing) nations in the news media during the 1980s and 1990s in the following two articles: Vaclav Havel, "Rio and the New Millennium," New York Times, 3 June 1992, A21 and Paul Lewis, "New Environmental Debate Expected as U.N. Convenes," New York Times, 16 September 1992, A10.

countries had agreed to “sign a treaty strengthening the world’s efforts to protect living species, the United States was left as the major dissenter” (Stevens C4). The United States’ unwillingness to cooperate not only proved problematic during the conference, but also detrimental to the public’s opinion of the industrialized state. As Keith Schneider stated, “divisions over ecological safeguards raised questions about the United States’ role” in protecting the environment (E1). Moreover, it confirmed to many that the powerful industrialized nation was, in fact, responsible for many of the world’s ecological problems. As a result, the public began to wonder if a global agreement could be realized.

Despite initial setbacks, *The Washington Post* stressed that the “chief purpose [of the conference] is not to examine inept American tactics” (“Opportunities Missed” A22). Rather, “it is to consider the terms of life on the planet over the next generation and to search for ways to keep a hugely expanding population, scrambling for a better life, from making life much worse for everyone in rich and poor countries alike” (“Opportunities Missed” A22). As the conference pressed on, various nations – including the United States – were able to set aside differences and reach various agreements. These agreements, as Paul Lewis noted, included “a new international convention to combat global warming and stabilize climate, a blue-print for a wide-ranging environmental clean-up and another convention on protecting the diversity of living things” (A10). Thus, in spite of early controversy, the United Nations Conference was largely perceived to be a success by both the news media and the public. It led to the creation of the Sustainable Development Commission – a fifty-three member group “charged with insuring that nations comply with the pledges they

gave that their future economic development would not cause irreparable damage to the world's oceans, forests and atmosphere" (Lewis A10). Though the commission was to have no "legal power to compel governments to change their environmental policies... it [relied] on the force of publicity and shame to encourage them to live up to their Rio undertakings." Moreover, the commission enlisted the aid of various environmental organizations like Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace to encourage governments to "submit periodic reports to the commission on what they were doing to meet the ambitious goals established in Rio" (Lewis A10).

Though the Earth Summit conference in Rio de Janeiro was globally viewed as a major achievement, it, along with the dialogue generated by the news media, sparked another shift in American attitudes. This shift was generated in part from what the news media had widely described as the heightened responsibility placed on the industrialized world. The publication of *Our Common Future* had, after all, touched on the need to find a balance between excessive consumption patterns of industrialized nations and the over-use of natural resources for survival by Third World nations. This observation had then been amplified during the Rio conference and subsequently discussed at length in news media coverage. Members of environmental organizations also echoed such views. James Gustave Speth – president of the World Resources Institute – for example, was quick to note that, "the industrial countries are largely responsible for the problem and have the most resources to do something about it" (B5). Over time, the sense of responsibility placed on industrialized nations was transferred to the individual. Individuals – specifically those in North America – were constantly reminded that they were part of

a “highly wasteful society” (Wall 174). The sense of collective responsibility that had emerged in the 1960s and 1970s was thus beginning to change. Though, as Wall notes, “industrialists, government officials, and ordinary people alike professed care and concern for the environment,” the individual, and more specifically, individual behaviour, had fallen under heavy critique (250). It was imperative that individual attitudes and behaviour change, as we were “no longer just threatening ourselves and our fellow humans... but we were [also] endangering the planet itself” (Wall 175). Individual responsibility thus constitutes a key component of the 1980s and 1990s environmental movement. Furthered in the discourse generated by the news media, it greatly affected public understandings of the environment, and aided in the significant transformation of collective social activism. As individual responsibility was promoted, the collective agenda fell aside entirely. Talk of collective action was set aside for an individualized sense of responsibility and action; from what can we do to what can I do?

### **Bridging the Economy/ Environment Gap: Individual Responsibility**

During the early 1990s, the news media reported on a growing trend: one of greater humanity, “creativity, compassion and connection” (Oldenburg B5). As Don Oldenburg noted, the American Dream was in the midst of a dramatic transformation. According to Oldenburg, “the conspicuous consumption, cold careerism, and self-centered spirit that made up so much of business as usual in the ‘80s now comes across as a bit tacky at best, ruinous at worst” (B5). He elaborated on this point by noting that many Americans had come to the realization that despite their excessive lifestyles and overabundance of stuff, they continued to feel unfulfilled. Many began

to long for more “personal fulfillment”: the kind that could not – it seemed – be bought or sold (Oldenburg B5). This sentiment quickly became so pervasive that, as Sarah Ban Breathnach noted, “Time magazine devoted a cover story to examine America’s longing for a return to a simpler life revolving around hearth and home pleasures” (C5). The prominent mood was described as “a reaction against the consumerism of the ‘80s, the consumer philosophy which led [people] to believe that if we had another VCR or another car or a bigger home it would make us all happy” (Breathnach C5). Over time, as media coverage indicated, individual citizens had come to accept such sentiments as evidence of the reality of an environmental emergency (Yardley B2). The next step, as Yardley noted, “will be to acknowledge, and come to terms with, the certainty that effective action will mean change and sacrifice. The toilet paper we use tomorrow may not be quite so gentle to our precious posteriors as that we now enjoy” (B2). The central question posed by the news media thus became one of whether or not such sacrifice would prove more than individuals could bear.

Despite some skepticism, an examination of news media coverage points out that many individuals had begun to take action. Though not quite to the extent as citizens had in the previous era, individuals did begin to consume less. Moreover, they were increasingly selective in their consumption choices. The effect of this shift was not only beneficial to the environment, but also the individual. As Ross Goldstein – a psychologist and market researcher – noted, in an article by Breathnach, exercising the power to say no to purchases, “whether out of necessity or out of conscious choice, makes people feel more confident, makes them more effective,

makes them more capable and makes them more resistant to advertising” (C5). Personal benefits to the consumer, combined with the reconciliation of individual responsibility, ensured that this shift in lifestyle and consumption habits continued. In fact, the results were so positive that advertisers, corporations, and industries were, as Valverde notes, “haunted by an anxiety that people might begin to consume less in order to preserve the environment” (183). To ensure that “corporate capitalism” remained in tact while simultaneously appeasing a public eager to protect the planet, the “opposition of environment and economy was, in part, broken down and re-articulated through the discourse of environmental business, part of which included the creation of the ‘green shopper’” (Valverde 183). Thus the disarticulation and rearticulation process was greatly aided by business and advertising. Working together, the two – along with the discourse generated by the news media – greatly altered the public’s understanding of the environment, and more importantly, of activism.

#### **i. The Role of Business & Advertising: Selling a “Green” Lifestyle**

In a sense, businesses and advertising agencies took cues from the celebration of Earth Day 1990. The event not only highlighted the environmental movement’s increasing reliance and use of the media, but also demonstrated that there was a market for “green” products and “green” business approaches. Earth Day 1990 had been re-created to be “more global, more mainstream and more professionally organized than its student-run predecessor,” reflecting the environmental movement’s increasing media savvy (Cohn A1).<sup>6</sup> As a result, the event was, in the words of

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<sup>6</sup> A similar theme was expressed in an article by Barnaby J. Feder, “The Business of Earth Day,” New York Times, 12 November 1989, F4.

Reinhold “probably the most glamorous of the thousands of Earth Day events worldwide. It could not have been more different in style and ambience from the environmental movement’s origins in organic farming and plain living” (A16). Much of its success was also owed to the inclusion of Hollywood celebrities. For, as Thrall et al. note, “as the public is offered greater choice in their media diet, the choices people make most often take the form of entertainment, rather than politically oriented news” (363). Furthermore, according to the authors, “Americans are increasingly likely to get information about [social and] political events... via soft news outlets” (363). The inclusion of celebrities sensationalized the Earth Day event, benefiting both the environmental movement and the news media. As Reinhold noted, it was through the persuasive powers of Hollywood that environmental concerns and issues were communicated to the masses (A16). Celebrity involvement simultaneously generated the kind of “event” that flourishes within the news media; it offers the public coverage of a social-political event that can be packaged within the realm of entertainment, making it more likely to be read. Coupled with the ever-escalating concern of human impact and continued emphasis on “sustainable development,” it became apparent within news media coverage that celebrity endorsement can have a great effect on the public.

The utilization of celebrity figures had also proven beneficial to environmental organizations. Michael Weisskopf outlines one such example. He states that the Natural Resources Defense Council, getting nowhere in court or Congress, decided to try a different approach. The group paid public relations firms forty thousand dollars in order to “spotlight the federal government’s failure to



remove dangerous pesticides from the food supply” (A1). Television commercials featuring actress Meryl Streep were, in turn, fashioned to drive the point home. The outcome was a success; the skillful use of the media and a celebrity figure had helped the group achieve the results they wanted. The environmental group Greenpeace constitutes another example; as Michael Harwood noted, the organization had become a media favourite in its own right by continuously providing controversial images and reports, as well as performing various stunts simultaneously aimed at gaining more attention and support for environmental issues. The end result was a massive increase in its list of members and supporters, “rising to 2.5 million” since 1980 (Harwood SM72). The success of these examples reiterates the notion that the media-movement relationship can be mutually beneficial, so long as the movement provides the media with newsworthy – increasingly entertainment-like – events.

