2003

Thinking Globally, Acting Locally: Documenting Environmental Activism in New York State

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THINKING GLOBALLY, ACTING LOCALLY:
DOCUMENTING ENVIRONMENTAL
ACTIVISM IN NEW YORK STATE

BY BRIAN KEOUGH AND AMY C. SCHINDLER

ABSTRACT: A significant component of the political history of New York and other states in the second half of the twentieth century is the extraordinary growth of a social movement directed at environmental issues. The authors completed a case study of a documentation project to collect archival records about the history of environmental affairs in New York State. This article critically examines documentation strategy and the evolution of statewide documentation projects in New York, describes the implementation of a documentation project for environmental affairs, and suggests methods for improving the identification and selection of records of enduring value. The project set out to answer a number of questions about the scope of environmental affairs, the nature of the political culture for environmental public policy, and the best way to develop an effective methodology for collection development, for record surveying, and for the education of record holders. A primary finding of the study was that holders of archival records are in dire need of education about the importance of and methods for depositing, providing access to, and preserving archival records.

Introduction

A salient feature of New York’s political history in the second half of the twentieth century is the extraordinary growth of a social movement directed at environmental issues. The proliferation of statewide advocacy groups based in Albany and New York City, as well as the emergence of local activists’ organizations, speaks to the growing and complicated debates over the enactment of environmental laws and regulations. These local and statewide groups were started to study environmental issues, influence public debate, lobby for or against legislation, monitor developments in the private and public sectors, and serve the interests of members. Now, the archival records that chronicle the manifestation of this new social movement are endangered. In office storage or in people’s homes there exists an extraordinary wealth of documentation on this dynamic chapter of New York’s past. Yet the phenomenon of contemporary
environmental politics has not been adequately studied, due in part to the paucity of documentation that exists in archival repositories. This article provides an overview of documentation planning, describes the implementation of a documentation project, and outlines the results of the University at Albany Libraries' M. E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives' project.

Background

In the early 1970s, Howard Zinn, Gould Colman, and Gerald Ham, among others, called for collection development work to focus on acquiring records that document organizations outside the political mainstream. This call to document the undocumented led to a mass of theoretical and practical work around the country. During the 1980s, documentation strategy emerged as a concept to improve the techniques and efficiency of identifying and selecting records, thereby presenting a broader and more representative historical record. As initially envisioned by Helen Samuels and others, documentation strategy was conceived as a theoretical concept aimed at improving and insuring a comprehensive documentary record. In response to the growth of modern society and the increase in contemporary record keeping, documentation strategy advocated cooperative ventures that combined the appraisal resources of many archives to document the key themes and functions of a particular society. By the 1990s, after much trial and error, many documentation projects were seen as either too broad in scope, too expensive to implement, or too focused on mainstream organizations. In response to recent criticisms of documentation projects, Stephen Sturgeon argues that documenting political activism and advocacy, specifically activism related to environmental justice campaigns, calls for “documentation advocacy,” which he defines as “an active effort by archivists to recruit record collections from individuals and groups who lack the institutional connections that normally result in records being donated to archives.” Indeed, documentation advocacy attempts to alter assumptions of a finite relationship that archivists traditionally employ when selecting records, and to instead place emphasis on promoting a dialogue among record creators, archivists, and users.

As historians began to examine environment-related social, political, and scientific developments in American culture, they also recognized the absence of a comprehensive record. Samuel Hays, a pioneering historian in the study of conservation and environmental history, described his difficulty in locating records pertaining to his research on post–World War II environmental issues. Hays lamented that many records were not in repositories, and he advocated a greater emphasis on preserving records as they are created to prevent the loss of documentation. More recently, Todd Welch profiled the increase in research on environmental history by outlining the current relationship between archival materials and environmental research. Welch examined the use of archival sources for environmental history and the efforts of archival institutions to meet the needs of such users. He concluded that while the use of environmental collections has increased, archivists have not modified their programs to encourage and accommodate such use.
It has long been recognized that in New York, and in many other states, much work is needed to collect and prepare manuscript collections for use by scholars. In 1984, after discussions with more than five hundred nongovernment records repositories in the state, the New York State Archives Advisory Board concluded that the state had "no regular forum for developing methodical documentation of key topical areas," and that records relating to "women, Blacks, and other minorities" as well as "environmental and ecological concerns" had received very little attention.7 After experimenting with a regional documentation project of six counties in western New York, the New York State Archives determined that it should develop programs to address regional documentation gaps by identifying priority subjects for collecting and by developing topical documentation strategies.8 The New York State Archives worked to meet this need in 1988 with the formation of the Local Government Records Management Improvement Fund (LGRMIF), to provide grants to local government agencies, and the Documentary Heritage Program (DHP), to provide grants to community organizations and historical records repositories. Building on the theoretical developments in documentation strategy, the New York State Archives initiated the LGRMIF and DHP to improve the selection and retention of records, and also created archivist positions for nine regions of the state to promote and advise on documentation projects.9

