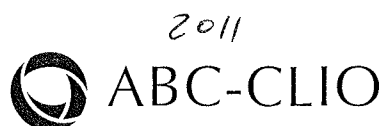


Encyclopedia of the U.S. Government and the Environment

HISTORY, POLICY, AND POLITICS

Volume One: Essays and Entries A–I

Matthew Lindstrom, Editor



Santa Barbara, California • Denver, Colorado • Oxford, England

E

Earth Day

Earth Day consists of annual events designed to focus political and public attention on environmental concerns. Taking place on April 22, Earth Day gives participants the opportunity to celebrate the Earth while simultaneously considering ways to protect it. Despite its now well-known name, Earth Day began with humble origins.

According to Earth Day founder and former Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson, the original idea for an Earth Day-like event occurred to him in 1962. Dismayed by what he perceived to be a lack of political will to engage environmental issues, he felt it would be necessary to mobilize large segments of



Part of crowd observing Earth Day, including youngster wearing “Let Me Grow Up!” sign on back relaxes on hilltop in Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park, Wednesday, April 23, 1970. The crowd, made up mostly of young people, was estimated at more than 20,000 persons. (AP/Wide World Photos)

the public to put green issues onto politicians' agendas. "The evidence of environmental deterioration was all around us, and everyone noticed except the political establishment. The environmental issue simply was not to be found on the nation's political agenda" (Nelson, 2002, 5). While Nelson was attempting to convince politicians, others were doing their part to build momentum for the early environmental movement. Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* in 1962, exposing the public dangers of DDT, Paul Ehrlich published *The Population Bomb* in 1968, prophesying mass starvation, and in 1969, newspapers across the country printed stories about the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland that was set ablaze and the Santa Barbara oil spill off the coast of California. The culture of the 1960s and the ubiquitous media coverage of environmental crises formed the social and political backdrop for what was to become the first of many Earth Day observances.

Nelson originally suggested President John F. Kennedy should make the Earth Day cause his own to drum up political support for environmental legislation, but the event did not materialize until years later. It was not until 1969 that Nelson finally found the source of organizational inspiration he needed. Amid fervent anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, Nelson observed protesters using "teach-ins" to express their pacifist views. Along with Denis Hayes, a recent Stanford college graduate who put his career on hold to get involved with Earth Day planning, Nelson believed teach-ins could also be used to draw attention to environmental issues. Nelson and Hayes paved the way for the first Earth Day teach-ins and events in 1970.

The first Earth Day was an overwhelming success. For Nelson, "the goal of Earth Day was to inspire a public demonstration so big it would shake the political establishment out of its lethargy and force the environmental issue onto the national political agenda" (Nelson, 2002, 3). The evidence indicates Nelson's goal was largely accomplished. In 1970, the U.S. population was approximately 200 million people. Standard accounts of the 1970 Earth Day events estimate that 20 million Americans participated in activities across the country, a staggering 10 percent of the entire population. This feat is all the more remarkable when one realizes that Nelson and Hayes only had \$125,000, primarily gathered from donations, at their disposal. Although the sheer number of participants is impressive, many observers point to the environmental acts passed in the wake of the first Earth Day as the true testament of its success.

In 1970, President Nixon signed the National Environmental Policy Act into law. Earth Day added to the momentum that was already beginning to develop on the national stage. Many commentators contend that the first Earth Day helped to put political pressure on lawmakers to pass at least two important legislative acts: the Clean Air Act of 1972 and the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Some even credit the first Earth Day as being the event that sparked an entire

decade of environmental legislation. With 28 major environmental laws enacted, the 1970s was one of the most environmentally active decades in U.S. political history. The 1970 Earth Day observances stand out as a shining moment in the development of American environmental consciousness.

Although the first Earth Day was a success, later Earth Days did not match the energy, excitement, or turnout of the first. Organizers soon discovered that turnout to Earth Day events depended largely on important years, such as the Earth Days celebrated during significant anniversaries (e.g., 10, 20, and 30 years). But even then, not every Earth Day after the first could match the original day's success.