The implementation of celebrity figures within the environmental movement and thus within news media coverage was also successful in helping the movement gain popularity. As Yardley noted, “the environmental movement, so long scorned as the preserve of kooks, zealots and little old ladies in tennis shoes, is moving into the mainstream” (B2). However, this mainstreaming not only marks the increasing reliance on the news media by a movement to convey messages to the public and sustain the movement’s popularity and support, but also begins to point out what Gamson and Wolfsfeld refer to as the “price of entry” (117). Given the dependency of movements on the media, they are often “forced to pay a price of entry that affects subsequent transactions in various ways” (117). I argue that a key consequence as a result of this entry fee is an increasingly more entertainment and event centered

discussion that subsequently begins to shift the initial ideas and values of the environmental movement towards a soft-news understanding that emphasizes celebrities, glitz, and glamour.

The mainstreaming of the environmental movement also had an affect on the business community. While the growing population of people expressing care and concern for the environment signaled – for environmental organizations and supporters – rising support, companies, businesses, and corporations viewed the emerging population as an opportunity; one which would outline and cater to, a new marketing segment. Initially, small companies were more willing to try out environmental business tactics. However, Freitag noted that it did not take long for “major consumer products companies – like Procter & Gamble, McDonald’s, General Mills and Coca-Cola – to test environmental waters” (F12). As the results were exceedingly positive companies, businesses, and organizations were increasingly interested in environmental issues. Freitag notes, the incorporation of an environmentally friendly business approach not only allowed these businesses the opportunity to differentiate their brands and receive premium prices, it also gained them consumer popularity and credibility (F12). As John Holusha noted, “in the past, convenience was the most important attribute of a package. Now, there is a new need: to be sensitive to the environment (A1). In short, “environmental sensitivity” was quickly becoming “advertising’s latest rage” (Rothenberg D22). As time passed, it became increasingly clear that even businesses that merely attempted to “look environmentally sensitive or green” appealed to the “rising environmental consciousness of American consumers” (Holusha D1). By adopting, or simply

claiming to adopt a “green” approach to business practices, companies and corporations built an image for themselves that consumers were increasingly seeking out. Given the publication of *Our Common Future*, the increasing emphasis on sustainable development, the newly formed relationship between the environment and the economy, and the ever more powerful role of the news media, the merging of business and environmental concerns was no real surprise (Holusha A1).

Along with emerging “green” business strategies, the 1990s witnessed the launch of “a new labeling program designed to help consumers identify products... that do the least damage to the environment” (Hamilton H1). The project, taken up by The Alliance for Social Responsibility, came at a time when consumers were growing increasingly concerned about environmental issues and companies were constantly searching for ways to “present themselves as ecology-minded.” As Hamilton notes, the “label is [as much as anything] a symbol of a growing trend in the environmental movement to draw on resources of the business community to help clean up the environment” (H1). Though designed to help consumers, news media coverage noted that the labeling program also had the tendency to confuse consumers “about what is and is not helpful to the environment” (Shaw 9). Moreover, several “false advertising” cases introduced a new dilemma to consumers who relied on labels to steer them in the right direction (Freitag F12).

Despite some confusion, the 1990s witnessed the growth of a new “market niche of people who believed in the ‘greening’ of America” (Freitag F12). By taking advantage of the union created between the economy and the environment, businesses and corporations ensured the continuation of capitalism. They, along with the news

media, helped to further the notion that individuals could make healthier choices for the planet by purchasing “green” products. Instead of consuming less, consumers were encouraged to consume as they had in the past, albeit the focus shifted to “green” products. In this sense, consumption choices were presented as one solution to the environmental problem. Moreover, the notion of green consumerism – with its emphasis on individual responsibility and consumption changes – became a form of empowerment, “one area where people could truly make a difference” (Wall 259). I argue that the disarticulation and rearticulation of environmental business and “green” consumption greatly altered the public’s understanding of the environment, and more importantly, of activism. The collective social activism of the 1960s and 1970s was replaced by “green consumerism” and the emergence of the “green consumer,” signaling the success of the union between the economy and the environment.

### **Activism with a Capitalist Twist**

By the 1990s, “a growing number of consumers [were] basing their purchases on environmental concerns” (Freitag F12). So significant was this shift that, as David A. Nichol noted in an article by Freitag, it is, “from a marketing point of view... potentially the most profound change we’ve seen in the consumer goods business for a number of years and perhaps for decades” (F12). Coming from the executive vice president of Loblaws, Canada’s largest supermarket chain – which sold “more than \$5 million worth of ‘environmentally-friendly’ products” through its recently introduced “Green Line” – the statement, carries a certain amount of authority (Freitag F12). Moreover, it also highlights the benefits to businesses and corporations like Loblaws. However, the success of “green consumerism” also stems from the

popular discourse generated; one that encouraged individual consumers to buy into the notion that small changes to lifestyles and consumption habits could have a substantial, positive impact on the environment. This discourse allowed for the emergence of various consumer trends as noted in the news media.

One example is that of “source reduction” – outlined in an article by Martha Hamilton (H1). Praised by the Environmental Protection Agency, “source reduction” includes using concentrates, “buying larger quantities, eliminating unnecessary packaging, buying returnables, [and] buying products that can be repaired” (Hamilton H1). In short, “source reduction” aims to change the buying behaviour of people in a society faced with a scarcity of material resources by reducing the amount one both consumes and disposes of (Hamilton H1). The goal is thus to encourage consumers to limit the amount of waste generated in order to help sustain the planet. Source reduction quickly became a key component of the growing trend of “environmental shopping.” Defined by Kate Lombardi, in an article for the *New York Times*, this term “simply means considering the environmental impact of the products [one] buys and selecting environmentally friendly products and packaging when [one] has a choice” (C1). The use of the four R’s – “reduce, re-use, recycle, and reject” – was also strongly promoted. As a result, environmental shopping came to be seen as a “perfect way [for consumers] to change just one or two habits” (Lombardi C1). In this sense, green consumerism (also known as environmental shopping) was hailed for its ability to affect people in a more personal way. As one self-confessed “green consumer” states, “I’m not really an advocate, but I wanted to do something about the environment in my own small way” (Freitag F12). This consumer was not alone.

Market research, and newspaper coverage during this time revealed that Americans were not only anxious to find ways to contribute to the preservation of the planet – especially when contributions seemed to require so little – but they were also “willing to spend more on products that are kind to the environment” (“The Cost” 28). The incentive for businesses and corporations was, as a result, clear. Motivation for consumers was also evident, generating in turn positive results for “green consumerism” and the union of the economy and the environment. However, as news media coverage pointed out, the news was not all positive.

**i. Positive Results & Negative Consequences of “Green Consumerism”**

To be sure, “the movement that changed the nation’s environmental ethic a generation ago [had, once again] reshaped itself” (Schneider E6). Though certain changes led the environmental movement in a new direction, there were, nevertheless many positive results that could be named. For example, the news media noted that air pollution had diminished across the nation, that drinking water was largely considered cleaner, hundreds of laws were put in place against toxic waste, recycling garbage was becoming a mainstay and endangered species are now protected by the law (Specter BR13). In twenty-five years, the environmental movement had amassed a great deal of success. The publication of *Our Common Future* had not only popularized the concept of “sustainable development” – turning it into what Roger Lewis called “a rallying cry, a cause celebre, a movement of almost religious proportions” – but also generated a new relationship for the economy and the environment (F3). Combined with increased media attention and growing celebrity endorsement, “green consumerism” was largely perceived as another significant part

of the environmental movement's continued success. Environmental shopping was hailed for its ability to affect people in a more personal manner, thereby increasing the likeliness of one's adherence. Many consumers found empowerment through the purchase of environmentally friendly products and changes in consumption habits were noted during this era. However, fears of false advertising persisted. As Barry Meier noted, in attempting to figure out which purchase would have the least damaging impact on the environment from start to finish – known as the “cradle to grave” approach – consumers were often left feeling overwhelmed and incapable of making the right decision. Quoting Linda Lipsen – a legislative counsel for Consumers Union – Meier stated that businesses and corporations were running the risk of driving consumers to lethargy (48).<sup>7</sup>

This risk soon became a reality. As Oldenburg notes, a portion of the public began to turn to what he called “armchair activism.” Though Oldenburg acknowledges that many individuals continued to take personal responsibility for their part in the preservation of the planet, he adds that a growing number were weighed down by their own passivity. Coupled with “misguided thinking such as: Don't worry because someone else knows what to do and is in control; or if I can't commit totally, I won't do anything; or, technology and the free market will straighten out everything in time,” the result was often inaction (Oldenburg B5). This inaction, according to Oldenburg, was not the result of a failure to comprehend the serious implications of unrestrained consumption. Rather, it was about a lack of effort, a lack of motivation. It seemed that for some, “green consumerism” was too

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<sup>7</sup> These concerns were echoed in an article by Keith Schneider, “For the Environment, Compassion Fatigue,” New York Times, 6 November 1994, E3.

much of a hassle. As a result, tips and advice aimed at “couch potatoes of social consciousness” began to emerge (Oldenburg B5). Boycotting constituted one example. Simply “by not buying a particular product manufactured by a company whose policies or practices were unfair or endanger people or abuse the planet” it was understood that “one can all at once make a statement of principle, affect the coffers of major corporations, and improve the world in a small way... with no cost, no sacrifice, and [most importantly] no effort” (Oldenburg B5). All that was required of the individual “armchair activist” was to find out which company or product should be boycotted and, as Oldenburg reassuringly points out, hardcore activists were already working hard to compile such lists (B5).

