Pollution Probe: The Emergence of the Canadian Environmental Movement

The emergence of an environmental movement in Canada was part of a general shift in the nation’s political process that introduced new actors, issues, and tactics, forever altering the life of the country. Environmental groups such as Pollution Probe, one of the first in Canada, helped to shift the debate on the environment from traditional political parties to public pressure groups. Most of these groups emerged from within the university community where a majority of radical students and professors encouraged their more moderate colleagues to address a variety of issues from social justice to gender equality, and, in the 1960s, the environment.

Many of the people who formed the inner core of the Canadian environmental movement had enjoyed outdoor experiences as youths during the outdoor recreation boom of the 1950s (see also 138–39). They attended summer camps or vacationed with their families in northern Ontario, which led them to value and appreciate nature. Mounting evidence of ecological imbalance during the 1960s, including that presented in Rachel Carson’s 1962 book, *Silent Spring* (see also 140–41), first alarmed and then angered these early environmentalists. Polluted air and water not only made the cities in which they lived increasingly unpleasant, but also threatened human health.

Establishment of Pollution Probe. Pollution Probe was one of the most effective of the first generation of environmental organizations in Canada. Pollution Probe was formed by students and professors at the University of Toronto in 1969 in response to a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) television documentary, *The Air of Death*, that highlighted ongoing fluoride pollution by the Electric Reduction Company at Port Maitland, Ontario. Stunned by the company’s aggressive response to the documentary, which spurred an inquiry from the provincial government, the students and professors organized to combat other polluters. In its first year, Pollution Probe was involved in many of the key environmental issues and investigations of the day, from pollution of the Great Lakes (see also 166–67) to the struggle to ban the pesticide DDT (see also 122–23). Although Pollution Probe’s core members came from the department of zoology, students in all disciplines joined. Soon the group opened membership to the greater Toronto community and by 1970 had grown to about one thousand members. The members deliberately avoided a hierarchical structure, opting instead to divide into loosely organized work teams responsible for particular issues and projects, such as public education, a newsletter, phosphate detergent pollution, air pollution, and legal affairs. Eventually leaders emerged, among them Tony Barrett, Monte Hummel, Brian Kelly, and Peter Middleton. Pollution Probe also created an advisory board composed of professors and other influential community members who offered the students guidance and expertise. From the beginning, though, Pollution Probe’s greatest strength came from the students’ youthful enthusiasm, idealism, and energy.

Upon its founding, the group adopted a mandate to investigate all environmental pollution, determine its effects on human health, and mobilize public support for specific remedial measures. Pollution Probe’s goals were formidable. First, Probe sought to curtail the negligent actions of corporate polluters through publicity, government pressure, and, where necessary, litigation. Probe’s second goal was to empower the public through research-based education and action, presenting the public with the opportunity to make a difference. The students saw themselves as a scientifically advised, grassroots movement that could mobilize public concern over environmental quality. Among the first projects Probe tackled was the issue of pesticides.

Pesticide Debate. Probe’s involvement in the pesticide debate is an example of the group’s effective tactics. Although the public furor over the information in *Silent Spring* died down relatively quickly, evidence of danger from persistent pesticides like DDT continued to build. In May 1969, the accidental death of almost thirty waterfowl at Toronto Island, apparently linked to the city’s fluoride probe was one of the most effective of the first generation of environmental organizations in Canada. Pollution Probe was formed by students and professors at the University of Toronto in 1969 in response to a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) television documentary, *The Air of Death*, that highlighted ongoing fluoride pollution by the Electric Reduction Company at Port Maitland, Ontario. Stunned by the company’s aggressive response to the documentary, which spurred an inquiry from the provincial government, the students and professors organized to combat other polluters. In its first year, Pollution Probe was involved in many of the key environmental issues and investigations of the day, from pollution of the Great Lakes (see also 166–67) to the struggle to ban the pesticide DDT (see also 122–23). Although Pollution Probe’s core members came from the department of zoology, students in all disciplines joined. Soon the group opened membership to the greater Toronto community and by 1970 had grown to about one thousand members. The members deliberately avoided a hierarchical structure, opting instead to divide into loosely organized work teams responsible for particular issues and projects, such as public education, a newsletter, phosphate detergent pollution, air pollution, and legal affairs. Eventually leaders emerged, among them Tony Barrett, Monte Hummel, Brian Kelly, and Peter Middleton. Pollution Probe also created an advisory board composed of professors and other influential community members who offered the students guidance and expertise. From the beginning, though, Pollution Probe’s greatest strength came from the students’ youthful enthusiasm, idealism, and energy.

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