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Croton Watershed Clean Water Coalition



Lessons about Grassroots Activism from the History of the Croton Watershed Clean Water Coalition

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The Author

I began my doctoral studies in environmental psychology to learn why and how people respond to environmental problems. In December 2000 I was searching the New York Times archive on the web to find a topic for a term paper and came across the controversy over construction of the Croton Water Treatment Plant. By the time I had completed my paper I had become fascinated by the Croton Watershed Clean Water Coalition (CWCWC) and its struggle against filtration. CWCWC's experiences promised to provide me with many valuable insights into the environmental policy process.

My research reveals that CWCWC played a unique role in the

controversy about the filtration plant. CWCWC reframed the issue of filtration, raising important questions about the implications of filtration for the future of New York City. CWCWC began the process of creating a watershed-based

identity for urban and suburban residents who rarely recognize their common dependence on water as a natural resource. And CWCWC advanced the cause of watershed protection for the Croton, raising consciousness in the watershed communities and bringing new resources to this cause. In this article I review the conclusions of my study which I hope will provide CWCWC activists with new perspectives on their experiences and accomplishments.

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Reframing the Policy Issue

If not for CWCWC, the New York City Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) policy of filtration of the Croton water supply might never have been challenged. The DEP and the United States Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA) insisted on filtration as a public health measure required under federal law. Their perspective was that pollution was the inevitable result of development, and thus filtration was unavoidable. When opposition to the plant emerged, the controversy was not about filtration, but about where to site the filtration plant. CWCWC reframed filtration as an environmental policy issue by claiming that the question was not where to site the plant but

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whether it should be built at all. They claimed that the real issue was whether the watershed's naturally high water quality and filtering capacity could be preserved. They called the filtration plant a technical fix that would worsen the pollution it was designed to solve. This kind of reframing of policy issues is a critical first step in the emergence and adoption of new approaches to environmental problems.

By the time CWCWC entered the picture the DEP's framing of the policy question was entrenched. First, there were plans to filter the Croton supply that dated back to the original construction of the Jerome Park Reservoir. It was assumed within the DEP that the Croton supply would

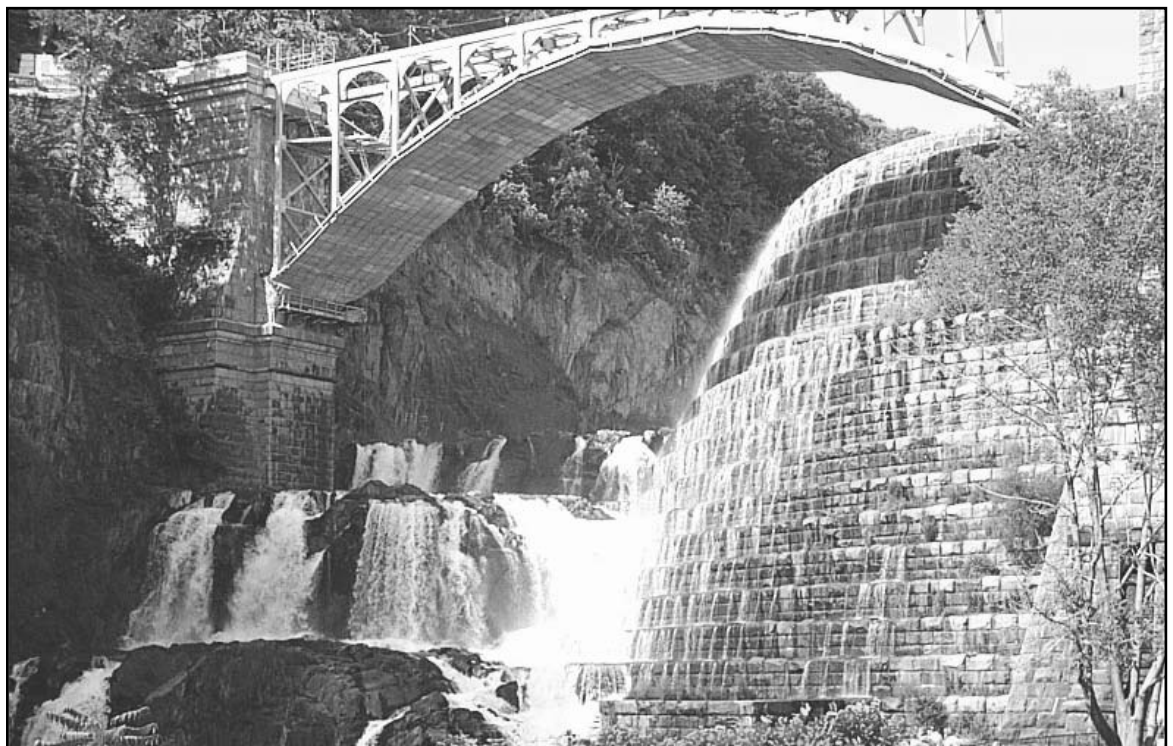
eventually be filtered. Second, the DEP was much more concerned about the implications of the filtration requirement for the West of Hudson watersheds than for the Croton. According to Albert Appleton, the former DEP commissioner, when the DEP began to consider filtration avoidance for the West of Hudson watersheds such a policy was considered unrealistic and naïve. He felt strongly that seeking filtration avoidance for the Croton, with its much larger population, would undermine New York City's case for filtration avoidance for the West of Hudson watersheds. So when the City embarked on the process that led to the New York City Watershed Agreement of 1997 its intention to filter the Croton was used to obtain credibility in the negotiations over the West of Hudson watersheds. And finally, the Westchester and Putnam County governments were told that there was no question that the Croton supply was going to be filtered. Their objectives in the negotiations for the 1997 NYC Watershed Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) were to preserve as much local control over land use as possible under the new watershed regulations, and to extract financial support from New York City in exchange for their cooperation on watershed protection. The possibility of

