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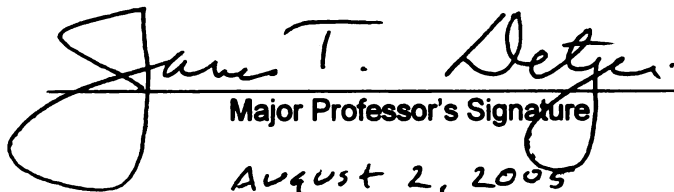
**THE MEEMAN ARCHIVE: ITS PLACE IN HISTORY AND ITS
UNCERTAIN FUTURE**

presented by

BRIAN FOLEY

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of the requirements for the

M.A. degree in Journalism


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**THE MEEMAN ARCHIVE: ITS PLACE IN HISTORY AND ITS
UNCERTAIN FUTURE**

By

Brian Roderick Foley

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ABSTRACT

THE MEEMAN ARCHIVE: ITS PLACE IN HISTORY AND ITS UNCERTAIN FUTURE

By

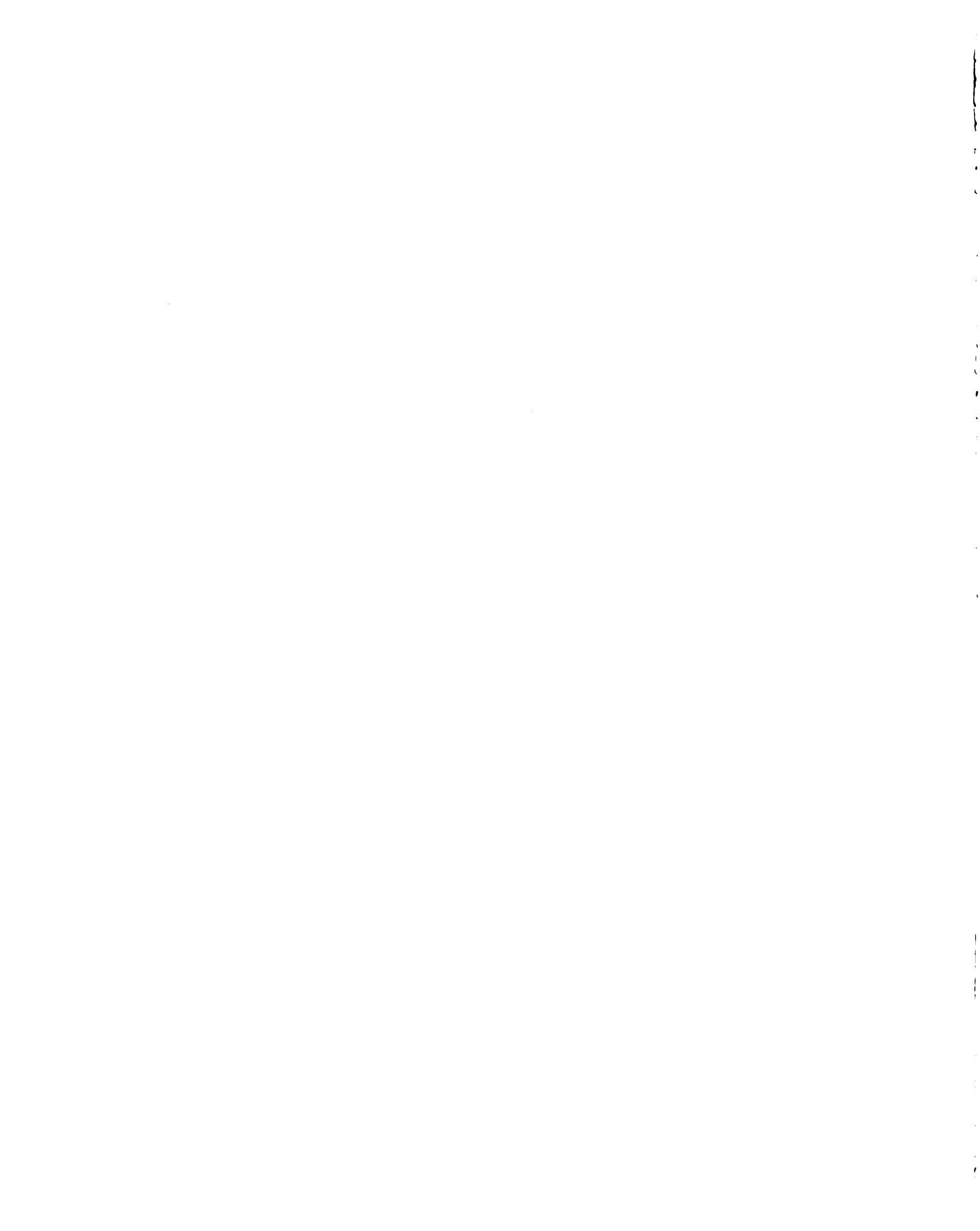
BRIAN FOLEY

Inside the Knight Center for Environmental Journalism lies the Meeman Archive, which contains over a thousand pieces of newspaper articles concerned with the environment. The archive began in 1982 at the University of Michigan's School of Natural Resources, with the help of grant support from the Scripps Howard Foundation.

For at least eight years, faculty and students maintained the archive in filing cabinets. However, in 1996, the department disposed portions of the archive. Most materials of the archive was retrieved by the Knight Center's director Jim Detjen and hauled from Ann Arbor to East Lansing where it sits today.

The archive is a living example of environmental history with many materials focused on the Reagan Administration and events leading up to the present state and standards of environmental journalism. The archive is a primary-source that holds increasing value over time.

An analysis of the Meeman Award winners of the past 20 years reveal the standards of the award that value investigative articles that create governmental, corporate and public change.



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I can't thank enough Jim Detjen for opening up his office to me. He gave me ideas and let me go wild. I hope this project will translate into something beneficial for the Knight Center as its future continues to shine.

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CHAPTER ONE: Environmental History and Archival Importance

A Revealed History

In 1997, after 132 years of existence, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service opened the National Conservation Training Center, reserved for governmental conservationists at the national and local levels who required a central venue for educational and research purposes. It is located in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

As part of the new program, the organization decided to recruit a staff historian, which was a new concept for an organization that always pursued biological and scientific projects. The man to fill the role was Mark Madison, who received a Ph.D. in science history at Harvard University and who was noted for his reforestation projects in the Philippines and his teaching of environmental history at the University of Melbourne.¹

Anxious to assess what kind of job awaited him, he quickly realized that organizing the agency's history, and how it fit into the larger scope of environmental history, was going to be a monumental, but worthwhile, ordeal. Here in front of him was an agency opening access to more than a hundred years of documents and historical antiques. It was primary-source history, yet to be dusted off, organized, interpreted and publicized.

¹ Madison.

Madison wrote, "The historical figures can change; what is crucial is making a connection to that earlier era and allowing the employees to feel part of the larger legacy of the American conservation movement.

"If there is one final historical theme I try to convey in every course at the center, it is the importance of conserving our history alongside our wildlife. I bring as many students as possible down to visit the archives to show them the raw materials of history."²

Indeed, historians are rarely handed the task that Madison had the privilege to experience: to be given access to a treasure chest, along with the complete freedom to organize it into something the public could use in the future. He described his steady progress in unraveling past stories about the agency, and his ongoing history classes he offered at the center.

But he uses this experience to emphasize and illuminate certain points for future historians, especially environmental historians. He wrote, "If you build an archive, eventually scholars will show up, attracted to easy pickings, like historical hyenas visiting a dead wildebeest. The reason is obvious to anyone who has traveled on minuscule budgets to research a dissertation."³

The significance of the Madison example is actually two-fold. First, Madison demonstrates the strength of creating a resource that would imminently enhance and enrich the importance of the U.S. Fish and

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Wildlife Service. Secondly, the action this government agency took in preserving its documentary and artifact history exemplifies how environmental history has grown into one of the fastest growing fields in the world of academia.

The following study is an example of Madison's story, but in much smaller proportions. In this case, the targeted historical item is the Meeman Archive, which sits mostly undisturbed and untouched in the Knight Center for Environmental Journalism at Michigan State University's journalism department. It is a collection of outstanding environmental journalism submitted to the Scripps Howard Foundation for consideration for the annual Edward J. Meeman Award for environmental reporting.⁴ The archive first began in 1982 at the University of Michigan's School of Natural Resources and moved to the Knight Center in 1996.

While the goals of this thesis do not seek to achieve or replicate the admirable workings of Madison, it does hope that it will inspire future students and researchers to see the archive's potential. Little has been written about the archive, while more materials stream in to the Knight Center on a yearly basis. The archive is currently contained in a half-dozen filing cabinets and over a dozen boxes, some of which were never opened before this project began.

⁴ Edward J. Meeman was a Tennessee environmental reporter for 45 years until his death in 1966. During his last four years he was the Scripps-Howard conservation editor. He wrote *The Editorial We: A Posthumous Autobiography*. Memphis: Memphis State University, 1976.

This thesis project is designed to advance knowledge and research and to encourage future students to consider the archive a valuable asset within the journalism department. It will present the archive in an historical context. As noted before, environmental history is a young and growing field. There is no arguing the fact that the archive, as any archive, acts as an historical resource open to interpretation. And one necessary part of an archive is the dialogue it evokes. An archive is not an archive unless it is observed by interested people who want to learn from it.⁵

And in the attempt of meeting these goals, hopefully, this project will plant the seeds of interest of environmental history within the Knight Center. While the academic world prefers to make things convenient by rank-and-filing topics of interest for students, it fails students by implying that multiple interests are separate and irreconcilable.

The fact is, history and journalism, let alone the environmental qualities of these two topics, share common traits on a number of levels. While they both rely on communication and interpretation, they are both an essential part of the American identity. They are both democratic in that they inspire debate and dialogue. They both also demand a level of impartiality from the part of the historian or journalist. And they are both essentially malleable and ever-evolving concepts.

The key to preserving the Meeman Archive is to begin its debate and dialogue. This paper will show that its hasty move in 1996 from the University of Michigan to the Knight Center was a result of the archive's

⁵ Madison; Trace; Couture.

non-existent dialogue. If the archive is recognized, talked about and written about, it can perhaps become an enormous asset to Michigan State's journalism department in the form of an organized library or an electronic resource—both of which are too big a task for this lone, eager researcher.