At the 1989 Environmental Records Conference held at Vassar College, the participants concluded that existing documentation was inadequate, and that the "failure to document this portion of New York State history represents a significant loss of social, political, ecological and economic data as well as a loss of primary research materials for scientists and historians."10 In response to the Environmental Records Conference and the larger need in New York for a documentation strategy to confront and appropriately handle records related to environmental affairs, the New York State Archives' Heritage Documentation Project issued a strategic plan to identify priority areas and to provide a framework for the development of regional documentation plans for environmental affairs. The State Archives developed this plan by conducting regional focus groups and by consulting with individuals actively engaged in environmental issues. According to the resulting report, "vast areas of citizen action remain undocumented," including records generated by citizen groups who support environmental regulation or those in favor of commercial land use and private property rights.11

In 1982, the University at Albany Libraries established the Archives of Public Affairs and Policy (APAP) to document the work of individuals and private interest groups concerned with New York State public policy issues in the twentieth century. The collection began as a documentation initiative within the Department of Special Collections and Archives to collect, preserve, and make available original research materials pertaining to New York State public affairs and policy, initially focusing on the personal papers of members of the gubernatorial administrations of Nelson A. Rockefeller. In 1989, the department engaged the services of two archival consultants to investigate the availability of resources for the study of New York State public policy. They reached two primary conclusions: that most private public-interest groups had no disposition plans for their archival records, and that no other repository in New York was actively collecting in this subject area.12 In response, the department expanded APAP's collecting scope, an action heavily influenced by two additional factors: a
desire to build collections that would be of particular interest to the community of researchers at Albany, including the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy, the Department of History, the School of Education, the School of Criminal Justice, and other high-profile campus programs, and the awareness of underdocumented subject areas discussed within the profession nationally since the 1970s and more systematically identified in New York by the State Archives’ Heritage Documentation Project. APAP presently has grown to more than two thousand cubic feet of archival material and includes the records of more than 175 individuals, private groups, professional associations, community groups, labor unions, and other organizations concerned with Empire State public policy issues. APAP is a significant component of the Department of Special Collections and Archives, which holds approximately forty thousand books and more than six hundred manuscript collections totaling approximately six thousand cubic feet in the University Archives, the German and Jewish Intellectual Émigré, the General Manuscript, and the APAP collecting areas. A special collections librarian and three archivists administer these collections.

Since 1988, the Department of Special Collections and Archives has had considerable experience in conducting surveys and regionally based documentation projects. Focusing on topics characterized as underdocumented by the New York State Archives, the department undertook projects to strengthen the historical record for the labor movement, for African Americans, and for public policy organizations in New York State’s Capital Region. Each project undertaken by the department dealt with subject areas that fit within its collection development policy and was possible only with grant funding, including two projects funded by the DHP. Taking this grant project approach allowed the department to apply the type of “concerted effort” Kären Mason discussed in relation to the Iowa Women’s Archives project at the University of Iowa Libraries. Such focused projects allow the repository to build a core of collections in a subject around which further acquisitions can be made. While the Department of Special Collections and Archives has successfully used this model for each of its documentation projects, we have found a perception among some record creators that the institution’s interest in collecting records is limited to the grant term as well, which demonstrates again the ongoing need for education and communication by archivists.

