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The Use and Availability of Environmental Activism Collections in Academic Archives

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Abstract:

This study seeks to reveal the current state of environmental research in academic special collections and archives, with an emphasis on materials associated with environmental activism. The use and availability of archival environmental activism collections were assessed in a two-fold process. The use of such collections was evaluated through a citation analysis of related research articles published in *Environmental History*, the premier scholarly journal in the field of environmental history. The citation analysis reviewed the prevalence of archival collections sourced, and examined citations by repository type and material type in order to gain insight into the kinds of items used by scholars. Additionally, academic archives with significant collections related to environmental activism were surveyed. Though not extensive, this overview highlights the availability of relevant materials for scholars. The evolution of environmental research collections and the implications for archival repositories and their patrons will be addressed.

Introduction

As noted by Todd Welch in his seminal 1999 work, “‘Green’ Archivism: The Archival Response to Environmental Research,” archivists have made progress collecting and promoting material documenting the new fields that emerged in the 1960s, such as Ethnic and Women’s Studies. However, the same enthusiasm has not been displayed towards archival material related to Environmental Studies, which developed shortly after the “new” Social History. Although Welch observed an upward trend in usage of environmental research, there remains a dearth of scholarship on this collecting focus in archives.¹ This perspective was echoed several years later in the work of Brian Keough and Amy C. Schindler, “Thinking Globally, Acting Locally: Documenting Environmental Activism in New York State,” whose case study critically examined a documentation strategy that hoped to reverse this trend.²

This study seeks to reveal the current state of environmental research in academic special collections and archives, with an emphasis on materials related broadly to environmental activism, including environmental justice and environmental racism. The evolution of environmental research collections and the implications for archival repositories and their patrons will be addressed.

¹Welch, Todd. “‘Green’ Archivism: The Archival Response to Environmental Research.” *The American Archivist* 62, no. 1 (1999): 74-94.

²Keough, Brian and Amy C. Schindler, “Thinking Globally, Acting Locally: Documenting Environmental Activism in New York State,” *Archival Issues* 28, no. 2 (2003/2004): 121-35.



Methodology

The use and availability of archival environmental activism collections was assessed in a two-fold process. The use of such collections was evaluated through a citation analysis of related research articles published from 1999-2009 in *Environmental History*, the premier scholarly journal in the field of environmental history. A total of 36 articles focused on environmental activism in North America were identified for the study. Although 51 articles were initially discovered, 15 were disqualified from the study due to a lack of references or were outside the scope of North America.

The citation analysis reviewed the prevalence of archival collections sourced and examined citations by repository type and material type in order to gain insight into the kinds of items used by researchers. The citation study method, which counts a source every time it is cited, was employed rather than a reference study, which only counts a source the first time it is cited. This method was deemed more appropriate in order to best illustrate the use of archival, primary source material.

Additionally, academic archives with significant collections related to environmental activism were surveyed, of which 12 repositories were selected and arranged by region. Though not extensive, this survey seeks to highlight the availability of relevant materials for scholars. The appraisal was facilitated by researching the Archival Sources page in the *Environmental History* journal website, the online SNAC: The Social Networks and Archival Context Project, and the Research Portal database maintained by the Forest History Society, as well as specific Internet searches.

Results

The citation analysis exposed data that helps to quantify the frequency and types of archival sources used by scholars of environmental activism. Nearly half (17) of the 36 articles reviewed used at least one primary source from an archival repository. Of those 17 articles, seven cited between 1-9 archival sources, while 10 articles cited 10 or more, with four of those articles citing more than 50 archival sources. It became evident that the articles that used the most archival sources focused on a single-subject or historical event for which a relevant archival collection was available.

A total of 2,052 references were listed in the articles reviewed, of which 20% (418) included citations of archival material. Forty-eight archival repositories were cited, resulting in an average of three per article. Of the 48 repositories, academic libraries accounted for the largest segment of those cited, with 16, or one-third, of the repositories housed in academic special collections and archives. The second most cited location was historical societies or museums, which, together with academic libraries, comprise over half of the types of repositories utilized by scholars.

Details regarding repository types are illustrated in the two figures below. It should be noted that personal interviews and photographs taken by the author were not included when accounting for citations of private collections.

	Number of Repositories by Type
Academic Special Collections & Archives	16
Public Libraries	3
Historical Societies/Museums	9
National Archives	5
State/Local Archives	6
Institutional Archives	4
Foreign Archives	4
Private Collections	1
Total Repositories Cited	48

Figure 1. Number of Repositories by Type

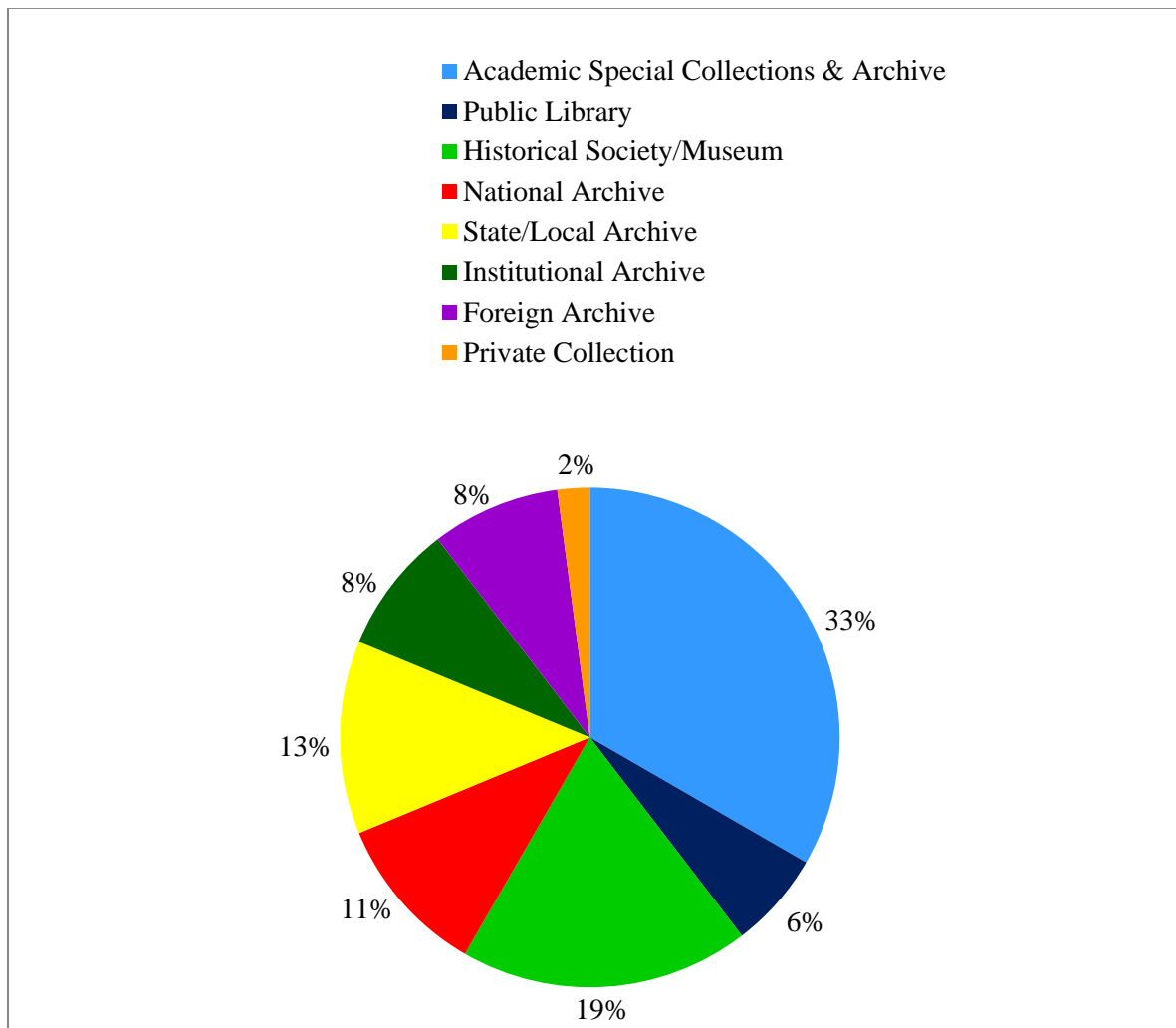


Figure 2. Percentage of Repositories Cited by Type

It is not surprising that documents, including manuscripts, correspondence, official reports, city plans, and transcribed interviews, resulted in the vast majority of materials cited, at nearly 94%. Photographs and maps, which include political, economic/resource, and thematic maps, comprised 3% each, with the remaining materials falling under the category of images, which includes all non-photographic visual materials, such as cartoons, advertisements, and graphic covers of printed works.

Details regarding material type are illustrated in the two figures below:

	Number of materials by type
Documents	391
Photographs	11
Images	5
Maps	11
Total Archival Materials Cited	418