This paper will examine the archive's move in 1996, how it was maintained in Ann Arbor and how it is currently maintained in East Lansing. In addition, it will offer a synopsis on environmental history and the pillars that construct its perpetual dialogue and its promising direction. The major bulk of the paper will explore selections of the archive itself and follow the reporters behind the articles, what motivated them, and how its concepts fit within the framework of environmental history.

Hopefully, what will ensue upon this project's completion is an interest among future students to create an organized and on-going resource in the Knight Center, which would further distinguish the reputable standing of Michigan State University's journalism program.

A Case for Environmental History

The Dust Bowl of the 1930s is etched in America's history as a literal example of the down-and-out times of the Great Depression. The hardships of the disaster and the ensuing migration of Midwest farmers to California are well documented, in large part due to the literary

masterpiece of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).⁶ The Dust Bowl also became a favorite topic among historians anxious to study how such a rich stretch of land in the lower Midwest could collapse into a humanitarian debacle.

Around 1980, two historians released books that thoroughly analyzed The Dust Bowl. One account, by Paul Bonnifield, approached this historical event from a humanitarian standpoint and framed it as a natural disaster, as though family farmers were victims of the planet's unexplained actions, like an earthquake or a hurricane.

Bonnifield wrote, "In the final analysis, the story of the dust bowl was the story of people, people with ability and talent, people with resourcefulness, fortitude and courage....The people of the dust bowl were not defeated, poverty-ridden people without home. They were builders of tomorrow."⁷

In contrast, Donald Worster, now considered one of the founding fathers of environmental history, took a different approach, zeroing in on the destructive habits of these farmers that brought the environmental disaster onto themselves. The Dust Bowl was an "ecological blunder" and "was the inevitable outcome of a culture."⁸

To compare Worster's account with Bonnifield is very telling. Both are smart, able historians; however, the distinctive difference between the

⁶ Steinbeck.

⁷ Bonnifield, 202.

⁸ Worster, 2; Cronon compares the Bonnifield and Worster books in "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative." *The Journal of American History*. 78: 4, 1347-1376. 1992.

two exemplifies the threshold between human history and environmental history. Worster clearly uses environmental themes and concepts to explain the disaster. This technique has matured and is now one of the fastest growing fields in the world of academic history.⁹

Environmental history has matured into two broad parts, in large part due to the “founding fathers” who framed the themes of this new history: Worster, William Cronon and Roderick Nash.

The first part of environmental history was already mentioned above. It utilizes the theme that human action causes an environmental re-action, which then, in turn, steers the course of human history. In addition to the Dust Bowl example, the landing of Christopher Columbus is another prime example of this type of history.

Historians have traditionally analyzed the Columbus landing in 1492 as a significant turn of events because what ensued was centuries of struggle between European settlers and the Native American peoples. And this struggle eventually led to the birth of the United States. Hence, Columbus’ landing is an essential part of explaining the country’s history.

However, it is also an unprecedented environmental disaster unseen in any other instance of modern history. The environmental implications are thoroughly covered in Alfred Crosby’s *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and cultural consequences of 1492* (1972). While it is undeniable that human history took a dramatic turn with Columbus’

⁹ More on the progress of environmental history is covered by White; Rome; Stewart; Rosendale, 42,59.

landing, it cannot be overlooked that diseases were swapped between the Europeans and Native Americans, and immeasurable environmental implications arose from this historical event. Once again, through the concepts of environmental history, new angles can be added to the interpretations of some of the most cherished and scrutinized events of American history, such as Christopher Columbus' landing.¹⁰

These new concepts is where the writings of Worster and Cronon contribute. Writes Cronon, "To such basic historical categories as gender, class, and race, environmental historians would add a theoretical vocabulary in which plants, animals, soils, climates, and other nonhumans entities become the coactors and codeterminants of a history not just of people but of the earth itself."¹¹

This passage summarizes the whole idea behind the approach Crosby took in analyzing the environmental implications of the Columbian Exchange. Cronon and Worster assert that environmental considerations could reveal why people of the past made their decisions. it is not enough to just observe the people's actions, but also the planet's actions and reactions.

Roderick Nash exclusively deserves credit for creating the second part of environmental history. The concept is somewhat metaphysical; It is of the mind. In his celebrated and commonly-cited book *Wilderness and the American Mind*, he writes, "The emphasis here is not so much what

¹⁰ Crosby.

¹¹ Cronon.

wilderness is but what men think it is. The obvious advantage is an accommodation to the subjective nature of the concept. And the focus on belief rather than actuality is especially useful.”¹²

The idea of perception is key in explaining the historical decisions people make. According to Nash, the environment is *there* while civilization in which we live is *here*. As McDonald notes in his critique of the book, “Nash begins his work with a warning to readers that in his work, wilderness will be treated as an idea rather than a material object.”¹³

To further this argument, the wilderness is not a physical reference. The wilderness and environment is a debate. It is a discussion. And the history of human actions was resultant of this debate. This concept is what also frames the foundations of environmental journalism, which is the main element of this study.

Environmental Journalism

The Society of Environmental Journalists’ mission statement says its goal is “to advance public understanding of environmental issues by improving the quality, accuracy, and visibility of environmental reporting.”¹⁴

This is not a statement of environmental advocacy. It is simply a statement of a standard this organization believes is the correct way a journalist should approach environmental issues. This approach adheres

¹² Nash, 5.

¹³ McDonald.

¹⁴ www.sej.org/about.

to the standards of a historian, striving toward impartiality and objectivity. It is simply saying that environmental implications arise out of human action and vice-versa, and environmental journalism is the coverage of such occurrences.

The mission statement also supports Nash's thesis, that "the environment" is an idea, or a debate, or a dialogue, among people within a civilized world; the environment is not really a physical thing. It is true that soil, trees, water and wildlife are physical things, but in the civilized world, they are ideas and values. Therefore, according to Nash, such journalism contributes to the perpetual debate. That is the role of environmental journalism.

Because the environment is a value and a debate, rather than a physical thing, people are inclined to prioritize this value with other values in their lives. Different people place their environmental values higher than others. This fact, in turn, influences environmental coverage and determines whether the debate is strong with resonance or tenuous and quiet.

Writes environmental writer Bud Ward, "Reporters who cover the environment...at mainstream news organizations would find satisfaction in producing a thoroughly reported, soundly sourced article documenting how chemicals such as DDT or PCB's in the environment do more good than harm....With global warming, any journalist would welcome the opportunity to report a well documented piece in which scientists find that

there is absolutely no basis for concern that climate change is happening, that humans are contributing to it, or it's a problem worth taking seriously."¹⁵

However, environmental journalism is a beat not without inherent identity problems. Like the Society of Environmental Journalism, Ward believes the beat should be "environment reporting" without the extra "al," which he says contributes to the notion that environmental reporters are advocacy reporters.¹⁶ But there are those who see a duty embedded within the beat, a duty to work on a partial level for the sake of the environment's protection and other issues "for the public's good."¹⁷

It's a debate within a debate. It's an example of how definitions of what is environmental journalism and environmental history are relative and in the eye of the beholder. What the Meeman Archive contains is one of many definitions of what is outstanding environmental journalism. And an analysis of what this definition is would reveal the environmental debates and values of the past. This point illuminates the interchangeable concepts of environmental history and journalism, and the Knight Center's Meeman Archive.

¹⁵ Ward; Yang.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Alexander; Witt; Sherman.

The Archive's History

The Meeman Archive is such a valuable resource, partly because of its vastness in environmental journalism, but also because it is nearly untapped. Little has been written about the archive itself, which might be surprising considering how fast the archive has multiplied over the years. Most publications or literature pertaining to the Meeman Awards were issued by the Scripps Howard Foundation.

One notable book about the archive was put together by the archive's original keepers, a book aimed at promoting the resource for future reference. Entitled "Environmental Journalism: The Best from the Meeman Archive," the book was compiled and edited by the archive's director at the time, Paul Nowak of the University of Michigan, along with three of his graduate students.

In it, Nowak articulates the motivations behind the book, writing, "We now believe that if this first book is well received, others focused on specific topics such as hazardous waste, nuclear problems and water issues could be developed."¹⁸

After Nowak's written comments, the book continues with seven series of articles from the archive, a small fraction considering there were more than 400 series to select from at the time.¹⁹ There is no indication in the book as to how these series were selected or if they were arbitrarily

¹⁸ Nowak, p. x.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

selected. The series were from 1983 and 1984 and covered an array of topics such as the depletion of the Colorado River, acid rain in Michigan and the vanishing grizzly bears of Washington. It is unclear whether the book effectively promoted the archive's publicity, but it did not lead to subsequent books.

The lone book, however, does reveal how the archive was first contemplated. In its introduction, Bob Stiff, who was then the executive editor of the *Tallahassee Democrat*, reminisced of being a judge in 1980 for the Meeman Award competition. He wrote, "These stories, and series of stories, seemed to me to be of great historic value. They actually comprised the most complete history that existed showing what the nation's environment was like in a given year."²⁰

In 1980, Stiff envisioned an archive, which would grow with each passing year. He called Dave Stolberg, who was at that time the assistant general editorial manager for Scripps Howard Newspapers. Stolberg was receptive toward the idea (he wrote, "Why didn't I think of that?"), and within two months the foundation granted a few hundred thousand dollars to preserve all Meeman Award entrees.²¹ At that point, it was a matter of approaching educational institutions worthy of maintaining such a rich resource for the years to come.

The two finalists were Yale and University of Michigan's School of Natural Resources, according to Stolberg. The foundation picked Michigan

²⁰ *ibid*, p. vii.

²¹ *Ibid*, p.viii.

because of the school's enthusiastic response, which included promising ideas of how best to make an archive accessible to students.

The archive began in 1982 under the supervision of Nowak, Barry Lonik and James Crowfoot, who was the dean of the School of Natural Resources. By 1985, the archive ballooned to 400 articles as the school's staff worked to create a database that organized articles by its content. The archive not only contained Meeman Award entries, but also entries for the Thomas L. Stokes Award for excellence in natural resources reporting. The planned "database" is not currently in the Knight Center, and it is unclear what it contained.

