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# Environmental Activism on the Ground: Small Green and Indigenous Organizing

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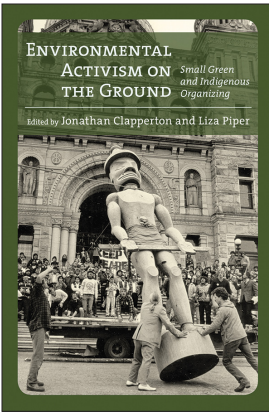
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**ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM ON THE GROUND:  
Small Green and Indigenous Organizing**  
Edited by Jonathan Clapperton and Liza Piper

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# The Ebb and Flow of Local Environmentalist Activism: The Society for Pollution and Environmental Control (SPEC), British Columbia

*Jonathan Clapperton*

As mentioned in this collection's introduction, over the past quarter-century a debate has simmered over why environmental organizations, and by extension the environmental movement, has failed to achieve the central goal of ecological sustainability. Most scholars and activists have attributed environmentalism's impotency to anti-environmentalist forces, a multi-faceted Goliath composed of capitalism, corporations, and the political right.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, more recent appraisals have blamed environmentalists themselves. Though such arguments have been formulated since the 1990s,<sup>2</sup> only in the past decade has the issue become hotly debated, sparked when environmental consultants Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger polemically announced the "death of environmentalism."<sup>3</sup> Fellow activist Adam Werbach, former US national president of the Sierra Club, then performed its autopsy. Cause of death: the failure of the environmental movement to both integrate its program with those of other progressive social movements and to narrate a compelling national

vision.<sup>4</sup> Leaders of the country's top environmentalist organizations vehemently disagreed, arguing that signalling the demise of environmentalism was "preposterous and distracting from the real work ahead."<sup>5</sup> The dispute has remained at the forefront of discussion among scholars and activists within and beyond the United States; in 2012, even renowned Canadian environmentalist David Suzuki proclaimed that "environmentalism has failed."<sup>6</sup> The question remains contentious, polarized, and polarizing.<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, the debate Nordhaus et al. spurred has led to some serious and necessary reflection upon the circumstances under which environmentalist activities and groups succeed or fail. The only issue on which everyone participating in the debate seems to agree is that environmental activists need to create a new approach for the twenty-first century by reconfiguring their goals, strategies, and even core philosophies. Certainly, there is much evidence demonstrating that many strategies of the past—such as basing the movement's goals on the belief in a "wilderness" ideal—have hindered the environmental movement's efficacy.<sup>8</sup> But it is important not to jettison the past entirely. In fact, many of the practices that proponents point to as "new kinds" of environmentalism predicted to revitalize the environmental movement, such as the current push for urban civic sustainability or the buzz around "civic environmentalism,"<sup>9</sup> actually have some (often unrecognized) historical antecedents, originating most often in local and small-scale environmental non-governmental organizations, from which lessons can be imparted.<sup>10</sup>

Accordingly, this chapter focuses on one such organization: the Society Promoting Environmental Conservation (SPEC).<sup>11</sup> While not many outside of (but likely many within) the Vancouver area have heard of SPEC, it is British Columbia's oldest charitable environmental organization, it was once western Canada's largest environmental organization, and many of its members would become key players in the environmental movement.<sup>12</sup> Early on in his career David Suzuki served a stint as SPEC's vice-president, SPEC youth organizer Bill Darnell was the one to coin the name "Greenpeace," and Darnell joined Bob Hunter (a SPEC member and Greenpeace co-founder) on the famous fishing boat *Phyllis Cormack* to protest American nuclear tests in Alaska. Greenpeace's first office space was even located in SPEC's main building.<sup>13</sup>

This chapter analyzes the strategies and tactics that SPEC used to effect a material and cultural shift in civic society, such as the implementation of recycling programs, banning pesticide and herbicide use, and implementing widespread energy conservation. It also evaluates the extent to which these methods have succeeded or failed, contending that SPEC has been most effective in changing human-nature interactions when it has been able to strategically gain popular acceptance as a community “insider” to operate within, understand, and change the dynamics of civic environmental practices. When SPEC lost that identity and became perceived as an “outsider,” the organization failed to repeat the successes it enjoyed in the local sphere and even came close to “dying.”

The use of “insider” and “outsider” is influenced by discussions from anthropology, ethnohistory, and sociology; these fields have been chosen because of their focus on explaining and understanding cultures, and cultural shifts, as well as identity politics. Traditionally, the positions of insider and outsider have been seen as fixed: one was either an “outsider” who “thought to study Others whose alien cultural worlds they must painstakingly come to know,” or one was, because of one’s identity (as a member of that group, for example), an “insider” who was “believed to write about their own cultures from a position of intimate affinity,” and who “share[d] an unspoken understanding with the people with whom” they work.<sup>14</sup> Over the past couple of decades these positions have come to be seen as far more fluid, hybrid, and involving a process of negotiation between the scholar and subject(s) of study.<sup>15</sup> In other words, just the fact that someone comes from a particular community or culture does not mean they will automatically be accepted as an “insider” and afforded with all the privileges and powers that such status grants. As that identity changes and fluctuates, it has implications for how the researcher is viewed and the degree to which the group will provide support, and it will ultimately determine the extent to which the researcher is “blocked” from accessing “insider” knowledge and support.<sup>16</sup> Approaches must therefore be established to overcome barriers to accessing an “insider” identity.<sup>17</sup> This theoretical discussion applies equally well to the desires of many social movement organizations, including SPEC. SPEC always prioritized public outreach spurring widespread civic activism, and therefore heavily

relied upon overcoming the barriers in order to gain the influence that “insider” status provided.

The above is different from the definition of “insider” that Douglas Bevington, among others, uses to describe the strategy whereby environmental organizations attempt to effect change through conventional forms of participation in electoral politics—most often through lobbying—and thus primarily seek to gain privileged, “insider” access to the political system.<sup>18</sup> While SPEC certainly sought to influence politicians and other government officials, especially post-1970s, their principal strategies and tactics always revolved around engaging civic society and as portraying themselves, and seeking to receive recognition, as community insiders in the anthropological/ethnohistorical sense.

