

Hear UR  
SEASON 5: Urban History  
Episode: The Rise of Everyday Environmentalism  
By: Maryah Albahhar, Sam Caldwell, & Henry Szuchman

**Introduction**

HENRY:

The physical world as we know it  
is changing. Ever wonder why it  
feels like it's always 75 degrees  
in November now?

WILDFIRES. MELTING GLACIERS. HIGH  
GAS PRICES. CLIMATE CHANGE. Every  
day more and more Americans are  
scrambling to find ways to be more  
sustainable in an attempt to do  
their part in this changing world.  
One not-so-new way people are  
trying to do their part? Simply  
riding a bicycle

MUSIC BED IN:

Greetings earthlings! Welcome to  
HearUR, a history podcast from the  
University of Rochester. My name  
is Henry Szuchman, your episode  
host.

Join us as we examine the  
complicated history and surprising  
overlap between the  
environmentalist movement and  
biking culture in Western NY.

This is HearUR, season five,  
Episode 5, **The rise of everyday  
environmentalism - Rochester in  
the 1970s.**

MUSIC BED OUT:

HENRY:

Bicycles. Fun objects you can  
easily ride around to avoid  
traffic, get exercise, and help

the environment. How could there be any issue? Well, politics. Yep. For this thing that might seem so simple at first, there was no shortage of polarization and debate. In local governments all over the country, there were, and still are, ongoing debates about infrastructure and traffic laws related to bicycles.

Notably, pollution was a major environmental concern during this time period, and Rochester was no exception. Much of Durand-Eastman beach had been washed away by high waters, and there was high demand for more bike paths and recreation centers.

SFX: WAVES CRASHING

HENRY:

We're joined now by local Cycle-Tour Guide and author Harvey Botzman.

HENRY:

Did you feel like there was kind of an uproar of change during the decade you were here in the 70s? Or did you feel like it was often complacent compared to the bigger cities like New York?

HARVEY:

I think that there was an idea of change among some segments of the population. You have to remember that the large businesses dominated everything here in Rochester.

SFX: CLOCK TICKING

Before we dive into the decade of Hippies, Disco parties, and Earth days, it's important to understand

just where environmentalism stems from.

MUSIC BED IN:

AMBIENCE: INDUSTRY

The concept of Environmentalism, a political movement organized around the protection of the environment, has roots dating back to the Romantic Era and the Industrial revolution. In this period, people struggled with the byproducts of industrialization, as smog and dust filled streets and bombarded lungs. In response, some people fled the city in search of a purer, more "natural" way of life.

A century later, the world had changed, and so too had environmental thought. Not only did people continue to seek refuge in nature, they began to organize around its protection.

Pollution crises proliferated everywhere. From the infamous 1952 London Fog, killing more than 4,000 individuals, to the Cuyahoga River catching fire in 1969,

SFX: FIRE

fear was sparked like never before.

SFX: PROTEST

And of course, one of the most impactful events in modern history, the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill, in which a massive 3 million gallons of oil were leaked into the California coast.

SFX: HAUNTING

HENRY:

We're joined now by historian Professor Thomas Fleischman, to provide some insight into the development of this time period. So to start us off, let's talk about the 1970s. There was so much going on during this decade, it's almost hard to know where to begin!

FLEISCHMAN:

The world that we live in today, was made in the 1970s. Everything from the geopolitical configuration of the world, the economic order that persists to this day, political movements from, of course, environmentalism and civil rights and decolonization, but also terrorism, separatism, Neo conservatism, Evangelical white nationalism, all these things are beginning in the 70s.

This movement is taking place all over the world, alongside a general trend in youth movements opposing power within their society.

HENRY:

How would you say this philosophy evolved into the environmentalist movement?

FLEISCHMAN:

The environmental movement, however, came to identify the ways in which that economic growth, a model that was dependent on cheap energy, in this case cheap oil and fossil fuels, but also the built world and environment of highways, economies that are oriented

towards heavy industry, meaning  
the production of steel,

SFX: INDUSTRY

and automobiles and heavy  
machinery, but also the rise of  
consumerism, meaning, the idea of  
an economic sector of the society  
that is organized around the  
consumption or buying of things.

Environmental activists coalesce  
around the critique of society  
that says that these things are  
destroying the earth.

HENRY:

What were some of the main ways  
that people tried to have a  
personal, positive impact on the  
environment?

FLEISCHMAN:

What you would see are organized  
campaigns against littering, trash  
pickup, which became prominent in  
the 70s. You would see political  
demonstrations using various  
tactics.

HENRY:

And how would you say biking  
specifically fits into that?