The articles meant to comprise the archive were divided by topic, pasted onto 8.5 by 11 inch papers, numbered individually and placed in filing folders. It is presumed that this format was chosen in order to transfer these articles onto microfilm, however that never happened.

The Scripps Howard Foundation devoted considerable amounts of money on an annual basis. What is in the archive now does not reflect the amount of money invested in the archive by the archives' directors. The approved grant was a 60-month grant totaling more than \$102,000, according to documents that are still currently in the archive. It is unclear whether the foundation devoted more money toward the archive's maintenance after the grant expired in 1987.

Nowak et al. did little to promote the archive during the ensuing years. There were no more compiled books. The only publicity for the

Meeman Award that existed was from the annual award brochures issued by the Scripps Howard Foundation with profiles of the winners of all their journalism awards.

It seemed that the motivation and vision shared between the faculty of the University of Michigan and the Scripps Howard Foundation was dwindling. While the archive sat dormant due to lack of activity under the care of faculty at the University of Michigan, it is equally important to note that the Scripps Howard Foundation did little to monitor their grant money.

Finally, the archive's promising fate took a dramatic turn when the school's communications department overhauled its curriculum and its goals. Faculty at the department did not want to maintain the archive anymore. In late 1996, despite offers from faculty at Michigan State University and the University of Colorado, two educators literally threw portions of the archive into a dumpster.²²

It is hard to comprehend the reasons behind this move. Room constraints and a change of heart prompted the archive's keepers to discard it, but they failed to seek other professors and departments who could potentially preserve the 14 year old archive. Granted, it was unorganized and poorly kept, but throwing it away seemed like a hasty option.

However, it reveals the notion of environmental journalism and environmentalism as a whole as concepts of living dialogue. One could assume that such hasty actions as throwing away valuable piece of

²² *EJ News*. Fall 1997.

environmental journalism would not happen if the archive's keepers invested more time and energy into the archive. The promise of creating a "database," along with books and microfilms of the articles, were not carried out like they were supposed to.

The lack of action and the overwhelming lack of dialogue and written literature led to the deterioration of the perceived importance of the archive. It was then that its keepers decided to throw it away in light of the department's changing priorities.

In response, Jim Detjen, director of the Knight Center for Environmental Journalism at Michigan State and a doctoral student, Joe Harry, rented a van, drove to Ann Arbor, and hauled the rest of the archive back to East Lansing.²³ Since that time, the archive has sat in a half-dozen filing cabinet in the Knight Center. Also, since 1999, the Scripps Howard Foundation has sent the nominees and winners to the Knight Center, where they sit in boxes. Some of these articles sit in the same boxes used to mail them.

In Conclusion

The story of the Meeman Archive is a story about environmental dialogue and what can happen when that dialogue wanes. When dialogue dims, perceptions of the environment and its importance also suffer. Environmental journalism acts as a tool in precipitating this importance. In turn, it shapes the environmental identity the public shares as citizens.

²³ Ibid.

This point plays into Nash's definition of environmental history, that the study of environmental issues and controversy is a study of ideas and values rather than physical, material things.²⁴ The founders of the archive were well aware of this fact.

In fact, this point is exactly what Nowak et al. wrote upon release of their lone book about the archive. Explaining the motivations behind the book, Nowak wrote, "These efforts are designed to increase the availability of material in the Archive to those who can use it to help solve our environmental problems."²⁵ However, neither the archive's founders nor the Scripps Howard Foundation did anything to further the importance of the archive, and as a result, the archive's dialogue suffered. Subsequently, the archive was eventually perceived as not important enough to preserve before finally receiving a permanent home in East Lansing.

The preservation of the archive is the preservation of modern environmental journalism. As years continue to pass and the archive continues to accumulate and grow, it will require more attention and polishing in order to ensure its continuity. This concept is not just applicable to environmental journalism and history but all types of journalism and history, as together they help define who we were and who we are in the present.

²⁴ Nash.

²⁵ Nowak, xi.

CHAPTER TWO: Document Preservation and the Study of Agenda-Setting

How Document Preservation Reveals Agenda Setting Trends

Thomas Jefferson once wrote, "It is the duty of every good citizen to use all the opportunities, which occur to him, for preserving documents relating to the history of our country."¹ The National Archive took this idea to heart, devoting 3 million dollars in 1987 for a security system to protect the Declaration of Independence, a document Jefferson helped write.

Preserving authentic, original documents are important for a number of reasons, ranging from nostalgia, such as a diary, to evoking pride and patriotism, such as the Declaration. These examples hold sentimental value.

In contrast, historians preserve original documentation for their craft, though they would say that they hold sentimental value toward what they study. Historians who become fortunate enough to see original, historical documents and artifacts, are also at an advantage. They yearn for the chance to study the very sources of their scholarship unscathed and uncorrupted. It is as if they want to take a time machine to the period of their studies.

¹ McDonald, Robert. "Tomas Jefferson Papers/Thomas Jefferson Digital Archive." *The Journal of American History*. 91:3, 1149-1152. 2004.

Original documents enable historians and other researchers to partially time travel in the sense that they get to interpret primary-sourced history. While historically significant documents can rile patriotism in citizens such as the Declaration of Independence, they also act as an enabler for historians.

Archives containing primary-source and original documentation share the same advantages.² The two main advantages are the study of the original text and also the very document itself.

In the realm of qualitative research study, text is an essential part of understanding a society, including an historical society.³ The way in which text is presented reveals ideas of language patterns and specific priorities among society.⁴ Qualitative research gurus Lindlof and Taylor (2002) wrote, “By themselves, documents are usually of limited significance. But when they are related to other evidence, they have much to offer....Documents reflect certain kinds of organizational rationality at work. They often embody social rules—but not necessarily the reasoning behind the rules—that govern how members of a social collective should behave.”⁵

These concepts are analogous to the study of journalism history, not just the study of these journalistic texts but the documents in which they appear. Journalistic “agenda setting” directly correlates with ideas of

² Ketelaar.

³ Silverman, 65-67; Kobrin, 49-64.

⁴ Miller, 77.

⁵ Lindlof and Taylor, 117.

social priorities among the masses. Because the mass media has control over agenda-setting through where it places stories and with how much emphasis it chooses these news stories, one can assume what type of effects past stories had on citizens, or the media consumers.⁶ The overwhelming amount of data asserts that agenda-setting is a determinant when analyzing prominence placed in a news story; it also will determine the resonance the issue has among citizens.⁷ Therefore, original copies of what is in an archive of newspaper articles are pertinent to speculating how much impact it had on the public.

Agenda-setting research also reveals that while the placement of a newspaper story (front page above the fold or buried deeper) determines public salience, the number of times a news issue appears in the newspaper also affects salience, and in some ways leads to change in public policy.⁸

This concept seems obvious if one were to look at some of the impacts some Meeman Award winners had on public policy and the change that took place subsequent to publication. One of the best examples is from the venerable reporting of Ken Ward, Jr. of the *Charleston Gazette*, who won the Meeman Award for a 1996 series of articles about a secretive plan to build a medical waste incinerator relatively close to the Capitol.

⁶ McCombs.

⁷ Ibid; Abbe et al.

⁸ McCombs; Zhu et al.

The plan quietly gained permit approval without public knowledge. Ward wrote 35 stories about the plan to bring it to light before the project broke ground. He uncovered that permits that were hastily approved were in fact invalid. But the state already gave the hospital an "oral OK." After several articles, the citizens fought back, forming petitions and demanding public hearings.

The hospital's president reacted with Ward in mind saying, "While we understand the guerrilla tactics of those who oppose such projects and the fact that in some of their minds no solution is acceptable, it is extremely difficult to accept some of the wild and irresponsible pronouncements individuals have made."

The medical center insisted its permits were legit and the case went to the state Supreme Court. Eventually the medical center caved and held a public hearing that turned into a three-hour debate. The dispute seemed resolved six months after Ward's first article. The lawsuit was settled after the medical center agreed to "burn less waste in a new medical waste incinerator and eliminate some of the burner's most dangerous air pollution."

The frequent number of articles Ward wrote forced a raised awareness among the public and eventually created change that directly had environmental implications. This reaction to Ward's insistence of hammering the issue was the one major reason why the award's judges granted him the Meeman Award. Most of Ward's articles ran on the front

page, with some being above the fold. Ward's series directly exemplifies the effect of agenda-setting and how valuable the tool can be in regards to environmental journalism.

Preserving Original Documents

The Meeman Archive is vastly incomplete in being a resource or an example of containing original documentation for the sake of historical interpretation. In the archive, original entries and presentation binders primarily date after 1990. Before that year, the archive's keepers in Ann Arbor practically cut and pasted every entry onto 8.5 by 11 paper and filed them into folders based on publication. The order of these folders seems arbitrary, without rhyme or reason. Presumably, entries were pasted onto standard paper with the intention of transferring them onto microfilm. But that never happened.

One could only imagine that with the sheer number of yearly entries, filing them was a cumbersome and time-consuming task that grew less ideal with each passing year. Such folders are not accounted for after 1990. Dozens of post-1990 entries might have been thrown away in 1996 shortly before Detjen hauled the archive to East Lansing.

Some original copies of entries are in dire need of preservation. In some instances, they are torn up and falling apart because they are stored in, or stuffed in, boxes with dozens of other original entries. For example,

the *Sacramento Bee's* 1997 series entitled "The Gathering Storm," a Meeman Award winner, is an analytical look at the shortcomings of federal flood-control efforts that had become increasingly ineffective as developers continued to target floodplains.

The *Bee's* managing editor, Rick Rodriguez, wrote, "[The reporters'] work does not stop at simply laying blame on government. Because for all of government's imperfections, the reporters found, the troubles ultimately stem from a public attitude...that has not sent government the pressing political signal to make flood management a priority." Instead, the series revealed, citizens saw floods as natural disasters and therefore a tragedy rather than a preventable problem.

Another Meeman Award winner, the *St. Petersburg Times* 2001 series entitled "The poison in your back yard" examined arsenic in pressure-treated wood used to build children's playgrounds. The series explored the possibility of the arsenic leaking and alternatives to such wood.