The experience of department staff indicates that most of the documentary materials of nongovernment entities are endangered. Individuals and private nonprofit organizations generally lack the space, staff, and environmental controls to offer satisfactory storage conditions for their inactive records. These records might be stored in basements and attics or allowed to “migrate” to individuals’ homes. Unfortunately, in the case of many small organizations, records are destroyed after the immediacy of an issue has passed, as storage space is exhausted, or because record creators are unaware of the existence of archival repositories. We have found that many organizations also tend to dispose of inactive records when moving to new offices or changing leadership. The preservation of records by activists who work without offices varies widely; some individuals conscientiously organize records while others retain material of value purely by chance. These observations are as true of environmental organizations as of other public-interest groups, labor unions, and individuals surveyed by department
staff. And our experience has shown that some of the most endangered records are those created by private organizations.\textsuperscript{15}

So, while the State Archives identifies underdocumented subject areas and provides grant funding for documentation projects, there is no assurance that environmental affairs or any of the other gaps in the historical record will be addressed. Despite its large geographic and populational size, New York State does not have a statewide regional archival center system as some states do, but it does employ regional staff members. The DHP, in a sense, presumes that a repository will realize that there is lack of documentation on a topic identified by the State Archives in its region, and will then have the resources and desire to pursue grant funding provided by the DHP.

The State Archives has increased the awareness of underdocumented topics and, as a result, has increased the amount of materials available in historical records repositories, but the lack of urgency or knowledge among record holders about archival repositories presents a challenge. As we began to document environmental affairs, the project staff was conscious of a lack of connection between documentation planning by the State Archives and the sometimes-haphazard collection development efforts on the regional level.\textsuperscript{16} As Brad Edmondson noted in his history of environmental affairs in New York, the hundreds of state and local laws passed each year are preceded by a "trail of documents" that amounts to hundreds of boxes of records from various organizations and individuals in the state.\textsuperscript{17}

**New York State Environmental History Documentation Project**

In 2001, the Archives of Public Affairs and Policy embarked on a documentation project to insure the preservation of a representative and balanced historical record of New York's environmental movement. Using traditional documentation planning methodology, combined with the concept of "documentation advocacy," our goals were to bridge the gap between creators of records and scholars interested in research, to promote the importance of archival records among environmentalists, and to arrange for the transfer of important historical documentation to appropriate repositories. The two-year project was made possible through a grant from the DHP, which enabled the department to hire a part-time staff person to work under the direction of the curator of manuscripts, the department faculty member with primary responsibility for the Archives of Public Affairs and Policy.

To identify records pertaining to environmental history in New York State, the Department of Special Collections and Archives launched a comprehensive survey of significant organizations and individuals who might possess archival records. Several questions drove our initial work:

- How do we define the scope of environmental history in New York State?
- Who are environmentalists? (For instance, are those who promote the commercial use of land environmentalists?) Or more importantly, how do we include diverse perspectives on complicated issues such as land use and conservation?
- While we included all statewide groups based in either Albany or New York City, how far geographically should we include local groups?
• How could we bridge the gap between researchers interested in recent historical study and the people and organizations that created the records?
• How do we emphasize to record holders that preserving their materials is vital to understanding our past and that the archive is the logical repository for many communities?
• How do we continue cultivating communication between record creators, researchers, and archivists?

Planning
During the initial planning for this project, the staff of the Department of Special Collections and Archives first reviewed environmental records already in our collection and in other repositories in the region. This self-education enabled the staff to plan further acquisitions based upon records already available. It also prepared the staff for questions from survey respondents about the organizations, individuals, and types of records the institution and other repositories in the area already held. The list of collections that were already part of the department’s holdings provided a foundation for additional acquisitions in environmental affairs. The analysis revealed a number of collections in the University Archives that documented environmental affairs, including the personal papers of faculty members, the records of campus offices and departments involved in construction and planning, and materials from student organizations. Several collections in the Archives of Public Affairs and Policy not primarily classified as environmental in nature were also identified as documenting environmental affairs at a secondary level of description. The department found that no other repository in the region had undertaken an environmental affairs documentation project and that those repositories housing collections related to environmental affairs held materials primarily because an organization was based in the same geographic location.

Advisory Board
A critical initial step for the documentation project was the formation of an advisory board. To determine key themes and topics for documentation, we applied the principle of involving the community in regional and local planning. An advisory board should include archivists, subject specialists, and representatives from regional groups. Local activists and members should be selected based on their expertise on issues and their existing networks, as well as on their reputations. A board member from one of the state’s most important environmental advocacy groups lends legitimacy to the project and provides an “in” with potential record holders who work with the board member or know the individual by reputation. The role of the board is to establish a dialogue on the existing documentary record, discuss goals for documentation, identify important events and issues, and serve as a vehicle to establish trust between a repository and potential donors. Sixteen scholars, archivists, and activists from regional and statewide organizations were invited to serve on the project’s board.

