

Earth Day - How It All Began

Summarized from an article at <http://www.earthday.net/>

April 22 marks the anniversary of the birth of the modern environmental movement in 1970. 1970 brought with it the Kent State shootings, the advent of fiber optics, "Bridge Over Troubled Water," Apollo 13, the Beatles' last album, the death of Jimi Hendrix, the birth of Mariah Carey, and the meltdown of fuel rods in the Savannah River nuclear plant near Aiken, South Carolina.

Earth Day founder Gaylord Nelson, then a U.S. Senator from Wisconsin, proposed the first nationwide environmental protest "to shake up the political establishment and force this issue onto the national agenda. " "It was a gamble," he recalls, "but it worked." He was later awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor given to civilians in the United States, for his role as Earth Day founder.

At the time, Americans were slurping leaded gas through massive V8 sedans. Industry belched out smoke and sludge with little fear of legal consequences or bad press. Air pollution was commonly accepted as the smell of prosperity. Environment was a word that appeared more often in spelling bees than on the evening news. Earth Day 1970 turned that all around.

On April 22, 20 million Americans took to the streets, parks, and auditoriums to demonstrate for a healthy, sustainable environment. Denis Hayes, the national coordinator, and his youthful staff organized massive coast-to-coast rallies. 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, freeways, the loss of wilderness, and the extinction of wildlife suddenly realized they shared common values.

Earth Day 1970 achieved a rare political alignment, enlisting support from Republicans and Democrats, rich and poor, city slickers and farmers, tycoons and labor leaders. The first Earth Day led to the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the passage of the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Endangered Species acts.

As 1990 approached, a group of environmental leaders asked Denis Hayes to organize another campaign. This time, Earth Day went global, mobilizing 200 million people in 141 countries and lifting the status of environmental issues on to the world stage. Earth Day 1990 gave a huge boost to recycling efforts worldwide and helped pave the way for the 1992 United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro.