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Melissa Cabat
Oberlin College

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INTERROGATING THE “AND”:
A STUDY OF ENVIRONMENTALISM AND DISABILITY

Melissa Cabat
Oberlin College Environmental Studies Honors Thesis
Professors Cheryl Cottine & Elizabeth Hamilton
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Purpose and Significance of Study

In March 2016, an incident occurred involving Whole Foods’ pre-peeled oranges, which were being sold wrapped in plastic packaging for six dollars. Tens of thousands of environmental activists retweeted a tweet condemning this packaging method, with subsequent tweets labeling users of this product as wasteful and lazy. However, for people with limited mobility and dexterity, having access to this product would be an extreme boon for their nutrition and would save a significant amount of energy. As a battle erupted on Twitter over ability, class, and privilege, it became clear to activists such as blogger CrippledScholar that protesters were prioritizing the environment over issues faced by people with disabilities. This situation illuminates a deficiency in the field of environmental activism: its inability to consider how climate change affects people of marginalized identities, particularly people with disabilities. Yet it also shows that accommodations for people with disabilities can often have negative environmental impacts. The link between environmentalism and disability rights is vital because without it, the rugged individualism that is so pervasive throughout the history of environmentalism in the United States of America is liable to continue silencing the voices of marginalized Americans. Neurotypical and able-bodied people will face the same environmental difficulties as people with disabilities when the effects of climate change worsen. However, the resources available to people with disabilities are far more limited. For example, in the event of mass flooding, elevators in high-rise buildings might be taken out of service. This poses an immediate threat to the livelihood of someone unable to quickly move down flights of stairs.

Having a nuanced understanding of intersectionality, which is the linkage of different social justice movements, seems to be the only way to reconcile uncertain political times with the state of our world today. On a national level, the discourse surrounding both environmental issues and disability rights has been limited in its scope. This paper seeks to inform the public about issues of justice and equity and expose activists from different circles to the connections between their movements by showing where the problems faced by environmentalists and disability rights advocates overlap and where the movements could work together to promote social change.

Disability rights and environmentalism are inexorably linked, often in ways that may not seem immediately apparent. Issues of human health, climate-related displacement, and natural disaster preparedness, amongst other problems facing our world today, contain elements of both these fields of study. Therefore, my paper will interrogate the “and” between environmentalism and disability rights. Environmentalism and disability rights are connected through their aims of creating a safer, more equitable society. However, history has illuminated many missed opportunities where these movements could have learned from each other and worked with each other to achieve a higher level of social change. The challenges faced by disability rights activists and environmentalists have always overlapped significantly, but the movements as a whole need to take stronger action and work together to protect communities from the effects of climate change and promote more equitable activism.

The link between environmentalism and disability should be acknowledged by activists and academics alike, and people who identify with either movement should be aware of the connections between these fields. Environmental activists, who are in a more powerful position
due to the heightened awareness of the importance of environmental activism after President Donald Trump’s election, should focus on including people with disabilities when they have discussions surrounding topics that concern them. This includes making the discussions accessible by ensuring that meetings are held in buildings with wheelchair access and within proximity to public transportation. These two movements working together could be mutually beneficial because liberals and conservatives both tend to care about people with disabilities, as evidenced by the dissent surrounding Betsy DeVos’s recent confirmation due to her comments about students with disabilities. Thus, having a stronger coalition between people with disabilities and able-bodied, neurotypical environmental activists could allow for more powerful and effective activism. If these two movements do not intertwine, it will lead to a continued splintering of coalitions and a lack of efficient activism. The history of American activism proves that collaboration and building coalitions can be a powerful method of creating social change. Without active communication between environmentalists and disability rights activists, activism may be more inefficient and less likely to succeed.

Mainstream environmental activists often draw the correlation between environment and disability as being a matter of public health inequities, including air quality, pollution, and now the aftereffects of fracking. These are important, but they only scratch the surface of the link between these movements. I will discuss the movement of ecodisablism and how climate justice activists with disabilities, including the Crips for Climate Justice movement, have been influenced by climate and disability activism. This research is relevant as the massive baby boomer population ages and risks losing their connection to nature due to inaccessible green
spaces. Moreover, discussing disability rights and environmentalism together may remind environmentalists of the importance of inclusion of all groups in their communities.

**Terms and Definitions**

Probing the link between environmentalism and disability rights is a growing field, with scholars like Sarah Jaquette Ray, author of *The Ecological Other*, leading the charge. However, there has not been a significant amount of literature written that discusses the intersection of these topics or considers their historical contexts and modern day connections.

One noteworthy facet of this paper is its usage of person-first language like “people with disabilities” as opposed to “disabled people.” While not all people who identify as having a disability, including Autistic people, and members of the Deaf and Blind communities, use this terminology, I feel it is the most neutral way of respecting the disability community as a whole.

Defining terms like “disability” and “environmentalism” is a challenging and often reductive practice, one that does not always pay enough respect to the language used by marginalized communities and instead favors a vaguer rhetoric. The Americans With Disabilities Act defines a person with a disability as

- a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity. This includes people who have a record of such an impairment, even if they do not currently have a disability. It also includes individuals who do not have a disability but are regarded as having a disability.\(^2\)

Yet there are many scholars within the disability community like Susan Wendell who feel that the concept of disability is a social construct, meaning that the idea of being “disabled” is created

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and overemphasized by society. Likewise, the distinction between mental and physical disabilities is expansive, making a conflation of the two experiences reductive. While the topic of this paper lends itself more directly to the discussion of physical disability, other forms of disability will be discussed as well. All in all, it remains vitally important to remember that the concept of disability is nebulous and coagulating many types of people into one category can lead to certain voices being unfairly prioritized over others.

