WHEN THE LIGHTS GO OUT:

MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE’S RESPONSE TO THE 1970S ENERGY CRISIS

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During the 1960s and 1970s, activists pressed forward with warning and advising the public of the potential for a global environmental crisis.¹ The onset of these growing sentiments of apprehension initially received mixed reactions, with some recognizing and advocating the validity of such environmental concerns, while others dismissed and even disparaged the movement.² However, the emergence of scientific evidence and official documents proving the existence of environmental degradation in the late 1960s’ cultivated environmental activism and support. As hives for young and old intellectuals alike, colleges emerged as a major contributor and supporter of environmental advocates. Nestled in Vermont, a state long recognized for environmental consciousness, Middlebury College established a reputation as one of the earliest academic institutions to acknowledge and support the growing environmental movement, beginning with its offering of an environmental studies major in 1965, the first of its kind.³ However, the 1970s energy crisis would test Middlebury’s commitment to environmentalism.

In 1973, after the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) imposed an oil embargo against the US, the nation faced extensive oil shortages and price hikes, the nation made unstable with America’s primary form of energy suddenly and largely unavailable.⁴ The oil embargo marked the beginning of a decade-long “energy crisis” that had far-reaching effects, with the remote Middlebury College not immune to the repercussions. The energy crisis, while staggering, served as an impetus for environmental awareness and activism, first aggressive and then victim to concern curbed by time. By the 1980s, issues concerning energy sources became reduced priorities after the US successfully found alternative energies and regained access to

² Ibid.
³ “Joint Major in Ecology to Be Offered,” The Middlebury Campus, 27 May 1965.
⁴ "Arab oil embargo," Encyclopædia Britannica Online.
Despite a history of environmental interest, Middlebury, too, suffered from a capricious sense of commitment to environmentalism. In examining 1970s editorials, articles, and event announcements relevant to the environment in *The Middlebury Campus*, Middlebury represents the changing nature of environmental activism during the energy crisis, as current events, politics, and levels of commitment and interest heavily influenced the success and methods of environmentally conscious efforts at the college.

Although the energy crisis inspired an expansion of environmental advocacy throughout the US, the Middlebury community indicated interest in environmental issues even before the decisive turn of the energy crisis in 1973. As early as 1970, the EQ group held its first Environmental Conference on “Earth Day” with the hopes of providing information on locally based efforts to prevent pollution. By 1971, Middlebury had reorganized their Environmental Quality (EQ) group, now a mix of students, faculty, and town members, with renewed commitment to becoming involved with Vermont environmental legislation and other local projects centered on environmental issues. Over the next following years, EQ’s efforts only increased; by 1972 EQ extensively promoted the sales of environmentally-friendly products in town, established a community bike program, and secured then Vermont governor Deane Davis as a speaker to discuss his efforts with environmental legislation in Vermont. Such initiatives at the beginning of the 1970s demonstrated Middlebury’s progressive nature in confronting environmental issues, whether due to the passions of the student body or the environmentally conscious efforts at the college.

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friendly disposition of Vermont. However, with the onset of the energy crisis in the following years, Middlebury exhibited the potential for national issues and political pressure to influence environmental consideration on campus.

In November of 1973, The Middlebury Campus covered a speech made by Vermont’s Governor Thomas Salmon, an immediate response to Nixon’s recent national address concerning the energy crisis.\(^9\) Salmon reiterates Nixon’s urging to reduce energy use and comments on the ways in which changes in energy use will affect Vermont, saying that such adjustments “will alter the lifestyle of the average Vermonter.”\(^10\) In the speech, the governor appeals to colleges to assume major roles in “the fundamental gameplan” of combatting the energy crisis.\(^11\) These sentiments, as well The Middlebury Campus’ decision to cover Salmon’s local speech, established the ground for Middlebury’s future energy-saving initiatives on campus, illustrating the impact national events and local governments had on environmental actions. James Armstrong, President of Middlebury at the onset of the energy crisis, strived to have Middlebury make an effort towards combatting the energy crisis. Only months after the oil embargo and the government’s national plan of action to meet energy needs, Armstrong authorized limited open hours for campus buildings to save electricity, a transition to coal-burning energy practices to reduce reliance on oil, and an adjustment to the academic calendar to limit heating needs in the winter.\(^12\) However, while interest in current events and the pressure of politics inspired the

administration of Middlebury to take action, Middlebury could not escape discontent growing within the study body at the inconvenience of energy saving techniques, a potential setback to their proactive actions.

The history of Middlebury as an institution as well as 1970s articles in The Middlebury Campus indicate Middlebury’s commitment to environmental causes, nonetheless balancing advocacy with an actual implementation of proposed objectives proved difficult. The initial response to the energy crisis riled students, with The Middlebury Campus reporting complaints. Students felt that reduced hours of high-traffic buildings like the library during daytime study hours did not conserve enough energy to justify the disruption in schedule. Additionally, students went so far as to bring their criticisms to Middlebury’s Grievance Committee, protesting the decision to discontinue the Snow Bowl Shuttle Bus on account of fuel shortages, despite that Armstrong initially allowed the continued functioning of the Snow Bowl by conserving energy elsewhere. Other concerns voiced revolved around college decisions that altered student life, if minimally, such as the reduced building temperatures, the changes in the operation of the ice rink, and the lowered pool temperatures. Regardless of student opposition, the changes put in place by the college resulted in some success. Middlebury used 15.5% less coal and oil in 1973 than 1972 and reduced the average daily energy use of the college by 14% in the same year, with such accomplishments attributed to both tactical energy-use adjustments and the efforts of the

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The successes and setbacks experienced by Middlebury illustrate how levels of commitment and interest, both from the student and administrative body, largely influence the changes that took place on campus and the extent of their impact in coping with the 1970s energy crisis.

