

ORIGINS

Earth Day was first observed on April 22, 1970, at a time when concern for the environment was just emerging as a public issue. More than twenty million Americans took to the streets to demonstrate their concern for the environment, making it the largest demonstration in the nation's history. In Washington DC, more than 200,000 gathered on the Mall in front of the Capitol building to encourage government officials and their fellow citizens to preserve the wilderness and the earth's natural resources. Almost every politician in Washington was involved in the event, although, up to this point, most of them had assumed that environmental issues were relatively low on the average citizen's list of priorities.

The idea of preserving the environment was nothing new. Explorers, writers, and naturalists like John Muir, John J. Audubon, and Henry David Thoreau had already fought to save the American wilderness. Their efforts led to the establishment of the national park system and groups like the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society. But it was Rachel Carson who brought the environmental message home to Americans with her 1962 book, *Silent Spring*. It warned people about the deadly effects of chemical pollution and led to the passage of federal laws banning DDT and other harmful agricultural chemicals.

It was Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin who came up with the idea for setting aside a day to honor the environment in which we live, and forty-two state legislatures passed Earth Day resolutions. Nelson's original idea was to hold an environmental "teach-in"—a day-long educational event that combined rallies, speeches, lectures, and other programs designed to raise public awareness of the hazards facing the environment. Nelson was also the first Congressman to introduce a bill banning DDT, and he sponsored a number of bills aimed at preserving the Appalachian Trail and other wild and scenic areas in the United States.

Activities that first year varied widely: Some cities lowered bus fares to encourage more people to leave their cars at home, while 200 demonstrators carried coffins into Boston's Logan Airport to protest its noise-polluting plans for expansion. Elsewhere, concerned citizens collected garbage and deposited it on the steps of their local courthouse or statehouse. Mayor John Lindsay of New York led a march that closed down part of the city's Fifth Avenue, one of the busiest commercial streets in the world. Altogether, more than 20 million people in 2,000 communities and on 12,000 high school and college campuses participated in ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVITIES.

April 22 is also **ARBOR DAY**, which, with its emphasis on planting trees, has been largely replaced by Earth Day. Some people observe Earth Day on the **VERNAL EQUINOX**.

Although the observation of Earth Day has lost some of its initial excitement, it has become much more widespread over the past thirty years. In 1990, for example, more than 300,000 people gathered at the Capitol in Washington, while 200,000 gathered in Boston, 500,000 in New York City, 100,000 in Chicago, and 50,000 in San Francisco. It was estimated that somewhere around 200 million people in 136 countries celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the event that helped spark the modern environmental movement. Earth Day 2007 became the biggest Earth Day celebration with plenty of activities and huge participation in a number of places including Kiev, Manila, London, Madrid, Venezuela and New York. In 2010, the fortieth anniversary of the Earth Day Network brought together, a participant count of two hundred and twenty five thousand for a climate rally. A program named "A Billion Acts of Green" was initiated as a goal to be reached in 2012, where an international initiative to plant one million trees in collaboration with Avatar movie director James Cameron was formulated. This initiative increased the online community members base of the Earth Day Network to ninety thousand. Today the Earth Day Network along with its twenty-two thousand partners worldwide conducts various programs in which a billion people participate to raise environmental awareness and to make every day Earth Day.

Some Prominent Environmental Organizations in the U.S.

National Wildlife Federation, founded in 1936 to protect wildlife
www.nwf.org

Nature Conservancy, founded in 1951 to protect natural resources
www.nature.org

World Wildlife Fund (WWF), founded in 1961 is a leading environment conservation organization
www.worldwildlife.org

Greenpeace International, a global environmental organization started in 1971 for environmental protection and conservation
www.greenpeace.org

National Audubon Society has been active since 1898 to conserve and restore natural ecosystems
www.audubon.org/

In addition to demonstrations, concrete action has been taken in support of Earth Day, including the United Nations' work on the Kyoto Protocol. As part of a global commitment to address the increasing problem of global warming, the U.N. adopted the Kyoto Protocol as an amendment to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) on December 11, 1997, in Kyoto, Japan. Whereas the UNFCCC, adopted in 1992, *encouraged* reduction of emissions by developed nations, the Kyoto Protocol *required* participating nations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions at least five percent (against 1990 levels) by 2012. For the Protocol to become binding, at least fifty-five countries and industrialized nations responsible for fifty-five percent of greenhouse gas emissions in 1990 needed to ratify the agreement.

On February 16, 2005, following the ratification by Russia, the Kyoto Protocol became legally binding for over 141 countries. Developing nations such as China, Brazil, and India have signed the protocol, but are not legally bound by it. By 2013, 192 nations had committed to the agreement. But the largest global polluter, the United States, has not ratified the agreement. Instead, the U.S. has proposed its own climate change initiative, which calls for voluntary reduction in emissions. The Kyoto Protocol's first period of commitment began in 2008 and ended in 2012; the second period started in 2013 and will end in 2020.

SYMBOLS AND CUSTOMS

Environmental Activities

The most common way to observe Earth Day is by participating in activities designed to preserve the environment and our natural resources. These include collecting garbage for sorting and recycling, avoiding the use of gasoline-powered vehicles, picking up roadside trash, and planting trees. Schoolchildren often pack their lunches in recyclable containers, and families try to give up wasteful habits such as using paper towels and plastic garbage bags. Several major environmental groups have undertaken environmental activities aimed at stopping development, offshore drilling for oil, and the construction of new highways and nuclear power plants.

WEBSITES

Earth Day Network Official Web Site
www.earthday.org

CONTACTS

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