Environmentalism is similarly challenging to define. Every single being on this planet has its own unique interactions with the environment and experiences environmentalism as a movement in a different way. One overarching definition for environmentalism is that it “typically refers to a concern that the environment should be protected, particularly from the harmful effects of human activities.” My decision to use the term “environmentalism” as opposed to “environmental justice” was made for the sake of cohesion. Issues of environmental justice are often based in a discussion of activism, and environmental justice also prioritizes the challenges faced by people of color. While activism is vital to social change, the more pertinent connection to investigate in this paper is the link between a movement toward a just world for people of all abilities and a movement toward a world that can sustain people of all abilities.

The final term that must be addressed is “ecodisablism,” coined by blogger Disabledmedic in 2012. Ecodisablism explores the connectivity between environmentalism and disability rights and is deeply rooted in the anxiety of not being able to live up to mainstream

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environmentalist norms and expectations due to ability. Ecodisablism also discusses how many issues of disability cannot be separated from their environmental roots, such as people with Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS) or other kinds of environmental illnesses, referred to as EIs. For example, a lot of people with MCS or EIs are reliant on eating organic products, which can be costlier than regular foods. For lower income people with these conditions, the inaccessibility of affordable organic food poses a dangerous health risk.

The words of Professor Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, a disability rights scholar who studies the relationship between bodies and the environment, show one implicit connection between these two movements. She writes that

all bodies are shaped by their environments from the moment of conception; we transform constantly in response to our surroundings. The transformations that occur when body encounters world are what we call disability. The human body varies tremendously in its forms and functions. Our bodies need care; we all need assistance to live. Every life evolves into disability, making it perhaps the essential characteristic of being human… it is, then, the various interactions between bodies and world that materialize disability from the stuff of human variation and precariousness.

Garland-Thomson comments that the question of what makes someone disabled is compounded upon by the fact that all bodies are impacted by the degradation of our environment. Yet the definition of what it means to be disabled by one’s environment has changed throughout the years. For example, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, much of the discourse about disability and environmentalism focused primarily on people with disabilities gaining increased equitable access to the built environment, which consists of human-constructed infrastructure. Research

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6 Ibid.
done in the early 2000s found the built environment to be more of a barrier than a facilitator for people with disabilities, but professionals involved in creating built environments believed that their created spaces were, in fact, beneficial for people with disabilities. This finding builds on a stark reality faced by people with disabilities: those who manage the world around them are often unaware of the realities of having a disability in modern society. A 2007 paper by Professor Dina Feldman discusses Israel’s history of linking disability and environmentalism, again, choosing primarily to focus on the built environment. Although this paper does not focus on the United States of America, Feldman connects environmentalism and disability in a relevant way to later discussions. Feldman writes that “the level of accessibility of public services to persons with disabilities in Israel has been very low” and discusses the lack of job opportunities, dearth of public transportation, and deficiencies in political recourse faced by people with disabilities in her country. Her comments indicate a dearth of resources and support for people with disabilities that has been mirrored by the behavior of the government in the United States of America.

In 2008, Victor Santiago Pineda revisited this subject of barriers to equity in the built environment. Pineda adopted what he called “a spatially relative view of disability.” He argued that “rather than maintain that person A is disabled without consideration of the environment, we ought to think of person A as being disabled with respect to environment E.” Pineda explains

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11 Ibid.
that planners often view environmental elements and even space itself as being fixed and inflexible, which can normalize the pre-existing socially-constructed model of physical ability. Moreover, he states that when spaces are made more accessible to people with disabilities, they also become increasingly accessible to people from other marginalized backgrounds by encouraging designs that promote tolerance and understand cultural differences.\(^\text{12}\) He concludes that in regards to distribution of space, “[if disability] is continuously held as a property of an individual independent of an environment, just theories of disability can never emerge.”\(^\text{13}\) Considering disability as a solitary issue in the creation of new spaces prevents a wider and more inclusive discussion surrounding the way that the current built environment disadvantages marginalized communities as a whole. This assertion is reminiscent of the “curb cut effect,” which states that the insertion of a curb cut on a street, something usually associated with helping people with mobility aids, also helps parents pushing strollers, people pushing suitcases, and a wider range of people beyond just people with disabilities. If city planners, engineers, and architects feel that the creation of accessible spaces only helps people with disabilities, they are ignoring an opportunity to create equitable spaces for a multitude of communities.

Eli Clare’s seminal work *Exile and Pride* contains vital discussions about rural environmentalism and disability while establishing a link between these topics and queer liberation. Clare writes, “I want nondisabled progressive activists to add disability to their political agenda. And at the same time I want disability activists to abandon their single-issue politics and strategies.”\(^\text{14}\) If disability rights activists remain fully centered upon disability

\(^{12}\) Ibid.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 122.

activism and do not take an intersectional approach to their activism, it seems likely that the concerns that the activists raise—many of which also impact non-disabled communities—will not get the attention they deserve. Yet it is imperative that people involved in other social justice movements strive to be inclusive of disability issues. Both sides must work harder to open channels of communication or risk their progress being stunted by apathetic members of mainstream society.