### **Green Consumerism: A Reflection**

In short, the discourse associated with green consumerism meant that individuals did not have to be advocates, specifically not in the 1960s and 1970s sense of the term. Collective forms of social activism – like protests, marches, and demonstrations – were largely abandoned. Furthermore, they were increasingly being replaced by the small changes to consumption choices that marked green consumerism. Coupled with growing celebrity endorsement and attention, the news media began to shift the focus of the environmental movement towards an increasingly celebrity-oriented, entertainment-centered, soft-news one. With the aid of businesses and corporations, a decidedly more marketable approach was adopted, thereby reshaping the messages and values to be conveyed to the public. In this manner, the news media began to give certain actors more standing and render select events and ideas more popular than others (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 119). Sustainable



development was one such notion. Green consumerism was another. In turn, “green” and environmentally friendly commodities received a great deal more media coverage. In other words, these concepts were given what Gamson and Wolfsfeld refer to as a “more generous welcome,” consequently strengthening their popularity. As a result, the news media assumed an even more active role in selecting the information that would be communicated to the masses than in the past era. This shift also influenced public understandings and attitudes. Consumer dedication to green consumerism fluctuated and the news media reflected this in its coverage as well. Though some individuals were content to continue contributing to the environment through environmentally sensitive consumption, others embraced “armchair activism.” Thus, though the growing trend did generate many positive results, it was not without some negative consequences.

### **III: The Many Shades of Green: A Historical Examination of the Current “Going Green” Trend**

The emergence of the “green consumer” in the 1990s signaled a major shift in the nature of the environmental movement. News media discourses called attention to the bridged gap between the economy and the environment which, along with the notion of sustainable development, generated a new kind of “eco-consciousness.” Public dialogue continued to focus on environmental issues, though lifestyle changes and individual responsibility were increasingly emphasized. Moreover, as Michael F. Jacobson and Laurie Ann Mazure point out, marketing and advertising agencies profited from the public’s growing desire to affect change as they soon discovered that “social issues sell” (91). Though it has long been understood that “businesses [constantly] seek out new ways to deliver their messages to consumers,” increased environmental concerns and substantial evidence pointing to the fact that consumers “were willing to spend as much as ten cents more on the dollar for environmentally benign products” provided corporations with a unique opportunity (Jacobson and Mazure 90; Schwartz 51). By “borrowing the language and imagery of environmentalism” corporations have been able to tap into a growing market of consumers (Jacobson and Mazure 94).

In the twenty-first century green marketing opportunities have continued to expand. Along with ongoing media attention, increased celebrity endorsement, a growing “cool” factor and an ever-escalating number of “green” products available, the “going green” trend has “changed the way people think about the environment” (“The Evolution SM65). As noted in an article for the *New York Times*, “our

definition of the environment has broadened, our understanding of increasing threats has sharpened and our ideas of how to protect and preserve our natural resources have evolved in surprising ways” (“The Evolution” SM65). Perhaps the most surprising has been the development of a new popular imaginary that has not only transformed earlier understandings and public dialogue, but has also successfully linked lifestyle changes and consumption choices to environmental activism thereby supplanting the environmental movement altogether. Beginning in the late 1990s, individuals were encouraged to continue the same capitalist agenda as before – purchasing products, disposing of these products, and subsequently consuming more, thus sustaining the production, consumption, and waste cycle. This time however, the discourse endorsed emphasizes environmental benefits.

As the twenty-first century commenced, consumers were increasingly shown ways to ease their “eco-guilt” – generated in part by “constant reminders of how bad we are” (Forgey C1) – through what Jacobson and Mazure deem “*permission to consume*” (94). Though consumption, and its counterpart, waste, are “fundamentally incompatible with the basic tenets of environmentalism: recycling, and conservation,” environmental activism has, in the “going green” trend, been rearticulated as acts of consumption (191). I suggest that one key consequence of this rearticulation has resulted in an altered notion of activism that once challenged the role of capitalism in discouraging sustainable practices. As a result, this chapter will focus on the most recent time period, 2000 to 2008. A historical overview will be provided through the use of newspaper articles in order to summarize the key issues, events, and actors in relation to the environment and the growing “going green” trend. These include the

growth and popularity of the “going green” trend in numerous aspects of social, political and economic life, celebrity endorsement of “going green” and various “green” products, the implementation of cause-related marketing strategies, Earth Day 2000, and the role of the individual citizen. Along with these aspects, a more specific examination of the Toyota Prius will be included. The novelty of the car, the appeal – sparked in part by celebrity endorsement and media coverage – as well as its “cool” factor will be discussed. The attention garnered and public dialogue that emerged will also be delineated in this chapter. The Toyota Prius, along with the news media, will therefore be used as catalysts for a discussion of how the “going green” trend has capitalized upon the economy/ environment connection creating a consumer activist and further promoting consumer activism.

### **Green Here, Green There, Green Everywhere**

The economy/ environment dichotomy continues to be explored in the twenty-first century as many corporations and industries are keen to demonstrate their alignment with the ever-expanding “going green” trend. Several newspaper articles – including one written by Amy Cortese for the *New York Times* – cite examples of individuals and organizations eager to change the public’s perception of “economic interests and environmental protection [believed to be] about as compatible as oil and water” (BU3).<sup>8</sup> In the words of Michael Brick, “a movement is underway to promote green development as economically compelling” (C5). This movement has been largely successful given what Mr. Alexander Roberts – president of Roberts Geo System, an energy management consulting firm – refers to as the difference between

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<sup>8</sup> Similar theme found in an article by Diane Marszalek, “Staying Eco-Friendly by Building Green,” *New York Times*, 21 March 2004, WE2.

“then and now” (Brenner WE1). In the past, “conserving energy meant doing without or with less, whereas today many of the new green technologies... actually improve comfort and work better. [Moreover] they also offer a clear economic benefit that people see in pocketbooks, [and that] is a powerful motivator” (Brenner WE1). This quote highlights two key incentives for consumers to “go green”: a distinct economic benefit and a lack of sacrifice. Such views continue to be confirmed. For example, Pamela Lippe – executive director of Earth Day New York – is quoted as saying “In this country, people don’t want to give up their lifestyles. We have to make it easier to do the right thing” (“The Evolution” SM65). With powerful individuals, organizations, and corporations increasingly choosing to incorporate more environmentally friendly business practices, it seems as though “the marketplace is responding” (“The Evolution” SM65).

The marketplace is not the only area of public life that has seen rapid growth in environmentally friendly products, services, and business practices since the 1990s. In “an era where environmentalism is,” in the words of Todd, “increasingly hip,” the pervasiveness of the “going green” trend has spread to all aspects of social, cultural, and economic life (86). In an article for *The Washington Post* Hartman notes that

while ‘doing something for the environment’ once meant tossing a newspaper in a recycling bin or buying organic lettuce, now nearly every aspect of daily life – from the toilets we flush to the flowers that decorate our dinner tables – is being radically rethought. Entrepreneurs, scientists, and thinkers are working to transform industry so that it functions more like nature, lessening pollution and inefficiency while propelling the economy forward (M1).

Indeed the twenty-first century has already seen the emergence of a wide variety of “green” and environmentally friendly products in addition to the rising popularity of

“old favourites.” Organic food, now a standard feature of “green” living, has garnered increasing consumer interest despite the higher prices it tends to command.

Moreover, as Stacy Albin notes, organic foods have greatly “attracted the attention of mainstream supermarket chains” signaling a growing consumer market (LI6).<sup>9</sup> More recently, a “green” approach has also surfaced in unexpected and unusual places. For example Jura Koncius notes that the trend – “barely on the cultural radar screen a couple of years ago,” – has “couples concerned about global warming scaling back and thinking green as they plan wedding venues, menus, flowers and transportation” (H1). The familiar sentiment “love, honour, obey” has been replaced for many by the following: “reduce, reuse and recycle” (Koncius H1). Unconventional “green” options are not limited to weddings; mothers can now opt for “green” births, and individuals are increasingly encouraged to take a “green” approach to death. For, as Thomas Lynch – author, poet and funeral director – is quoted as saying: “It’s not enough to be a corpse anymore. Now [one has] to be a politically correct corpse” (Brown A1). As Brown states, “In the green scheme of things, death becomes a vehicle for land conservation and saving the planet” – making it the ultimate “green” achievement (A1).