Both series are accomplished, investigative pieces that raised the standards and prestige of the Meeman Award because they are such captivating examples of environmental journalism. However, they are both hard to read because they are in such bad condition. They are both examples of how documents that will eventually hold historical value are deteriorating because they are scrunched in boxes and filing cabinets.

This, in turn, diminishes their ability to be historical tools for future researchers and scholars.

In conclusion, similarly to Jefferson's assertion that document preservation is an American duty, it also goes to the heart of a historian's duty. Not only does it clarify and alleviate the relative nature of historical interpretation, it creates sentimental value that advances the perceived importance of that history. In this case, the Meeman Archive acts as advancing the importance of environmental journalism history, which can be compared and contrasted to the ways and means of today's environmental coverage.

In addition, original document preservation gives an idea of how much salience environmental issues had, based on the proven models of agenda-setting. By reviewing the number of articles an environmental reporter wrote and the placement of these articles in the newspapers, one can infer the amount of action and reaction created by the reporter's coverage. Because of agenda-setting, one can assume that the more prominence placed in the story directly results in more action taken by organizations, government agencies, corporations and the general public.

However, as noted above, the Meeman Archive contains only a small portion of such original copies of Meeman Award entries. And in some cases, these newspaper articles are damaged due to poor storage. While it won't require a million-dollar system to preserve these newspapers the way The National Archive preserves its most cherished

document, it will require time, money and a plan to make these original series accessible and usable among future researchers and student journalists who might aspire to follow in the footsteps of past environmental reporters.

The Archive's Future

The Meeman Archive has existed for over two decades with more than 1500 pieces of environmental writings. It nearly met its death in 1996 before it was transported from Ann Arbor to East Lansing. The archive continues to grow with each passing year thanks to the Scripps Howard Foundation and awards officials storing articles in FedEx boxes and shipping them to the Knight Center. Storage is increasingly sparse. Nobody maintains the archive and it is widely disorganized. Its future is unclear, yet its potential as a resource for the journalism department is outstanding.

During the summer 2004, Jim Detjen, director of the Knight Center for Environmental Journalism, formally asked the Scripps Howard Foundation about the chances of receiving a grant in order to transform the archive into a useful entity of the journalism department. The idea was to use grant money to teach a devoted graduate student the skills to organize the archive into an online library of some capacity. Such a project

would preserve the archive and relieve the Knight Center of some lost space.

However, the foundation declined Detjen's inquiry, presumably because it had already granted so much money to the University of Michigan in 1982 without seeing any good come of it. As a result, the archive sits dormant in the Knight Center, occupying roughly eight filing cabinets and a giant blue-print cabinet. Entries from 1999 onward sit in the very boxes they were mailed in. As mentioned before, several of these entries are in rough condition because they were scrunched into these boxes.

In 2003, Dave Poulson, assistant director of the Knight Center, braved the archive and spent a day and a half reviewing the material. In a memo, he wrote, "We have an impressive amount of high quality environmental journalism. I found it difficult not to stop and read it. But the organization task is much more challenging than even I anticipated. And every year we receive boxes of entries that are compounding the problem....I believe we are at a very critical point. We either have to find the money to catalogue this material responsibly, or we have to quit collecting it. It is next to useless now and it poses serious storage problems already. I don't know what we're going to do with the next shipment of boxes."

Poulson's memo reflects an old human adage that time seemingly passes exponentially. The years go by fast. This effect has two

implications: The Knight Center faces incoming award entries and winners with each passing year; but on the flip side, old entries from the 1980s carry even more historical significance.

Dozens of entries from two decades ago critique issues that tie into the policies of then-Interior Secretary James Watt and the conduct of the Reagan Administration. The way in which Americans faced its environmental issues in that era is directly reflected in the archive. This is only one of several reasons why the archive cannot be lost.

The online option clearly looks like the most viable and practical option to ensure the archive's preservation and continuity. Such a project would require a commitment of someone with computer and organizational skills. However, this ambitious project is one where the first step is the most difficult. And such a project would be impossible without financial backing. However, it would not be difficult to maintain such a project once the foundation is laid. But because there are two decades worth of material in the archive, maintenance seems secondary; the first step here is the most difficult.

Where there's a will, there's a way. The first step for the Knight Center is to find the financial backing before conjuring the will to get this task done. But once such a project is complete, the archive would seem less of a nuisance and a space-eater and more of a resource and commodity that would greatly enhance the Knight Center and the overall importance and relevance of environmental journalism.

The Meeman Award's Future

For 2004, for the first time since 1980, the Scripps Howard Foundation handed the Meeman Award to one entry rather than two—one to a big newspaper and one to a small one, based on the 100,000 circulation mark. The lone winner for 2004 went to *The Sun* in San Bernardino for a series entitled “Unnatural Disasters,” about how private property and their sovereign owners contribute to hazardous conditions that prompt mudslides, floods and wildfire.⁹ The competing finalists were from the *Sacramento Bee*, *The Denver Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, all major circulation newspapers.

When the author of this thesis asked Patty Cottingham, executive director of the Scripps Howard Foundation, why the number of award winners was now one instead of two, she replied, “We eliminated circulation divisions for environmental, public service and electronic media categories because entries were dropping off in both divisions. Newspapers and broadcast stations no longer have the resources (staff and dollars) to devote to investigative reporting—at least on the everyday level. We have noticed that if there is a significant investigative reporting story, the resources are devoted to the project.”¹⁰

⁹ <http://www.scripps.com/foundation/>

¹⁰ Cottingham wrote this March 28, 2005.

This is a telling revelation about the state of environmental journalism. Apparently, the standards were set so high with numerous entries that the tough competition of the award called for two awards based on circulation in 1981. However, now that has changed because the investigative resources are dwindling, especially among smaller newspapers, as evident in entries for the Meeman Award. Unfortunately, the big environmental story is out there, but newspapers are not meeting the standards they once did, according to Cottingham.

The one winner and three finalists for 2004 were all big-circulation newspapers. The strength of the archive is the array of small newspapers that broke through with intriguing articles about issues in their own backyards. One would find dozens of newspapers in the archive that most people have never heard of. Unfortunately, with the Meeman Award going to one entry now, this unique feature of the archive, comprising small obscure newspapers with the same fervor for environmental journalism, might not continue.

CHAPTER THREE: Analysis of the Meeman Archive

Overall Trends of a 20 year span

The Meeman Archive is a library of modern environmental journalism that displays how reporters at daily newspapers solidified the foundations of the beat. The beat itself is relatively young, which reflects the notion that modern environmentalism as we know it began in the 1960s. Prior to that, the public had not seen such vigor in the environmental debate since the days of Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot and John Muir.¹

Even though the Meeman Award began in 1967, the archive, which started in 1982, and its content is consistent with the formula of modern environmental journalism. However, to examine the winners of the Meeman Award over a two-decade span is not really an indicator of the environmental issues that were pertinent to that time period. A true examination of environmental issues would involve more than just an analysis of newspaper coverage.

This archive is a modest reflection of the environmental issues that faced Americans; this reflection is displayed in small, obscure newspapers and large, prestigious ones within the Knight Center's archive.

¹ See Nash.

A statistical analysis of the archive's content is not required to conclude that most of the content deals with chemical, nuclear and toxic pollution and the immediate human effects. This type of content usually unearths reluctance, intimidation or a cover-up by the obstinate perpetrator, which is usually a corporation or the government. The reporters usually have to aggressively investigate and they usually come across obstacles or utilize the Freedom of Information Act.

The fact that most of the content of the list of winners within the archive deals with the chemical and nuclear industry should not surprise anyone, considering the volatile and pernicious nature of them. And in many cases, these stories arise from the larger issues of that time, namely the rise of the chemical industry after World War II as a means to run American energy policy and production in the face of a Soviet Union threat.²

Of the 44 Meeman Award winners between 1982 and 2003, 22 of these winners dealt with chemicals, nuclear and toxic waste in some capacity. Some of these articles dealt with the local ramifications (a "not-in-my-backyard" approach) while other articles started with a local issue and branched out to a larger scope that affected the whole country or even the world. One could assume that the Meeman Award judges were compelled by these articles because of the urgent nature of the issue.

² Charatan examines the political aspects of biological weapons in the 1970s. McQueen's article examines the effort to reduce chemical stockpiles of weapons with the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. This trend marked the decrescendo of relying on chemicals as a combative mean during the Cold War. These events had environmental implications, though Charatan and McQueen do not specify them.

In many instances, questions of toxicity and human health took on angles that were not previously analyzed. For example, in 1984, *Orange County Register* reporters Chuck Cook and Maria Cone won for their series “Deadly Smoke,” which analyzed the changing perceptions among firefighters, that smoke exposure actually killed firefighters due to increasing use of chemicals in building material. Inhaling smoke while battling blazes was previously deemed a “badge of courage.” The series initially focused on Southern California but then branched out to find that it was actually a national issue. Firefighters were dying of damaged lungs and heart disease, more so than coal miners. They lived an average of 10 years less than the typical American.

“Of the 2,435 full-time firefighters in Orange County, 937 of them can expect to die from cancer....They are not accustomed to watching fellow firefighters die of cancer. In the face of it, they are realizing, the badge of courage is bravado.”

Here, Cook and Cone touch on firefighters and cancer, a topic not typically reserved as an environmental issue. But it is an environmental story because it highlights the changed building materials from a natural wood to synthetic plastics that can instantly kill someone upon open exposure. In an age where chemicals became the building blocks of what we inhabited, the unseen effect was “in 30 years, the number of firefighters dying from cancer has almost doubled.”

The following year, the winner for under 100,000 circulation went to *The Advertiser*, a small newspaper in Alabama, regarding the illegal storage of 300,000 gallons of PCBs. Reporters Booth Gunter and Mike Williams, both in their 20's at the time were able to connect this illegal activity to the governor, who gave quiet permission.

The year after that, both awards for over and under the 100,000 circulation mark went to stories that pertained to chemicals and toxic pollution issues. Jim Detjen and Susan FitzGerald of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and Jane Kay at the *Arizona Daily Star* directly focused on the people affected by shady corporate activity. In the former, it was a revisiting of the Three Mile Island nuclear debacle, and the long-term health ramifications that was systematically suppressed by the industry and overlooked by the media. In the latter, Kay added the element of environmental racism, where local Hispanic neighborhoods were the targets of a water supply polluted with TCE or trichloroethylene, an industrial chemical.

