Student Edition

California Education and the Environment Initiative

12

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Active Voices: Civil Society and the Environment

California Education and the Environment Initiative

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Key Leadership for the Education and Environment Initiative:

Linda Adams, Secretary, California Environmental Protection Agency
Patty Zwarts, Deputy Secretary for Policy and Legislation, California Environmental Protection Agency
Andrea Lewis, Assistant Secretary for Education and Quality Programs, California Environmental Protection Agency
Mark Leary, Executive Director, California Integrated Waste Management Board
Mindy Fox, Director, Office of Education and the Environment, California Integrated Waste Management Board

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Office of Education and the Environment
1001 I Street • Sacramento, California 95812 • (916) 341-6769
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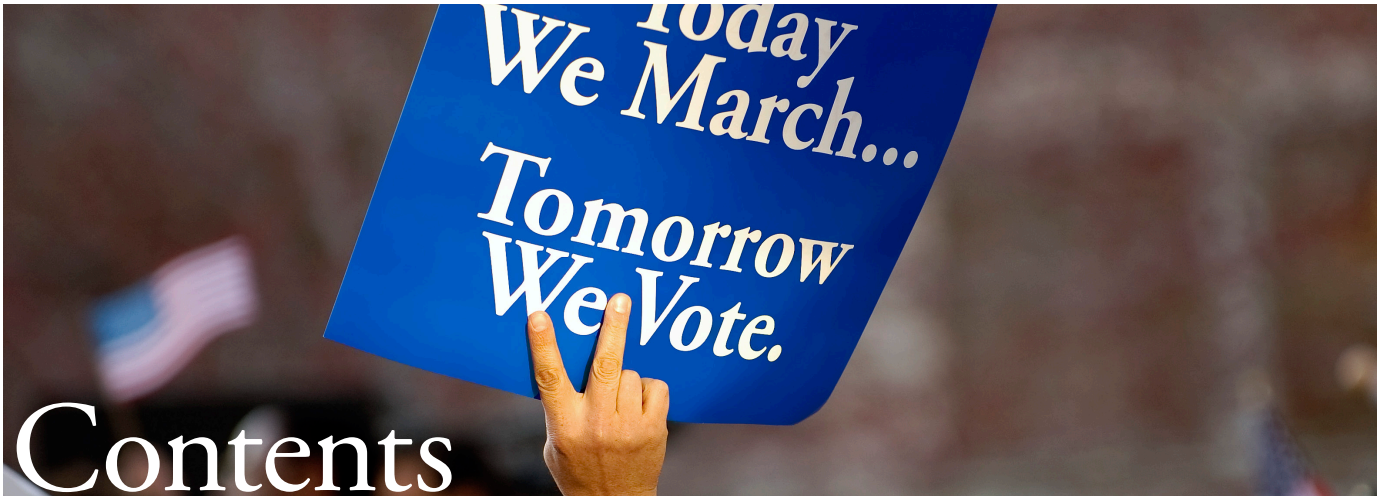

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None required for this lesson.

Farm Workers Organize for Change

Supporters of the farm workers movement still chant "¡Sí, se puede!" as they gather to demonstrate. Emboldened by the symbol for the United Farm Workers (UFW), a black Aztec eagle against a red background, this movement's success illustrates how a group of people committed to a cause can effect social change.

"*¡Sí, se puede!*" is loosely translated as "Yes, we can!" Through the leadership of one man and the commitment of thousands, the United Farm Workers of America (UFW) showed people in our society that if they unite, then indeed, "It can be done."

Farm worker

Working Conditions in the 1950s and 1960s

California farm laborers in the 1950s and 1960s endured some of the worst working conditions in the nation. Receiving substandard wages, they stooped over crops for long hours without breaks. Most farm workers were migratory, following crop seasons throughout the fertile valleys of California. Thus, families were constantly uprooted, children transferred from school to school. After classes and on weekends, children worked beside their

parents in the fields. Babies were strapped to their mothers' backs or left beneath scant shade amidst flies and dirt. On one farm, the boss charged a quarter for a cup of water. On another, 67 field workers drank from a single cup—an empty beer can.