## SPEC’S Formative Years and Rise to Prominence, 1969–71

The Pacific Northwest enjoys a well-deserved reputation as a hotbed of environmental (among other social) activism and it is arguably one of the modern environmental movement’s epicentres. The province of British Columbia, Canada, specifically, is the birthplace of Greenpeace, includes many of the other largest and best-funded environmental organizations, it had at one point (if it does not still) the highest density of environmental activist organizations in the country, and it provided the first two elected Green Party members in Canada (one federal and one provincial).<sup>19</sup> Following the 2017 provincial election, the Green Party obtained nearly 17 percent of the popular vote, saw three of its members elected to the legislature, and secured significant power through its support of the minority NDP government. Yet there is a notable absence in the province’s historiography regarding environmental activists pushing for change in urban environments, with most scholars (myself included) having paid more attention to the “wilderness” battles, colloquially referred to as the “war in the woods.”<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, by the end of the 1960s, a rapidly growing proportion of British Columbia’s population had become anxious, if also angry, about environmental deterioration in the province’s urban spaces, notably the

rapidly growing metropolitan centre of Vancouver. Unchecked resource and industrial development in the era of high modernism was pushed by the dominant Social Credit government, which was in power from 1952 to 1972.<sup>21</sup> Conservationists within the province, such as the renowned angler, nature enthusiast, and prolific writer Roderick Haig-Brown, called for a balance between development and preservation.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, urbanites in the province's most populated centre, Vancouver, were inspired to civic action by a growing North American environmental consciousness, epitomized and spurred by publications such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968), and events, such as an increasing backlash to nuclear bomb testing, especially in Alaska. Finally, Vancouver was a centre for generalized social activism in the 1960s, which created an atmosphere conducive to environmental activism.<sup>23</sup>

SPEC, first known as the Canadian Scientific Pollution and Environmental Control Society, then the Society for Pollution and Environmental Control, and finally the Society Promoting Environmental Conservation, was born into the above political, social, and cultural structure. SPEC began innocuously in the founders' basement in December 1968. Led by Derrick Mallard (1921–2001), a lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Simon Fraser University, and his wife Gwen (1917–1999), SPEC began with a broad ecological objective to: “preserve a healthy environment and promot[e] the *rational* use of natural resources.”<sup>24</sup> Unlike Pollution Probe (which might be considered SPEC's counterpart in Toronto), founded in 1969 by students and supported by university professors, SPEC's executive was stocked with middle- to upper-class professionals: university professors, lawyers, journalists, and the like. SPEC targeted support from the same segment of “grassroots, middle-class” people, notably professionals, where SPEC's leadership felt “real power for change can be released.”<sup>25</sup> The issues it tackled during its first few years, however, were quite similar to those of Pollution Probe and other “first wave” Canadian environmental groups: opposition to uranium mining, nuclear power generation, and atomic bomb testing; demands for better sewage and other effluent control for rivers; calls for sustainable logging and mining practices; an end to chemical pesticide and herbicide spraying; the implementation of a recycling program; and even steps to combat noise pollution.<sup>26</sup>

SPEC's strategies, again comparable to those of groups such as Pollution Probe, as well as other organizations addressed elsewhere in this volume, most notably the Conservation Council of New Brunswick (McLaughlin, this volume), were all designed to appeal to their target audience and to gain widespread recognition as insiders.<sup>27</sup> First, SPEC promoted a humanist ideology valuing science, rationality, and empiricism. Derrick Mallard described the "SPEC movement as an effort to make responsible presentation of facts."<sup>28</sup> At high modernism's peak, and as the ecological sciences grew in popularity, this strategy was a reflection of the founders' faith that science provided an objectivity and authority that politicians and corporations lacked. SPEC accordingly researched and wrote reports, which read like scientific papers but were worded in language suitable for the general public, submitted professional briefs at development hearings, and produced countless information pamphlets covering an array of environmental issues.

SPEC's second strategy was to infuse their humanist approach, which could come across as cold, emotionless, and elitist, with an equal amount of compassion. They hoped to promote themselves as a community-based and community-building organization that used their scientific research to solve social as well as environmental problems. For example, after SPEC released its ground-breaking, headline-grabbing *Fraser River Report* in 1970, industry and government criticized its findings for being amateurish, as much of the field work was carried out by students rather than professionals. SPEC countered with a defence of both its data and method—highlighting that the research had been overseen at all stages by experts—and with an emotional response, one that displayed SPEC's local roots and engaged with the atmosphere of anxiety that permeated the middle class over youth employment and aimlessness:

How often have people asked, 'What are young people doing for society?' Well here is a fine example. This last summer, 51 unemployed life science students, many with degrees, completed the first pollution survey of a major North American watershed—the Fraser River. Working in the field for 54 solid days. . . . [It was a] rugged and enlighten-



ing experience that also provided each student with \$450 to further his [*sic*] education.<sup>29</sup>

As a result of this stance, SPEC received frequent praise for what one journalist termed its “particular attention to the HUMAN environmental needs of the present and future.”<sup>30</sup>

Finally, and in line with its push to be rational, objective, and broadly appealing, SPEC’s founders sought to pursue a non-radical strategy, one that ensured the organization’s members would be identified as apolitical and mainstream rather than fringe “eco-freaks,” Marxists, or militants. As one SPEC document explained, “The Society has neither courted nor acquired any political affiliation. It is considered that the objects of SPEC can best be advanced by avoiding identification with any single political group or economic interest.”<sup>31</sup> In another instance, SPEC’s President, Dr. Robin Harger, a zoologist working as a professor at the University of British Columbia, set SPEC in stark contrast to other social movements, asserting, “The ‘do your own thing’ line of modern thinking belongs properly to flower child cults and Trotsky radicalism where persuasive use of such thinking fosters dissolution of otherwise effective (non-Trotsky) social groups.”<sup>32</sup>

In order to be perceived as insiders with mainstream society, SPEC made public outreach via education its principal tactic.<sup>33</sup> In its first few years of operation, SPEC’s experts gave hundreds of public talks themselves, hosted guest speakers, and showed documentaries at schools, public venues, government offices, businesses, union meetings, and private events. Derek and Gwen Mallard, among other SPEC leaders, toured the province, met with local environmental groups and officials, discussed pollution problems, and recruited new members. SPEC boasted that in the society’s first year of existence, “More than 30,000 school children have been exposed to our films and speakers throughout the Province. Over 50,000 adults have attended our public meetings, major shopping centre displays, etc. The Society’s speaker’s panel, composed of specialists, has fulfilled some 300 speaking engagements.”<sup>34</sup> Alongside this public education initiative, media attention followed.