Clare describes how he used nature to explore his own identity as a disabled, queer child growing up in a rural community. For him, exploring the wilderness was an escape from mainstream societal conventions. The myths and stereotypes surrounding disability that were applied to him did not affect him when he was out in the forest; instead, nature gave him a way to be more aware of and form his own relationship with his body.  

When he moved to Portland, he felt that his positionality—his status—as someone from a rural background differentiated him in a negative manner from his urban colleagues. Thus, he raises the point that urban environmentalists often do not have a deep enough understanding of the challenges faced by people in rural settings, especially regarding the difficult balance of environmental preservation and monetary concerns. The divide between urban and rural cultures broaches conflicts related to class and socioeconomic status, conflicts that both environmentalists and disability rights advocates face.

Another author exploring the bond between disability and the environment is Sarah Jaquette Ray, who wrote *The Ecological Other: Environmental Exclusion in American Culture* (2013). Ray argues that the modern environmentalism movement excludes people of

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15 Clare, *Exile and Pride*, 120.
16 Ibid., 124.
marginalized identities, especially people with disabilities, immigrants, and indigenous people. This stems from the perception of people of these identities as “ecological others,” people who either do not belong in or are considered a threat to nature. These ecological others are often distanced from their natural surroundings due to this perception. When Ray explicitly discusses disability studies, she states that the connection between the body of someone with a disability and their environment remains as valid as any other connection. One problem with mainstream rhetoric is that it often uses people with disabilities as examples of beings that are disconnected from their environments, which is both dehumanizing and offensive. Ray writes that the American tendency toward using the wilderness—which, per William Cronon, is a social construct—to fulfill the masculine-dominated adventure culture of the nation prevents people with disabilities from connecting with nature. Adventure culture frequently involves activities that are inherently inaccessible and more inclusive options are rarely given in these situations. Indeed, Ray believes that “the figure of the disabled body activates an impulse for corporeal purity and environmental pristine-ness.” If this is the case, then the so-called freak of nature is deemed as such because of an impurity, an irregularity in the face of an allegedly pristine human culture.

Since the subjugation of the wilderness encouraged by adventure culture connects back to rugged individualism and Transcendentalist ideals, people with disabilities engaging with the natural environment can be viewed as a subversion of mainstream norms. After all, these

19 Ibid., 81.
20 Ibid.
able-bodied men who are considered so attuned with nature, such as Emerson and Thoreau, portray nature as a space for solitude and a type of physicality that may not be possible for people with certain disabilities. This trope, per Ray, is overplayed and out of date.\textsuperscript{21} In fact, the wilderness can be a place of unity and a place to acknowledge shared recognition of the truth that the construction of wilderness is based in cultural appropriation and the American desire for conquest.\textsuperscript{22} Reclaiming the wilderness as a space for marginalized identities to acknowledge the difficulties they face and come together as a singular community is certainly one way to make the wilderness more accessible to people of all abilities. This involves the acknowledgment of the socially-constructed nature of American wilderness, which must be paired with the realization that adding in accessible paths and points of access benefits a wide range of people.

**Discussion: Pathways Toward Collaboration**

In this section, I will explicate the historical context of the link between disability rights and environmentalism and provide modern examples of this overlap. In doing so, I will also illuminate further pathways toward an intersectional approach to disability rights and environmentalism. So many of the issues faced by people with disabilities, like a lack of disaster preparedness resources and indoor health problems, are related to environmentalist concerns and activities. The goals of environmentalism, such as the preservation of a healthy and safe living environment for all Americans, are shared by people with disabilities, who also want the current standards of “healthy” and “safe” to be expanded in a way that makes spaces more accessible to all Americans, regardless of ability.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 80.
When the national parks system was created, it was partially to preserve land for leisure purposes and to increase the public’s access to nature. Yet these national parks are often not properly accessible to people with disabilities because they may not have enough paved paths or accessible means of entry. One ironic element of the inaccessibility of national parks is that Theodore Roosevelt, who greatly increased the size and scope of the national park system, had chronic childhood health problems related to asthma.\(^\text{23}\) Despite his condition, he spent a great deal of his time outdoors throughout his childhood. Roosevelt believed strongly in the importance of the outdoors and equitable access to green spaces. However, a 2004 study showed that families without a member with a disability are four percent more likely to visit a state or national park than families with people with disabilities, which was attributed primarily to disparities regarding class, race/ethnicity, and employment status between these two types of families.\(^\text{24}\) While this may seem to be a small difference, it speaks volumes to the barriers to access faced by people with disabilities and their traveling companions today, 145 years after the creation of the first national park in the United States of America. The national park system has worked to make itself accessible to people with disabilities by putting in paved paths and providing easier access routes. Yet there are people who believe that paving nature depreciates its wildness. This concept of the untamed wilderness is exceedingly common in environmentalist circles when in fact, the ideal of the wild neglects the history of preservation and its unsavory roots. It also neglects to acknowledge that the creation of a park is, in itself, a human-constructed space which diminishes its ability to be purely natural.