Workers' housing consisted of farm labor camps made up of sheet-metal tents, lean-tos, or derelict barns and stables. Rooms were commonly crowded with four or more people. Many of the "camps" had no running water, refrigeration, or toilets. In some cases, water sources were downstream from livestock, exposing occupants to waterborne diseases. Infants born in these "camps" sometimes died from dehydration caused by diarrhea.

Farm workers often faced racist attitudes from their bosses. Some bosses treated workers with less respect and care than their mechanical equipment or animals. While farm owners installed elaborate irrigation systems for their crops, they sometimes ignored the need for clean water in farm workers' "camps." Growers hired veterinarians to tend to sick animals yet refused medical care for sick workers. While some growers maintained their equipment and sheltered their animals in heated barns, workers lived in dilapidated shanties without heat or basic sanitation.

In the years following World War II, farm workers also faced a new danger: the widespread use of chemical pesticides. Developed by scientists for biological warfare, organophosphate compounds entered the domestic market immediately following the war. They soon became the standard means of pest control on California farms. Organophosphates are neurotoxins, which kill by inhibiting enzymes critical to nervous system function. Effective at killing insects, these chemicals also affect humans—and farm workers began getting sick. In 1949, the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) recorded 300 cases of farm workers poisoned by pesticides; two workers died. Throughout the 1950s, the number of reported farm workers sickened from agricultural chemicals increased. In 1963, the issue made front-page news when almost a hundred peach pickers on a San Joaquin Valley orchard became seriously ill.

Aside from the newspaper reports of this incident, most media coverage focused on the risk to consumers from toxic residues on the edible portion of crops. Meanwhile, pickers stood in plant foliage, absorbing pesticides into their skin and clothes. They breathed in toxic vapors, eyes stinging and throats burning as chemicals assaulted their bodies. CDPH reports

Migrant farm workers in California

Grape boycott

showed that farm workers' rate of occupational disease was 50 percent higher than the rate for any other industry in California. It became clear that this was more than a medical issue. This was a political issue; the health and welfare of farm workers were being ignored.

Roots of the United Farm Workers of America

In 1962, César Chávez and Doris Huerta co-founded the National Farm Workers Association, which later became the UFW. Chávez saw the collective force of the numerous farm workers in the United States as a powerful vehicle for social change. Organizing farm workers across the state, he believed, would give field laborers a greater voice in society, and thus greater influence in government decisions. Earlier attempts to organize field workers had failed because of major resistance from growers, the seasonal, migratory nature of the work, and the surplus of labor. Chávez, who himself was a former migrant farm worker, used a different technique than outside organizers had tried. He began organizing farm workers from within. Chávez started by traveling throughout California farm labor communities, talking to workers and recruiting them to join his union to resist poor wages and working conditions.

The UFW's goal was to obtain a union contract, which would provide legal protection and guarantees to farm workers. But farm workers in the early 1960s had little financial or political power. They needed to harness the power of public support and sympathy. To achieve this goal, Chávez and his group drew inspiration from such leaders as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi, using boycotts and other nonviolent methods to attract attention from newspapers and television networks. The farm workers organized walkouts, formed picket lines, led protest marches, and held "sit-ins." In some cases, they practiced civil disobedience, breaking the law or refusing to obey court orders,

that were obtained by growers, as a means of limiting picketing.

One of the farm workers' most effective tactics was an international boycott of California grapes that lasted from 1967 to 1970. This boycott, and the strikes associated with it, attracted national media attention. Once the public became aware of the farm workers' plight, the UFW won the support of student activists, religious groups, minority groups, powerful unions, and other American consumers. Farm workers convinced millions of Americans concerned about social justice to stop buying domestic grapes. In 1968, César Chávez went 25 days without food to rededicate his movement to nonviolence, again capturing the sympathy of the public for the farm workers' cause. On the last day of the fast, Senator Robert F. Kennedy visited him to show support. Newspapers quoted Kennedy as saying that Chávez was "one of the heroic figures of our time." Securing this position in the national spotlight allowed the UFW to gain a foothold in national affairs.