filtration avoidance seems never to have been raised in the negotiations with the counties.

Despite this history, CWCWC developed a new perspective on the filtration issue and proposed a new solution to the problem. I found it useful to draw on insights from political ecology to explain this accomplishment. This framework suggests that when you examine an environmental problem, you ask at what scale the problem is generated. The scale to which a problem is assigned determines which solutions are considered. Contestation and negotiation are elements of the process through which a problem is defined as occurring at a specific scale and appropriate solutions are considered. Thus production of scale is a political tactic. The CWCWC

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activists challenged New York City's assignment of the problem to the local scale; which neighborhood should get the unwanted filtration plant. They decided the problem was really at the watershed scale; how to keep the water clean. Then they created an organization that could address the problem at the watershed scale. In taking these actions CWCWC reframed the issue of filtration from the scale of the neighborhood to the scale of the watershed.



The New Croton Reservoir Dam

Precautionary Principle

In my dissertation I argue that CWCWC also reframed the choice between filtration and watershed protection as a choice between application of a technical fix to the problem of pollution and application of the precautionary principle. The precautionary principle was originally developed as a framework for the consideration of the risks of policies about which there is considerable scientific uncertainty. Although detractors claim that it is merely a pretext for halting technological progress, in fact the precautionary principle provides a lens through which the risks of actions that will have environmental consequences can be analyzed. This principle places CWCWC's objection to filtration in perspective as reflecting cutting edge environmental thinking.

As a legal concept, the precautionary principle developed from the principle in German law of "vorsorgeprinzip," which translates as "forecaring" or "foresight principle." It began to appear in international agreements in the 1970's in relation to pollution of the oceans. Notably, it was included in the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development in 1992. The framework of the precautionary principle has been applied to decisionmaking about the release of chemicals and genetically modified organisms into the environment. These issues have raised concerns about widespread impacts, unknown interactions with other substances and irreversible harm. The precautionary principle may be summarized as "a shift in emphasis in governance of environmental risk, from reacting to clearly defined problems as they arise, to recognition of uncertainty and ignorance, anticipation of harm, prevention of problems, taking cautious action, and monitoring of potential impacts." (Cooney, R., December, 2003, [The Precautionary Principle Project: Sustainable Development, Natural Resource Management and Biodiversity Conservation](#). (IUCN 3-IC Project Situation Analysis). (Available:

www.pprinciple.net/PrecautionaryPrinciplesissu.espaper.pdf)

On the surface, water filtration would not seem to be characterized by a level of uncertainty and risk that would justify the application of the precautionary principle. However, CWCWC's argument suggested that this surface appraisal of filtration was inadequate. The question of filtration should have triggered consideration of precaution because the question was not merely whether or not to build a filtration plant, but how to maintain the viability of the water supply for millions of people. There was a potential for serious and irreversible harm if the watershed was further degraded. And the complexity of interactions between the many physical and social factors raised the possibility of many unknown risks and uncertainties.