As with most social movement organizations, another of SPEC’s tactics was to capture constant, favourable media attention, an outlet they

rightly perceived as key to growth and success. SPEC's communications director, Jim Marunchak, consistently argued that SPEC needed to establish and maintain a "responsible relationship with the media through relevant and enlightening action."<sup>35</sup> SPEC was helped in no small part by the fact that journalists representing all of Vancouver's major newspapers held membership in the organization; accounts of SPEC's activities regularly appeared in all of the province's major, and many of the minor, publications.

Mainstream media offers, at best, unpredictable support. William Carroll and R. S. Ratner specifically argue that in the British Columbia context, "When organized dissent is given coverage, media accounts are usually commercially motivated and liable to reconstructions that mock or demonize the groups on which they report."<sup>36</sup> Yet for its first couple of years, SPEC largely avoided this type of negative attention, likely helped by their identity as "insiders" and the amount of social capital they were able to establish as a result of their many outreach activities, as well as their rational approach and staunch rejection of radicalism; for many, SPEC represented a clear choice over other social movement organizations such as Vancouver's far-left New Liberation Front. Even SPEC's hippie-like "Ecology Caravan," a scheme wherein a group of university students from Vancouver drove across the province in the summer of 1970 to drum up support and spread the group's message, received only media praise, though admittedly also some slight ridicule, pointing out, for instance, that the SPEC representatives were "scraggly looking" or that the caravan was "a large, gaudily coloured bus."<sup>37</sup>

Finally, any social movement organization that wanted to gain widespread support within British Columbia during the late 1960s and early 1970s needed to be tactical in gaining the support of organized labour. Environmental historians have noted that labour and environmentalist organizations generally cooperated during this period, but it appears that SPEC and labour were especially close allies.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, SPEC bridged the divide between labour and environmentalists with an ease that environmentalists over the past few decades have found frustratingly difficult to repeat. SPEC's success in this regard was achieved by focusing on the physical dangers that pollution caused to workers and their families, by supporting union calls for better labour standards, and by maintaining

a non-radical position. Unions, in turn, demonstrated staunch support for SPEC. In one notable instance, about half the employees of a mining and construction company petitioned the provincial government to allow SPEC to present a brief at a Pollution Control Board (PCB) hearing. The employees' petition stated that the "men want to have SPEC's brief heard because it emphasizes the dangers of pollution created by the mine."<sup>39</sup> John McKnight, the petition committee chairman, stated he believed it was the first time that construction workers, in the process of building a mine, had ever taken part in this kind of petition. He continued that they were "violently opposed to the fact that the [PCB] denied SPEC the opportunity to present its brief. . . . We feel that there could be a danger of pollution to Rupert Inlet and the fact that the [PCB] refuses to hear SPEC's brief makes us feel this more strongly."<sup>40</sup> Other unions, when negotiating for new contracts, "put environment on the bargaining table, sacrificing part of pay increases to cover it."<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, once it expanded, SPEC branches emerged in many resource-dependent towns, labourers dependent upon the resource industry joined SPEC, and they even, though often anonymously, reported on their employers' environmental infractions. The insider-outsider demarcation separating labour and environmentalists thus ceased to exist.

Clearly, SPEC had found a winning formula and it produced tangible results. According to sociologists Jane Mansbridge and Katherine Flaster, social movements need to achieve success on two levels. One is to change policy at a variety of scales (e.g., local, regional, national, international) and structures (e.g., government, corporate, media).<sup>42</sup> SPEC was certainly involved in these efforts, and focused on, among its many campaigns, preventing nuclear power plants from being constructed in British Columbia, stymieing a number of developments that would have led to greater pollution of the Fraser River, and halting a city council scheme to widen streets and cut down trees. Second, social movements need to effect "everyday outcomes," or "changes in the realm of daily life."<sup>43</sup> Here, too, SPEC enjoyed many notable achievements, such as its anti-pesticide and herbicide campaign, likely the first of its kind in British Columbia, and its implementation of the first recycling depots in the province. SPEC also effected widespread citizen activism; these activists encouraged boycotts and called politicians to account. In one instance, Ray Williston, the

provincial forest minister, singled out SPEC for causing a dramatic spike in the number of letters from concerned citizens, flooding his department with so many requests for information that the office staff could not respond to them all.<sup>44</sup>

Statistically speaking, SPEC was also a success. SPEC was similar to other environmental organizations (as Frank Zelko notes of Greenpeace in this volume) in measuring its efficacy by how “big” it could grow, both in its geographical spread and in terms of membership numbers. The organization’s membership grew far larger and faster than its founders could have anticipated. Barely a year old, SPEC needed to amend its constitution in January 1970 to allow for the formation of branches in order to incorporate the many environmental groups that chose to join the burgeoning “SPEC Federation” (Figure 11.1). Over the next eight months, more than forty SPEC branches popped up across the province. As one of SPEC’s newsletters reported,

With such an incredible growth pattern SPEC has been barely able to cope with inter-branch needs let alone pursue environmental projects and activities with the knowledge and participation of the branches. Our growing pains have been many, but put in perspective with the tremendous progress made and impact we have had on industry, government and the general public, they have been mild indeed.<sup>45</sup>

Journalists commented upon this phenomenal growth, one pointing out that the appeal of SPEC’s “approach has not been without results as SPEC has grown from a nucleus of five dedicated people to an active membership exceeding five thousand over the course of the last year.”<sup>46</sup> By 1972, SPEC counted its membership in the tens of thousands.<sup>47</sup> Everyone was predicting that SPEC would quickly expand to become—if it was not already—Canada’s largest and most powerful environmental organization.



