

# A Brief History of Environmental Policy Through Literature

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## An Introduction to Environmental Policy

Environmental policy is a relative newcomer on the scene of federal regulation, with cries for a unified federal environmental response ignited by the publication of *Silent Spring*, by Rachel Carson in 1962 which exposed the new field of environmental science and its effects to the American public. However, the tradition of literature driving public awareness and federal policymaking does not stop at its genesis with many seminal works such as *Collapse*, by Jared Diamond, *The Diversity of Life*, by Edward O. Wilson, and *Love Canal*, by Richard Newman, continuing to do the same. These books have continued to champion the cause of environmental awareness through detailing the effects of human activities on the ecosystems around us, as well as the human cost. The shocking imagery in this literature has prompted many in the American public to take up the cause of environmental reform, this increased awareness and involvement of many in the public has perpetuated a chunk of the environmental reforms adopted by the federal government. As such, the history of the federal environmental legislature is inextricably linked with literature.

### *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson

*Silent Spring* was published in 1962 in an effort to bring environmental concerns to the forefront of public concern. While it serves as a call to action for a general environmental movement, the book itself focuses on the effects of the chemical compound Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane or DDT, a common insecticide used at the time. The book uses powerful imagery and many anecdotes in order to deliver a powerful message to the common man that serves to demonstrate the danger chemicals such as DDT pose to the environment and the human race. For example she compares the dangers of these chemicals to radiation, the effects of which were well known and feared by many due to the ongoing Cold War and the danger of Mutually Assured Destruction. The book served to galvanise many in the general public to the cause of federal environmental reform as public outcry resulted in a federal ban on DDT in 1972. However this was not the crowning achievement of the environmental movement, as the Nixon administration both established the Environmental Protection Agency and created Earth Day in 1970 beginning the history of a unified federal environmental policy in the United States.

Carson, Rachel Louise. *Silent Spring*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1962.

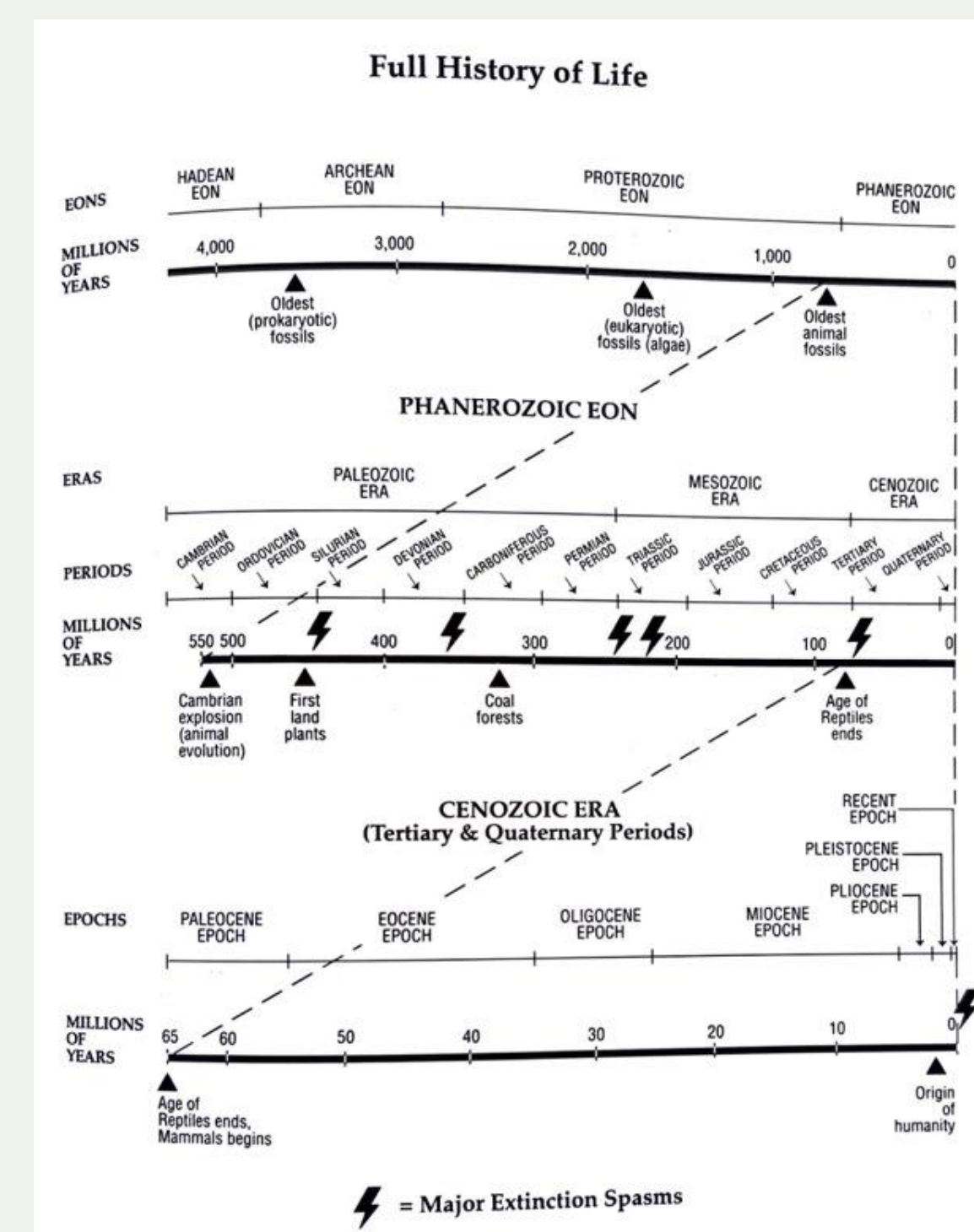


### *The Diversity of Life* by Edward O. Wilson

*The Diversity of Life* provides an account of the history of ecosystems ranging from the earliest examples of microbial mats to the modern day. In this work, Wilson specifically analyzes the formation and evolution of species in response to environmental and human factors. In that analysis, Wilson describes the resilience of ecosystems as nature seeks to balance itself – largely to prevent an influx or collapse of a particular species in an ecosystem. However, the resilience of ecosystems has been challenged by human actions ranging from improper disposal of chemicals to deforestation to overexploitation of organisms. *The Diversity of Life* calls for a new way of studying diversity. Namely, Wilson advocates for adopting a bottom-up philosophy whereas the emphasis is placed on individual species interaction to construct a broader ecosystem as opposed to destructing the ecosystem to explain inter-species interactions.

Wilson follows the mainstream concerns of environmental literature in his grave assessment of the future of Earth. He claims that humans will cause the next extinction crisis and that continuing on our current trajectory is not sustainable.

Wilson, Edward Osborne. *The Diversity of Life*. London, England. Penguin Books, 2001.



### *Collapse* by Jared Diamond

Jared Diamond's *Collapse* discusses the perennial and pedigreed topic of societal downfall, but in so doing also explores themes of ecology and sustainability. By the end of the work, Diamond concludes that environmental consciousness is crucial for the longevity of any civilization, and ours is no exception. Through the course of *Collapse*, Diamond explores the histories of various cultures spanning from the South Pacific to Greece, Iceland to Montana. By over-reaping natural resources, undervaluing economic stability, and refusing to temper development with sustainable practices, groups of people all across the globe faced existential threat by the time they realized the magnitude of the threats posed against them.

Notably, Diamond leaned on the influence and research of previous researchers (such as Carson and Wilson) to inform his views of environment, and ecology.

Diamond, Jared. *Collapse*. New York City, NY. Viking Press, 2005



### *Love Canal* by Richard Newman

*Love Canal* tells the story of an environmental disaster that takes place over decades. The pollution and disruption of the Love Canal has been going on since the 1700's or the colonial era. Newman seeks to explore the ideology of the area and the factors that led to the poisoning and evacuation of Love Canal and the newly built suburb. Newman describes the folly of man and our greed through over consumption and our need to industrialize to a dangerous extent. The need to over industrialize and expand technology with no regards to the environmental impact. The toxification of Love Canal is a tragic story that still serves as an example of what happens when the production of hazardous materials is not regulated and waste is dumped with no regard to the environment. Newman also describes the grass roots movements that took place after Love Canal was found to be toxic to all the people that lived and worked in the area. These movements led to a national emergency being declared, an evacuation of all citizens within Love Canal, and the creation of Superfund, which acted as the first federal statute governing hazardous waste remediation and the creation of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

Newman, R. S. (2020). *Love canal: A toxic history from colonial times to the present*. Oxford University Press.

## Conclusions

The mentioned environmental literature has not only developed an avenue for the common person to understand the world around them, but they have also fostered a sense of urgency regarding human actions. By studying the past, we can learn so much about the current status of the environment. From Carson's call to abandon irresponsible DDT use to Newman's account of purely placing economic gain above the needs of the community, we have compiled a working knowledge of the impact of human actions on our environment. These works simultaneously serve as instructions for redemption. While we may never return to an Earth of decades ago, all of these works outline methods of lessening the harms we have learned to accept.