CWCWC's experiences illustrate the obstacles to adoption and implementation of the precautionary principle. The sheer difficulty of explaining the argument was the first of these obstacles. The precautionary principle also requires us to see problems in a broader perspective. Solutions require moving to higher scale, taking the long view, and taking into account the interests of future generations. When viewed through the lens of the precautionary principle, the most appealing solutions usually involve creativity, innovation and the cooperation of many partners. Since they require changing the usual way of doing things, they always involve stepping on the toes of vested interests that have benefited from doing things the old way. Despite these obstacles, the precautionary principle is achieving more and more acceptance. Lois Gibbs, the Love Canal leader who founded the Center for Health, Environment and Justice, has launched a nationwide initiative to build support for the precautionary principle. And the City of San Francisco adopted the precautionary principle as city and county policy in 2003.



The Role of Grassroots Organizations in the Environmental Movement

As I followed the controversy over filtration, one question that troubled me was why the environmental organizations that were involved in advocacy for the New York City water system did not take the same position as CWCWC. Riverkeeper and NRDC were all allies, yet their positions were different from that of CWCWC. The Sierra Club had a similar position, but did not pursue it with the same energy as CWCWC. CWCWC's role in the filtration controversy revealed how differences emerge within the environmental movement between different types of organizations, and reinforced the importance of the role played by grassroots organizations like CWCWC in contrast to more established ones.

Established, professionalized organizations play a different role in environmental controversies than grassroots organizations. They make different calculations about which particular positions are worth adopting, and their ongoing relationships with other participants in the policy process provide them with different opportunities for influence. Riverkeeper, NRDC and the Sierra Club were influenced to different degrees by organizational constraints that have been identified as limiting the freedom of national, professionalized organizations. These include constraints stemming from prior history with the issue, commitments at a broader scale, prior compromises, general policies that might or might not be applicable in a particular situation, the need to maintain the credibility of their organization, and the need to husband resources for battles they were more likely to win. In contrast, CWCWC was free to take a position against filtration and the siting of the plant in the Mosholu Golf Course, and to pursue these positions relentlessly.

CWCWC was part of an explosion of thousands of grassroots, place-based organizations with an environmental agenda that emerged in communities across the country in the late 1970's and continued in the following decades. These included organizations prompted by newly discovered toxic landfills, opposition to siting of incinerators and their threat of future pollution, protest against environmental racism, and advocacy for protection of local water bodies and

watersheds. These organizations expanded the range of issues considered in the environmental movement to urban problems and developed a critique of the political economy of capitalism and the contributions of industry, technology, and science to environmental problems.

Environmental justice activists and scholars have stressed that the interests and positions of these new grassroots organizations were different from those of the established environmental organizations because they had much more diverse constituencies. The unique role of CWCWC in the filtration controversy was a result of such diversity in its membership.

The diversity of the people in CWCWC in terms of their communities, backgrounds, race and class created the possibility for it to frame the filtration issue in a new way. CWCWC's make-up allowed its leaders to see and articulate the connections between the concerns of New York City residents and residents of the suburban communities located within the New York City watershed. The City residents were concerned about the siting of the plant and the impact of its cost, and the watershed residents were concerned about sprawl and its impact on both the character of their communities and the quality of their own water supplies. CWCWC

identified the need for watershed protection as common ground.

Thus it is no surprise that neither Riverkeeper nor NRDC took a public position on the siting of the plant. The Sierra Club, which has characteristics of both grassroots and professionalized organizations, supported CWCWC's position, although not with intensity. The stance of Riverkeeper and NRDC is an example of the kind of position criticized by the environmental justice movement, which argues that elitist environmental organizations ignore the concerns of oppressed communities. These organizations minimized the concerns of the Norwood community in favor of what they perceived as a greater purpose. These organizations could take this stand because they did not have to consider the multiplicity of views that was typical of CWCWC's membership.