Karen M. Lamoree advises documentation planners that staff must know the issues and players well, and that they should recognize and take advantage of these pre-existing networks. Such measures, Lamoree suggests, enable project staff to anticipate the reactions of potential participants and counter any arguments against the specific
project or the preserving of records in general. Based on the project staff's research, it was a relatively simple matter to identify the major regional organizations active in environmental affairs. These groups included state and regional chapters of national organizations such as the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society and the major statewide environmental interest groups located in Albany. These organizations formed a network that often shared office space, board members, supporters, staff, and volunteers. Members of the advisory board included representatives from these existing networks as well as individuals with connections to less prominent organizations.

Ten of the 16 advisory board members attended the first meeting. The project director led a discussion of two planning documents, "A Strategic Plan for Documenting Environmental Affairs in New York State" and "Environmental Affairs in New York State: An Historical Overview." Board members were asked to help identify topics and issues of particular importance in the region. The presence of nuclear power plants and the potential for a disaster were on the minds of many at the meeting. Antinuclear groups, which in the words of one board member "have really come and gone," were actively discussed. Other areas were logically dictated by geography—such as issues related to the Hudson River and the nearby Adirondack and Catskill Mountains. Attendees also focused on regional land use and the role of the city of Albany as home to many statewide organizations. For the most part, we found that the advisory board acted in a collegial manner and its members were impressed by the advance planning of the archivists at the meeting. One interesting observation was that the gathering of significant individual and organizational representatives demonstrated to board members the vital importance of preserving archival records. In light of this, they eagerly provided specific contacts with organizations that ultimately contributed to a greater understanding of environmental history by the archivists and strengthened the project in terms of our ability to identify records.

After the initial advisory board meeting, project staff developed an E-mail Listserv for sending periodic updates to board members and for soliciting further suggestions for contacts. In subsequent phases of the project, staff also sought input from the advisory board via the Listserv, through in-person consultations, and by telephone. The advisory board members' extensive knowledge and experience was very useful in identifying other organizations that were no longer active or prominent. As the project progressed and the largest and most prominent organizations and individuals in the region were identified, it was critical to the success of documenting the full scope of environmental affairs to find other, inactive organizations, or those that had been overlooked because of size or scope. With the help of advisory board members, project staff was able to identify the smaller, community-based grassroots groups and individuals and to disseminate information about the project to them through the survey instrument and by word of mouth. With the departure of the project staff at the end of the project's two-year grant funding, the department determined that maintaining regular contact with each advisory board member could prove too burdensome for its permanent staff. However, instead of losing all contact with advisory board members, the department decided to send an informal annual report to members to provide an update on new acquisitions in the department and on processed collections related to the documentation project. Additional information could easily be provided to board
members more frequently, as well as appeals for guidance and connections with other individuals and organizations.

**Surveying**

A key component of any documentation project is the opportunity for archivists and record holders, through surveys and in-person consultation, to discuss preservation issues and to emphasize the importance of maintaining records. This interaction provides an opportunity to educate the public about archival management issues, such as the types of records that are important, the role of the archive as society’s repository, the nature of depositing records in a repository, access policies, copyright, privacy, and other issues associated with long-term preservation.

Staff introduced the documentation project to potential record donors through a mailing and then followed up with phone calls and site visits. The cover letter introduced the project to the potential respondent and donors. It was less than one and a half pages in length—long enough to introduce the project without becoming too technical or involved. The letterhead included the names of the advisory board members and their organizational affiliations. The survey provided an introduction, or “first look,” at the project and made an excellent pretext for follow-up telephone calls instead of project staff being forced to make “cold calls.”

Drawing on findings at the advisory board meeting, on the project staff’s professional contacts, and on preliminary research by the project director, the department contacted 115 groups and individuals through two mailings in 2002. The initial contact included a cover letter, a records survey form, a postage-paid return envelope, a list of environmental collections already housed in the department, and a brochure about the project. Of the 115 surveys mailed, 47 (40 percent) were returned or completed over the phone during follow-up contact. The survey respondents represented a broad range of organizations by size, location, and issues of interest. We did not find a link between survey response and the size of the organizations surveyed. Surveys were returned by a wide range of record creators in proportionate numbers, from large, statewide organizations to small, single-issue, community-based groups. Our findings do seem to indicate that active organizations were more likely to return the records survey, but this is partly attributable to the fact that inactive organizations obviously no longer maintain office space, and central figures involved in the organization or issue may have moved since its prominence. However, when members of defunct organizations could be reached, they were generally very interested in the records survey and the possible depositing of their records in an appropriate archival repository. This may be attributable to two central reasons: the respondents’ desire to preserve the record of an individual’s and organization’s advocacy and countless hours of labor, and their hope to repurpose materials that were no longer active records and were simply taking up space in their homes.