Figure 3. Number of Materials by Type

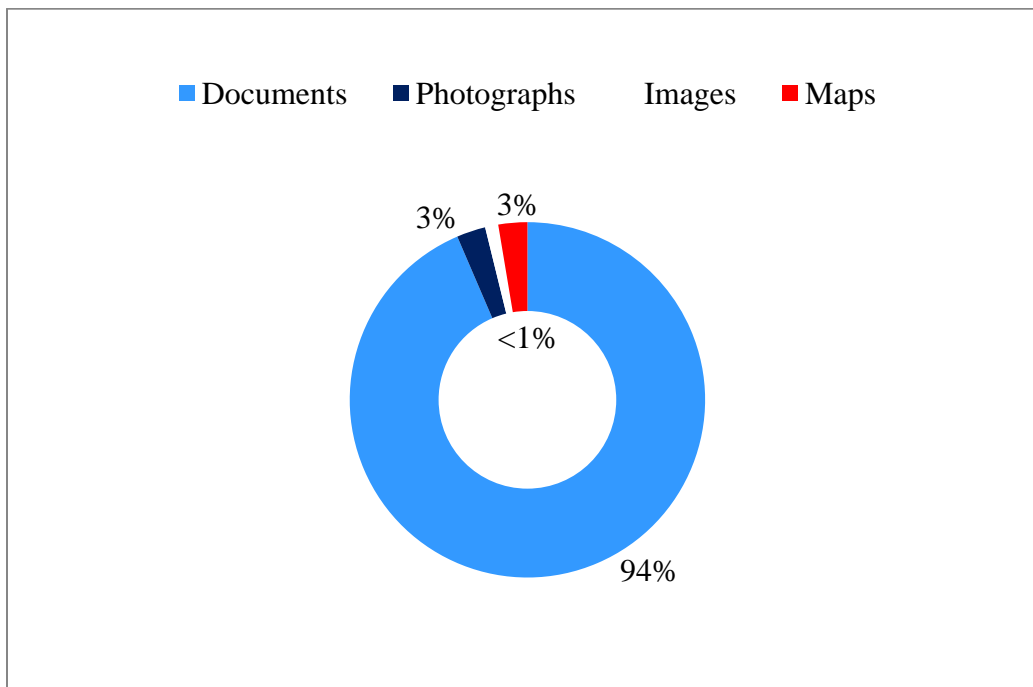


Figure 4. Percentage of Archival Materials Cited by Type

The following results section highlights 12 selected academic special collections and archives with significant collections related to environmental activism. These repositories are categorized by region and include a brief overview of their holdings:

NORTHEAST

University at Buffalo, State University of New York, SUNY: The University Archives maintains numerous collections on environmental issues in Western New York, with a special emphasis on material related to the environmental disaster, Love Canal.

University at Albany, SUNY: The Special Collections and Archives houses several organizational records of advocacy groups and faculty papers regarding water resources and the environmental impact of proposed construction projects in the Albany region.

College of Staten Island, City University of New York, CUNY: Staten Island Environmental History is a major collecting focus of the Archives & Special Collections. The work of individuals and advocacy groups are documented, with an emphasis on the closure of the Fresh Kills Landfill and successful efforts to preserve Staten Island's park system from infrastructure projects.

University of Pittsburgh: The Archives Service Center has extensive holdings of personal and organizational papers on urban environmental history and activism concerning industrial pollution and other environmental issues in Western Pennsylvania.

MIDWEST

University of Michigan: The Bentley Historical Library has extensive material documenting the work of citizens, officials, and activist groups to prevent the destruction of Michigan's forests by logging companies and the reduction of fish and game populations by commercial interests.

Indiana University Northwest: The Calumet Regional Archives includes collections of activists, politicians, and advocacy groups that document efforts regarding industrial pollution, the steel industry, and environmental protection of the Calumet Region and surrounding Great Lakes.

SOUTH

University of Florida: The Special and Area Studies Collections maintains the papers of several environmental activists involved with preserving the Everglades and Florida's water resources.

University of Houston: The Special Collections maintains extensive material related to the work of local environmental advocates whose work focuses on watershed management, wilderness recreation, green space protection, and urban planning. These four themes of environmental activism have culminated in the exhibit, "Houston's Environmental Past."

WEST

University of California, Los Angeles: In addition to numerous manuscript collections, the Center for Oral History Research captured decades of local environmental activism. Issues such as conservation, restoration, environmental justice, and toxic waste disposal were documented.

University of California, Berkley: The Bancroft Library embarked on several initiatives to support its strong environmental activism holdings, including the Grassroots Environmental Oral History Project and the on-going Environmental Papers Processing Project.

San Diego State University: The Special Collections & University Archives maintains numerous collections related to environmental protection and wilderness conservation, including the Pandora Rose Environmental Activism Collection.

University of Wyoming: The University's American Heritage Center holds a number of nationally significant environmental collections related to conservation and wildlife advocacy.

Conclusion

While there is significant room for growth, the data from the citation analysis study revealed that scholars regularly researched archival collections for material related to environmental activism. Furthermore, the majority of those archives are housed in academic libraries, which accounted for one-third of the repositories cited. The prevalence of academic libraries, historical societies, and museums suggests potential opportunities for collaboration on projects related to local environmental activism.

During the process of surveying academic libraries for environmental activism collections, it was observed that many archival holdings on the topic were not clearly identified as being related to advocacy. Instead, they were often found in related collections, such as those on conservation or simply environmental history. With few exceptions, such material was excluded from artificial collections or subject listings for social activism. Therefore, although this study illustrates that significant environmental activism collections exist, it also confirms Welch's argument that the records of environmentalists, both individual activists and grassroots advocacy groups, lack the same standing as those associated with other social movements.

There are several future studies that would shed additional light on the use and availability of environmental activism collections in academic archives. It would be helpful to perform a citation analysis study of the number and types of unique collections cited in order to further quantify the use of archival material. The kinds of material cited could also be broken down in order to identify, for example, the category of maps or variety of documents used. The development of new terminology to account for digitized archival material as well as primary sources found in printed works may also be advantageous. The results of such further studies would help archivists better understand their users' research needs, and may encourage collecting related to environmentalism and specifically the role of environmental activists.

Resources

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Appendix

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