

Clayford Nelson

1994

A M E R I C A N
P R O F I L E S

**NATURALISTS,
CONSERVATIONISTS,
AND
ENVIRONMENTALISTS**

■

Eileen Lucas



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David Brower

Further Reading

Works by David Brower

For Earth's Sake. The Life and Times of David Brower (Salt Lake City, UT: Peregrine Smith Books, 1990). Brower describes people and events in his life that shaped and directed his commitment to working for the Earth.

Work in Progress (Salt Lake City, UT: Peregrine Smith Books, 1991). Part II of Brower's autobiography.

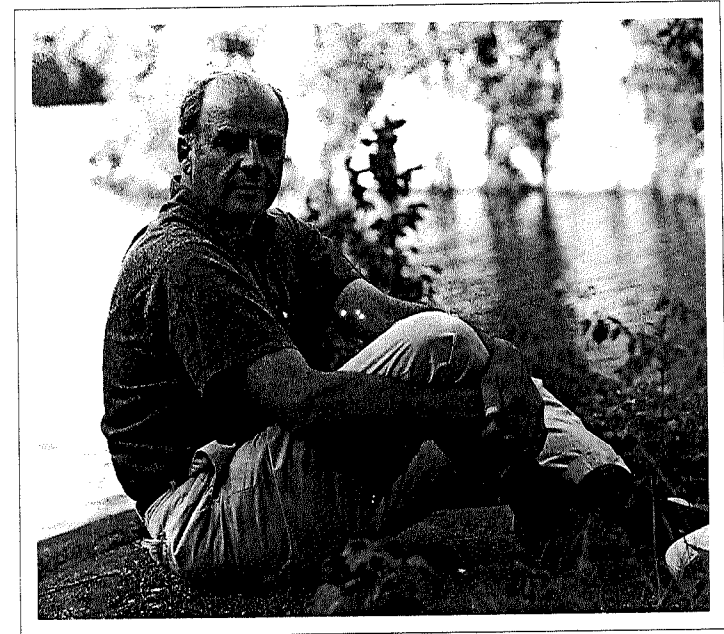
Other Works

Anker, Debby and John deGraaf. *David Brower, Friend of the Earth* (New York: Twenty-First Century Books, 1993). Biography for schoolchildren.

McPhee, John. *Encounters with the Archdruid* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971). The author spent extensive amounts of time with Brower during the height of his leadership with the Sierra Club. Much of the book was first published in *The New Yorker*.

Turner, Tom. *Sierra Club. 100 Years of Protecting Nature* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991). A history of the Sierra Club, including Brower's years of participation and leadership.

Gaylord Nelson: Honoring the Earth



Gaylord Nelson.
(Courtesy of the Wilderness Society)

In February 1969, there was an oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara, California. Hundreds of thousands of gallons of oil washed ashore, coating the beaches and coastal wildlife. Pelicans, ducks, fish, and sea lions floundered in the muck and died.

On a summer's day a few months later, Gaylord Nelson, U.S. senator from Wisconsin, visited the site of the disaster. He'd been invited to Santa Barbara to speak at a conference on water and wanted to see for himself the damage caused by the oil slick.

What he saw distressed him greatly, and he was still thinking about it when he flew from Santa Barbara to Berkeley to speak at

a conservation conference. While on the plane he read an article about student demonstrations called "teach-ins" being held on college campuses around the country. They used speeches, classes, and other activities to educate people about the Vietnam War.

Nelson knew that it was human activities that were causing the environmental crisis in America and believed that people had to be educated about harmful activities and taught alternatives. "I suddenly thought," Nelson would later recall, "why not have a national teach-in on the environment?"

From this brainstorm would come one of the largest demonstrations in U.S. history. Organized by Nelson and a corps of volunteers, the first Earth Day, April 22, 1970, drew the participation of some 20 million people. It was not, however, the first time Gaylord Nelson had spoken up on behalf of the environment; nor would it be the last.

Gaylord Nelson was born on June 4, 1916, in the small Wisconsin town of Clear Lake. Tucked in the northwest corner of the state, far from any large cities, Clear Lake was then a community of 700 people, surrounded by wilderness. At one end of Main Street was a marsh, inhabited by birds and muskrats. Nearby were several small, clear lakes created by ancient glaciers, and tall forests of pine, maple, and birch.

"There was a special adventure to being a young boy in northwestern Wisconsin," Nelson would later write. "There was the adventure of exploring a deep green pine forest, crunching noisily through the crisp leaves and pine needles on a fall day, or taking a cool drink from a fast running trout stream or a hidden lake." Throughout his boyhood Gaylord spent as much time as he could outdoors—swimming, fishing, and ice skating. "There was never any reason to believe that the rest of the world wasn't as clean and comfortable," an older and wiser Nelson would one day admit. "It was easy for the children of Clear Lake to believe that the legacy they had inherited in rich land, clean air, and safe water was one every boy and girl in the nation had."