Project staff used telephone calls to answer questions about the project and schedule visits for the assessment of inactive records. The staff visited 42 organizations and individuals between April 2002 and June 2003. As a result of the site visits, 21 collections were deposited in the department and three collections were referred to more appropriate repositories based on either their subject matter or geographic location.
Findings

We learned a great deal about the types of records that exist, the perception of archives, and the nature of advocacy and activist groups. It was noted at an environmental records conference, "[A]ll environmentalists are concerned with preservation of one form or another, yet they remain baffled with regard to the maintenance and disposition of their records." Indeed, since the creators of environmental records are occupied with the immediate issue, it is the responsibility of archivists to educate and reach out to save the documentary heritage. Archivists can provide education and guidance to record creators about the historical value of materials and their long-term preservation. In our interactions with record holders, we spent considerable time educating individuals about how archives function, what access policies exist, and what types of records should be permanently retained. In addition to preserving records in repositories, the opportunity for archivists and record holders to engage in a dialogue was a significant benefit of the project. The archivists were able to learn from record creators what records they would find useful as researchers. This type of dialogue not only assists archivists in making better-informed appraisal decisions when new collections are accessioned, but it also assists a group of users who were perhaps not previously considered likely users by the institution.

We set out to answer a number of questions about the scope of environmental affairs, the nature of the political culture for environmental public policy, and the development of an effective methodology for collection development, records surveying, and the education of record holders. The two planning reports for documenting environmental affairs developed by the New York State Archives provided a historical narrative and identified broad topics and events by region. The reports were useful in initiating discussion at the advisory board meeting about specific events and individuals that further defined the scope of our project.

In calling attention to the value of preserving a documentary record, the project staff achieved positive results and a clear focus for continued documentation efforts. Clearly, the most beneficial component of our project was the conversations with organizations and individuals who had significant impact on regional and statewide environmental affairs. Perhaps surprisingly, people were pleased and enthusiastic about archives and records retention once they learned how an archival repository functions and its role in society. By opening a dialogue, we were able to educate record creators about some basic archival principles and methodology. Concepts such as how records are deposited, how researchers use records, how a manuscripts repository stores and provides access to material, and the nature of ongoing relationships with record creators were very informative for those we surveyed. Reaching out to individuals and organizations within a topical framework is very beneficial to stakeholders in the archival process. Over the long term, one challenge for repositories is to develop an outreach program that maintains contact with organizations that correspond with an institution’s collection development policy. Although we have ably emphasized the importance of preserving records, organizations and individuals may have other more immediate priorities, which archivists must be sensitive to in order to maintain a mutually beneficial relationship with record creators.
Using the New York State Archives’ documentation planning model, we found that topical and narrow regional documentation projects were most effective in educating record holders about the role, functions, and activities of an archival repository. Through advisory board contacts and research, we discovered archival collections outside our geographical scope, but were unable to find a repository suited to acquiring new collections based on needs for adequate storage and environmental controls. From our analysis, it is clear that the lack of regional archival centers is limiting the effectiveness of the New York State Archives’ DHP. The DHP should investigate the usefulness and viability of establishing regional record centers in order to offset the potential loss of research material due to inadequate and underfunded repositories.

Our attempts to bridge the gap between record holders and researchers was most fruitful in discussions about the types of archival materials that would be appropriate to collect. We frequently heard record creators make comments such as, “Oh yes, we have a closet full of scrapbooks and photographs in the back. Are those of interest?” People told project staff during consultations, “Oh, you don’t want that, it is so old,” or “We don’t have anything of interest, only old newsletters, lawsuits, and things like that.” An individual active in regional and international issues for three decades was thrilled to learn that “someone, anyone” was interested in the boxes she had planned to dispose of in her community’s recycling program. If a telephone call had not been made on that particular day, and if it had been a clear fall day instead of a rain-soaked week, three decades worth of material would have been lost to a recycling bin.