# PER SPECTIVE

SCIENTIFIC POLLUTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROL SOCIETY

CENTRAL OFFICE

44 WEST 6TH AVENUE, VANCOUVER 10, B.C.  
PHONE 876 4131



S.P.E.C. CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

NOVEMBER 7-8, 1970

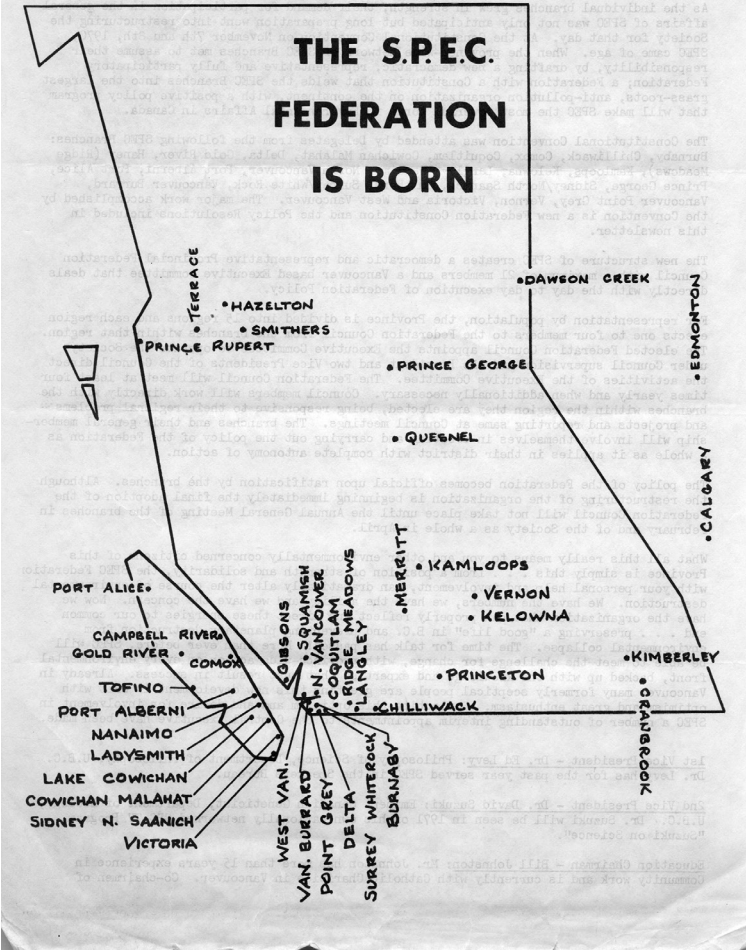


FIGURE 11.1: Map showing the branches of SPEC as of November 1970. City of Vancouver Archives, SPEC Fonds AM 1556, box 729-A-2, f. 10.

## SPEC's Decline and Fall

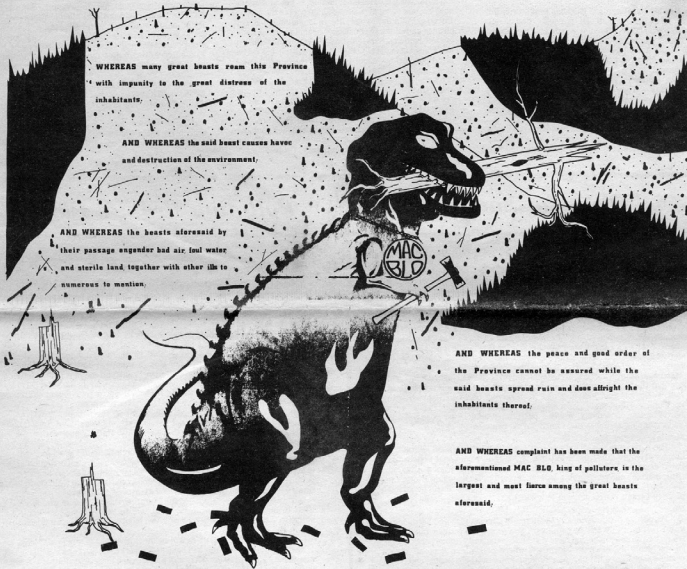
Shockingly, given its dramatic ascent, by the mid-1970s SPEC's membership was bleeding out. It was (and would for years continue to be) on the verge of bankruptcy, its reputation tattered, and its near-hegemonic media attention notably lessened. This sudden, precipitous decline begs an explanation; the answer provides some broader insights into why social movement organizations succeed or fail, and specifically whether or not environmental organizations are to blame for the movement's failure. In SPEC's case, it was overwhelmingly forces within the organization that caused its downward spiral. These were twofold: a move toward radicalization, and the failure to manage exponential growth. Both contributed to SPEC's loss of community support, and with it their privileged insider identity, which was essential to SPEC's success, since it was not an environmental organization like Greenpeace that got "big" and stayed that way.

SPEC became embroiled in a widely publicized internal struggle over whether or not to adopt more confrontational—even radical—tactics, or to stay the course as a mainstream, "rational" society. Many of those who sought radicalization also hoped to turn SPEC into a political party. In 1971 SPEC launched an aggressive campaign against MacMillan Bloedel, the province's forest industry giant, which included a satirical poster printed in some newspapers depicting the company as a dinosaur run amok (Figure 11.2). While some members were "delighted that the real battle with industry had finally been joined," others were "afraid that it had smashed SPEC's middle class image."<sup>48</sup>

However, what marked a real turning point in SPEC's popularity and the beginnings of internal disunity was when the Burrard SPEC branch protested the annual meeting of the Council of BC Forest Industries, at the Bayshore Inn, on April 16 1971. The demonstrators carried large papier-mâché eggs labelled with the names of major forestry firms, which were intended to represent the "pre-historic attitudes on the part of the industry to pollution." SPEC's former president, Robin Harger, and Gary Culhane, a past executive member, took the matter further, barging into the meeting with the intent to detonate "stink-bombs," which, according to Bayshore officials, failed to explode because of a faulty mechanism.<sup>49</sup> This action received exclusively negative press coverage as well as angering

**TO THE INHABITANTS OF BRITISH COLUMBIA:  
IN THE MATTER OF MAC-MILLAN BLOEDEL, KNOWN AS MAC BLO,  
ALSO KNOWN AS TYRANNOSAURUS REX - KING OF POLLUTERS!!**

**GREETINGS:**



NOW THEREFORE THE SAID MAC BLO IS HEREBY PROCLAIMED

**ENVIRONMENTAL OUTLAW**

AND HENCEFORTH let all persons take special note of this PROCLAMATION and be governed accordingly that is to say, let the hue and cry be raised. Let all persons inform those who hunt the whereabouts of the outlaw, of its waste acts, of its secret places, its doings and its recent designs upon the environment so that fresh pursuit may be given.

IT IS ORDERED that this proclamation be published at all places where the people gather in the Province of British Columbia.



**THE SOCIETY FOR POLLUTION & ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROL**

44 WEST 5th AVENUE, VANCOUVER 10, B.C. PHONE 876-4131

This is one way of attacking companies who pollute, denude and perpetrate other acts against the environment. SPEC in B.C. published this poster awhile ago and it is bound to have some effect, even if only a projected lawsuit from Mac Blo for "libel", i.e. telling a truth which may be unpleasant. Anyone with a small amount of backing can make up similar posters for Companies in their own areas.

FIGURE 11.2 SPEC Anti-MacMillan Bloedel Poster, 1971. City of Vancouver Archives, SPEC Fonds AM 1556, box 729-F-7, f. 3.

many in SPEC. Mallard had to engage in damage control. He ultimately tried to explain away the protest as independent actions by individuals who did not represent the SPEC organization.<sup>50</sup>

Derrick Mallard and Robin Harger then engaged in a bitter rivalry for leadership of the society during its annual convention that same month. Harger argued for radicalization, claiming, “The traditional liberal approach would be great if we were selling toothpaste.” He predicted that the rest of Vancouver would “catch up” to SPEC’s radical tactics, and publicly stated that he was willing to risk the organization’s future if he was wrong.<sup>51</sup> Mallard countered with his own prediction: “We have support from people of all parties, but if we become identified with any one political group, we would destroy SPEC as an effective anti-pollution, environmental organization.”<sup>52</sup> Mallard also labelled Harger and his allies as “Marxist,” a term he soon regretted using as it further cast an unappealing light on SPEC in general.<sup>53</sup> Harger and the “radical” faction ultimately lost, with Mallard being reappointed executive-director and many of the radicals resigning from their positions within SPEC.<sup>54</sup> Despite Mallard’s victory, the damage had been done.

Media outlets, as William Carroll and Robert Hackett observe, are often agents of the hegemon and are after sponsorship, via advertising dollars, from large corporations, or are in fact owned by them.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, media relies far less on coverage of social movement organizations than these organizations rely upon media attention and support; the balance of power is clearly asymmetrical, and it was especially so at a time before social movements could turn to effective alternatives, such as online tools.<sup>56</sup> Social movements therefore needed to delicately balance utilizing the media while challenging its sponsors. As mentioned, SPEC walked this fine line very well when using the strategies and tactics described above. Once their attacks became too threatening to the media’s interests, however, the media quickly turned on them. As evidenced in one *Vancouver Sun* editorial:

[SPEC] that worthy organization (of which I am a sympathetic but deplorably inactive member) is suffering from pressures imposed by the Ecology Freaks. It was surely their influence that created the current tasteless and sophomoric



campaign against MacMillan Bloedel, the forestry firm. . . . This isn't to say that anti-pollution groups shouldn't hit specific targets. They should—they must. But there's an effective way: *cool, tough, factual*. The smear posters and hi-jinks against MacMillan Bloedel are self-defeating, alienating even SPEC's own North Vancouver branch.<sup>57</sup>

Radicalization—or even the threat thereof—and disunity ultimately damaged SPEC's insider status, eroding public sympathy for the group, curtailing SPEC's broad appeal across all political stripes and even resulting in many members dropping their affiliation or simply failing to renew.

SPEC's aspirations for super-growth also proved antithetical to its core strategy of appearing as an insider, inclusive, and mainstream movement, though at first SPEC's ambitions worked to its advantage. SPEC adopted an aggressive tactic of geographical and demographic expansion, believing that a wider area of coverage and greater membership list would result in increased power and popular support. Mallard hoped that SPEC would cover the country and become Canada's largest environmental organization, but he adjusted this aspiration to encompass only western Canada once it became clear Canada's other leading anti-pollution group, Pollution Probe, was growing in Toronto and expanding in eastern Canada.<sup>58</sup> By 1972 SPEC had expanded beyond the province, boasting branches in the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan, as well as in the Yukon.<sup>59</sup> SPEC helped to create other important organizations, such as the West Coast Environmental Law Centre, and it founded the Recycle Council of British Columbia. SPEC also took the lead in unifying anti-pollution and other environmental groups throughout the province and, eventually, with similar groups in the rest of Canada and even into the United States.<sup>60</sup> This included, most notably, joining with Pollution Probe to create an umbrella organization called the Canadian Association for the Human Environment.<sup>61</sup>

SPEC's experience suggests that its incredible growth also led to internal fractures. Much of this tension, and the eventual decline in membership and loss of SPEC branches, arose from the disconnect felt between SPEC Central, where executive decisions were made, and the SPEC branches. For example, the president and seven executive members of the

Nanaimo SPEC branch quit following a dispute with the central body's policies, with the branch's president stating that he was "no longer certain that all members of the SPEC central body still pursue the original aims and objectives of the society."<sup>62</sup> In another instance, SPEC Central publicly opposed the federal enactment of the Canadian War Measures Act in 1970 without consulting the other branches, and much to their ire.<sup>63</sup> Bob Hunter, at the time a *Vancouver Sun* columnist but better known for role in founding Greenpeace and, as Frank Zelko describes elsewhere in this volume, not well versed in how best to structure an environmental organization, nonetheless appraised the situation, writing,

SPEC is at the most critical juncture. . . . On the one hand, its grandest organizational schemes stand on the verge of being realized. Within a month or two it will finally be hooked into a nationwide environmental and anti-pollution organization, a move which cannot help but work a transformation similar to the one worked on Clark Kent when he slipped into the telephone booth. . . . On the other hand, with . . . some branches at odds with the central executive, and the central executive itself split by clashes over tactics, the question which has to be asked is: Will SPEC survive?<sup>64</sup>

In response to such criticisms, Mallard and others sought to decentralize the organization by reducing the role of SPEC Central.<sup>65</sup> Such measures proved insufficient.

