

Earth Day History



Each year Earth Day, April 22nd, celebrates the beginning of the Environmental movement. It is a day intended to promote preservation and appreciation for the Earth's natural resources.

Gaylord Nelson was known as "the Conservation Governor" because of the popular reforms he started in Wisconsin to clean up waterways and protect natural resources. Elected to the U.S. Senate in 1962, he spent 7 years trying unsuccessfully to get the other politicians to support his environmental agenda. Washington might not have listened, but Senator Nelson found that Americans around the country were becoming increasingly concerned with environmental issues such as smog, pesticides, and water pollution. According to Gaylord Nelson, "The people were concerned, the politicians were not."



The idea that became Earth Day occurred to Senator Nelson in 1969 after he toured the devastation in Santa Barbara following a massive oil spill off the California coast. He was inspired by the anti-Vietnam War "teach-ins" that were taking place on college campuses around the United States. He envisioned a large-scale, grassroots environmental demonstration "to shake up the political establishment and force this issue onto the national agenda."

He announced his idea for Earth Day in September 1969 during a conference in Seattle. He proposed "a national teach-in on the environment," to take place on college campuses and Universities across the United States on April 22, 1970.

Senator Nelson hoped that a grassroots outcry about environmental issues might prove to Washington, D.C. just how concerned the American people were.



Thanks in part to media coverage from magazines such as Time, Life, and Newsweek, Nelson's idea spread quickly across the country. He was overwhelmed by the enthusiasm and support he received from elementary school students, high school teachers, churches, and community groups. Nelson quickly realized the national day of teach-ins went far beyond college campuses.



He was so inundated with letters and phone calls, he set up an independent organization, Environmental Teach-In, Inc. Nelson invited Republican Representative Paul N "Pete" McCloskey to serve as his co-chair and they established a steering committee of scientists, academics, environmentalists, and students. The committee acted as a clearing house and resource for Earth Day organizers. They hired former Stanford student president and Harvard Law School student Denis Hayes to serve as Earth Day's national coordinator. He worked with student volunteers and several staff members to organize the project. Hayes would go on to become a widely recognized environmental advocate.

According to Nelson, "Earth Day worked because of the spontaneous response at the grassroots level. We had neither the time nor resources to organize 20 million demonstrators and the thousands of schools and local communities that participated. That was the remarkable thing about Earth Day. It organized itself."

It is estimated that 20 Million people took part in the first Earth Day on April 22,



1970. Thousands of colleges and universities organized protests against the deterioration of the environment. Groups that had been fighting against oil spills, polluting factories and power plants, raw sewage, toxic dumps, pesticides, and air pollution suddenly realized they shared common values. The first Earth Day was effective at raising awareness about environmental issues and transforming public attitudes.

Earth Day influenced a new environmental political agenda. During the 1970s Congress passed 28 pieces of legislation, including the Endangered Species Act, the Occupational Health and Safety Act, the Safe Drinking

Water Act, the Toxic Substances Control Act, and amendments strengthening the National Environmental Policy Act and the Clean Air and Water Acts. Another key development was the establishment in December 1970 of the Environmental Protection Agency, which was tasked



with protecting human health and safeguarding the natural environment—air, water and land.

Since 1970, Earth Day celebrations have grown. In 1990, Earth Day became an international event. In 2000, Earth Day focused on clean energy and involved hundreds of millions of people in 184 countries and



5,000 environmental groups, according to EDN. Activities included a gathering of hundreds of thousands of people at the

National Mall in Washington, D.C. Today, according to the Earth Day Network more than 1 billion people are involved in Earth Day activities, making it "the largest secular civic event in the world."