\(^{24}\) Songjae Jo et al., "Comparison of Travel Patterns of Families with and without a Member with a Disability," *Journal of Rehabilitation* 70, no. 4 (October 2004): 40, accessed March 5, 2017.
One recent example of this phenomenon was in 2015 when the commissioners of Dakota County, Minnesota were voting on a plan to add a six-mile paved trail in Lebanon Hills Regional Park. While this trail made the park more accessible for people using mobility aids, only three percent of the 690 local commenters believed that the path should be created, while the opposition felt that the path would betray the park’s motto of “Forever Wild” and believed the path’s creation would destroy the park’s natural beauty. The final version of the plan decreased the width of the path, likely inhibiting its compliance with the Americans With Disabilities Act, and also moved it to the park’s perimeter, severely limiting accessible access to the center of the park. These sorts of conflicts regarding accessibility and the preservation of natural spaces in parks have been occurring for decades and will likely continue for the foreseeable future. However, like the controversy encompassing Whole Foods’ pre-packaged oranges, there may not be a singular correct answer. The Lebanon Hills Regional Park’s value to many of its patrons is rooted in its untouched and pristine depiction of nature. However, following William Cronon’s logic, one must conclude that this preserved space has already been greatly impacted by human involvement. Indeed, the initial creation of the Lebanon Hills Regional Park was an example of humans determining the value of preserving a patch of green space. Thus, the further human impact of adding in a paved road, which could benefit a great deal of people, should seem relatively minimal when considered in the context of the human effort expended upon the

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26 Van Berkel, "Dakota County Advances Plans for Paved Trail at Lebanon Hills Regional Park."
creation of the park already. Yet the human interference caused by a paved road was irreconcilable to so many of the patrons of this park.

The case of Lebanon Hills is reminiscent of the words of prominent environmentalist Edward Abbey, who considered in his 1968 book *Desert Solitaire* “how to pry the tourists out of their automobiles, their back-breaking upholstered mechanized wheelchairs and onto their feet, onto the strange warmth and solidity of Mother Earth again.” Abbey uses wheelchairs to denote a disconnect from nature and implies that the only way to connect to nature is by being on one’s feet. This view excludes many people with disabilities and shows the historical distancing that the environmentalist movement has done from people with accessibility needs. Essentially, he argues that people with impacted mobility have no right to the wilderness unless they can interact with natural spaces the same way that able-bodied people do. Sarah Jaquette Ray, writing decades after Abbey, identifies this phenomenon in environmentalist literature and thought as “the disability-equals-alienation-from-nature trope.” Ray believes that this trope stems from what she coins the “wilderness bodily ideal,” which is the cis-gendered, able-bodied, muscular young man whose connection with nature is prioritized over other groups’ in literature and mass media.

**Histories and Movement Trajectories**

For the sake of brevity, this discussion of the history of environmentalism will be limited to how the movement has progressed in the United States of America. Environmentalism in the United States was perhaps originally derived from the Jeffersonian ideal of rugged

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29 Ibid., 259-260.
individualism, which is deeply intertwined with Ray’s “wilderness body ideal.” However, environmentalism as a movement gained a lot of traction in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Industrial pollution and waste led to inequities surrounding race and class, as the places where pollution occurred were largely areas where low-income people and people of color resided. Disputes regarding access to natural resources grew significantly as disputes over the meaning and responsibilities of conservation also increased. From there, the history of environmentalism shifts back to the cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where a lack of sanitation and unsafe working conditions for laborers led to increased awareness regarding the connection between environmentalism and class. Then, New Deal initiatives such as the Civilian Conservation Corps led to enhanced amenities in national parks and more improvements in federally-owned natural spaces. After that, organized labor in the mid-twentieth century, both on a local and an international level, worked with other dissidents in the wake of World War II to enact and strengthen pollution-control laws. These humble beginnings of environmental activism developed into the modern environmental justice movement, which returned to the discussion of how industrial capitalism affected both urban and rural areas.

Consider the beginning of disability history in the United States of America, wherein people with disabilities were often segregated from mainstream society. This stigmatization

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32 Ibid., 42.
33 Ibid., 77.
34 Ibid., 91.
occurred from the beginning of American history until the conclusion of World War I. Indeed, one of the first times that disability issues were ever brought into the spotlight was when veterans fought to be given assistance and rehabilitation after suffering injuries while in combat. At the same time, the environmental degradation caused by industrial society inflicted damage upon ecosystems and contributed to climate change, while also creating significant health risks that often led to people developing disabilities or having children with disabilities. The irrevocable damage to society caused by American industry and labor practices affects a wide range of Americans. Only through examining and encouraging these connections between who stands to suffer from the ills of society and what is causing them to suffer can modern day activists understand the significance of historical precedents and properly reach out to form more inclusive coalitions.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the United States of America had its first President with a disability. Yet Franklin Delano Roosevelt, perhaps due to his own pride, but likely due to the lingering stigma and “othering” of people with disabilities in his time, distanced himself from his disability as much as possible when he was in the public eye. The press, for example, took great pains to hide any sign that he had a disability, and he avoided using his wheelchair in public as much as possible. In doing this, Roosevelt sent a strong message to people with disabilities in the United States of America: it was a disadvantage to be disabled, and people with disabilities should avoid publicly displaying their disabilities. In effect, Roosevelt closeted the disability community when he could have instead contributed to the lessening of the stigma against them. While he did believe strongly in the rehabilitation of people with disabilities, he still was

influenced by the implicit bias against them and engaged in the belief that they ought to be cured or fixed if possible.