After SPEC's annual meeting in 1972, the organization remained "a divided organization [and] [i]t failed to reach accord during debate about its future and priorities." Many members argued SPEC had become too large, and others still sought to radicalize it. Some called for greater decentralization, while others wanted a central office to continue to closely coordinate the branches.<sup>66</sup> SPEC's internal problems became apparent when Derrick Mallard, along with Gwen, resigned from SPEC in April 1972, claiming he faced too much internal opposition to his moderate, decentralized approach.<sup>67</sup>

SPEC found itself adrift, internally fractured, and on the verge of collapse. As membership growth slowed, then declined, then plummeted,

with it went funding. Such internal strife and bad press came at a poorly timed historical juncture, coinciding as it did with the energy crisis, beginning in October 1973 with the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) oil embargo, a key event that O'Connor and McLaughlin acknowledge as prompting the end of the "first wave" of the Canadian environmental movement.<sup>68</sup> As both government funding sources and, more importantly, individual contributions dried up throughout the 1970s, SPEC Central nearly went bankrupt a number of times, hitting its nadir in November 1976 with only \$376 in the bank. Fortunately, it always managed to secure grants from various sources to stay alive, but other branches did not, and many folded.<sup>69</sup> In 1978, SPEC's president, Don Ellsay, stated the obvious, remarking that the organization's "credibility had fallen to an all-time low, as had membership."<sup>70</sup> By 1980 SPEC Central had no employees, only a handful of volunteers, a small, cramped office, and little funding; three years later, total SPEC membership had plummeted to 2,000.<sup>71</sup>

## Revitalization, Reorganization, and Refocus

By the end of the 1970s, SPEC realized that the tactic of expansion was not working and that they could no longer claim to be a "mass citizens' movement."<sup>72</sup> No longer able to compete with the other dominant greens—eclipsed by Greenpeace in the 1970s and, later, the Western Canadian Wilderness Committee soon after its creation in 1980—the organization needed to find a niche if it hoped to survive. In short, they needed to regain their insider status as a grassroots, community-centric organization. SPEC therefore refocused on the local, narrowing its geographical purview largely to the province's lower mainland and targeting urban environmental issues, which no other environmental group in the 1980s was doing within British Columbia.<sup>73</sup>

While SPEC continued to maintain its roots in broader campaigns and a provincial outlook, it refocused on addressing "everyday" material change, notably its ongoing programs of recycling and opposition to pesticides and herbicides, as well as a number of new issues, such as home energy efficiency. The group also turned most of their efforts toward public education and away from confrontation, emphasizing collaboration with

all interest groups, at all levels, including government—a strategy more generally termed “civic environmentalism,” though one that scholars have not generally identified as existing prior to the 1990s.<sup>74</sup>

Public education and outreach within grade schools had proven popular and generated much community support in the first few years of SPEC’s existence; accordingly, SPEC continued to focus much of its attention there. SPEC built upon its provincially unique “Environmental Education Program,” which it had created in 1973–74 to fill the void in environmental education within the classroom, to include urban environmental issues, the need for conservation and the transition to renewable resources, and fostering an everyday “classroom conservation ethic,” such as “more effectively using paper in the school office and classroom” and recycling.<sup>75</sup> SPEC received recognition for these programs from the Science Council of Canada, the British Columbia Energy Commission, and the Conserver City Committee of Vancouver City Council.<sup>76</sup>

SPEC also found some of its greatest vitality as the first environmental group in the province to implement a public education program on everyday energy conservation. SPEC’s energy program included creating and distributing information packets that included tips for homeowners to reduce energy consumption, a vetted list of contractors who could renovate houses to be more energy efficient, and even a free “Energy Audit”—an innovative in-home energy analysis offered to homeowners in western Canada. SPEC’s energy program proved incredibly popular and led to real change: according to SPEC, 90 percent (377) of the homeowners followed through with the inspectors’ recommendations (such as caulking, weather-stripping, and pipe insulation), and 90 percent of them noticed a significant reduction in their energy bills.<sup>77</sup> SPEC also produced a number of education programs for adults. One, titled “Energy and Us,” was so well researched and popular that it caught the attention of the federal Ministry of Energy, Mines & Resources, who contracted SPEC to transfer the program to 16mm film and distribute it throughout the province for public use.<sup>78</sup> SPEC’s energy program also included a large push for improving everyday individual energy consumption between work and home, notably by encouraging an increase in bicycle traffic. SPEC lobbied the government for more bicycle lanes and better transit, as well as providing workshops on simple bicycle repairs and maintenance, parts and service, maps of bike

outings and the best routes of travel, tips on clothing and bike accessories, basic sports medicine, and biking events.<sup>79</sup>

Collaboration—rather than confrontation—with multiple levels of government and industry also became one of SPEC's prime tactics. Perhaps the greatest achievement of this cooperation was the Vancouver Energy Information Centre, often referred to as the SPEC Conservation Centre, built in 1981. SPEC, in partnership with the City of Vancouver, the province, and the Canadian federal government, designed the centre as a much-needed resource building to educate the public about good energy practices. A renovated electrician's shop, the centre showcased sustainable building and living techniques that demonstrated how the typical home could save between 50 and 70 percent of its energy costs, served as a community meeting space, and had a resource library, an urban garden demonstration project (including a solar greenhouse), and a children's environmental education centre.<sup>80</sup> If SPEC had maintained its oppositional, if not radical, stance of earlier years, one can only speculate that such funding proposals, along with other activities in public institutions (such as schools) would have been much less forthcoming.