For 1986, the Meeman Award went to the *Seattle Times* for an introspective look at the nation's nuclear system after the Chernobyl disaster proved how destructive nuclear could be. The series initially compared Washington State's nuclear weapons facility, the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, to the conditions that led up to the Chernobyl disaster. The breakthrough came when an anonymous source sent them internal auditing documents, which exposed regulatory safety violations

and meek security operations. (The Department of Energy, which has environmental and safety oversight was described as a “toothless watchdog.”)

These findings prompted critiquing of bomb production across the country. According to the Scripps Howard Foundation’s annual pamphlets, the story led to the closing of two nuclear plants at the Hanford site and a decrease of 50 percent production at a nuclear site in Savannah, S.C.

These efforts by reporters who framed the widespread destructiveness of chemical and toxic pollution and its volatility connected the issue of environmental stewardship with public health. Especially in the case of the *Orange County Register*, *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Arizona Daily Star*, these reporters went straight to those affected to illuminate the human costs.

These examples show that while the term “environment” might create images of the forests and streams, it also refers to the urban environment and its effects on citizens. In addition, this type of reporting proves indelible and effective in creating policy change and holding those responsible accountable.

Besides the health effects of chemical and toxic waste exposure, the archive covers an array of other environmental topics. There are no other clear themes to these articles, just that they exemplify the wide-range of topics that are possible under the environment beat. One year might emerge a look at fish mutation because of water pollution and the

spiraling salmon population (1987) while the next year might produce an intriguing look at the sudden drop of migratory ducks in Minnesota because of rampant poaching in Louisiana and Mexico (1988).

Unique stories seem refreshing because they actually break from the “typical” topic, such as an analysis of the auto industry (2002) and the corruption behind The Nature Conservancy (2003). (Originality is discussed later in this chapter.) However, conformity seems to be the key within these 44 Meeman Award winners. The formula for outstanding environmental journalism, according to this archive, is that a reporter must investigate an obstinate corporation, government agency or organization, unveil damning activities, interview victims and cause reactionary demand and change for the better.

This formula closely adheres to a book that some say defined modern environmental journalism—that is *Silent Spring* (1958) by Rachel Carson. Of the book, Al Gore wrote, “This book was a shaft of light that for the first time illuminated what is arguably the most important issue of our era....Her work, the truth she brought to light, the science and research she inspired, stand not only as powerful arguments for limiting the use of pesticides but as powerful proof of the difference one individual can make.”³

³ Gore wrote the foreword for Carson’s 1994 printing of *Silent Spring*, published by Houghton Mifflin Co.

National Newspapers

If one were to peruse through the archive, he or she might notice entries from unknown newspapers located in the deepest and most remote areas of America. With the exception of the *Boston Globe* and *Philadelphia Inquirer*, lacking in the 1980s era of the archive are well-known newspapers such as *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*.

But entries from these newspapers conspicuously appear in the mid-1990s and onward, as though these prestigious newspapers suddenly found value in winning the Meeman Award.

While some late entries are exemplary in their investigative prowess, some of these big-named newspapers submitted entries that clearly lacked clout. For example, in 2000 the *Los Angeles Times* submitted "Dirty Air, Infected Water," by reporter Marla Cone, who wrote two series about the city's gloomy, yet improving air pollution and also the beaches and its pollution. (Cone, however, won the Meeman Award in 1983 with the *Orange County Register*.)

The entry letter by the newspaper's executive editor, Leo Wolinsky, reads: "Cone's series on the pollution caused by diesel exhaust focused attention on one of the preeminent air quality issues of the coming decade: controlling emissions from the large trucks that have become

increasingly central to our economy. The stories provided a detailed look at health problems, the issues faced by regulators and the technological advances that hold promise for a new generation of clean diesel. Later in the year, Cone provided a similarly in-depth look at pollution of the region's beaches....Again, Cone explained not just the problem but the potential solutions, some costly, others relatively simple.”

But as this letter, and also the series, reveal, there is no evidence that Cone’s writings impacted the public or prompted action among those accountable for such issues. As noted in this study of the archive, most winners of the Meeman Award had the distinction of creating a pivotal impact among the public, government officials and agencies, and corporations.

In 1998, *The New York Times* submitted a small collection of articles by Andrew Revkin about the recovering population of New York’s bald eagles and the extensive plan of cleaning up New York’s rivers. But the stories lacked investigative elements and was presented more like an open-ended question with an unknown answer.

The same year saw *USA Today* submit its series “The Zilog Mystery: What made so many workers so sick?” by Elliot Blair Smith. The very first article began: “The first sign of leaking poisons at Zilog’s aging semiconductor factory in rural Idaho in 1993 and 1994 came from the workers’ blistered faces and bloody lips. At the end of 12-hour shifts, Zilog

employees staggered from the factory 'clean room'...their mouths bleeding and faces red as if sunburned.”

Such disturbing images pepper this series and it is well-rounded and addresses concerns over corporate abuse in the computer age. “The U.S. computer chip industry is not as clean as its image,” the series said. But the series recounted what happened during the litigation process as workers fought back with lawsuits. The series did not *prompt* legal action, which would have been more impressive for the Meeman Award judges. Rather, it covered the legal action after the fact.

Both these series had holes in them compared with the winners of that year. The winner for over 100,000 circulation was the *Sacramento Bee*, where reporters Tom Knudson and Nancy Vogel covered the issues of floods through a 12-state study that included more than 150 flood-control experts concerned over urban sprawl in floodplains and an obvious complacency about this issue.⁴ According to the Scripps Howard Foundation, “response to the series was most vocal—and most positive—from the very agencies the series criticized. Officials from [FEMA] and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation thanked the *Bee* for sounding the alarm.”⁵

The Meeman Award judges felt that the *Bee*'s series exceeded what is expected of exemplary environmental journalism; the resourceful newspapers *USA Today* and *The New York Times* were lacking in their submissions.

⁴ According to the National Journalism Awards pamphlet for 1997, issued by the Scripps Howard Foundation.

⁵ *Ibid.*

The one big-named newspaper that has seen its environmental reporting blossom into fruition is the *Washington Post*, which won the Meeman Award twice in 2000 and 2003. The former, by reporter Michael Grunwald, scrutinized the Army Corps of Engineers, which had a 12 billion dollar federal budget with 34,000 employees and little accountability. The latter was a series by reporters David Ottaway and Joe Stephens, which targeted The Nature Conservancy, the largest environmental non-profit organization in the world.

Grunwald revealed projects by the Army Corps that had little value and widespread environmental impact. Ottaway and Stephens exposed the Nature Conservancy as run by people with ties to corporate polluters and that the organization “repeatedly purchased scenic properties, added some development restrictions, then resold the land to its own trustees and supporters at greatly reduced prices. Many buyers retained rights to build on the sites and reaped huge tax breaks by making charitable contributions to the Conservancy.”⁶

Both series created a widespread impact that received national attention and created internal change among these two organizations. They were also examples of how a prestigious newspaper with national clout could cover the environment in an effective manner. However, the Meeman Archive reveals that these major newspapers only began to submit entries in the mid-1990s. Perhaps this is a sign that the definitions

⁶ According to the National Journalism Awards pamphlet for 2003, issued by the Scripps Howard Foundation

of environmental journalism are changing and that these major newspapers no longer see the beat as beneath them.⁷

Small newspapers triumph

In contrast to big newspapers, there are a handful of examples of the Meeman Award for under 100,000 circulation awarded to newspapers with extremely limited resources. Traditionally, an exceptionally small circulation reflects a small newspaper staff, which usually limits the range of coverage. The award's judges seemingly give weight to entries submitted by newspaper staffs that are small yet able to uncover or bring to light a large and pressing environmental issue.

The Meeman Archive contains dozens of examples of small, obscure newspapers examining their local environmental conflicts. Newspaper enthusiasts would no doubt come across newspapers they never heard of before. Reading such examples would inspire young environmental journalists who might have a preconceived notion that only resourceful and prestigious newspapers excel at environmental and investigative muckraking.

The latest example of such a newspaper winning was in 2002 when the *Canon City Daily Record* triumphed in a David-versus-Goliath type endeavor. The controversy began when The Cotter Corporation, which

⁷ Ward says that environmental journalism is still seen in newsrooms as beneath other beats.

works in uranium, sought to haul half-million tons of a contaminated soil from New Jersey to Canon City's backyard in Colorado.

The award's judges' comments stated, "An incredible effort by a 9,000-circulation newspaper....Although small in staff, it spoke with the voice of a 9,000-pound gorilla."⁸

Because the newspaper knew it might bite off more than it could chew, they borrowed staff writers from other nearby, small newspapers to help. The series articulated the extent of the political divide within Canon City on the issue and the larger scope of the shortcomings of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. The series comprised 30 articles and prompted the department to implement stringent inspections.⁹

The runner-up that year was reporter Sherry Devlin of *The Missoulian* of Missoula, Montana. However, Devlin had already won the award in 2000 for a four-part series about forest fires, which were particularly ferocious that year, destroying 300 houses in Montana.¹⁰

The series, "The Big Burn of 1910," was a new angle for the 30,000-circulation newspaper, which everyday ran updates about the summer fire that never waned. Rather than harping on the disastrous effects of fire, Devlin wrote about fire as an asset to forests, and the ecological benefits that arise from it. Devlin emphasized that the giant fire of 1910 created a fire-suppression policy, which in turn inevitably created

⁸ According to the National Journalism Awards pamphlet for 2002, issued by the Scripps Howard Foundation.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ According to the National Journalism Awards pamphlet for 2000, issued by the Scripps Howard Foundation. Unfortunately, this series is unaccounted for in the Meeman Archive.

harsher conditions and left residents more vulnerable. The series pointedly contextualized how that dreaded summer was not a stroke of bad luck but a result of a nine-decade-old policy that made things worse.

Another example of small newspapers doing extraordinary things is the *Alabama Journal*, an afternoon publication with six staff writers and a circulation of 20,000. It won in 1991 for its critique of Alabama's rivers, which were clear victims of governmental neglect and corporate abuse. An interviewee described his local river as "a nasty root-beer float." It seemed that this series would go in vain when even the state's environmental agency refused an interview.