When World War II veterans returned from combat, they placed pressure on the government to receive rehabilitation and vocational training. Yet at the time, people with disabilities were still largely shuttered away from mainstream society, which was unprepared to deal with barriers to access. People with disabilities who might have wanted to join the conventional workplace at the time did not have access to public transportation, there were no accessible bathrooms in workplaces, and many offices were still only accessible by stairs. Meanwhile, the Dust Bowl had forced many people from rural areas into cities, which were becoming overcrowded and facing their own challenges regarding accessibility for people with and without disabilities. Today, cities are often still the only viable locale for many kinds of people with disabilities because they usually have systems of public transportation. However, cities in the 1930s and 1940s were not equipped to handle the environmental effects of overcrowding, which were issues surrounding air pollution and the rapid spread of disease caused by poor sanitation.

The 1960s provided outlets for activism in environmentalism and disability rights alike. Environmentalists and activists with disabilities often found themselves fighting alongside each other for civil rights. Indeed, the 1960s showed a shift in priorities from environmentalists advocating for conservation to environmentalists having a multifaceted understanding of environmental concerns. Environmentalists advocating for reforms that placed them as rivals of corporations were struggling to have their message heard, an experience shared by disability

37 "Disability History Timeline."
38 Ibid.
rights activists of the time who were pushing for their own legislation. Both groups of activists owe a great debt to the civil rights protesters, who showed that forming a collaborative and inclusive moment could influence the thought patterns of the nation and of the government as well. Racial justice is deeply connected to both disability and environmentalism. Martin Luther King Jr. noted the existence of “islands of poverty,” which were low-income areas of predominantly people of color who also were affected most strongly by industrial pollution. Due to this, some people living on these so-called “islands” developed environmental illnesses such as asthma, and many of those people had disabilities. The problems that Dr. King spoke of in the 1960s are still prevalent today. As of 2015, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities was 10.7 percent, about twice that of those with no disability, who have an unemployment rate of 5.1 percent. Similarly, while the overall unemployment rate was 5.3 percent, it was 9.6 percent for people who identified as Black, as opposed to 4.6 percent for people who identified as White. This disparity shows the systemic disadvantage that people with disabilities and people of color face when trying to find jobs, and the inability to find employment can lead to people living in unsafe and unhealthy conditions.

When Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring* came out in 1962, it galvanized American citizens to become more interested in environmentalism, though the people who became active in the movement were primarily White, male, and middle class. Indeed, while environmentalists

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had, in the past, been somewhat involved with issues considered to be more “urban” like pollution, their focus had predominantly been on conservation efforts before the 1960s. However, although mainstream environmentalism began to learn about problems being faced by people living in cities, it still lacked an understanding of who was disadvantaged by these environmental problems in urban communities, including people of color and people with disabilities. Until environmental justice cropped up within environmentalism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, environmentalism as a movement continued to be controlled by White middle class men. By advocating for an inclusive definition of environmentalism, one which actively highlights the ecological histories of marginalized communities, the movement stands to gain recognition and allyship from other activist circles. If environmentalism does not become more inclusive, it will gain fewer devotees as activists and casual allies alike trend toward more diverse social justice movements. Without a strong support base, the reforms that environmentalism wants to advance will be waylaid and the environment will suffer.

The independent living movement, an essential component of disability rights, began in the 1950s and 1960s and was deeply connected to the civil rights movement in terms of the challenges and the methods of protest they both employed. The independent living movement stems from the belief that “people with disabilities should have the same civil rights, options, and control over choices in their own lives as do people without disabilities.” 42 Independent living activists saw a lot of overlap between what civil rights activists and disability activists were fighting for, specifically the end of “disgraceful treatment based on bigotry and erroneous

stereotypes in housing, education, transportation, and employment." People with disabilities saw the success of Rosa Parks’ arrest and the Montgomery Bus Boycott and only a decade later took their own actions to make public transportation more accessible. This is a prime example of how two social movements with different focuses can learn from and be influenced by each other. The disability rights movement benefitted from the knowledge of how successful activism aided the Civil Rights Movement and adapted a lot of its techniques to advance the agenda of the disability rights movement. This model could be used to show environmentalists and disability rights activists how coalition building across different movements can work to benefit all parties involved.

Indeed, environmentalism and disability rights blossomed almost simultaneously in the 1970s. On April 22, 1970, the first Earth Day occurred as twenty million Americans around the country organized around peaceful demonstrations for environmental reform. This effort galvanized students, both at the primary and the university level, to learn about environmental issues and express their opinions on the condition of environmental policy in the United States of America. Later that year, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was founded, in addition to many environmentally-conscious non-profit organizations such as the League of Conservation Voters and the Natural Resources Defense Council. Having student and youth involvement in the movement certainly contributed to its success, and the ability to have environmental activism being discussed in the federal government as well as in grassroots,

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non-profit organizations meant that more legislature and educational resources were being produced.

In 1973, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 made it illegal for federal agencies, public universities, and other public institutions receiving any federal funds to discriminate on the basis of disability. Another major victory occurred in 1975 when the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was signed into law, guaranteeing free and equitable public education for children with disabilities. Although other legislation regarding disability rights had been passed before, IDEA is considered to be the first major piece of legislation addressing this sector of the population. Consider the fact that decades of labor, time, resources, and legislation had been dedicated to the simple preservation of certain natural spaces. A clear deviation in priorities, rooted in the stigmatization of people with disabilities in American society, is shown in the history of the legislation around these two issues. After all, until 1974, there was a law in Chicago known as the “Ugly Law.” This law permitted police to arrest and imprison people with apparent disabilities for no reason other than being disfigured or demonstrating some type of disability. While natural landforms that had no ability to speak for themselves were given protection, people with disabilities who could speak for themselves were silenced by the law, silenced by the State, and even silenced by the policies of the federal government.