Large grape growers gave in to the economic and political pressure, and the UFW won the first real labor contracts in U.S. history. Once the contracts were in place, wages increased, growers provided fresh water and toilets in the fields, the federal and state governments began regulating pesticide use after union agreements banned some of the most dangerous chemicals, and employers offered workers pensions and medical coverage. The UFW's continuing efforts included lobbying the California legislature to pass the 1975 California Agricultural Labor Relations Act, which protects the rights of farm workers to unionize and bargain collectively.

One of the UFW's greatest legacies is the mobilization of a farm worker movement that continues today. From this association, a support system for farm workers has grown through organizations within the movement, including a three-state network of educational-style Spanish-language radio stations, high quality housing communities, and education programs. The activism of César Chávez and the United Farm Workers in California have given laborers the knowledge that they have a voice and can bring about social and environmental change.

"*¡Sí, se puede!*"

Selling grapes

The Upper Newport Bay Ecological Reserve

The Upper Newport Bay Ecological Reserve was dedicated on April 11, 1975, with the following words: "In the name of the people of the State of California, so that this and future generations may continue to have, to use and enjoy the priceless heritage of the wildlife resources, the Upper Newport Bay Ecological Reserve is hereby dedicated."

Behind those words were years of effort by two people—Frank and Frances Robinson—and an organization they founded, the Friends of the Upper Newport Bay. Understanding their work provides insights into how civil society makes it possible for people, individually and in association with others, to influence government.

Upper Newport Bay Ecological Preserve

The Story Begins

The story begins In the 1950s and 1960s. Orange County was one of the fastest growing communities in the entire United States. The growing population meant increasing demand for housing and recreational opportunities.

The Lower Newport Bay area was a high-priced residential harbor community. Developers wanted to turn Upper Newport Bay into the same type of area. Orange County owned some land in the Upper Newport Bay. It had acquired that land back in 1919, intending to build a harbor. Private citizens owned the rest of the land in the area.

In the 1950s, a large developer, The Irvine Company, proposed developing the upper bay. In 1963, they struck a deal with the Orange County Board of Supervisors. The Irvine Company would acquire the land in the upper bay in exchange for a large parcel of land elsewhere in

the county. The Irvine Company intended to build a recreational harbor and high-priced homes there. The Orange County Board of Supervisors believed this development would have economic benefits.

Community activists organized to stop the proposed development. They believed the Upper Newport Bay should be a wildlife refuge. Upper Newport Bay was one of the few remaining estuaries (an estuary is a place where fresh and salt waters mix) in Southern California. As a result, Upper Newport Bay supported a unique and diverse array of wildlife. This wildlife included 200 species of birds, among them several endangered species, and 100 species of fish, numerous mammals, and native plants. The bay is also an important stopover point for migrating birds. During the winter months, some 30,000 birds populate the estuary.

Board of supervisors meeting

Enter the Robinsons

Frank and Frances Robinson moved to Newport Beach in 1962. They immediately began lobbying and organizing to stop the land trade and prevent the development of the upper bay. The Robinsons formed a small group of local citizens called Friends of Upper Newport Bay. They organized protests, educated fellow citizens, and challenged the deal in court. Through education campaigns, the Robinsons tried to convince their fellow citizens that preserving Upper Newport Bay would have a greater value than the proposed development.