Ten years after the founding of Earth Day, environmentalists had the opportunity to reflect on what they had accomplished. The 1980 Earth Day was emotionally different when compared to the first. While the 1970 event was energized and directed to the flower children of the 1960s, the 1980 Earth Day was more reserved. According to *New York Times* journalist Philip Shabecoff, the 1980 Earth Day was "more sober and introspective than the spontaneous, ebullient mass demonstrations of April 1970" (Shabecoff, 1980). Mike McCabe, executive director of Earth Day 1980, noted that, "the crowds were generally smaller than in 1970" (Smolowe, 1980). The Earth Day mood reflected tensions over a sense of backlash against the environmental movement and all that had been accomplished in the preceding decade. With energy questions weighing heavily on the minds of politicians after the oil crises of the 1970s, as well as mounting economic pressures at the pump, many business leaders argued much of the environmental legislation that had been passed since 1970 was too costly to maintain in the long run. McCabe commented on the political and cultural pressures environmentalists were facing: "The past 10 years have tempered our perspective of the issues and the enormity of the task. There is tremendous pressure to modify our goals and roll back our gains" (Shabecoff, 1980). Yet Earth Day continued to be an important cultural phenomenon. Despite the skeptical countermovement of the 1980s, Earth Day eventually recovered from its lackluster performance.

Twenty years after its inception, Earth Day 1990 marked a significant turning point in the way observances were handled. Earth Day 1990 once again captured the spirit of the first Earth Day, but with a significant difference. Unlike the national focus of the 1970 observations, which consisted of events that were primarily spontaneous in nature, Earth Day 1990 witnessed a concerted effort to bring international attention to some of the world's most pressing environmental concerns. Denis Hayes, 20 years after being involved in the first Earth Day, was the executive director of Earth Day 1990. With hundreds of individuals involved in the management of the 1990 Earth Day planning, compared to only seven in 1970, organizers raised millions of dollars for their cause. Their marketing

techniques were also far more sophisticated than past efforts. Earth Day 1990 was an even bigger success than Earth Day 1970. Nearly 200 million people participated in Earth Day events in more than 140 countries. According to *New York Times* journalist Robert D. McFadden, Earth Day 1990 was “the largest grassroots demonstration in history” (McFadden, 1990). Many observers also credit Earth Day 1990 for generating momentum for the 1992 Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro. With Earth Day 1990, Earth Day was no longer seen as being a narrowly focused national observance; Earth Day became a day of international importance.

Earth Day 2000 continued to build on its past successes. Like Earth Day 1990, Earth Day 2000 remained an international observance. However, organizers were now using the Earth Day Network and new technologies to make connections throughout the world. Hundreds of millions participated in Earth Day 2000 events in 183 nations. With more than 17,000 partners, the Earth Day network claims observances after Earth Day 2000 now exceed one billion participants, making it “the largest secular civic event in the world.”

Richard D. Besel

See also DDT; Endangered Species Act of 1973; National Environmental Policy Act of 1969; Nixon, Richard; *Silent Spring*

References

Earth Day Network. “About Earth Day Network.” <http://www.earthday.net/about> (accessed May 3, 2009).

Graham, Mary. *The Morning After Earth Day: Practical Environmental Politics*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999.

McFadden, Robert D. “Millions Join Battle for a Beloved Planet.” *New York Times*, April 23, 1990.

Nelson, Gaylord. *Beyond Earth Day: Fulfilling the Promise*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.

Shabecoff, Philip. “Earth Day ’80 Dawns Tomorrow Amid Reflections and Plans for a New Decade.” *New York Times*, April 21, 1980.

Smolowe, Jill. “Crowds Enjoy Earth Day ’80 By Strolling in Midtown Sun.” *New York Times*, April 23, 1980.

Earthjustice

With nine regional offices throughout the United States, an international agenda, and more than 30 years of legal representation, Earthjustice, formerly known as the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, has become one of the key nonprofit law firms in the United States. Although the group’s primary function is to file