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In 1977, demonstrators occupied the Health Education and Welfare (HEW) office in San Francisco, California, because the requirements of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which made it illegal for federal agencies, public universities, and other public institutions receiving any federal funds to discriminate based on disability were not being upheld. These activists occupied the office for twenty-five days, which is still the longest occupation of a federal office by protesters in the history of this nation. They would not be silenced, and they were supported by other organizations like the Black Panthers. But even with this support, the physical toll of their activism was often debilitating. This sit-in, which was held in conjunction with shorter sit-ins around the country, is considered by some to be the “public birth of the disability rights movement.” People with disabilities were forced to change societal perceptions of themselves that had lasted for centuries simply to be given the rights that able-bodied and neurotypical people possessed.

The mid-1970s saw an uptick in environmental legislation with the passage of the Endangered Species Preservation Act, the National Reserves Management Act, the Energy Policy and Conservation Act, and the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act, amongst others. However, environmental catastrophes also became increasingly frequent. The Love Canal contamination was revealed to the public, the Three Mile Island accident occurred, and there were multiple oil spills. Environmental disasters visibly affected the livelihoods of

48 "Disability History Timeline."
49 Ibid.
51 "Environmental History Timeline."
52 "Environmental History Timeline."
Americans in a way that was publicly exacerbated by televised news and the direct impact of the energy crisis of the mid-1970s. The 1970s created an atmosphere of bipartisan interest in environmentalism, but the 1980s showed a splintering of the movement, one that the disability rights community would face in the early twenty-first century as well.

When Ronald Reagan became President, he slashed the EPA’s budget due to his belief that environmentalists were all “radicals.” Yet while he impeded the efforts of the EPA, non-profits like the Sierra Club were gaining massive boosts in membership and power, which forced Reagan to renege some of his earlier statements. Indeed, the mid-1980s saw the passage of the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act Amendments of 1984, the Safe Drinking Water Act Amendments of 1986, and the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act of 1986. The 1980s also saw an ideological rift forming between mainstream environmentalism and more radical sects of environmental activists. Whereas environmentalism tended to focus on larger-scale matters, environmental justice focused on how people of color and people of lower income were significantly more impacted by environmental inequities than other demographics.

The radicalization of environmental justice coincided with the increased radicalization of the disability rights community. In the late 1970s, protests erupted in the disability community, such as when nineteen activists used their wheelchairs to block buses to protest the inaccessibility of public transportation in Denver, Colorado. What was intended to be a single

54 Shabecoff, "Reagan and Environment: To Many, a Stalemate."
55 “Environmental History Timeline.”
56 “Disability History Timeline.”
event turned into a series of protests and acts of civil disobedience that went on for nearly a year before the Denver Transit Authority bought buses equipped with wheelchair lifts. Based on this effort, a non-profit called Americans with Disabilities for Accessible Public Transportation (ADAPT) was founded, which continued to do similar bus-blocking events throughout the 1980s. Tenacity was rewarded in these pockets of activism, and groups within the larger movement of disability rights materialized to focus on smaller-scale issues. This specialization ensured that multiple types of disabilities would be included in policy discussions in both activist and government circles.

In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law. The act mandated that local, state, and federal governments offices and programs be accessible and that employers with more than 15 employees make “reasonable accommodations” for workers with disabilities and not discriminate against qualified workers with disabilities. It also required that businesses such as restaurants and stores not discriminate against people with disabilities, and that they make “reasonable modifications” to ensure access for disabled members of the public. The act also mandated equal access to public transportation, communication, and other areas of society. As the cornerstone of disability-related legislation, the ADA is vital to disability culture and must be understood to its fullest extent by employers, academics, and laypeople alike in order to foster equitable spaces for people with disabilities.

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57 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
Both environmentalism and disability rights expanded their member bases and purviews significantly from their inceptions through the end of the twentieth century. The environmentalism movement began with a focus on preservation and splintered into covering a variety of issues while the disability rights movement spent decades validating the right of people with disabilities to exist within the mainstream, then continued to fight for recognition and support. Moreover, both movements ended up alienating segments of their respective memberships for not being inclusive or radical enough. There were far more non-profits and government offices providing monetary support for environmental initiatives than those supporting projects to ameliorate problems being faced by people with disabilities. Yet both movements strived for healthy, safe, and equitable communities. While Americans were fighting for civil rights in the 1960s, environmentalists and disability rights activism both blossomed. Without connectivity and shared experiences in activist circles, there remains a great deal of room for disillusionment and misunderstandings that can be detrimental to a cohesive social justice movement.

Environmental Health

Environmentalists have fought for decades for legislation to alleviate the effects of pollution and environmental degradation. As the consequences of climate change grow and expand, air and water quality will decrease even further. Thus, the efforts to create federal policy to protect environmental health have been to the great benefit of all Americans, including people with disabilities. Beyond the fact that people with certain types of disabilities are more susceptible to the effects of air pollution due to compromised immune systems, air pollution has been linked to increased rates of asthma, chronic respiratory and heart disease, lung cancer, acute
respiratory infections in children, chronic bronchitis in adults, and to aggravating pre-existing heart and lung diseases. These risks contributed to the strong desire to pass the Clean Air Act; environmentalists and disability rights activists alike saw the danger inherent in poor air quality. The Clean Water Act was also enacted to protect Americans from both water-borne diseases and the impacts of water pollution coming from sources such as agricultural runoff, chemical leakage, oil spills, and acid rain. Exposure to toxins like pesticides, nitrates, lead, and petrochemicals can cause cancer, damage to the central nervous system, liver damage, and reproductive and endocrinial damage in addition to some developmental and intellectual disabilities. Environmental health is just one example of where environmentalists and disability rights activists can find commonalities and work together to help create policies that have stronger consequences for reckless pollution.