By the mid-1980s, SPEC had firmly re-established its sense of efficacy and presence in the community. Though it would still experience some periods of uncertainty, each time these occurred the organization displayed a maturity, a calmness, and an ability to weather the storm that was not displayed during its early life. Rather than measuring success by the number of members and expansive geographical reach beyond Vancouver, it refined its expectations, acknowledged its limitations, and maintained its insider status—which it had been unable to do in the 1970s.<sup>81</sup> During the last few years of the 1980s, for example, SPEC was once more faced with internal complaints of an ineffective board of directors and a declining membership.<sup>82</sup> However, the core group of members were confident in their product—expertise and community-based outreach—and this confidence showed in the organization's relatively quick turnaround. Indeed, by 1993 SPEC's president, Alice Coppard (according to SPEC's 1992–93 Annual Report, a founder of the Vancouver Raging Grannies activist group and a member of the City of Vancouver's Peace Committee), could boast that SPEC continued to offer community support through its Vancouver Environmental Information Centre, that it had the largest

stand-alone environmental library in western Canada, which was used extensively by students and the public at large, and that SPEC staff were regarded as a community resource and an authority on all things environmental. “Very often,” Coppard wrote, “members of the public, as well as government organizations, who have reached a dead end through the established channels rely on us to find answers to their problems. We help them find solutions, thereby providing a sense of community which is missing in other lower mainland jurisdictions.”<sup>83</sup>

Indeed, arguably the most telling aspect of SPEC’s success was (and is) its popularly accepted reputation as an expert on conservation and pollution control on the lower mainland. SPEC received countless in-person and mail requests from the general public, including a large number of grade school students, requesting information in the age before the Internet and Wikipedia, on a variety of environmental issues, such as how to start a recycling program, how to reduce energy use, and what alternatives to pesticides and herbicides existed. Students enrolled in environmental programs in high school or college, and others employed in the field, even wrote to SPEC asking if they could serve a stint with the organization as a volunteer to build up their qualifications.<sup>84</sup> One notable letter from a couple located in Germany asked for information on the state of the Fraser River environment and pollution. They explained they were planning to immigrate to the Lower Mainland but wanted to get information on the state of pollution before determining where to live.<sup>85</sup> In addition to this, SPEC representatives continued to be active on numerous environmental steering committees, working groups, and boards.

SPEC has maintained course through the twenty-first century, cognizant of the need to adapt to remain relevant, but also maintaining focus on the strategies, tactics, and issues that allowed them to stay alive. Today, their main campaigns are much the same as those they built up and refined in the late 1970s and through the 1980s. They continue to prioritize public education, community outreach, and providing up-to-date information. Their support is truly wide ranging—broader than its original founders likely envisioned—and comes from a diverse range of sponsors, from organic markets, to government bodies, to corporations such as The Home Depot.

## With Hindsight

While many environmental organizations that start out relatively small and hope to expand to prominence fail to realize that goal, SPEC became one of the—if not *the*—fastest-growing environmental organizations in North America during its first few years of existence. Within eighteen months of its founding, SPEC had gained thousands of members and boasted branches across western Canada. SPEC’s spectacular fall from prominence occurred equally as fast. SPEC membership, along with funding, plummeted, and SPEC Central very nearly “died” multiple times through the 1970s and into the 1980s; many of SPEC’s regional branches did disappear. The approach SPEC eventually took to revitalize itself—focusing on the urban environment and educating the public through a variety of fora—provides useful lessons for environmental organizations struggling to find their way in a movement now saturated with environmental groups as well as within increasingly conservative, neoliberal political governance structures that extend from the municipal to the global levels. Many environmental groups have failed to remain relevant and stay “alive.” Each time SPEC encountered setbacks—some of which appeared fatal—it found a way to reinvigorate itself and to make headway in creating both discursive and material progress toward environmental sustainability, proving that its time, like the environmental movement’s, was far from passed.

Scholars of the environmental movement, and of social movements more generally, have tended to be attracted to, and emphasize the importance of, direct action and confrontation. Those who oppose dominant power structures via confrontational—if not radical—tactics, rather than seeking to work within them, are often applauded for their efforts if not also romanticized and valorized.<sup>86</sup> These radical actions and groups certainly have their place and purpose, and have produced results—or at least temporary ones—to protect the environment and to maintain the environmental movement’s relevance. SPEC’s turn to less confrontational tactics might be seen by those who are uncompromising in seeking a paradigm shift as a selling out or as “greenwashing”—or at least as being the foil for governments at all levels who are doing so. But what this study of SPEC reveals is that, at least when it comes to changing everyday civic

environmental practices, confrontation and radicalism are not necessarily the only answer, and can—and did in SPEC’s case—prove detrimental to these goals. Turning to confrontation and (at least toying with) radicalism in the 1970s meant that fewer people could relate to the organization, and thus SPEC found its insider status much diminished. In the environmental movement, then, there is ample room for confrontation and radicalism alongside collaboration and moderation.