For many Americans, the decision to incorporate “green” themes in major life events has emerged from the increasing adoption of “green” practices in everyday life. Responsibility has become deeply ingrained in the discourse of environmentalism and consumers are acutely aware of their role. As newspaper coverage continues to outline the average American’s negative contribution to the

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<sup>9</sup> Similar views expressed in an article by Nicole Tsong, “Eco-Friendly Remodeling Slowly Heads Mainstream: As Sustainable Material’s Popularity Grows, Consumers See Prices Fall,” The Washington Post, 13 May 2006, F44.

environment, it is clear that reminders of individual and consumer responsibility have not been abandoned (“The Evolution” SM65).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the notion that “even our smallest lifestyle choices can have a big impact on the environment” continues to be emphasized (“The Evolution” SM65). It is therefore, no surprise that lifestyle choices constitute one key aspect of the “going green” trend.

Individuals are encouraged to “green” their lives by making what are often considered to be small but effective changes. Moreover, in the rhetoric of “green consumerism” education that was previously encouraged and largely used, among other things, to identify companies that failed to live up to their eco-friendly claims and collectively boycott them, is now rendered irrelevant. In other words, there is seemingly no inconsistency between buying a green product from a company that may not have integrated an environmentally friendly approach in all production processes.

An equally important and not unrelated component of the “going green” trend is environmentally friendly products. The availability and accessibility of these products is becoming more and more widespread. With an array of products available this aspect of the “going green” trend helps to further the notion that consumers – more often than not – need not give up the luxuries they have come to enjoy. “Going green” thus implies both an awareness and conscious decision to alter one’s consumption practices in order to help save our planet. Furthermore, these two key components – lifestyle choices and environmentally friendly products – also strongly encourage consumers to view shopping as a form of social action.

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<sup>10</sup> Similar themes found in the following articles: Norbert Walter, “Gobbling Energy and Wasting It Too,” New York Times, 13 June 2001, A33 and Kofi A. Annan, “A World to the Wise,” The Washington Post, 2 September 2002, A23.

Another key factor that aids in this process is marketing. Though “green” marketing and advertising strategies emerged during the late 1980s and continued well into the 1990s, there has been a substantial growth in today’s society; it seems “green” can now be used to sell anything and everything (Burros F2). As Michelle Slatalla observed, “these days you can buy a socially conscious version of almost any product” (G6). Slatalla continued on to state that, “no merchandise category is exempt” highlighting the domination of environmentally friendly and “green” products in today’s marketplace” (G6). Nowadays, terms like “green design” and “organic style” – both described in separate newspaper articles as being an “oxymoron” – are popular phrases used to sell even more popular products and lifestyles (Szabo F1; La Ferla ST1). Consumers are increasingly encouraged to seek out products with environmentally friendly labels, ingredients, and claims. Coupled with the notion that these products will not only enhance one’s “green” lifestyle and benefit the environment comes the reassuring reminder that these products do not “require a denial of pleasure” (Szabo F1). So successful have “green” marketing strategies been that, as Cortese notes, the “green” market “accounted for \$230 billion in 2000” (BU4). In this manner, “green” marketing strategies – utilized in a society progressively driven and defined by consumption – contribute to a discourse that significantly aids in the conservation of capitalism while simultaneously likening the consumption of “green” products to environmentalism. Coupled with an increasing emphasis on cause-related marketing, the combination runs the risk of “severing our links with traditions of activism” (Jacobson and Mazure 100).

**i. Cause-related Marketing: It’s Good to be Green**



The increasingly prevalent notion that consumption can serve as activism stems in part from what Jacobson and Mazure refer to as “cause-related marketing” (91). The authors state that the term refers to companies who “donate a portion of their income to nonprofit groups and publicize the gesture [in order to increase popularity and] boost profits while generating funds for worthwhile causes” (91). The concept is not new; Stuart Elliot notes that “it has been around for more than two decades” (C4) and in an article for *The Washington Post* Alan Cooperman observes that many “business historians credit American Express with the popularity of cause-related marketing” (E1). Daniel Gross elaborates on this point by stating,

in 1983 American Express revolutionized corporate philanthropy when it introduced a highly successful campaign to restore the Statue of Liberty. The company offered to donate 1 cent from every charge made on its cards over a three-month period to help rebuild and restore the statue. The campaign raised \$1.7 million and encouraged customers to pull out their cards to make purchases. During the campaign, card use rose 28 percent compared with the same period a year before (G26).

According to Jacobson and Mazure, “since then, corporations have clamored to exploit the public’s concern for social issues.” Though the authors acknowledge that “some corporate philanthropy is motivated by genuine goodwill, charitable giving is [in their view] increasingly driven by marketing considerations” (95). More recently, it seems, cause-related marketing has become a way to “burnish the image of a brand or company” (Elliot C4). In his article for the *New York Times* Elliot cites the example of GQ – a men’s magazine hoping to redefine its trademark phrase, “very GQ” – which conjures up “sartorial splendor or stylish behavior” – by “declaring that [one is] never fully dressed without a social conscience.” To promote its new image the magazine started a charitable project named the Gentlemen’s Fund, installed the

help of singer John Legend, and announced that “all proceeds [would] benefit five organizations in areas like education, men’s health and the environment” (C4).<sup>11</sup> The initiative thus comprises one example of many recent cause-related marketing practices utilized by corporations and businesses.

Though “some consumer advocates have criticized the marketing method” it remains one of the “hottest trends in fundraising for the perennially cash-short nonprofit world” (Salmon and Sun A10). Cooperman confirms this notion by stating that, “to their customers, companies often emphasize the purity of their motives and the compassion of their employees. But to investors, they stress that good citizenship is also good business” (E1). The result is a “win-win” situation, one that has not been lost on proponents of the environmental movement. Considered to be one of the “strongest social movements” in America, environmentalism has become more than just a special interest; it is a mainstream preoccupation (Barringer 18). As Ed Begley Jr. happily notes, “like miniskirts and skinny neckties, ‘green’ is back in style” and this time, “everybody seems to want a piece of the action” (B4; Eggen B1). This mainstreaming of environmentalism can thus be partly attributed to corporations and their cause-related marketing strategies, as well as “ordinary” citizen-consumers. However, several prominent members of society; namely celebrities, politicians, environmentalists, and environmental organizations, as well as the media can also be accredited with helping to thrust the “going green” trend into the limelight. Moreover, they have all been instrumental in helping to imbue the trend with a distinct “cool”

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<sup>11</sup> Just how the Gentlemen’s Fund contributes to the environment is unclear; investigation of the website itself did not provide any details (thegentlemensfund.com). The only option available is to donate money to Oceana, a website that one is re-directed to once the donation option is selected. No subsequent information could be obtained about how much of the money donated goes to the charity or what Oceana does with the money exactly.

factor that has, in turn, generated further interest from corporations and the public.

## ii. Spotlight on Prominent Greens

James Traub notes that, “stars... exercise a ludicrous influence over the public consciousness.” He continues on to state that,

stars have learned that their intense presentness in people’s daily lives and their access to the uppermost realms of politics, business and the media offer them a peculiar kind of moral position, should they care to use it. And many of those with the most leverage – Bono and Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt and George Clooney – have increasingly chosen to mount that pedestal (M38).

Indeed, it is increasingly common for celebrities – Hollywood actors, famous musicians and athletes – to align themselves with a cause. In 1985 when Irish rock star Bob Geldof helped organize a massive musical event with the goal of drawing attention to, and raising money for, famine stricken people in Africa the relationship forged between a highly recognizable face and charity proved exceedingly successful.<sup>12</sup> The same connections have been made in regards to the “going green” trend. Earth Day 1990 marked the beginning of this connection. Once almost exclusively endorsed by environmental activists, the daylong celebration had, over time, opened up to the mainstream. Increased public support was subsequently coupled with the backing of celebrities, influential and celebrated figures in their own right. The combination proved newsworthy, sparking increased media coverage. Ten years later, Earth Day 2000 was, as Eggen notes, nothing short of a “bona fide mainstream extravaganza.” Celebrities – like Leonardo DiCaprio and Melanie Griffith, both of whom “sang the praises of conservation”– had become even more

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<sup>12</sup> Similar theme noted in the following article by Richard Harrington, “Live 8 Concerts to Amplify Problem of Global Poverty; Philadelphia, Paris, and Berlin Among Sites of Free July 2 Event,” The Washington Post, 1 June 2005, C1.

ingrained in environmental affairs and events (B1). They helped facilitate worldwide participation, thereby earning the “going green” trend even more media coverage. Though some complained that the role of celebrities like Leonardo DiCaprio was simply “to help sell an Earth Day special,” others chose to focus on the “widespread – even global support” – this once “radical,” counterculture movement now enjoys (Brown X6; Eggen B1). As Eggen notes in a follow-up article for *The Washington Post*, “the crowd’s makeup varied wildly, from suburban soccer families to pony tailed environmental protestors... underscoring Earth Day’s transformation from a fringe protest movement into a mainstream campaign” (C1).

Along with celebrity involvement, politicians have also garnered support for the “going green” trend. Arguably the most influential political figure has been Al Gore. He has not only produced a highly acclaimed film entitled *An Inconvenient Truth*, but also has an important website – AlGore.com – that features tips, advice and links to organizations he is a part of such as “We Can Solve It.” Environmentalists like David Suzuki and John Passacantando – the executive director of Greenpeace USA – as well as renowned environmental organizations, including the Sierra Club, the David Suzuki Foundation, and Greenpeace have also helped to thrust the “going green” trend into the limelight. As a result, the support and endorsement of key figures in society have aided in the process of transforming the environmental movement from a counterculture interest group to a mainstream trend.