Friends of the Upper Newport Bay handed out informational leaflets about the bay's ecology. They led citizens on nature walks through the area, pointing out the unique diversity of wildlife. They also enlisted the help of scientists from nearby universities who had studied the ecology of the area. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw growing nationwide support for protecting the natural environment and preserving wildlife. The Robinson's campaign benefited from this growing public awareness of the value of preserving natural systems. The educational campaign carried out by Friends of the Upper Newport Bay was

so successful that it influenced the politics of Orange County.

The Robinsons also used legal channels in their campaign. In 1969, they sued to stop the land swap, arguing that it was unconstitutional. In court, they argued that the land the county owned in Upper Newport Bay could not be granted to private developers. After a four-year legal battle, a state appeals court ruled in the Robinsons' favor and declared the land swap unconstitutional. The Irvine Company decided not to appeal the court ruling against the swap.

Furthermore, in 1970, Ronald Caspers was elected to the Orange County Board of Supervisors to represent the district that included the bay. During the campaign, Caspers had announced his opposition to the land swap. His opponent, Alton Allen, strongly supported the deal. Once in office, Caspers worked to get the Board of Supervisors to reverse their decision. He proposed that the Upper Newport Bay be set aside as an ecological preserve.

The growing awareness of the ecological diversity of the Upper Newport Bay, the recreational and scenic opportunities represented by the preserve, and the activism of the Robinsons and other citizens, finally convinced the Board of Supervisors to explore the possibility of preserving the land.

A New Plan

The Board of Supervisors formed a committee of local and state officials to evaluate the future of the land. They called on federal and state officials to document the value of preserving the bay. At public hearings, they heard testimony from private citizens, developers, and scientists, who testified about the environmental benefits of preserving the bay. As a result of these hearings, the State of California established the Upper Newport Bay Ecological Reserve. The state purchased 572 acres of land from Ventura County and acquired another 214 acres from Orange County.

In addition to benefiting wildlife and the natural environment, the nature preserve has become a popular refuge for residents of Orange County to hike, cycle, canoe, fish, and kayak.

The history of the Upper Newport Bay Ecological Reserve illustrates how local citizens organized to influence how government valued economic development versus natural wildlife. Citizens of Orange County conducted education campaigns, lobbied local government, and sued in court to stop the development of Upper Newport Bay. These combined actions ultimately helped result in the foundation of the Upper Newport Bay Ecological Reserve.

Encelia californica flower found in Upper Newport Bay Preserve

The term "civil disobedience" comes from a famous 1848 essay by Henry David Thoreau. In that essay, he described why he refused to pay a state poll tax. The government was using the money raised by the tax to wage war against Mexico and enforce the Fugitive Slave Law. Thoreau objected to these government actions and served time in jail as punishment for not paying his taxes.

Civil disobedience occurred even before Thoreau gave it a name. The Boston Tea Party could be considered an act of civil disobedience. Thus, this practice has a long history in the United States. Yet, throughout that history, it has generated controversy. Why? While some members of civil society find it an effective way to make their voices heard, especially when other means fail, others believe that civil disobedience is just a fancy name for breaking the law.

So what are the arguments for and against civil disobedience? The following are some of the major arguments made regarding this form of protest.

Arguments For Civil Disobedience	Arguments Against Civil Disobedience
■ A founding principle of our democracy is popular participation. When all other means fail, civil disobedience is the only form of participation left. ■ History shows that rarely do large numbers of people participate in civil disobedience. Rather than destabilizing society, civil disobedience stabilizes it by pushing government to create a better society. ■ Acts of civil disobedience provide an avenue for the disenfranchised to make their voices heard. ■ Legal channels can take too long. As Dr. Martin Luther King said, "Justice delayed is justice denied."	■ A founding principle of our democracy is rule of law. Civil disobedience undermines that principle. ■ Acts of civil disobedience, while principled, encourage others to break the law for no principled reason. This could destabilize society. ■ Acts of civil disobedience often lead to violence, resulting in harm to people and property. Such harm cannot be justified. ■ In a democracy, unjust actions can be changed through lawful channels of change, such as the courts, lobbying, or voting in new policymakers.

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