Inclusive and Equitable Activism

The histories of disability rights and environmentalism are both rooted in activism, but modern activism often fails to properly consider the needs of people with disabilities. Amongst many environmentalists, the idea of individual responsibilities and actions being vital to the solutions for vast global struggles is pervasive, hence the focus on directing people to turn off lights when they exit a room and other similar small-scale personal actions. Some radical disability rights activists believe that environmentalists are actively preventing disability rights from inclusion in their movement. In the words of disability rights activist s.e. smith,

we’re being actively told to go away by a movement that argues for our eradication, and in the daily nuts and bolts of environmentalism, which often seem to hyperfocus on the

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individual to the exclusion of the institutional, making it impossible for disabled advocates to engage with the institutional structures that perpetuate environmental harm without being criticised for not doing enough as individuals. 63

smith feels that the environmentalist movement does not make space for the concerns of people with disabilities, and often chooses instead to shame people with disabilities who take “shortcuts” for the sake of their health that may not be as environmentally conscious as they could ideally be. Discussions of activism can lead to a belief that there is a “correct” or an “incorrect” kind of activism, which can be rooted in ableist—meaning discriminatory against people with disabilities—beliefs. Activists are meant to be committed to a cause, but the material conditions, environments, and situations that activists must submit themselves to are sometimes inaccessible to people with disabilities. This can lead to feelings of guilt and shame that distance people with disabilities from being involved in causes that are directly connected to their own livelihoods.

Moreover, following the train of smith’s logic, the concept of rugged individualism that has traced its way through the history of environmentalism has manifested itself in a modern-day battle of egocentricity wherein spending more money, time, and energy on living sustainably is what allegedly validates an activist’s commitment to the environment. However, this model of activism promotes grueling practices that are often unviable for people with disabilities. Instead of people with disabilities being kept from being involved in the narrative of mainstream environmentalism, the voices of disability rights activists must be included in environmentalist

63 s.e. smith, "To Each According To Their Own Abilities: Disability and Environmentalism," This ain't livin' June 14, 2012, accessed March 5, 2017, http://meloukhia.net/2012/06/to_each_according_to_their_own_abilities_disability_and_environmentalism/.
circles such as direct action initiatives and local environmentalist hubs like food cooperatives, or these already niche communities doing beneficial labor may never appeal to a wide enough community to do their successful work on a larger scale. The current environmentalist narrative, according to many environmental justice activists, excludes the voices of marginalized groups, including people with disabilities, which devalues centuries of work done by marginalized activists.

The devaluing of disabled and marginalized voices in environmentalist rhetoric is central to the concept of ecodisablism. Ecodisablism occurs when people with disabilities feel unable to live up to the standards of mainstream environmentalists due to accessibility issues which causes an internalization of feelings of failure. Deborah Ruth Fenney Salkeld conducted a study in the United Kingdom about how people with disabilities interacted with environmental advocacy. Since a similar study has yet to be completed in the United States of America, there may be a slight difference between the experiences of Salkeld’s participants and Americans with analogous experiences. However, the words of the anonymous survey participants present certain ideals that seem almost universal in regard to the discussion of disability. One participant in Salkeld’s study commented,

what tends to happen is that disabled people are an add-on [...] there would be a lot of people who’d view [her potential participation] as being a tokenism... they’d say ‘oh well that person’s there as a token symbolising that’ rather than see you as being actually wanting, as a disabled person, to see the whole aspect of your life being linked to the environment as well.  

This idea of people with disabilities being seen as token figures separated from their desire to protest in favor of equitable environmental conditions is extremely reminiscent of recent events in the United States of America. Before the Women’s March on Washington in January 2017, the organizers released an official platform that barely mentioned people with disabilities, except to raise the point that caring for people with disabilities can be a burden and to state that people with disabilities should be guaranteed the rights given to them by the Constitution.  

Considering the fact that one in five Americans identifies as having a disability, disability issues should have been more prominently featured in their platform. However, many activists with disabilities found their own way to make the event accessible through the creation of a virtual march so that people with disabilities who were unable to attend the march could express their solidarity online. This is the kind of activism that environmentalists must embrace and create space for in upcoming protests to promote a more inclusive activist culture. With the uptick in larger-scale protests in 2017, as evidenced by the Women’s March, the March for Science, and the People’s Climate March, the importance of giving people with disabilities space to express their opinions in conjunction with these protests is especially relevant.

Consider the methods environmental activists use to disseminate their messages. Direct actions, civil disobedience, and even protests are often inaccessible to people with disabilities. For example, protests that do not have a large financial backing may not employ an American Sign Language translator, which can make the experience inaccessible for Deaf people. Moreover, for people with limited mobility and people using wheelchairs, the experience of

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being packed in a sea of able-bodied people can be extremely unsettling and cause feelings of claustrophobia. Yet people with disabilities also have remained active in environmental activism. An activist group of people with disabilities known as Crips for the Climate, also referred to as Crips for Climate Change, marched in the People’s Climate March in 2014, before the time of these virtual marches. They cited the inaccessibility of natural disaster preparedness methods, the desire for eco-friendly accessible technologies, and a desire to show solidarity with other marginalized communities as main reasons for their participation in the event.\textsuperscript{66} In truth, people with disabilities stand to benefit from a more environmentally-conscious world; for example, if green technology were to replace current infrastructural elements like cars and trucks, it seems likely that air quality would improve, which could vastly improve the lives of people with respiratory diseases.