Along with these key individuals is another, equally powerful actor, the news media. To be sure, news coverage has greatly shaped the nature of the discourse regarding the environmental movement. Though, as Petersen notes, “the content of

environmentalism as public discourse has changed over the past decades [and] different issues have been at the center of environmental concern,” the news media has played a particularly powerful role in shaping public understanding (206). Moreover, the news media, speaking “mainstreamese,” push movements to adopt this language in order to be heard (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 119). The environmental movement has proven no exception; it has become more celebrity-based and commodity centered, gaining more popularity while simultaneously moving further away from initial values, messages, and goals. As a result, the following section will focus on the news media’s role in actively constructing the “going green” trend.

### **News Media as a Powerful Communication Media**

Environmentalism is not only a “complex and multifaceted” issue comprised of a variety of environmental concerns (such as climate change and global warming) but it is also tied to “the pronouncements of a variety of social actors [including politicians, scientists, corporations, and environmental organizations]” (Carvalho and Pereira 127). The examination of various newspaper articles, spanning four decades of environmentalism highlights the news media’s significant role in the “production, reproduction and transformation of meanings” in regards to past environmental movements and the current “going green” trend (Carvalho and Pereira 128). It is also indicative of how the news media has become “a crucial arena in the negotiation of different understandings of [environmental] issues” (Carvalho and Pereira 128). As a result, the news media has not only played a part in the construction of the 1960s/1970s and 1980s/1990s environmental movements and the current “going green” trend, but has helped broaden the discourse of each.

The new media has also become a key actor in the popularization of the “going green” trend. In recent years, several newspaper companies have integrated an environmental section, devoted solely to environmental issues and concerns. The *New York Times* online edition constitutes one such example. Information can be found under the main heading “SCIENCE” and the wide range of topics includes everything from global warming and energy efficiency to air pollution and Earth Day (“SCIENCE”). While in the past only select events and individuals would have been considered newsworthy, the addition of an entire section signals the growing importance of a series of environmental issues. It also highlights the scope of the current “going green” trend. Moreover, the addition of an environmental section titled “SCIENCE” is significant in that it underlines the shift from a focus on the environment specifically, to an emphasis on the role of science in issues of environmentalism. Being concerned, as we are in today’s society, with issues of climate change and global warming, this shift stresses the authority of a science-based understanding. Coupled with the implementation of what John S. Dryzek deems “green romanticism” – an environmental discourse that “calls for a change in human consciousness” and has largely had an impact on “changing consumer behaviour” – this shift signals a growing trend for consumers to make better consumption choices, and the reliance of scientists to work through the bigger issues (166-167). In other words, the “real issues” of climate change and global warming are increasingly being left up to scientists to understand and offer citizens technologies to solve. What is left in our own control is the decision to use re-useable bags, and buy eco-friendly products where and when we can. As the review of newspaper articles in the 1980s

and 1990s point out, change in regards to the environmental movement no longer requires sacrifice or doing without. Instead, through green consumerism, newspaper articles focused on consumption as a form of social activism. Other possibilities of activism – specifically collective forms – are thus excluded. Furthered in the “going green” trend this notion of consumption as activism has not only greatly transformed earlier understandings, but it has increasingly advanced the idea that science must be relied upon to tackle the major environmental problems.

Today’s news media coverage also frequently incorporates environmentally friendly products, tips, and advice. The increasing inclusion of such information draws attention to particular aspects of the “going green” trend – namely its popularity, emphasis on consumption, and individual empowerment – and excludes others. The Toyota Prius is a primary example. As noted in an article for the *New York Times*, the vehicle is “probably the most talked about eco-friendly technology today” (“The Evolution SM65). Described as “the world’s best-selling, mass-produced hybrid,” this article and many others focus on the vehicle as a significant technological – and environmental – innovation (“The Evolution” SM65). Moreover, many articles also highlight the vehicle’s appeal to celebrities, and subsequently, “ordinary” citizen consumers. In this way, the Toyota Prius has come to be seen as a new status symbol with an increasing “cool” factor. Furthermore, given its rave reviews, commercial success, celebrity endorsement, and ongoing media coverage, Toyota has become a well-respected “green” company. As a result the Prius and the “green” marketing strategies implemented by the Toyota company will be examined in the following section. The hybrid vehicle will serve as a prime example of how

consumption is, in the discourse of the “going green” trend, rearticulated in order to appear beneficial to both consumers and the environment. It will also be used to show which aspects of the “going green” trend are emphasized. The Toyota Prius will thus act as a site for investigation of a much larger shift; one I argue not only encourages a move away from collective forms of social activism, but also furthers the notion that consumption can serve as activism.

### **The Toyota Prius**

As news media coverage indicates, the Toyota company has received considerable attention given its recent “green” attitude. It is, as Andrew Pollack notes, the proud manufacturer of “the world’s first mass-produced hybrid vehicle” (“Toyota Prius” AU1). Despite being beaten to the American market by Honda’s Insight, the Toyota Prius – which relies on “both gasoline and electric power” – quickly became a consumer favourite. By avoiding “most of the drawbacks and inconveniences of other vehicles that were designed to be clean and fuel-efficient,” the Prius not only became the most popular choice, but the one that required the least drastic changes in driving behaviour by its owner (Pollack AU1; Ginsberg and Bloom 79). As Ginsberg and Bloom reiterate, “most consumers simply will not sacrifice their needs or desires just to be green” (79). The Prius thus gained appeal by not only requiring less of consumers, but for driving much like a “regular car.” As Pollack notes, one just presses “the pedal and the car goes. The switch from electric to gasoline power is virtually seamless and imperceptible” (“Toyota Prius” AU1). The comfort, spaciousness, convenience, and likeness of a “real” car constitute just a few of the reasons why the Toyota Prius quickly became the favored hybrid vehicle.



Celebrity endorsement has also significantly contributed to the Prius' appeal and market success. Along with an emphasis on technology/ science, celebrity endorsement constitutes another key aspect of the "going green" trend highlighted by the news media. As Thrall et al note, "in today's entertainment-centered, soft news world, an obvious way to get attention is to leverage one of the engines of today's media system: celebrity appeal" (363). In the case of the Toyota Prius, celebrities played a particularly important role in the popularization of the vehicle. Coupled with the news media's increasing attention, the Prius and the Toyota company generally speaking, earned a great deal of coverage and respect. Coverage began shortly after the release of the Toyota Prius as the news media drew attention to the growing number of celebrities who were driving the new hybrid vehicle. Though, as one newspaper article points out, well-known celebrities like Leonardo DiCaprio could afford to purchase any car, they were increasingly opting for the Toyota Prius (Niles and White F9). Newspaper articles also referred to the Prius as the car of choice for several famous celebrities and, more often than not, included a list of recognizable names. So extensive was the coverage, that newspaper articles outlined a growing divide in Hollywood between the previously popular celebrity-celebrated vehicle, the Hummer and its "holier-than-thou" counterpart, the hybrid (Waxman ST1). In this sense, the news media pointed to Hollywood as a key site for the interrogation of environmental concerns in regards to vehicles. As the issue of global warming gained more media coverage, it was increasingly important – and chic – to make an environmental statement through the purchase of products. For celebrities, choosing a hybrid vehicle came to be seen as more than a matter of personal taste; the decision

reflected the driver's stance on the environment – commitment and responsibility included.

Celebrity endorsement of the Prius also had a significant impact on the public. As David Meyer and Joshua Gamson note, their involvement helped to shed light on the “shift in tone of the movement's communication toward a more personalized and dramatized style” (181-206). Taking a cue from the much-covered Hollywood elite, ordinary citizens clamored to purchase the hybrid vehicle. Unlike its adversaries, the Hummer and S.U.V. – accused of contributing “to global warming by emitting 40 percent more pollution than an average car” – the Toyota Prius was recognized as being much more fuel-efficient and kinder to the environment (Williamson C7). Moreover, as Hollywood celebrities demonstrated, the Prius had become a symbol of environmental responsibility, making it the car of choice for both celebrities and citizen consumers alike. Indeed, the hybrid versus Hummer divide had not been limited to those residing in Hollywood. In the words of Hakim, the “unornamented Japanese subcompact [was increasingly being] driven by people who wanted to poke a finger in the eye of Saddam Hussein, the oil sheiks, and the neighbours who jump into gas guzzling sport utility vehicles for a drive to the grocery store” (C1). Furthermore, it appealed to those who wished to follow in the footsteps of celebrities and make a “political and environmental statement without demanding too many trade-offs” (Hakim C1).