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Watershed Organizing

One of the exciting things about CWCWC was that it seemed to have the potential to overcome the history of tension and conflict between New York City and the communities in all three watersheds; what some scholars refer to as the City's "resource extraction region." Here grassroots activists were saying that the City and the watershed communities had a common interest and should work together. I wanted to understand what prompted this realization of a watershed community of interest.

Although it seemed very unusual, CWCWC was actually part of a trend. The watershed movement expanded rapidly in the 1980's and 1990's. One estimate is that there were 3600 watershed based associations in the United States. The watershed movement should properly be viewed as a grassroots expression of environmentalism alongside the anti-toxics and environmental justice movements. Historically the watershed movement can be seen as a response to urban sprawl and suburbanization. The degradation of water bodies and water quality is one of the effects of sprawl that threaten everyday life. The movement was also inspired by the ideas of

bioregionalism, a perspective that views the watershed as a natural boundary within which natural systems and local culture can be appreciated and preserved. The watershed movement is motivated by hopes that regionally based approaches can be more successful at protecting ecosystems than are piece-meal approaches that characterize more conventional efforts.

The watershed movement has been encouraged by the US EPA as a response to the complex challenges presented by non-point source pollution. Across the country many and perhaps most watershed organizations were established by government agencies. Collaborative watershed protection efforts are viewed as a way of obtaining political support for unpopular measures such as restricting land uses, changing farming practices, and limiting the use of polluting substances such as fertilizers, pesticides and road salt. In an era in which the federal government has been committed to deregulation and devolution, watershed organizations have been encouraged as an alternative to the environmental policy process as it developed in the 1970's.



Polluted Runoff from Construction



Place-based Activism

Unfortunately, the alliance between New York City residents and residents of the watershed communities did not last. Although a few New York City organizations remained with CWCWC, most left in 2001. Activists on each side accused the other of NIMBYism (not in my backyard), or of caring only about their own community and not about the bigger issues. Proponents of filtration, including the DEP, characterized all of the opposition to the plant as NIMBYism. I interpret the history of CWCWC as reflecting both the promise and the challenge of place-based activism.

The grassroots environmental movement was made up of organizations that emerged out of local place-based struggles. Activists have emphasized, and scholars have noted, that a sense of attachment to place and concern for its protection is a motive force in environmental activism. The centrality of this motive is a major distinction between the policies and strategies of national, professionalized environmental organizations and grassroots organizations.

Early research explained NIMBYism as resulting from irrationality, selfishness, or prudence. More recently scholars have pointed out that charges of NIMBYism should be viewed more as a political tactic used to discredit political opponents than as an explanation of motives. Activists described as NIMBY are often far from selfish, making

tremendous sacrifices to carry out their campaigns, although they may appear selfish because the legal context may force them to into emphasizing the protection of their private interests. Charges of NIMBYism are merely symptoms of avoidance of fundamental environmental problems that should be dealt with at the source. Instead the negative consequences of our system of production, such as pollution, are transferred to communities which are forced to try to protect themselves.

Accounts of the grassroots toxics and environmental justice movements stress that activists frequently reach the conclusion that fighting off the siting of a noxious facility only to see it be sited elsewhere is not a satisfactory solution. Like CWCWC, many activists have responded by choosing a strategy of NIABY (not in any backyard). But many coalitions have also struggled with how to protect the multiple places to which its activists were committed. The desire to join forces does not always overcome differences based on local interests, class and race. New York City used tactics of "divide and conquer" to split the opponents of the filtration plant. With more experience, grassroots activists are learning to recognize these threats to unity, to seek guidance on how to overcome them, and to take proactive steps to avoid division.

Changing Policy

CWCWC failed to achieve its main goal. Despite a multi-faceted campaign maintained over a period of years, it was not able to stop the construction of the filtration plant. This result may be attributed to multiple factors both external and internal to the CWCWC. A critical factor was that CWCWC entered the scene too late, after the policy issue had been framed and the decision to construct the plant had already been made. Furthermore, New York City had plenty of power and money to back up its decision, as well as political support from people and organizations that would benefit from this vast construction project. While touting the financial benefit to the Bronx, and the water quality improvements that would accrue to the entire City, the NYC DEP chose to locate the plant - and its attendant burdens - on a neighborhood with little political power.