The reporters followed two canoeists who toured the Coosa and Alabama rivers, passing dozens of industrial lots. By their own direct observations, the *Journal's* reporters found the rivers to be cesspools containing alarming amounts of cancer-causing dioxins, that specie extinction and habitat destruction were common and that state government agencies were run by the very industries responsible. The reporters concluded that by trekking to the deep portions of the rivers, where such activities existed, "you see a lot you wouldn't otherwise see."

The *Journal's* reporters, once again, exemplified the admirable elements of American journalism, by traveling to sites of question and observing for themselves the facts of the issue. In this case, it required canoes and a six-month investigative journey, which, in the end, raised the standards for what small newspapers are capable of doing.

While the three examples above are not the only ones within the archive, they are the strongest display of what environmental journalists are capable of doing, even when resources are limited.

However, one may speculate as to whether these types of works will continue to appear at the Knight Center in the future. Because the Meeman Award is switching to one award for all circulations rather than two awards for over and under the 100,000 mark, there might not be as many entries and winners from smaller newspapers. It is safe to assume that these newspapers will not win either, because they can be easily overwhelmed and overshadowed by the larger, more resourceful newspapers.

Nevertheless, the archive remains an inspirational example for journalism students entering the profession with a small publication. These examples show that the power of the pen can go a lot further than a publication's prestige.

An Aim for Originality

While the bulk of award winners took up the issue of nuclear, toxic waste and chemical pollution, there are only two winners in the archive that are truly original in topic and prose. These two series are: "Yadkin Passage: Adrift in the Mainstream" by Floyd Rogers at the *Winston-Salem*

(N.C.) *Journal*, the winner in 1982, and "The Big Burn of 1910" by Sherry Devlin at *The Missoulian*, which won in 2001.

As mentioned earlier, "The Big Burn of 1910" is a brilliant series, not just because it offers alternative explanations for the particularly harsh forest fires that gripped Montana at that time, but because it offers an historical perspective as a means to explain the present. This is a technique that might be lacking in articles in the archive; while the past can bring to light present environmental problems, the key is in the long-term past going back several generations. Here is Devlin's opening passage:

"When survivors came crawling from the creeks and mine tunnels, the monster cedars atop Moon Pass were still burning--like candles, one young firefighter imagined, glowing for the dead.

"Some of the snags burned into the winter, stubbornly bearing witness to the greatest firestorm ever recorded in the northern Rocky Mountains.

"Some yet stand sentinel, reminders not only of the calamity, but of the debate that followed, changing the course of national forest management by convincing Americans that fire was bad and the forests should be rid of it.

"The story of the fire that--on Aug. 20 and 21, 1910--burned 3 million forested acres in western Montana and northern Idaho is a story of wildland firefighting in America. Heroic. Deadly. Expensive. It is the story,

said historian Stephen Pyne, of how and why a society declared war on nature.

“And how, 90 years later, nature bit back.”

Devlin's series does not muckrake or engage in anything investigative. She doesn't use FOIA or interview hundreds of victims of a scandalous pollution debacle. She adopts a different formula based on story-telling, which can be the most effective way of informing the public and inducing change. She talks with historians and uses pictures from the 1910's to give the series a human element. The result is a story of the past told in order to change the present, which in this case was the false impression that forest fires were harmful and needed to be absolutely oppressed.

Similarly to Devlin's alternative approach to her environmental coverage, Rogers' series about the Yadkin River and its waning sentimental importance among the public, relies on its writing style to lure readers. Instead of writing in the standard, third person, Rogers writes of his own personal journey in a larger effort to restore the pride of the river that once defined it. Ditching the confined rules learned in journalism school, Rogers writes in the first person with personal lament, nostalgia and humor.

The immediate issue in the series is a local hotel, which decided to build a concrete parking lot right on top of the river. "When it rains, runoff from the parking lot collects in the catch basin and mingles with the spring

water. A culvert carries the water to the edge of the parking lot and dumps it down the hillside, which is littered with beer cans and dead brush....But (the parking lot) is symbolic of the way the Yadkin has been treated, and mistreated, in the two-plus centuries since white men came to live in its valley."

Rogers describes his idea of venturing on a canoe trip organized by the Yadkin-Pee Dee River Basin Committee. His stories involve his relationships:

"Perhaps 25 miles downstream from the once-Yadkin Spring is the community of Ferguson, named for a family of Scottish immigrants who came to the valley more than 20 years ago.

"It was at Ferguson that we got our feet wet so to speak, with an unofficial excursion Thursday down the upper Yadkin and across the lake to the dam.

"Bob said it had been a while since he and the others had been on the river, and they wanted to get limbered up before the official launching. I suspect, though, that he wanted to see if he could paddle the canoe without falling out.

"He found out about 30 minutes after we pulled in.

"I fell out."

The conversational prose of Rogers' relationship with the Yadkin River is a welcoming approach that generates intrigue, which in turn creates a sense of the river's importance as a local icon. This approach to

writing is unseen throughout the archive, and it is no wonder that it won the award, because it distinguishes itself from other writings that rely on traditional means.

Newspaper columnists are multi-dimensional, just like their readers. Their bylines stand out whereas the common reporter's byline is usually overlooked. Columnists can be critical and expressive and they are expected to be, whereas reporters are subtle in tone and careful in wording. For a miner of the Meeman Archive, it is refreshing to see this series and somewhat disheartening to not see others, because environmental reporting should not be construed as strictly a reporter's beat.¹¹

There are several series that are distinguishable based on its angle, however, Devlin's and Rogers' series are the only two award winners that were strong in its impact and purpose. They used different elements than other winners, which relied heavily on investigative techniques. This suggests that Meeman Award judges weigh how reporters pieced their series over creativity and experimental angles within the realm of environmental coverage.

The only series that emerged during the perusal of the archive that turned the idea of environmental coverage upside-down was *The Oregonian's* 1999 entry on eco-terrorism. Rather than pick apart the government, corporations and juicy scandal, this series examined the

¹¹ Many would argue that John Muir was an environmental reporter because the definition can apply to anyone with a pen, a pad and an appreciation.

world of violent environmental activists. The entry letter read: “Case by case, [the reporters James Long and Bryan Denson] sought insight from government specialists and those convicted and suspected, as well as from members of a large underground ‘family’ of western extremists who accounts were vital to establishing motivation and context.” The series framed eco-terrorism as a movement. And PETA was paying these terrorists’ legal bills.

“Liberating animals and burning structures,” one sympathizer said. “This action [takes] place not as an act of eco-terrorism, but as an act of love.”

However, this series did not win that year, but it did highlight that environmental reporting is not simply flushing out the governmental and corporate cheaters and polluters. It also explores all the elements, whether it’s violent environmentalists that deviate from social norms, a first-person testimonial (Floyd Rogers), or a historical look of ancient times as a way to explain the present, such as Devlin’s series.

The Importance of FOIA

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) was passed in 1966, just under two centuries after the birth of the country. It was an action taken not just for journalists but for everyone; however, journalists have largely adopted it as one of the most advantageous tools available for the free

press. It also began a tug-of-war between government and journalists as agencies searched for new and creative ways to withhold documents from the public. These ways include charging high fees, claiming the documents lost or damaged or blaming understaffing.¹²

While FOIA was meant to open access, it also, perhaps inadvertently, introduced a perpetual struggle that made government even more far reaching in its ways to withhold documents. This trend has culminated with the terror events of 9-11 with government officials using the excuse of security in order to deny the release of information.¹³

There are dozens of examples in the Meeman Archive of reporters using FOIA for its investigative articles, many of which won the award. Because it is clear that many winners included the use of FOIA in their work, one can conclude that the Meeman Award judges defines this legislation as an important entity of environmental investigative reporting. There are a handful of entry letters written by editors that tout the fact that their reporters used FOIA to obtain information, as though this technique is the mark of a hard-nosed, cerebral reporter.

The first example used here is the series on Three Mile Island in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that won for 1985. A post-series article entitled "Behind the scenes: How this series was written" summarized how the two reporters, Jim Detjen and Susan FitzGerald, came to use FOIA. The reporters focused on documents after interviewing hundreds of former

¹² Pember, p. 287.

¹³ Halstuk; Walters.

workers of the scrutinized nuclear plant that revealed neglectful management conditions.

Instead, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission and Departments of Labor and Energy declined to share documents. “But [they] persisted with other officials and they filed requests to see hundreds of documents under [FOIA].” After an NRC official provided access, he figured the two reporters would “spend only a few days at that office. But the reporters ended up returning day after day for several months. They read through tens of thousands of pages of documents—most of them never before made public.

“The records confirmed what the workers had been saying. Scores of cases in which workers had been needlessly exposed to radiation were documented in detail.”

As noted earlier in this thesis, documents hold intangible value on multiple levels, and they especially help reporters who seek proof when environmental problems seem apparent on the surface. Documents articulate the meat of environmental problems beyond what is apparent to observations. They affirm and solidify the urgency conveyed by environmental reporters and they often lead to public action and policy changes.

The best recent example comes from Michael Grunwald’s investigation of the Army Corps of Engineers for the *Washington Post*, which won the Meeman Award in 2001, as mentioned earlier in this

chapter. As Grunwald asked questions about the Corps' annual budget, the agency became guarded and apprehensive. Grunwald was insistent, prompting officials to direct their staffers to not talk to him or face termination.

“Grunwald persisted, using [FOIA], internal agency sources, and traveling to the field to locate independent sources and whistleblowers.”¹⁴

After an obstinate Corps publicly attacked Grunwald, they suddenly became compliant after Congress raised questions. “The Army inspector general delivered a 168-page report on the Corps that strongly supported the Post’s findings and acknowledged Grunwald’s assertion that the Corps’ aggressive pursuit of work and ties with Congress jeopardizes objectivity,” in the effectiveness and usefulness of its projects.¹⁵

The Meeman Archive can be utilized as containing examples of journalistic capabilities due to the liberties provided by FOIA. This remarkable law is also malleable in the sense that government agencies are always grappling with it, along with stubborn and insistent journalists. Usually these journalists are successful and are on the side of expanding FOIA beyond its limits.¹⁶ And while FOIA is an asset to all journalists, the archive strongly displays it as essential for muckraking, environmental journalists who are capable of turning harmful and negligent corporate and governmental activity on its head.