FLEISCHMAN:

The reason why bicycles fit into  
environmentalism is it's a really  
natural outgrowth of the student  
protest movement. Some of the  
earliest breakthroughs for  
environmentalism are these mass  
demonstrations. Of course, Earth  
Day is the most famous.

SFX: BIRDS

HENRY:

So it seems like in many ways during the 1970s, the essence of environmentalist culture was truly becoming integrated into aspects of mainstream society. And guess what, just like today, there's one major relevant issue that never seems to go away: high gas prices

MUSIC BED IN:

HENRY:

The year is 1974. Rochester bikes sales are at an all time high, skyrocketing 10-15 percent from the previous year. People are waiting months just to get their hands on a two-wheeler. Just one year later "Americans...bought 10 million cars and 14 million bicycles." What on earth is happening?!

MUSIC BED OUT:

FLEISCHMAN:

The real major shock, and the one that's most famous, is the oil crisis of 1973, which was a result of the six day war between Israel and several neighboring countries in the Middle East.

So you get these sort of rolling waves of inflationary forces that are up ending the economy. And this leads to this acute shortage in the West, you see these lines of cars waiting to get gas from gas stations that are running out of gasoline. And so people start to turn to bicycles

SFX: BIKE BELL

HENRY:

Environmentalism and increased demand for bicycles were seen throughout the nation. What about right here in Rochester?

MUSIC BED IN:

HENRY:

One of the biggest components of this was the so-called Bicycle Task Force. Harvey, have you heard of it?

HARVEY:

Of course, I'm aware of the bicycle Task Force. [LAUGHTER] How did you know about the bicycle Task Force?

MUSIC BED OUT:

HENRY:

For those that might not be aware, the Rochester Bicycle Task Force was composed of citizen volunteers and representatives of local governments or safety-oriented agencies, and it was established in the summer of 1974, after a petition signed by 5,000 people was presented to the county legislature.

HENRY:

What do you think inspired the bicycle Taskforce?

HARVEY:

I think it was just to have better facilities, not environmentalism at that time

SFX: FUNNY DRAMATIC NOISE

One of the first things we said that had to be done was to have bike racks within the city of

Rochester. And you can still see some of those there.

HENRY:

So did it seem like the taskforce was mostly successful or popular with the public? Or did it feel like there was more controversy around it?

HARVEY:

The problem with the bicycle taskforce is that they never had enough input to make enough roadway changes. It was very active, and people tried to do this, but the local — Monroe County particularly, but also the city, was not open to putting in facilities of any type.

MUSIC BED IN:

HENRY:

We've examined a variety of history and local policy debates in Rochester. But let's be real — none of this means anything unless we really address the human element to it.

To that end, we'd like to introduce Roger Levy,

SFX: BELL/DOOR

the owner of Freewheeler's bike shop right here in Rochester.

ROGER:

My name is Roger Levy. I own Freewheeler's bike shop on 1757 Mount Hope Avenue, since the age of 31. I am now 68. So I've been here 37 years almost.

MUSIC BED OUT:

HENRY:



We know that students have traditionally led social movements and looked for change. Do you have a lot of students as customers?

ROGER:

Students, faculty, and staff, they're the ones with the money. But I have an awful lot of repeat business from people I've known

At the same time we had a lot of people interested in living off the grid, as it's called now. People wanted to grow their own food. And so bicycling just fit in really well with that

HENRY:

Amazing. What got you interested in the greater bike community and really staying with this occupation for a long time?

ROGER:

I went to a city high school and I became political. I got very upset with the state of the over-paving of America, the environment. And so I didn't want to be part of the car culture.

SFX: CAR

HENRY:

It's interesting to note how there's this mix of motivations for people to commit to biking. As we know, the bicycle movement definitely corresponds with environmentalism - it really picked up during the 1970s. So related to that, do you remember the first Earth Day, which took place on April 22 1970.

ROGER:

That's the day this store opened! The original owner,

coincidentally, happened to start on that day.

HENRY:

Wow, that's incredible! It's like it was meant to be!

HENRY:

Thank you so much for your time! It's been wonderful speaking with you and having the chance to hear the perspective of such a dedicated, local voice.

SFX: BELL/DOOR

HENRY:

Roger gave us a distinct perspective of someone who has spent their life focused on the crossover between environmentalism and bicycling. It's inspiring to hear about someone who is so dedicated to the cause.

But was bicycle culture always so clear-cut? The environmentalism movement was certainly present in Rochester, but its specific history here is a bit more varied and unique with these big businesses at the forefront. Could you elaborate on that?

HARVEY:

My motivation for biking was that it was a fast form together around the city at that time. There were far more people in the city of Rochester. And more traffic, particularly going to the large businesses. There's a lot of more industry than there certainly was, then there is now.

