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Posters about Ecology and the Environment Before and During the 1970s

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Oakland Museum of California, California, USA

The first Earth Day in 1970 signaled a dramatic escalation of public perception about environmentalism and ecology. It is important to remember that efforts to address these issues had been simmering for some time. This was not easy, given the other high-profile issues confronting this country – such as a disastrous war in Vietnam, systematic FBI destabilization of political organizations, and a criminal president who endorsed surveillance against his opponents.

Most of the presented posters are from the San Francisco Bay Area, which has a long history of social movement activism. They reveal some of the early expressions through which these issues gained traction in citizen consciousness and public policy. They are from the All Of Us Or None archive, built by Free Speech Movement veteran Michael Rossman and recently donated to the Oakland Museum of California.



Bodega Bay Benefit
[artist unknown]

This poster from 1963 promotes a fundraiser to block the first proposed commercial nuclear power plant in the United States; after substantial opposition it was never built. Not only was it to be sited on a known seismic fault, but the glorious concept of “safe, clean, and cheap” nuclear power had begun to develop scientific and popular opposition.



10th biennial Wilderness Conference
For the Sierra Club, by Stanley Mouse
1967

Stanley Mouse was best known for his outrageous rock posters. This one utilizes a common theme of the 1960s, the romanticization of Native American culture symbolizing a return to anti-corporate and environmentally benign roots.



Camp Fest Apr [April] 28-9: Celebrating Man and Nature
Ski Hut, Berkeley [artist unknown]
Circa 1967

The hiking, camping, and mountaineering communities were early activists in preservation of public lands and challenging projects that would degrade the environment.



Caution: Keep out of the Reach of Children [DDT ban]
Photo by Eli Leon
Circa 1967



The Next Pelican you See... [DDT ban]
[artist unknown] Limerick by Dixon Merritt, 1910
Circa 1970

The late 1960s saw the first public efforts to ban the widely-used pesticide DDT. The pelican poster was produced anonymously, with no reference to an illustrator, designer, or originating organization. Berkeley Graphic Arts' tiny union label is the only clue as to where it was produced. This was common for independent activist posters of the period, which sought to exhort general mass public action ("Join the fight") and raised consciousness ("Inform yourself") rather than endorse a single group or campaign. Many such graphics were deliberately anonymous, either because the notion of personal credit was offensively bourgeois or the creator(s) did not want to attract the attention of authorities.



Earth is Finite - Greed is Infinite: Protect the Earth
By Ariel Parkinson
1969



Americans are 7% of the world's population and use over 50% of the world's raw materials: What are We Doing with It?
Photo by Eli Leon
1969

These two posters address the consumerist base of the looming environmental crisis, challenging the postwar American frenzy of exponential economic growth.



Teach-in on the Environment March 11-14, 1970 [Ann Arbor, MI]
[artist unknown]
1970



[no title] [five children raising peace symbol flag]. Published by Synergisms, San Francisco.

One of numerous political graphics based on the famous Joe Rosenthal photograph taken at Iwo Jima. Although this used the then-common peace symbol, after 1970 another icon for environmental activism was designed that combined the letters “e” (environment) and “o” (organism). It looked like the Greek letter Theta, and never really gained public acceptance.



[Parody cover] *Bazaar* magazine, March 1975
By George, Stowe Jr.
1970

This reconstruction of a high fashion magazine brings home the looming environmental crisis at the same time that it wryly points out how capitalism is capable of profiting from any political movement.



Be a Transformer: Evolve the New Spirit
By “Ashley”
1970



Heal the Earth
[artist unknown]
1970

After April 22, 1970 “ecology” became a household word, but during that whole year the issue was raised on multiple fronts. It took local efforts such as the teach-in by Environmental Action for Survival (ENACT) in Ann Arbor, as well as independently produced posters on the role of environmentalism to eventually make it a required cornerstone of any program for fundamental social change.

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