¹⁴ According to the National Journalism Awards pamphlet for 2000, issued by the Scripps Howard Foundation.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Rosenfield; Walters.

Chapter Four: A Retrospective Conclusion

What It All Means

There are several conclusions that can be derived from this analysis of the Meeman Award and the Knight Center's archive. While the larger goal of this analysis is to see the archive utilized into an accessible and useful resource, concepts of environmental journalism, history and documentation are also emphasized. These concepts share more similarities than differences, namely dialogue.

While the history assesses the dialogue of the past, the journalism displays the dialogue of the present. To preserve this dialogue for future analysis is to preserve a piece of history. The volume of this dialogue indicates the urgency of the issue at the time, which is one way historians try to capture the ideas and values of the past.

As Nash emphasizes, environmental history is a history of what people perceive of the environment. In early American history, the environment was seen by European settlers as threatening, mysterious and a haven for Native Americans. It wasn't until Gifford Pinchot and John Muir at the turn of the nineteenth century that the wilderness held sentimental and aesthetic value.¹ Since that time, dialogue and images of

¹ See Nash.

“the environment” have changed, and a good historian uses that dialogue to interpret the past.

The beginning of Chapter One describes Mark Madison, the first historian hired by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The agency gave him access of its documents, revealing its potent history. With this opportunity, Madison was given the chance of analyzing the agency’s dialogue, and the changing issues that faced it as time progressed.

Documents are a form of dialogue invaluable to such historians. In terms of journalism history, the preservation of newspapers helps reveal the effects of agenda-setting and salience among the public. They also display a media of a different era, even if the newspapers in question are merely a decade old, which is the case with a portion of the Meeman Archive.

For environmental historians, they indicate the top issues of that era and locale. However, while the Meeman Archive holds several original copies of award entries, they are somewhat unorganized, and in some cases damaged. This diminishes the historical importance and usefulness of a document.

While Pinchot and Muir invented ideas of conservation and environmental pride, their era was much more concerned with untapped and pristine forests.² As noted in Chapter Three, the Meeman Archive

² See Gifford Pinchot’s Breaking New Ground, Washington, D.C.: Island Press, reprinted in 1987. Also see John Muir’s The Mountains of California, New York: The Century Co., 1894. Muir writes as a poet with great emotion.

covers an era more concerned with toxic and nuclear waste, and chemical pollution.

The archive also incorporates ideas of public health and people as victims, which suggests that human health is indicative of environmental stewardship. The theme of corporate and governmental neglect and the use of the Freedom of Information Act are prominent in the archive, which furthers the understanding of the journalistic beat.

One may presume that generations from now, environmental issues will concern things far from what concerned Pinchot and Muir, and also the chemical and nuclear age of the 1980s and 90s. Pinchot and Muir probably couldn't fathom the issues we face today, of nuclear waste, ozone depletion and global climate change. Likewise, our present society cannot comprehend what environmental challenges lie ahead. Perhaps many generations from now, environmental journalism will adopt a new approach, starkly different from today's beat.

As time passes, the archive's historical significance rises. Not far from now, the Knight Center's new students will not have memories of the Cold War and the nuclear arms build-up of the 1980s. The archive clearly displays that era; the era of Ronald Reagan and James Watt, both widely criticized by environmental advocates.

As noted in Chapters One and Two, if the archive is preserved, these comparisons can be more apparent to future generations. However, the archive's future remains uncertain because there is no financial

backing to ensure its preservation and utilization. The archive has great potential to be transformed into a library, possibly online. These types of ideas require not just money but commitment and the design of some sort of infrastructure.

If the Knight Center carries out such ideas for the archive's future, Michigan State's journalism department would benefit as a whole. There are only a handful of environmental journalism programs across the country. The archive would further distinguish the Knight Center, which is already a prestigious and growing option for students within the journalism program.

Lastly, an accessible archive would draw general interest among students who otherwise wouldn't find the beat appealing. The archive shows how the beat has limitless angles and is not confined to doomsday coverage. This is why environmental journalism can be an attractive and viable option for young student journalists seeking to hone a focus. If the goals are made and the steps taken to develop the archive, the unforeseen benefits could emerge that would strengthen the Knight Center, the journalism department and the beat as a whole.

APPENDIX

Appendix: Award Winners 1982-2004

1982

Newspaper: *Winston-Salem* (NC) Journal

Reporter(s): Floyd Rogers

Summary: Rogers writes in the first person about his journeys through the Yadkin River. It is an effort to restore local pride and historical awareness of a river victimized by apathy.

Newspaper: *Christian Science Monitor*

Reporter(s): Jonathan Harsch

Summary: This series explores the science of soil and its fragility amid widespread depletion and erosion.

1983

Newspaper: *Easton* (MD) *Star-Democrat*

Reporter(s): Jack Bowie, Peter Jensen and Rick Boyd

Summary: Urban sprawl, hazardous runoff and unmonitored fishing are only a fraction of the problems facing the Chesapeake Bay. The series sparked major surrounding news agencies in addressing the bay's condition. Walter Cronkite appeared and moderated public forums.

Newspaper: *Orange County Register*

Reporter(s): Marla Cone and Chuck Cook

Summary: With the increased use of chemicals in building materials, firefighters are in serious danger of dying at early ages. Among firefighters, toughing out inhaled smoke was a badge of masculine honor, until they began dying of cancer.

1984

Newspaper: *The Advertiser* (AL)

Reporter(s): Booth Gunter and Mike Williams

Summary: The series focuses on the small town of Emelle, home of the rest of the country's nuclear waste, which also includes the toxic waste of foreign countries. Public response was of shock since citizens did not previously know of such an operation.

Newspaper: *Des Moines Register*

Reporter(s): James Risser

Summary: After President Reagan ends President Carter's organic farming program, Risser explores the intangible benefits of organic, both

environmental and economic. The Dept. of Agriculture denies such benefits and instead advocates chemical farming.

1985

Newspaper: *Arizona Daily Star*

Reporter(s): Jane Kay

Summary: Drinking water is contaminated with trichloroethylene in Hispanic neighborhoods due to nearby industry. Hundreds of interviews with residents reveal widespread sickness in southern Tucson. It is discovered that residents had been drinking contaminated water unknowingly for several decades.

Newspaper: *Philadelphia Inquirer*

Reporter(s): Jim Detjen and Susan FitzGerald

Summary: The Three Mile Island nuclear disaster still reverberates among exposed workers who struggle partly due to non-contrite management. The reporters heavily relies on the Freedom of Information Act to review progress, or lack thereof, of the disaster cleanup.

1986

Newspaper: *The Morning Advocate* (LA)

Reporter(s): Bob Anderson and Mike Dunne

Summary: With 100 acres of coastline vanishing a day, the Louisiana wetlands is a prime examples of how such an environmental disaster can be detrimental to neighboring ecosystems and pertinent industries.

Newspaper: *Seattle Times*

Reporter(s): Eric Nadler, Dick Clever, Elouise Schumacher and Tom Brown

Summary: After the Chernobyl debacle, the nearby Hanford nuclear plant proves to be of the same design coupled with lax management and maintenance. However, this investigation reveals Hanford to be one of dozens of similar situations across the country.

1987

Newspaper: *Charleston (WV) Gazette*

Reporter(s): James Haught, Paul Nyden and Norman Oder

Summary: A telling quote: "Our DOE commissioner, Ken Faerber, so blatantly ignored federal strip mine regulations that even Reagan administration officials denounced him."

Newspaper: *Seattle Times*

Reporter(s): Natalie Fobes

Summary: The depletion of salmon is a combination of over-fishing, pollution, dams and genetic mutations. Salmon's future might be in farms to satisfy the country's appetite.

1988

Newspaper: *Charleston (WV) Gazette*

Reporter(s): Norman Oder, Paul Nyden, James Haught and Alyssa Lenhoff

Summary: For a second consecutive year, this newspaper wins for investigative pieces on the overwhelming importation of garbage and toxic waste from New England cities.

Newspaper: *St. Paul Pioneer Press*

Reporter(s): Dennis Anderson

Summary: The Minnesota skies seem starkly quiet with a lack of ducks because of unregulated poaching in Louisiana and Mexico. Ducks Unlimited is portrayed as inactive.

1989

Newspaper: *The Sun* (San Bernardino, CA)

Reporter(s): Sam Atwood

Summary: The country's worst air pollution, situated in San Bernardino, is attributed to deteriorating health among local children.

Newspaper: *The Boston Globe*

Reporter(s): Larry Tye

Summary: The Soviet Union's environmental stewardship is the worst in the world as acid rain literally strips evergreen forests of its color and causes widespread birth defects and permanent brain damage among newborns.

1990

Newspaper: *The Alabama Journal*

Reporter(s): Steve Prince, Dianne Ludlam, Katherine Bouma, Nancy Dennis, Jim Tharpe, Dan Morse, Elizabeth Hayes and Early Thaxton

Summary: Hands-on journalism brings the reporters directly to the scene of industrial abuse along Alabama's rivers.

Newspaper: *Orlando Sentinel*

Reporter(s): George Romaine, Jeff Brazil, Cindy Schreuder, Red Huber, John Huff, Craig Dezern, Sean Holton and John Radux

Summary: The lovable manatee is on the verge of extinction thanks in large part to boat owners with sharp propellers who would rather enjoy the Florida sun on the water than worry about giant odd-looking sea creatures.

1991

Newspaper: *The Poughkeepsie (NY) Journal*

Reporter(s): Meg Downey and Mary Beth Pfeiffer

Summary: The newspaper's call to create the Hudson River Valley Greenway prompts state lawmakers to do just that. The goal is to reintroduce people back to the river by creating recreational opportunities and clean up its pollution.

Newspaper: *The Times-Picayune*

Reporter(s): James O'Byrne and Mark Schleifstein

Summary: A 56-page series examines Louisiana's dealings with the chemical industry, everything from toxic air and water pollution to modernized petrochemical plants located next to the Capitol in Baton Rouge.