The popularity of the Prius is also derived from its ability to “satisfy the love of breakthrough technology and comfort” (Gross ST1). Such knowledge not only increased the vehicle's appeal and resulted in the protest of sport utility vehicles, it

also made the hybrid car the ultimate “must-have, can’t-get automotive fashion statement” by the year 2004, four years after it first hit the American market (Gross ST1).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, newspaper articles derived from both the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post* indicate that the mainstream appeal of the Toyota Prius occurred rather quickly; especially once the 2004 model was released. As Gross notes, “the new model has enough sex appeal for Hollywood celebrities, enough trunk space for soccer moms and enough whiz-bang gadgets for somebody who defines success as having more toys than the next guy” – a description applicable to many American consumers (ST1). The Prius had successfully transitioned from a niche market commodity to an immensely popular purchase, pleasing to a wide range of consumers. In fact, the car was so desirable that, as Gross notes, Toyota reported a “backlog of 22,000 orders in the United States” for the year 2004 alone. The Prius had become, in the words of one owner, “a car anybody can love. It has all the benefits...without compromises” (Gross ST1). This combination proved enormously successful for the Prius. Moreover, the mastery of marketing a “green” product also greatly enhanced the image of the Toyota company as a whole; as Polonsky and Rosenberger III note, “Toyota is now a leader in this sector of the market” (22). By adopting a “shaded green” approach, the Toyota company has “branded itself a green company... [generating] a more positive public image” that has [in turn] enhanced sales and increased consumer affinity (Ginsberg and Bloom 82-84). As a result, the Toyota company provides insight into the benefits of implementing green marketing strategies. It also serves as a site of investigation for what green marketing endorses.

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<sup>13</sup> An example of the protest of sport utility vehicles is noted in this article: Elizabeth Williamson, “Activists Confront, Ticket SUV Drivers,” [The Washington Post](#), 20 July 2003, C7.

Thus, the following section will more thoroughly examine the Toyota car company as an exemplary green company.

### **i. Green Marketing: The Toyota Company**

In an article for the *New York Times* Micheline Maynard asks the following riddle of readers: “Why has the Toyota Prius enjoyed such success, with sales of more than 400,000 in the United States, when most other hybrid models struggle to find buyers?” One answer provided suggests that the company’s success might have something to do with buyers wanting “everyone to know they are driving a hybrid.” As Maynard observed, “The Prius has become, in a sense, the four-wheel equivalent of those rubber ‘issue bracelets’ in yellow and other colours – it shows the world that its owner cares” (A1). When the Prius was first introduced however, such sentiments were absent. Ginsberg and Bloom report that

when the Prius was first launched in the U.S. market in 2000, Toyota Motor Corp. did not play up its environmental attributes. The emphasis was instead on fuel-efficiency – consumers would spend less on gas and spend less time at the pump. The fact that the Prius reduced air pollution was merely icing on the cake (82-83).

However, as the Prius gained popularity among Hollywood celebrities and ordinary citizens, the marketing strategies used to sell the hybrid car, and the Toyota company itself, began to change. Increasingly the Toyota company sought to “green” its entire image, leading Ginsberg and Bloom to cite it as an example of a company that has successfully implemented a “shaded green” approach as its marketing strategy (82). This approach is the third strategy of four, including lean green, defensive green, and extreme green (81). The first strategy (lean green) refers to companies that “try to be good corporate citizens, but are not focused on publicizing or marketing their green

initiatives” (81). Companies who implement this strategy are more interested in the internal benefits than they are in gaining media coverage. Defensive greens, on the other hand, “usually use green marketing as a precautionary measure, a response to a crisis or a response to a competitor’s actions” (81-2). They recognize that benefits arise from “greening” but are not invested in the long run; rather they are looking for a quick fix. Shaded greens, like the Toyota company, “invest in long-term, system wide, environmentally friendly processes that require a substantial financial and non-financial commitment” (82). Moreover, these companies promote consumer and environmental benefits. Finally, the extreme greens are those companies for which “environmental issues are fully integrated into the business and product life-cycle process of these firms” (83). They constitute, in many ways, the highest level of “green” a company can achieve.

Though the Toyota company does not constitute an “extreme green” corporation, it has worked hard to incorporate the notion of “strategic greening” (Polonsky and Rosenberger III 22). Strategic greening, as Polonsky and Rosenberger III point out, “requires a change in corporate mindset *as well as* in corporate behaviour (tactics)” (22). For the Toyota company, this has meant, in part, the creation of a new corporate philosophy; one which emphasizes Toyota’s dedication to adhere to its slogan, “make things better.” On Toyota’s Canadian website, the following statement is made in the “Company Info” section:

Make things better. A philosophy of continuous improvement. Small steps added together to make a big difference. At work. At home. In the community. Even in the world at large. Make things better is what we all strive for. At Toyota, it’s how we approach everything we do. Seeking ways to make things better. In our products. In our services. In the lives of our customers. This section of toyota.ca is designed for the people of

Canada and the people of Toyota who work continuously to make things better. A better vehicle. A better society. A better world.

This quote highlights the company's commitment to "being socially responsible." In this manner, the Toyota company moves beyond simply employing green marketing strategies to sell one product, the Toyota Prius. Instead, a green approach has been incorporated into Toyota's overall mind-set. The company's website now features a section entitled "Environment" which is further broken down into three main headings: "Our Commitment" – which outlines the company's various environmental commitments, "Programs" – which entails information about both the Earth Day Scholarship Program and Toyota's partnership with Evergreen, and finally "Hybrids" – a section devoted to summarizing the benefits, myths, and future of Toyota's hybrid vehicles. As the website states, the company aims to "promote environmental responsibility [in] every aspect of our company and significantly reduce the impact our vehicles have on the planet" ([www.toyota.ca](http://www.toyota.ca)). The incorporation of socially responsible corporate values, complete with tangible demonstrations of environmental claims, has thus further enhanced the credibility of the Toyota car company. Both of these aspects are key elements of a successful green marketing strategy (Ginsberg and Bloom 84). Moreover, the company also fulfilled another key aspect of green marketing: continuing to "highlight the direct benefits of their products (84). As Ginsberg and Bloom note, "traditional product attributes of price, quality, convenience and availability" should be touted along with the product's environmental appeal (84). Todd further expands on this notion by stating that

companies engaging in environmental marketing must direct messages toward a dual audience: consumers whose buying habits already reflect an awareness of ecological implications of consumption, as well as a vast

number of potential consumers – those who must be convinced that the eco-costs of products are important (87).

Given the success of the Toyota Prius it seems the company has effectively implemented green marketing strategies to appeal to both sets of consumers (Brooke C1). Moreover, Toyota also introduced a hybrid S.U.V and Lexus, generating further appeal for consumers not taken by the Prius model. By consistently striving to appeal to a wide range of consumers, and strategically employing green marketing strategies, the Toyota company has become synonymous with a green, environmentally conscious corporation. Consumers eager to make a green statement about themselves, consistently turn to the Prius (Maynard A1). As a result, the Toyota car company has enjoyed the benefits of being branded a green company. Moreover, the company is also a role model for other corporations and organizations hoping to implement green marketing strategies. Toyota has taken the previously held notion that employing the rhetoric of the environmental movement to sell consumer goods is ironic – especially when it comes to a product like a car, known for its detrimental effects on the environment – and disarticulated it (Jacobson and Mazure 94). Instead, the very purchase of a hybrid vehicle becomes a key part of “making things better” for the consumer, and more importantly, the environment.

To be sure, Toyota is one example of many. As Warren Brown noted, “practically every major automaker [is] promising to build energy-efficient vehicles powered by electricity, ethanol, hydrogen, low-sulfur diesel, biodiesel, compressed natural gas, propane or myriad combinations thereof.” The reason, as Brown states, “has little to do with image.” Instead the motivation lies in a desire to maintain cash flow and, more significantly, to “stay in business” (G2). Car companies are not the

only ones attempting to align themselves with a more “green” approach. Numerous companies, corporations and organizations – from those concerned with beauty products, cleaning goods, clothing, and furniture – are increasingly aiming to establish themselves as “environmentally responsible.” As Polonsky and Rosenberger III note, “responsible green marketing has evolved into a complex, integrated, strategic and tactical process”(21). Companies use green marketing strategies to link their products to environmental concerns. These products not only enhance the appeal of the company as a whole, but also allow for the continued sales of the company’s products. In a world increasingly concerned with environmental issues, green marketing strategies have become more than a powerful marketing tool; they are increasingly a necessity for the continuation of a successful business.

Companies like Toyota have thus begun to alter the public’s perception of consumption. Once scorned for its negative impact on the environment, it is now widely used in marketing campaigns as a way to “make things better.” As I have been arguing, green marketing is, at its core, a way to promote the maintenance of consumption. Individuals are encouraged to continue purchasing a wide variety of goods, only this time the discourse endorsed emphasizes “environmentally friendly” or “green” versions of such products. Together with an emphasis on science and technology – specifically the ability of the two to help positively change the state of the environment – the media has largely altered the focus of environmentalism. Collective forms of social action – which once comprised environmental activism – have been rearticulated as acts of consumption, supporting and sustaining capitalism, not challenging it. Moreover, the creation of what I call the “consumer activist” has



not only furthered the notion of “green consumerism” but has also equated activism with consumption. As a result, “the meaning of the movement in the public’s eyes” has been greatly reshaped (Thrall et al. 364-365).