CWCWC undoubtedly failed to accrue as much influence in the Bronx and in New York City as it might have. After the dissolution of the alliance between the organizations from New York City and the organizations from the watershed communities, it never regained significant support in New York City. The New York City contingent in CWCWC, made up mainly of organizations from the Bronx, had been led by the activists who had successfully sought to prevent the construction of the filtration plant in the Jerome Park Reservoir. After these activists became alienated by some of CWCWC's positions, and it became clear that the plant would probably not be built in Jerome Park Reservoir, they and their allies left CWCWC. Although the CWCWC's

leaders made efforts to reach out to the Norwood neighborhood, they were unsuccessful in engaging people and organizations there. CWCWC had lost both its credibility and its contacts in the Bronx.

In contrast to its lack of progress in derailing the construction of the filtration plant, CWCWC was considerably more successful in its efforts to advance watershed protection. Its leaders consider that obtaining the designation of Critical Resource Waters for the entire Croton watershed and preventing New York City from endangering the New Croton reservoir's ecosystem with huge doses of alum, to be major achievements. CWCWC's successes in furthering watershed protection may be attributed partly to the characteristics of the goal. While CWCWC activists achieved some encouraging successes in their campaign against the filtration plant, ultimately success was defined in terms of whether or not the plant would be constructed. Watershed protection, on the other hand, could be furthered by many small actions on the part of many different actors. The achievements are cumulative and although no one victory is definitive, neither is any one defeat. Furthermore, after the New York City-based organizations left CWCWC, most of the remaining leaders were from the watershed communities. And they also had the advantage of being able to achieve their goals by working within the small polities of the watershed where citizen participation is known to be more effective.

Looking Ahead

CWCWC's successes and failures challenge us to consider the implications for similar grassroots efforts. Like the CWCWC activists, grassroots groups across the United States have seized upon the idea that a watershed provides an appropriate geographical unit for efforts to protect ecosystems and quality of life. CWCWC's experience points to some of the potential and the pitfalls of organizing along the lines of a watershed. Although CWCWC did have some success in creating a watershed-scale network of grassroots activists, this proved difficult to maintain.

This case certainly illustrates the lack of appropriate political frameworks for addressing regional environmental policy challenges such as those affecting the Croton watershed. In its efforts to stop construction of the filtration plant and promote watershed protection efforts, CWCWC found it was necessary to engage multiple political bodies at various levels of government but there were no effective governmental frameworks for discussion of the regional issues raised by the filtration controversy. Even the non-governmental bodies that might have provided a forum for these discussions, such as the Regional Plan Association of New York,

New Jersey and Connecticut, did not do so. It is difficult to imagine that even the most effective regional grassroots coalition could succeed without governmental and non-governmental frameworks responsive to environmental challenges at this scale.

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On a personal note, a study such as this one is always a journey. In order to understand the filtration issue I had to learn about the New York City water system. I learned what it takes to supply the metropolis with water, and how much I always took for granted. I have learned how ideas about how to manage our environment have changed and evolved over time. I have learned about the obstacles to achieving change, but also about how people can make a difference. I am now aware of the many challenges facing our water system, and how important it is for citizens to make their interest and concern known to government. Most importantly, the CWCWC activists have inspired me with their energy, knowledge, and dedication. The future of our water, our watershed, and the quality of life of future generations of New Yorkers, may depend upon their efforts.

Mirele B. Goldsmith is an independent consultant providing program evaluation services to non-profit organizations. She recently completed her PhD in environmental psychology at the City University of New York Graduate Center. Her dissertation was titled: The Technical Fix or the Systemic Solution for Urban Water Quality? A Case Study of Grassroots Activism on Behalf of New York City's Drinking Water. She is grateful for the enthusiastic support and assistance provided by past and present activists of the Croton Watershed Clean Water Coalition which enabled her to complete her research.



*The Scene in Van Cortlandt Park
The Result of NYC's Unwillingness to Protect the Croton Watershed*





PLEASE JOIN US

Through regional action, CWCWC is dedicated to providing alternatives to chemical treatment/filtration, and to protecting and improving the naturally-filtered, high-quality waters of the Croton Watershed for today and for generations to come.

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- Individual Membership (Non-Voting) \$10/year [For Individuals only]

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Make checks payable to Croton Watershed Clean Water Coalition and mail, along with your membership form, to:

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