## Notes

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- 2 See, for example: Mark Dowie, “American Environmentalism: A Movement Courting Irrelevance,” *World Policy Journal* 9, no. 1 (1991/2): 67–92; and Mark Dowie, *Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).
- 3 Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, “The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World” (paper presented to the Environmental Grantmakers Association, October 2004). The points made in this paper were incorporated into a larger book, *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007). The second edition of this book was published as Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, *Break Through: Why We Can’t Leave Saving the Planet to Environmentalists* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2009).
- 4 Adam Werbach, “Is Environmentalism Dead?” (speech presented to the Commonwealth Club, San Francisco, December 2004).
- 5 Eileen Gauna, “El Dia De Los Muertos: The Death and Rebirth of the Environmental Movement,” *Environmental Law* 38, no. 2 (2008): 457–72; and Amanda Little, “Over Our Dead Bodies: Green Leaders Say Rumors of Environmentalism’s Death Are Greatly Exaggerated,” *Grist*, 13 January 2005.
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- 8 See, for example: William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 69–90; and Jonathan Clapperton, "Desolate Viewscapes: Sliammon First Nation, Desolation Sound Marine Park and Environmental Narratives," *Environment and History* 18, no. 4 (2012): 529–59.
  - 9 See, for example: William A. Shutkin, *The Land that Could Be: Environmentalism and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001); Julian Agyeman and Briony Angus, "The Role of Civic Environmentalism in the Pursuit of Sustainable Communities," *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* 46, no. 3 (2003): 345–63; Marc Landy and Charles Rubin, *Civic Environmentalism: A New Approach to Policy* (Washington, DC: George C. Marshall Institute, 2001); and Özgüç Orhan, "The Civic Environmental Approach," *The Good Society* 17, no. 2 (2008): 38–43.
  - 10 While it is beyond the scope of this study, which considers postwar environmental activism, it is important to acknowledge that the many of these urban environmentalists were mimicking in many ways previous generations of activists such as urban sanitary and public health reformers and urban park proponents.
  - 11 This organization has changed its name a number of times throughout its existence, and these names will be used as historically appropriate throughout the paper.
  - 12 Arn Keeling is the only scholar who has made more than a passing reference to SPEC, and even his study pays relatively slight attention to the society. See Keeling, "The Effluent Society: Water Pollution and Environmental Politics in British Columbia, 1889–1980," (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2004).
  - 13 Gary Gallon, "SPEC's Roots," *SPECTRUM*, Winter 1989, 5, in SPEC fonds AM 1556, box 729-A-3, f. 1 SPEC History, City of Vancouver Archives (hereafter CVA).
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  - 15 Narayan, "How Native," 672; and Narmala Halstead, "Ethnographic Encounters: Positionings Within and Outside the Insider Frame," *Social Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (2001): 307–8.
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- 23 Frank Zelko, "Making Greenpeace: The Development of Direct Action Environmentalism in British Columbia," *BC Studies* 142/143 (Summer/Autumn 2004): 197–239; William K. Carroll and R. S. Ratner, "Old Unions and New Social Movements," *Labour / Le Travail* 35 (Spring 1995): 195–221; and Dominique Clément, "'I Believe in Human Rights, Not Women's Rights': Women and the Human Rights State, 1969–1984," *Radical History Review* 101 (Spring 2008): 107–29.
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- 25 Jim Marunchak, Office Manager, Communications Director, to the Central Executive, April 1971, SPEC fonds AM 1556, box 729-A-2, f. 5 SPEC History, CVA (hereafter Marunchak to the Central Executive).
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- 30 “The Canadian Conservation Scene,” *Northwest Passage*, 23 March 1970, in SPEC fonds AM 1556, box 729-A-2, f. 6 News Clippings, CVA.
- 31 “Summary of SPEC—First year of operations,” n.d., in SPEC fonds AM 1556, box 729-A-3, f. 1 SPEC History, CVA. See also “Our Union Allies,” *PerSPECTive*, 8 March 1971, 2.
- 32 *PerSPECTive*, July 1970, in SPEC fonds AM 1556, box 729-A-2, f. 10 *PerSPECTive* 1969–1970, CVA.
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- 34 “Summary of SPEC—First year of operations,” n.d., in SPEC fonds AM 1556, box 729-A-3, f. 1 SPEC History, CVA.
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- 42 Jane Mansbridge and Katherine Flaster, “The Cultural Politics of Everyday Discourse: The Case of the ‘Male Chauvinist,’” *Critical Sociology* 33, no. 4 (2007): 629.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 “Letters Irk Williston,” *Vancouver Sun*, 17 July 1970, in SPEC fonds AM 1556, box 729-A-2, f. 6 News Clippings, CVA. Williston was from the outset one of SPEC’s most vocal opponents.
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- 46 “The Canadian Conservation Scene,” *Northwest Passage*, 23 March 1970, in SPEC fonds AM 1556, box 729-A-2, f. 6 News Clippings, CVA.
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- 60 Stephen Brown, "SPEC Leary [*sic*] of Socred-tainted Environmental Council," *Vancouver Free Press*, 17–24 December 1969, 14.
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- 67 "SPEC Co-founder Breaks with Group," *Vancouver Province*, 24 April 1972, in SPEC fonds, AM 1556, box 729-F-6, f. 3 News Clippings 1972–1992, CVA.
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- 78 Cliff Stainsby, Executive Director, SPEC, to Rafe Mair, 28 February 1979, in SPEC fonds, AM 1556, box 729-F-6, f. 2 SPEC History, CVA.
- 79 SPEC, "March 1983 Spring Program at Energy Information Centre," in SPEC fonds, AM 1556, box 729-D-5, f. 1 Education Courses Idea File, CVA.
- 80 SPEC counted the centre's creation as a huge victory, and continued to operate it through 2011 until it became outdated. SPEC, "Fostering Urban Sustainability Since 1969," last updated 2017, <http://www.spec.bc.ca/since1969>; and "New Centre to Give Advice on How to Cut Energy Bills," *Vancouver Sun*, 9 August 1981, in SPEC fonds AM 1556, box 729-F-6, f. 3 News Clippings 1972–1992, CVA.
- 81 The many definitions of "success" or "failure" are examined in further detail in the Afterword of this volume.
- 82 SPEC, "Minutes of the Meeting Called by the SPEC Membership," 15 December 1987, in SPEC fonds AM 1556, box 729-D-5, f. 16 Water for Tomorrow SPEC Campaign Planning, CVA.
- 83 Alice Coppard, "President's Report," 1992, in SPEC fonds, AM 1556, box 729-E-1, f. 11 SPEC History 1969-1993, CVA.
- 84 Many of these letters are available in SPEC fonds, AM 1556, box 729-E-6, f. 7 Correspondence in 1988–2005, CVA.
- 85 Andreas and Christine Mueller-Mettnau to SPEC, 13 March 1997, in SPEC fonds, AM 1556, box 729-E-6, f. 7 Correspondence in 1988–2005.
- 86 For example, see: Rik Scarce, *Eco-Warriors: Understanding the Radical Environmental Movement* (Chicago: The Noble Press, 1990); and Tzaporah Berman, *This Crazy Time: Living our Environmental Challenge* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2011).