In the beginning of 1974, only months after Nixon’s first plea for national sacrifices, Middlebury already began to suffer from a sense of security that the energy crisis would resolve itself, reigning in or abandoning completely their initial, dedicated efforts to conserve energy. Apathy set in, with student concern diminishing, as seen by the previously described complaints, dwindling attempts to reduce student automobile usage, and a slight decline in environmental activism in terms of energy on campus. Middlebury began to shift away from enforcing energy-saving modifications, and instead students resorted to publicity campaigns to raise awareness and encourage personal efforts towards reducing energy consumption. Furthermore, administration sanctioned adjustments began to lose ground, with the Community Council agreeing to reinstate some library hours as early as March of 1974. Nonetheless, such perceived lapses in Middlebury’s efforts following 1973 do not represent a decline in environmental consciousness within the college community, but rather a shift. The intensity with which Middlebury implemented concrete energy-saving efforts with the onset of the energy crisis began to wane, but interest remained and manifested itself in a different form, with a growing emphasis

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16 Ibid.
placed on education, awareness, and individual student action, rather than comprehensive change enforced by administration.

After EQ’s reorganization and heightened success after 1971, their continued presence and efforts on campus in 1974 and after demonstrate Middlebury’s deviation from the structured efforts to conserve energy after the energy crisis.\(^{20}\) By 1976, environmental responsibilities primarily fell on students rather than administration, with the student-led EQ group initiating new recycling efforts on campus and in town, planning environmentally-friendly socials, and organizing lectures centered around environmental issues like pollution, transportation, and energy.\(^{21}\) Middlebury’s 1976 Energy Conference, organized by EQ, embodies the transition to more conceptual advocacy rather than applied action, with discussing “problems of energy consumption which face industrialized countries” as the main purpose of the conference.\(^{22}\) The conference consisted of three days of workshops, lectures, debates, and socials led by such local environmental leaders, warranting a five-page spread in \textit{The Middlebury Campus} the following week.\(^{23}\) Rather than an inspiration for on-campus changes, the conference guided the college community’s attention to larger issues, such as discussing the state and national politics involved in US energy use, current and future techniques for low-energy technology and construction, and large-scale alternative energy possibilities.\(^{24}\) The conference, from the perspective of \textit{The Middlebury Campus} coverage, lacked discussion and promotion of opportunities for impactful


\(^{22}\) Nick Andros, "EQ to hold energy conference," \textit{The Middlebury Campus}, 22 January 1976.


\(^{24}\) Ibid.
student activism, indicating Middlebury’s changing method of approaching environmental issues with the abating of the energy crisis.

The later half of the 1970s continued to demonstrate Middlebury’s adjustment of interests and ambitions to better fit the growth of environmental activism, blending concrete actions with academia. In 1976, Middlebury offered an environmentally themed Winter Term Course titled “The US Energy Crisis and Its Impact on Lifestyles” while the same year receiving a “save energy citation” from the US Secretary of Commerce for successful energy saving efforts. The administration continued with campus-wide endeavors after the citation, with Middlebury in 1977 further reducing water, electricity, and fuel use, although the Middlebury Service Manager at the time offered his opinion that Middlebury “had not emphasized enough the need to cut down on energy consumption.”

Concurrently in the late 1970s, on the student level EQ advanced their environmental efforts, with a renewed campus-wide recycling push and more on-campus environmental events. EQ went on to form an Energy Working Group, with the goal of conducting an Energy Fair “to increase the awareness and understanding of the students, faculty, and administration” of opportunities for implementing alternative energies. Middlebury no longer occupied an extreme position where international situations forced the college administration to enforce energy saving efforts themselves, nor did the responsibility for environmental consciousness rest with the students alone with the diminishment of the energy crisis. These major events that took place leading up to the 1980s illustrate the impact the 1970s energy crisis had on Middlebury, as Middlebury developed a balance between college and

25 “Courses Offered Winter Term 1976,” The Middlebury Campus, 30 October 1975; “Save Energy Citation,” The Middlebury Campus, 1 April 1976.
26 Pam Dinsmore, "College fights energy waste," The Middlebury Campus, 26 October 1977.
28 Jane Legett and David Towne, "EQ fair to examine energy alternatives," The Middlebury Campus, 16 March 1977.
student initiatives, and promoting thoughtful awareness with actual action. Moreover, with which Middlebury gained an advantage for the future energy crises and environmental dilemmas ahead.

Even within the short time period of a single decade, Middlebury embodied a variety of ways in which environmentalism can manifest itself, whether through national pressure, institutional regulations, or community interest. With successes and setbacks, Middlebury continued to seek a balance between fostering both intellectual pursuits and environmental passion. Nevertheless, Middlebury’s identity as an environmentally conscious institution remained constant, and to this day serves as a hallmark of Middlebury’s history.
Bibliography


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I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment.

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