### **Consumer Activism**

The increase in green shopping patterns, attitudes, and behaviours reflect, in part, the popularity of the “going green” trend. Celebrity support, ongoing media coverage, the involvement of major social institutions and the ever-expanding use of green marketing strategies have also played a role in shifting consumer alignment. The availability and vast choice of products constitutes another motivating factor. So widespread is this trend that even environmental groups have joined in; the Sierra Club, for example, has begun to sell everything from pillows and mattress pads to coffee, tea, hats, gloves and jackets. According to Johanna O’Kelley, the director of licensing for the club, these “products will make it possible to create a total Sierra Club lifestyle” (Deutsch BU6). Research shows that consumers are increasingly doing so; buying more environmentally friendly products to reflect their growing eco-consciousness and showcase their environmentally responsible behaviour.<sup>14</sup> In this manner, the “going green” trend seems to have created more than a new consumer market; it has signaled a cultural shift in consumption patterns, marketing strategies, and consumer expectations

While the popularity of the “going green” trend constitutes a major reason for the rise in consumers adopting a more “green” approach, other factors must also be

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<sup>14</sup> A comparison of the 2002 and 2007 Green Gauge Reports conducted by GfK Roper ASW Consulting highlights the intensification of citizens who see themselves as “green” consumers. Broken down into five consumer segments – true blue greens, green back greens, sprouts, grouzers and finally basic browns – the second report indicated a growth of 21% in consumers who viewed themselves in the top consumer segment; true blue greens.

taken into consideration. As Sheperd and Sparks note, “self-identity as a green consumer often involves a particular ethical orientation, as also is likely to be the case with blood donation”(397). In this sense then, the emotional and psychological aspects tied to environmentally friendly products are equally important in understanding the recent growth in consumer activists. These interconnected aspects include an emphasis on self-improvement, a “feel-good” factor, and the notion of “responsible consumption” (Todd 94). Advertising a product’s ability to ensure self-improvement is not a new strategy. As Todd notes, many “products are hawked as self-improvement aids... we see it in ads for clothing, cars and alcoholic beverages” (89). In regards to environmentally friendly products, this marketing strategy – which plays into our desires to remain young, be more successful and live longer, more fulfilling lives – figures strongly into the “feel-good” aspect as it also “guarantees to improve our self-image and thus self-esteem” (Todd 89). Coupled with individual emotional benefits, environmentally friendly and “green” products also promote a “feel-good” factor tied to the environment. Slatalla notes that many consumers see an added benefit to buying “green” products, as they experience a sense of making the “right” decision (G6). By purchasing products made with due attention paid to the production process – in order to ensure the least amount of ecological harm – consumers are encouraged to feel that they are both “supporting their own environmentally conscious lifestyles and... promoting ecological sustainability” (Todd 93).

Moreover, as individual responsibility continues to be emphasized, the consumption of environmentally friendly products is increasingly considered to be

“virtuous,” adding to the “feel-good” factor (Slatalla G6). The discourse tied to the consumption of these products also persuades consumers to “feel-good.” As Ms. Jeanie Pyun – editor of Organic Style magazine – is quoted as stating, “it’s a misconception to say that a [green] lifestyle is all or nothing. Maybe you get the car with great gas mileage, maybe you replace light bulbs with compact fluorescents that last 10 times longer” (Slatalla G6). In other words, though the consumption of environmentally friendly products is encouraged – and to an extent, a “green” lifestyle is viewed as the ideal goal – consumers are reminded that even one or two key “green” choices is good enough. This, in my opinion, furthers the “feel-good” factor, as consumers are encouraged to equate a single purchase of such products with acts of environmentalism. This “feel-good” component also relates to the notion of “responsible consumption.” According to Todd, “responsible consumption” is a “tactic that promotes an environmental ethic that does not rely on consumer guilt, but empowers consumers to feel good about their consumption choices” (94). This shift from guilt to empowerment has proven motivating to a wide range of consumers.

The “imperative to consume” – largely considered to be a normal part of everyday life – is thus transformed within the discourse of the “going green” trend into something much more significant (Miller and Rose 114). “Green” and environmentally friendly products are set apart from typical consumer goods. While the two share many similarities in terms of how they are advertised, what “needs” and desires they claim to satisfy, and how they portend to improve our lives generally speaking, “green” commodities have also acquired a new, more powerful role by providing a way for consumers to “actively” participate in the preservation of the

environment. This understanding of “environmental protection has become [so] mainstream [that] opposition to it is socially unacceptable” (Carvalho and Pereira 144). Moreover, with so many options available to consumers and constant reminders of our individual responsibilities, consumption provides a relatively simple way to protect the environment without sacrifice. Coupled with the emotional appeal, and increasing “cool” factor, going green is not only popular, but a seemingly effective strategy to bring about change and simultaneously align oneself with an important social trend. Consumer activism thus signals a complete transformation in public understandings of environmental activism.

#### IV. The Mark of Time: A Summary

The historical analysis of newspaper articles across four decades allows for the examination of shifts in popular dialogue regarding environmentalism. It has pointed to a significant transformation in public understandings that have not only disarticulated and rearticulated previous notions of activism, but have also successfully linked lifestyle changes and consumption choices to environmental activism.

The inclusion of major events and key actors that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s allowed for the contextualization of my argument. This time period points to the emergence of what has traditionally been understood as the environmental movement, marked by a sense of collective responsibility. Rachel Carson's work *Silent Spring* not only proved effective in gaining increased media coverage and attention for environmental concerns and issues, but helped spark collective forms of social activism. These included protests, marches, demonstrations, sit-ins and weeklong celebrations like Earth Day 1970. The news media also played an instrumental role in garnering popularity for the book and its author. Hailed as a rallying "cry to the reading public," the news media documented interviews and insights of Carson's as well as the various protests, demonstrations, and marches that her book had inspired (Milne and Milne 303).

Such coverage can, in part, be seen as constituting the "historical context" of the era. As the media adopted a more substantial role in citizen's day-to-day lives, the public became increasingly more aware of various social ills and problems that affected them personally. With other social movements on the rise – notably the civil

rights movement – citizens were progressively encouraged to take action. In this manner, the “historical context” of the era created the necessary foundation for the rise of the environmental movement. This movement achieved a great deal of success; numerous laws, government acts, and policies were established.

Environmental organizations were created and membership continued to rise. Support for environmental causes grew and as a result, citizens began to reevaluate their love affair with consumption. Seen as the “biggest villain” of them all, citizens actively worked to consume less and conserve more (Aarons A20). Prominent examples were set by authority figures like then President Jimmy Carter and sacrifice came to be viewed as a necessary precaution. Citizens joined together to rectify their relationship with nature, working towards a healthier, cleaner, safer environment for present and future generations.

The inclusion of this information is necessary in order to highlight the shifts in public understandings and popular dialogue that have emerged. This era marks the first moment of my analysis, which, as noted, extends to the current millennium. The inclusion of the 1980s and 1990s serves as a bridge between the first and final periods undertaken in this analysis. This era was largely marked by a series of transformations; news media reported shifts in citizens’ attitude toward the environment and their role in its preservation as the economy/ environment dichotomy began to receive more attention. Though Reaganomics threatened to end the reign of environmental support and coverage, the news media reported that such attempts failed in the end. Despite lacking some of the fervor to remain as frugal as their 1960s and 1970s counterparts, citizens did profess care and concern for the

environment. However, the attention paid to the economy/ environment divide began to raise questions as to the whether one would have to be chosen over the other. The publication of the World Commission on Environment and Development's report, *Our Common Future* was thus a significant event in this era as it not only proposed a new relationship between the two opposing entities, but also popularized the notion of "sustainable development."

While the strategies outlined proved more difficult to implement than delineate, global agreements had been reached during the Earth Summit conference in Rio de Janeiro. More significantly, responsibility moved from the collective to industrialized nations to the individual. Once again, citizens began to cut back on their purchases, generating fear in businesses, corporations, and organizations who, desperate to not have their profits reduced, broke down the "opposition of environment and economy... through the discourse of environmental business, part of which included the creation of the 'green shopper'" (Valverde 183). Consumers were, as a result, encouraged to view their consumption choices as part of the solution to preserving the environment. Empowered by such notions, consumers began to actively seek out "green" and environmentally friendly options, thereby encouraging corporations and businesses to further demonstrate their alignment with an "eco-friendly" business approach. However, false advertising claims and increasingly effortless ways to contribute (such as "armchair activism") meant that once again, citizens' commitment wavered.

In today's "going green" trend, heightened media attention, celebrity endorsement, a growing "cool" factor, and the array of "green" products available

have helped take the “green consumerism” trend of the 1980s and 1990s to a whole new level. Today consumption is viewed as part of the solution to environmental problems. This view has been constructed and largely promoted, in part, by the news media. The examination of newspaper articles from the 1960s to 2008 have pointed to a shift in what Ereaut and Segnit call “linguistic repertoires” (7). Defined as “systems of language that are routinely used for describing and evaluating actions, events and people,” the authors focus specifically on the linguistic repertoires of climate change. From my own research, I feel that their argument can be applied to a shift in the linguistic repertoire of environmentalism; from the environmental movements of the past to the current “going green” trend.