HENRY:

So do you feel like these large industries affected the bicycling infrastructure debates and the

development of environmentalism in the city?

HARVEY:

It had nothing to do with environmentalism it was just purely, we want some sort of facilities, which will allow us to move through the city, through the county at some times, but basically through the city to work, to where we were going to work from where we lived, easier, faster, without being hassled by drivers, pedestrians.

HENRY:

Hmmmm. So it seems like from your experience, Rochester might have been slower to develop or for there to be progress in the environmentalist movement due to all these other factors. But I also have to ask – for you personally, why bicycles? And how do you view your relationship with the environment?

HARVEY:

This was a fun thing to do, it was something else to do.

SFX: BIKE GEARS

AMBIENCE: PARK

That you could travel this way and see more, and encounter more things by using a bicycle, because you're open to the world, and to people, and people do not see you as a threat. Plus, you are interacting with as much, not only the elements,

SFX: WIND

rain, wind, snow, you were also encountering just a different way

of transporting yourself and moving.

HENRY:

That's great to hear. So even though the development of bicycling here in Rochester might've been different, it certainly still had this personal resonance with individuals. It's interesting to note how, even if one doesn't consider themselves an environmentalist, there's still this undeniable element of wanting to connect with the world around us. Harvey, thank you so much for your time and for this creative insight!

AMBIENCE: NATURE

HENRY:

So where do we go from here? Do we have to consider ourselves strict environmentalists to make progress? And how do we balance something like that in a city environment? Well, it ultimately comes down to our humanity.

MUSIC BED IN:

As living beings, we are naturally inclined to care about our environment. Sometimes we just need a reminder or a method to do so.

But it really is fascinating to see how we can go from a topic as seemingly simple as bicycles, to examining political thought and city infrastructure, to understanding more about the human condition. I certainly think striving for a better environment starts with rekindling your relationship with nature. Even in a city environment, biking offers

a unique perspective on  
interacting with the world around  
us. Whether it be passing by  
people and seeing the humanity in  
the world, or passing by trees and  
experiencing the beauty of nature,  
it's no surprise so many cyclists  
aren't giving up on the fight for  
our planet.

I guess one of the most wonderful  
things about being human is having  
different perspectives. We all see  
and enjoy the world a little  
differently. We're able to reach  
the same conclusion a dozen  
different ways. At the end of the  
day, no matter how you frame it,  
humans have the desire to co-exist  
with the world around us.

Environmentalism has turned into  
somewhat of a buzz word in our  
current culture and carries a  
certain connotation with it. It  
can often be seen as a "highbrow"  
or a "moral" choice and thus is  
off putting to many. But make no  
mistake, loving your neighbor is  
environmentalism, caring for your  
culture and community is  
environmentalism, caring for the  
world around us is at the root of  
environmentalism. Roger and Harvey  
are both amazing souls who found  
the same conclusion along  
different paths. Though at times  
it may seem we are divided, I urge  
us all to look around and explore  
the fact that we can agree and  
care while maintaining our own  
identities and perceptions. Who  
would've thought for this snapshot  
in time it was the bike that could  
bring us together. And now, today,  
in a world that feels just as  
unsure as the 70's, if not more,  
it's amazing to see individuals,  
both old and young, take a stance  
on what they believe in and do

their part to care for our  
community.

#### CREDITS:

HearUR is a podcast created by students at the University of Rochester. This episode was produced by Maryah Albahhar, Henry Szuchman, and Sam Caldwell. Our engineer was Sam Caldwell. This episode was written by Henry Szuchman and Sam Caldwell. This episode was performed by Henry Szuchman. We'd also like to thank Thomas Fleischman, Roger Levy, and Harvey Botzman for their interviews. The executive producers are Thomas Fleischman and Stephen Roessner. This season was made possible through the financial support of the Department of History and the Department of Audio, Music, and Engineering. Special Thanks to Jasmine Myers and the team at HOPR, who hooked up the Hear UR team with complimentary bikes for a historic tour of the city. HOPR is a micro-mobility company offering on-demand bicycle and scooter share in cities including Rochester. More info can be found at [goHOPR.com](https://goHOPR.com). Thank you as well to Jesse Peers, our tour guide, multi-episode guest, and the Cycling Manager at ReconnectRochester, a cycling advocacy group, working to build a more sustainable transportation infrastructure in Rochester. More info can be found at [reconnectrochester.org](https://reconnectrochester.org). And finally, be sure to check out the other episodes of HearUR Season Five: Cycle Paths at [HearUR.com](https://HearUR.com)