The developments in language surrounding the movement trajectories of disability rights and environmentalism are often similar. As each of these movements began to gain traction through supportive legislatures, media attention, and donations to organizations focusing on these issues, a split occurred. In environmentalism, this occurred when activists like Peggy Shepard, co-founder of WE ACT for Environmental Justice, found that mainstream environmentalism was ignoring the problems faced by people of color and other marginalized groups. In disability rights, this occurred in the early 2000s when groups like Sins Invalid, a disability justice group founded by people of color, felt that their narratives as people of color with disabilities were not being prioritized by the overall movement. Thus, disability justice, like environmental justice before it, was named as its own movement in the overarching field of

disability rights. Previous terminology within the disability rights movement hampered the creation of individual identities within the “whole” of the community of people with disabilities. People with disabilities have been systemically marginalized by humanity’s use of language. Even today, there remains a great deal of contention about the person first model of disability (for example, saying “someone who is blind”) versus the medical model of disability (for example, saying “a blind person”). Within the disability community, there is no one correct way to refer to someone with a disability, and perhaps it is this lack of a simple, singular answer that befuddles able-bodied activists into inaction; the fear of offending someone with a disability keeps them from engaging actively in disability rights matters. But this is a fear that must be overcome for the benefit of society, and by promoting active dialogues between different activist communities, spaces for discussion and education will occur.

Perhaps the exclusion of the voices of people with disabilities is rooted in a lack of understanding of how environmentalism and disability are related. To many, this connection is not obvious. However, environmentalism is meant to be an advocacy effort, not based in any specific kind of lifestyle. There is no singular correct way to be an environmentalist and anyone can be an environmentalist in theory. Yet in practice, environmentalism today is an exclusive pursuit that often ignores its own inaccessibility toward marginalized communities. The lack of active inclusion of people with disabilities within environmentalism suppresses further thought about the connectivity of these groups.

Natural Disaster Preparedness

Natural disaster preparedness is another field where disability and environmentalism interact. People with disabilities are often not included in meetings around emergency response
systems used during natural disasters. In cases like Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Sandy, a great deal of the safety risk and the property loss befell people of lower incomes and people of marginalized identities, including people with disabilities. The National Council on Disability’s report from 2006 on the impact of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita on people with disabilities identifies key inequalities between the experiences of people with disabilities and those without, such as differences in access to evacuation transport, food, medical support, shelter, and urgent information. The report also stated that the accessible Emergency Alert System for Hurricane Katrina was never employed, which meant that people with disabilities may not have been properly informed as to the magnitude of the storm. Also, many of the evacuation buses did not have ramps or lifts for wheelchairs, which meant that people with mobility aids had to wait in potentially dangerous conditions to be rescued. As a result, sixty-eight residents of nursing homes perished during Hurricane Katrina. Unfortunately, this dangerous precedent was not entirely repaired by the time that Hurricane Sandy occurred because over 4000 residents of nursing homes impacted by the storm were stranded in flooded spaces for days. Beyond the fact that the lack of accessible evacuation vehicles was a clear breach of the Americans With

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71 Ibid., 14.
72 Ibid., 15.
Disabilities Act, it also shows a lack of local planning initiatives to protect people with disabilities in the event of natural disasters, which is likely linked to people with disabilities not being included in these discussions. In a world increasingly plagued by climate change, it remains vital for community engagement in the planning of natural disaster relief efforts.

Moreover, the aftermath of a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina includes a heightened risk of fatality for people with chronic illnesses, whose conditions are often worsened by the effects of the disaster. Since access to regular health care is disrupted by natural disasters, all disaster preparedness efforts must include provisions to protect people with chronic illnesses.

Environmentalists given a proverbial seat at the table in discussions about natural disasters must create space for people with disabilities to voice their opinions on the subject. Otherwise, the consequences may continue to be dangerous, and even deadly.

Conclusion: The Significance of the “And”

Supporters of both the environmentalism and disability rights movements need to be better aware of each other’s collective struggles and work more collaboratively to combat the issues that they face. While there is a significant amount of overlap between the issues targeted by mainstream environmental activism and disability rights activism, these two groups have not proactively collaborated enough to produce effective results. If supporters of both movements work together, their collective power will be more able to create change than if they work

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separately, and by not working together, they may risk not making necessary progress that will protect American citizens and the environment of the nation.

Missed Opportunities

By looking at the trajectories of these movements, we see so many points of missed opportunities, places where a more intersectional form of activism could have set an important and worthy precedent, like activism in the 1960s and 1970s and activism that occurred after Hurricane Katrina. Scholars have also neglected fruitful opportunities to write about the connection between these fields. Although a field of scholarship is growing around the intersection of disability and environmentalism now, it is not yet being taught in courses or being supported by institutions to the extent that mainstream environmentalism is touted in higher education. Environmentalist groups should be leveraging the current uptick in interest surrounding environmentalism into using environmental organizations as a platform to elevate the priorities of marginalized groups including disability rights organizations. If society is to interrogate the “and” of disability rights and environmentalism, there must be increased communication, active inclusion, and better coalition-building between activists in these two groups.

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