1992

Newspaper: *The National Law Journal*

Reporter(s): Claudia MacLachlan, Marianne Lavelle and Marcia Coyle

Summary: Environmental racism is a reality after it is made clear that the federal government's effort to clean up toxic waste sites favors those closest to white neighborhoods over black neighborhoods.

Newspaper: *Orlando Sentinel*

Reporter(s): Alex Beasley, Mary Beth Regan, John Glisch and John Huff

Summary: "A toxic soup" penetrates Florida's fresh water reserves.

Hundreds of toxic dumps are seeping hazards into wells and aquifers amid inactive lawmakers and governmental agencies.

1993

Newspaper: *Mobile Register*

Reporter(s): David McCormick, Bailey Thomson, Renee Busby, Ronni Patriquin, Michael Hardy, Doug Dimitry, Carol McPhail, Sam Hodges, Kiichiro Sato, David Rainer and Michael Callahan.

Summary: Illegal dumping in Mobile Bay by chemical plants, paper mills and other industries abound because the South invited such activities though its environmentally lax politics.

Newspaper: *The Dallas Morning News*

Reporter(s): Randy Lee Loftis and Craig Flournoy

Summary: A vast public housing project receives governmental approval only when the proposal is located in the middle of a toxic dump. This series also examines this issue as the latest in environmental racism.

1994

Newspaper: *Charleston (WV) Gazette*

Reporter(s): Ken Ward

Summary: An obstinate coal corporation pushed to build a giant pulp mill while refusing to reveal plans for disposing its byproducts. Ward

discovered the company contributed large sums of money to the governor's reelection campaign.

Newspaper: *Los Angeles Times*

Reporter(s): Marla Cone

Summary: Chemical pollution is transforming wild animals' genders to the point that reptiles, birds and fish are losing their sexual identities. It is evolution gone awry.

1995

Newspaper: *Albuquerque Tribune*

Reporter(s): Tony Davis

Summary: Overrun by cattle, environmentalists and ranchers grapple with two extremely different solutions amid high tensions.

Newspaper: *The News & Observer (NC)*

Reporter(s): Pat Stith and Joby Warrick

Summary: Hog producers have pushed out the small farmer at an alarming rate. The result was hog waste contamination of wells.

1996

Newspaper: *Charleston (WV) Gazette*

Reporter(s): Ken Ward

Summary: A medical center tries to fly under the radar in gaining approval of building a medical waste incinerator near the Capitol. In response, citizens rally and petition and eventually win in seeking a safer compromise.

Newspaper: *Mobile Register*

Reporter(s): Sam Hodges, Sean Reilly, Bill Finch and Dewey English

Summary: This series emphasizes how forests are an economic commodity, however tree harvesters are clear cutting with little concern for long-term implications.

1997

Newspaper: *Cape Cod Times*

Reporter(s): William Mills, Anne Brennan and Alicia Blaisdell-Bannon

Summary: A local military reservation is the source of toxic plumes. Despite over a hundred million dollars and 15 years of clean up efforts, toxic pollution is still rampant.

Newspaper: *Sacramento Bee*

Reporter(s): Tom Knudson and Nancy Vogel

Summary: A 12-state study examines the inevitability of widespread flooding because of outdated flood-plain maps and an insatiable appetite to engage in urban sprawl.

1998

Newspaper: *Yakima Herald-Republic*

Reporter(s): Jennifer Hieger and Bill Heisel

Summary: The dairy revolution in Washington raises questions over what to do with all of that manure.

Newspaper: *Seattle Times*

Reporter(s): Eric Nalder, Danny Westneat, Deborah Nelson and Jim Simon

Summary: Public lands are traded to private interests, supposedly for equal value. But while law demands equal value, there are several examples of developers obtaining land for very little.

1999

Newspaper: *The Advocate* (LA)

Reporter(s): Mike Dunne

Summary: Wetland restoration efforts are extremely lacking in management and implementation. The series appears shortly before Congress considers renewing its federal wetland program; however, the state government's incompetence is conspicuous.

Newspaper: *The Blade*

Reporter(s): Sam Roe

Summary: The building of nuclear bombs and the chemicals required has exposed workers to cancer-causing toxins that the public was unaware of. The series created federal action to investigate weapons-related illness.

2000

Newspaper: *The Missoulian* (MT)

Reporter(s): Sherry Devlin

Summary: One of the worst fire seasons raises questions, but the answers lie in a century-old policy of fire suppression that gradually created conditions ripe for a disaster.

Newspaper: *Washington Post*

Reporter(s): Michael Grunwald

Summary: The Army Corps of Engineers is an unchecked governmental agency that makes rash decisions detrimental to the environment and shows little care in spending tax dollars on ineffective projects.

2001

Newspaper: *Pensacola News Journal*

Reporter(s): Scott Streater

Summary: Scenic Escambia County is actually the home of Florida's toxins, a fact discovered after doctors asked questions about its unusually high cancer rate.

Newspaper: *St. Petersburg Times*

Reporter(s): Julie Hauserman

Summary: This series explores the perils of pressure-treated wood and the chemicals in them. The issue particularly raised eyebrows when locals looked at children's playgrounds.

2002

Newspaper: *Canon City (CO) Daily Record*

Reporter(s): John Lemons, Lee Spaulding, Terri Holloway and Tamera McCumber among reporters from other local newspapers

Summary: This 9,000 circulation newspaper attacks a uranium milling company with a bad environmental record. As the company tried to dispose thousands of tons of radioactive soil, the series connected the struggle to larger issues of lacking governmental inspection and oversight.

Newspaper: *Chicago Tribune*

Reporter(s): Sam Roe

Summary: Ambitions toward the gas-efficient "Supercar" dissolved under the Bush Administration. But this series exposed how the auto industry steered the future toward SUVs because the profit margin was higher in the short term.

2003

Newspaper: *Naples Daily News (FL)*

Reporter(s): Cathy Zollo, E. Staats, J. Zeitlin, J. Cox and A. Zagier among a dozen others

Summary: The invasion of "black water," described as "blob and white threads—like spider webs" has enveloped the Gulf's waters. The source of the blob eventually pointed to hazardous dumping along Mexico, Texas and Alabama thanks to little regulations and oversight.

Newspaper: *Washington Post*

Reporter(s): David Ottaway and Joe Stephens

Summary: The Nature Conservancy, a reputable organization, is actually comprised of corporate business executives that at one time favored drilling for oil in an area home to endangered birds. The organization misused funds in loaning over a million dollars to its president. In another incident, it bought property and developed the land only to sell it cheaply to business friends.

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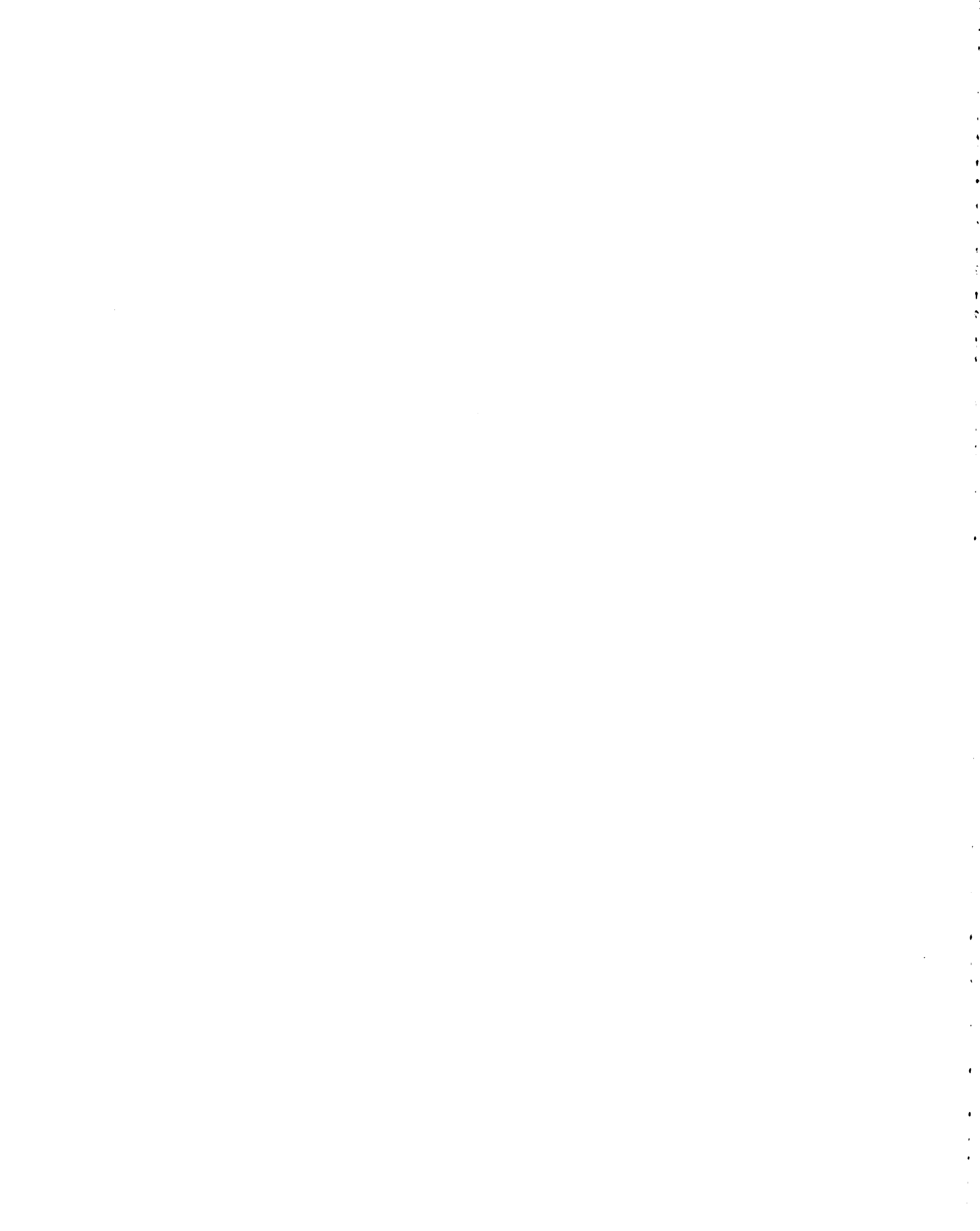
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