Early coverage of the 1960s and 1970s environmental movement employed what Ereaut and Segnit deem the “alarmist linguistic repertoire” (7). Problems associated with the environment during this era – including pollution, overpopulation, and a lack of resources – were conveyed in a manner that established them as “terrible, immense, and [to a certain extent] beyond human control” (7). The urgency of the situation was a prime focus in the news media and countless newspaper articles reported the desperate need for change before the situation was rendered irreversible. The production of this kind of discourse within newspaper articles – which constructed the problem as being too big for individuals to tackle – was deemed counterproductive by the 1980s and 1990s. Individuals had begun to express feelings of hopelessness and often found such messages to be demoralizing.<sup>15</sup> However, as the news media continued to cover environmental issues and events, the discourse

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<sup>15</sup>A primary example is found in an article by Joanne Omang, “Earth Day, a Decade Later,” The Washington Post, 22 April 1980. A1.



became more mainstream and popular, bringing forth a more positive, “pragmatic optimistic” view (Ereaut and Segnit 12). Marked by the belief that the situation can be fixed if something is done, the pragmatic optimistic linguistic repertoire was found in newspaper articles towards the end of the 1980s and has become a mainstay in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This approach has been successful in terms of re-introducing hope to citizens concerned with the state of the environment. Part of its success can be attributed, as I have argued, to the rise of green consumerism and its corresponding discourse, as well as current understandings of what it means to be an environmental activist, as delineated in the “going green” trend. With its emphasis on individual responsibility, lifestyle changes and consumption choices, “green consumerism” became a form of empowerment. While scientists have been entrusted with finding solutions to major environmental problems like global warming and climate change, citizens have been left with consumption choices. This choice is further empowered in the “going green” trend by a discourse that links consumption to activism, thereby creating what I have called the “consumer activist.” The implications of this shift and future research ideas are discussed in the following two sections.

### **Consumption as Environmental Activism: Implications**

The goal of this thesis has been to gain a better understanding of the popular dialogue that has been generated as a result of ongoing media attention – specifically in relation to the news media in the form of newspaper articles. The effectiveness of consumption as a form of activism has not been a primary concern. Instead, the focus of this research has been an investigation of how a connection between activism and consumption has come to be forged over time, as it is neither necessary nor

inevitable.

It is crucial to point out that the consumption of environmentally friendly products is not inherently negative. Moreover, the “cool” factor associated with the “going green” trend is, to some extent, a positive feature; it has helped to generate increased awareness and inspire more and more citizens to take action, albeit mainly in the form of consumption. Nevertheless, the “going green” trend is not without use or value. Neither are the changes in lifestyle that it encourages. Switching to energy efficient light bulbs, recycling, conserving water and energy, along with choosing public transportation and being more environmentally conscious are all valuable changes. Acknowledging them is important. As a result, this thesis does not aim to degrade the trend, or even its ties to consumption completely. It has however, sought to examine how the “going green” trend has appropriated and disarticulated the discourse of past environmental movements, generating in turn, the rearticulation of environmental activism as acts of consumption.

It is increasingly evident that in today’s society, consumption plays a significant role. The consumption of products and goods has long ago acquired more meaning and value than the straightforward fulfillment of basic needs and requirements. Shopping, the act of consuming, has not only come to be seen as a form of pleasure, but is also colloquially referred to as a form of therapy. Moreover, in industrialized nations, commodities are widely understood as “social communicators” that speak on behalf of the individual consumer (Schor 37). As Schor states, “in a very basic sense, we are what we wear, drive and live in” (28). Consumption, as part of the “going green” trend moves beyond a source of pleasure, an exertion of

individual power and choice, as well as a means of communicating certain messages, particularly of status, wealth, and intelligence among others. Along with these established factors, consumption becomes a form of empowerment, a way to actively participate in helping to preserve the environment. The “ordinary” citizen-consumer thus becomes the new activist, replacing previous portrayals of activists, specifically environmental activists –often reduced to a “hippie” stereotype.

This emphasis on consumption in the “going green” trend imbues consumers “with agency because [they are encouraged to believe that] through personal purchase, [they] can cause change” (Todd 100). However, as Todd points out, “the belief that individual consumer choices make a difference underscores the marketing of [numerous] companies” (100). In this manner, activism which once challenged the role of capitalism in discouraging sustainable practices, has been altered; making capitalism and its key component consumption, a necessary part of environmental activism in today’s society. I argue that this alteration has significant implications not only for environmentalism, but also for understandings of social activism generally speaking.

The creation of a connection between consumption and environmental activism has, to an extent, been shaped by the various events and key actors that emerged during each of the above mentioned time periods. It is also the result of a series of shifts in discourse that have been influenced, in part, by the “historical contexts” of each era, altering popular understandings and dominant discourses over four decades. While celebrity endorsement, a rising “cool” factor, and the ongoing proliferation of cause-related marketing strategies have also played a contributing

role, the inclusion of newspaper articles has highlighted the news's media's progressively more important role in disseminating and "circulating particular knowledge" that has significantly aided in the process of furthering the discourse which links consumption to environmental activism (Motion and Weaver 246). This knowledge has been used to "raise public awareness, influence public opinion, and gain support for [environmental – and increasingly capitalist –] interests and causes" (Motion and Weaver 246). As Lars Kjerulf Petersen states, "the media are not simply involved in reporting on a social world... Rather, the media are actively involved in constituting the social world." (208). Petersen furthers this point by stating that "the social world is – in part – constructed through *discourses* fixed and diffused by mass media" (208). In regards to environmentalism, the news media has not only reflected, but also actively constructed discourses which have, in turn, affected public understandings. From dominant discourses that emphasized sacrifice to an increasingly consumer-oriented environmental approach, the news media has been a primary player in the construction of a seemingly coherent union between consumption and environmental activism.

Greenberg and Knight note that "as an arena first and foremost of communication and the circulation of information, the news media is the place where activism is shaped, and its meanings are given form" (169). However, given that the understanding of activism in the "going green" trend reproduces the logic of capitalism, it is "also a source of new problems and vulnerabilities in that it is at the same time [generating] a society of ... consumer activism" (Greenberg and Knight 169). Herein lies the major issue with consumption as a form of environmental

activism; this understanding empowers the maintenance of capitalism. Environmental activism is, in the “going green” trend, largely dependent on sustained consumption which, subsequently, sustains capitalism – the very thing environmental activist discourses of the past have attempted to challenge and undermine. As a result, capitalism not only continues unfettered and unchallenged, it becomes part of the very environmental solution from which it has, historically, been excluded.

In this manner, and with the aid of more recent news media coverage, this emphasized discourse thus also runs the risk of moving completely away from an “analysis of underlying causes” of environmental degradation, of which consumption is a part (Carroll and Ratner 24). As more and more aspects of the “going green” trend – for example Earth Day celebrations – become what Carroll and Ratner refer to as “media events,” the previous focus applied to investigating and amending underlying causes is replaced by an emphasis on commodities, celebrities, and quick-fix solutions (10). The rest is arguably left to scientists to solve. Citizens, on the other hand, are increasingly encouraged to limit their participation and involvement to consumptive behaviours. Whereas in the past citizens were motivated to seek out underlying causes and actively work together in order to ignite change, today’s citizens are taught, in the discourse of this trend, that consumption can save the environment. Underlying issues need not be examined. The solution has been provided for individuals in the form of consumption and its contradictory nature is increasingly rendered invisible.

The implications of this connection are quite serious. Equated with environmental activism, consumption (capitalism) not only becomes a viable solution

to environmental issues, but also an acceptable form of social-political activism. Moreover, given the exceedingly powerful role advertising and marketing plays in promoting this connection, the negative impact of consumption – especially excessive consumption – remains hidden. In fact, given its positive spin, advertising and marketing campaigns may well serve to encourage consumers to consume even more than before. The negative impact of consumption is thus increasingly trivialized and rendered invisible. If such discourses continue to dominate, will consumption fully replace other, more traditional and collective forms of social activism? Will consumers, eager to feel empowered and capable of contributing to a global issue, increasingly understand activism in a capitalist context? Furthermore, will the news media continue to play a role in promoting this connection? If so, the implications may extend far beyond environmentalism and affect other social trends. If cause-related marketing becomes more predominant and more and more organizations and groups – like those associated with Product (RED) – continue to emerge, activism of the past may become obsolete.

### **Future Research Possibilities**

Areas of further research include the examination of the effectiveness of consumption as a form of environmental activism. Has it generated positive results? Does it have the potential to solve environmental problems or is it not as effective as many have come to believe? Case studies could be undertaken in order to examine this research problem further. A comparison could also be taken up between the effectiveness of collective forms of social activism and a more personal, individualized approach. This type of research could not only be applied to

environmentalism, but other social issues as well.

Moreover, discourses, which oppose the consumption of “green” products as a solution to environmental problems could constitute another avenue of future research. An investigation of other solutions, devoid of consumption, could be undertaken to provide an alternative view to the dominant discourse. One could look into the kinds of solutions proposed and compare/ contrast their effectiveness. Furthermore, given the shifts that have already taken place, another interesting possibility for future research would be to take a look at the potential changes that may occur down the road; how will activism be understood in regards to the environment in the next ten years? In the next twenty or fifty years? Will consumption continue to play a role in environmental activism, or will the discourse once again be broken down and rearticulated to include a new understanding? This kind of research may shed light on the sustainability of current understandings. It may also be able to address whether “going green” constitutes a lasting movement or a passing trend.

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