Another individual contacted project staff late on a Friday afternoon and requested an immediate meeting to discuss depositing her records from grassroots organizations involved in historic preservation, urban sprawl, and land-use issues. She had heard about the project from a member of one of the organizations she belonged to that had received a survey. The activist called at a time when she was very disenchanted with the state of affairs in her community and had decided to remove all evidence of certain projects from her home.

However, for every “just in time” acquisition there are also an incalculable number of missed opportunities and records forever lost. Project staff assessed the records of an environmental education organization, which had lost the earliest materials from its thirty-year history due to a broken pipe and subsequent flood in its headquarters’ basement the previous year. Perhaps not fully aware of the historical value of the records and unable to justify the expense necessary to salvage the material, the organization disposed of these records. In another case, project staff discussed the survey instrument with an interested advocacy group and scheduled a site assessment visit. When we arrived in the basement where many of the organization’s records were stored, we found water seeping through the floor and a mold infestation. Important records were preserved in this case, but the organization’s staff acknowledged that, if not for the timely visit, most would have likely been discarded.

These anecdotes illustrate an excellent sense of timing in some cases, but also the critical, ongoing need to educate people with an interest in environmental affairs as well as the general public about the purposes and functions of archival repositories. The Department of Special Collections and Archives’ experience with this documentation project suggests that outreach programs must bridge the disconnect between
environmentalists, researchers, and archivists, and can be applied to various regions and topics. These programs should be similar to those advocated by James Quigel, who in his discussion of outreach efforts to labor unions in Central Pennsylvania, cited the need for labor archivists to “find our collective voice” and endorse the significance of archives during a period of great institutional and administrative change for labor unions.\textsuperscript{28} Professionals documenting environmental affairs face similar challenges as issues ebb and flow nationally and in each of our communities.

Many smaller environmental organizations, or so-called “advocacy groups,” are driven by a specific issue or interest, such as preventing the construction of a solid waste disposal site in a community, or halting the spraying of potentially dangerous pesticides in school yards and parks. Archivists must know that these types of groups are generally less concerned about their records than better-established organizations because they have no paid staff, no formal office space, and no property or endowment to be maintained and responsibly managed. Often, there was sporadic documentation of an issue or group; but there were also many examples of project staff finding group members who had conscientiously preserved records. While some were preserved in anticipation of future usefulness to themselves or another organization on similar issues, some people simply retained their records by chance.

Despite their more transitory nature, advocacy groups are an important component of documenting issues, particularly those that did not come to the attention or notice of the more formalized state and regional organizations. Not surprisingly, the groups that are outside the mainstream environmental movement or that oppose environmental regulations often hold the records that are most endangered, for a variety of reasons. Unfortunately, these records that present opposing viewpoints within the debate over environmental policy are frequently discarded.

One of the greatest ongoing challenges we face in conducting this documentation project is maintaining contact with community and grassroots activists who are unable to take their eyes away from the issues at hand to discuss the records generated as a result of the issue. In some cases, archivists must be satisfied with making an initial contact, leaving a brochure or other information with the group, and creating a timetable to continue ongoing contact with the group. This must be done in the hopes of preventing someone from “cleaning out the junk” when the immediacy of an issue has passed, an organization is inactive, or record holders die.

The project further attempted to broaden the range of groups and individuals surveyed by employing Lamoree’s advice to utilize the staff and advisory board’s knowledge of the issues to avoid controversy.\textsuperscript{29} The project attempted to document issues and not simply points of view. Although these efforts are not always fruitful, it is important to maintain the legitimacy of the project by appreciating the diverse opinions on issues. However, as Lamoree also stated, “[K]nowledge can be obtained only through experience,” and that experience sometimes included the lesson that individuals and organizations on all sides of an issue were skeptical of the project and its aims.\textsuperscript{30} Since we are a state university, some private environmental groups that may have had negative experiences with government agencies in the past were apprehensive about the project. In our interactions, we continually emphasized that we were interested in documenting all sides of the debate and were primarily concerned with preserving
appropriate records. This provided another opportunity to educate about the nature of deposit agreements and the repository’s legal responsibility to preserve and provide access to archival materials.

Project staff provided additional information to several organizations active for only a few years about the importance of preserving the records they are producing now and into the future. Recently, a department staff member became reacquainted with an individual contacted during the initial project in 2001. At that time, the individual had founded a fledgling organization barely six months old, and project staff discussed basic principles of record keeping and the types of records to retain. After being actively engaged in a particular issue, this person had maintained a comprehensive record of the organization’s activities and was ready to donate the materials to a repository.

The documentation project’s staff also found that organizations and individuals who heard about the project and were interested in participating contacted them. Interest was generated through the written word as well as by word of mouth. On-line resources about archival methodology from a number of organizations were quite useful for these organizations. The Department of Special Collections and Archives is considering an on-line exhibit or guide featuring the types of materials individuals and organizations should preserve, as well as basic records management and archival procedures applicable to the needs of these record creators. Based on the department’s past experience documenting the labor movement, this information will be useful to organizations and individuals.

Project staff interacted with more organizations than have deposited their inactive records in an appropriate repository, but significant progress was made in documenting and preserving the history of environmental affairs in New York State. One organization disclosed that their inactive records would be preserved as part of a visitors’ center currently under development. An independent scholar inspired at the advisory board meeting later received grant funding and began an oral history project on the development of the Adirondack Park Agency. He plans to deposit the interviews in two regional repositories. The relationships that were created will result in the deposit of other records in the future, as several other organizations and individuals expressed an interest in depositing records in the department or at another repository. Contact in these cases will be ongoing, according to the needs of the organization or individual.
Conclusion

Until quite recently, the preservation of environmental records was, and frequently remains, haphazard. This is attributable to a number of factors, including the immediacy of the issues facing environmental activists, the unstable nature of advocacy groups, and the need for a dialogue between archivists and environmentalists. But most importantly, it must be emphasized that for many people, archives simply do not exist. Since archives have no tangible effect on their lives, people are unaware that their activities and the records they produce are worth preserving. Gerald Ham’s words continue to remind archivists and historians of the mission to document and distribute the historical record: “If we are not helping people understand the world they live in, and if this is not what archives is all about, then I do not know what it is we are doing that is all that important.” Ultimately, a documentation project results in more and better documentation of a topic, event, or community as well as a greater awareness of the materials that have been lost or destroyed. It will be increasingly important to integrate documentation projects, such as the one described here, into the larger goals of parent institutions, including historical societies, college or university archives, industry associations, or other organizations. After all, the past is not prologue if historical records are not available for study.

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NOTES


9. The LGRMIF funded records management activities for local governments, while the DHP provided the resources for regional documentation projects using a topical framework intended to guarantee the identification, appropriate administration of, and access to historical records of nongovernment entities. Although a wide variety of topical documentation and processing projects have been funded by DHP grants, priority is given to those that focus on areas designated as underdocumented by the New York State Archives, including mental health, environmental affairs, new population groups in the twentieth century, and deindustrialization and economic revitalization in the twentieth century. New York State Archives, “Documentary Heritage Program,” 2003, http://www.archives.nysed.gov/a/nyaservices/nsmgr_dhp.shtml (3 May 2004).


14. We utilized the lessons learned by Samuels et al., and determined that a more effective documentation strategy would focus on educating and promoting basic archival principles and methodology to record creators as part of the documentation project.


16. The State Archives in Albany is generally limited in its collecting to government records, and the New York State Library, which is administratively separate from the State Archives, holds nongovernment manuscript collections documenting New York State history. The State Library does not have an established regional system in place either, so its collections are particularly strong in the region around Albany. This perceived dominance by the library’s location in Albany reflects the findings of Judith Endelman in her synthesis of the collection analyses conducted by state repositories in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota in the 1980s. Endelman not surprisingly found that


20. Helen Weltin, memorandum to Brian Keough, Summary of the Advisory Board Meeting, 12 February 2002.


22. New York Public Library, 3.

23. We found that there are many perspectives on environmental policy and that, as Lamoree discussed, we needed to be inclusive of all points of view without appearing to favor a particular position. Documenting environmentalism must also include the interests of business and government, the position of anti-environmentalists, as well as the standpoint of those who are traditionally thought of as environmentalists. For information about anti-environmentalism and the Wise-Use Movement see David Helvarg, *The War Against the Greens: The Wise-Use Movement, the New Right, and Anti-Environmental Violence* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1994).

24. Weltin, Summary.


27. Ibid.


29. Lamoree, 149.

30. Ibid.


33. Ham, 13.