When Gaylord was inside, he was more than likely reading. ("Everything I could get my hands on; that's what I read," he says.) Another popular activity in the Nelson house was political debate. Gaylord's father, Anton Nelson, was mayor of Clear Lake for a time while Gaylord was young, and his mother, Mary Bradt

Nelson, was also involved in public service. Local, state, and national politics provided interesting topics for neighborhood and family discussion.

Gaylord enjoyed accompanying his father on his rounds as a country doctor and at first he thought he'd like to help people in that way when he grew up. But when he was 10 years old he heard the Progressive politician "Fighting" Bob LaFollette speak from a train platform to a large, enthusiastic crowd, and he realized that politicians can help people too. Gaylord decided that he would become a politician and solve problems too. He thought he'd start by asking the village board to plant elm trees along the main entry into Clear Lake. The board members listened politely to the young boy's request, but they did not plant any trees.

After graduating from high school in Clear Lake, Nelson attended San Jose State College in California, and then returned to Wisconsin to attend the University of Wisconsin Law School. After receiving his law degree in 1942, Nelson spent four years in the U.S. Army.

When his term in the army ended in 1946, Nelson ran for the Wisconsin State Assembly. The race was close, but Nelson lost by a narrow margin. The next year he married Carrie Lee Dotson, an army nurse he'd met in the service. They settled in Madison, the Wisconsin state capital, where Nelson went into law practice.

In 1948 he ran for the state Senate as a Democrat, and this time he won. At last he held a political post and had partially achieved his childhood goal. It still remained for him to use his position to help people, and he set out to fulfill that mission as well. He must have satisfied the electorate in that regard as he was re-elected in 1952 and again in 1956.

During this time the Nelsons had two children, Gaylord Jr. and Cynthia. Another son, Jeffrey, was born a few years later.

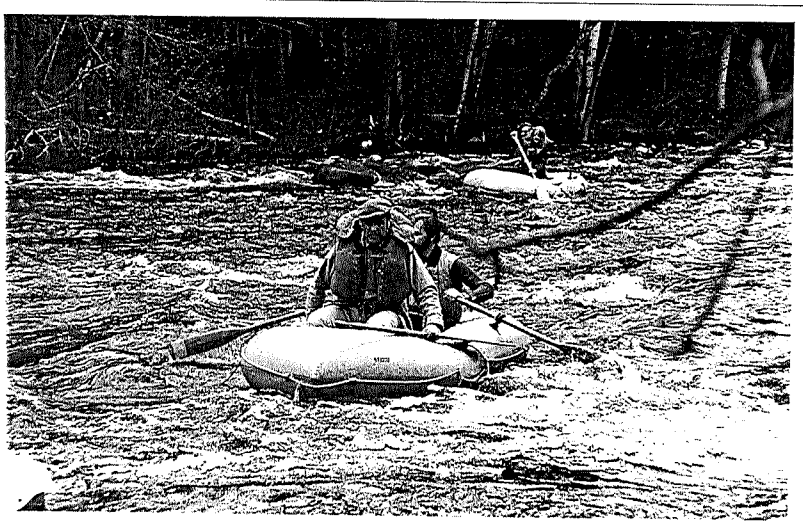
Nelson's influence in the state Democratic party grew to the point that he was nominated for governor in 1958. Wisconsin had not had a Democrat in the governor's mansion since 1932, but that was changed when Nelson was elected on November 4, 1958.

In many of the speeches Nelson made as governor he talked about his boyhood days in Clear Lake. By now he realized that not all children in the United States, not even all children in Wisconsin, grew up in such idyllic conditions. He pledged that he would do all he could to preserve what remained of Wisconsin's wilderness heritage.

When Nelson was re-elected in 1960, he initiated a ten-year program of wilderness preservation. Under this program, \$50 million was spent to purchase one million acres of privately owned land and convert it to publicly owned wilderness areas for recreation and wildlife habitat. It was a progressive program and placed Wisconsin in the forefront in state initiatives for conservation. Nelson was proud of this program, believing that it helped provide the opportunity for further generations of children to experience the peace and beauty of at least bits of wilderness.

By now he'd read the words of Aldo Leopold, who'd been a professor at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and had written much about wilderness. "I wish Leopold was still alive," said Nelson. "I'd put him in a job where he could do something." He read and reread *A Sand County Almanac* and worked hard to see that its wisdom was applied in Wisconsin.

Nelson also attacked the problem of detergent pollution. Many of the lakes and rivers around the nation were suddenly frothing with suds from detergents being dumped with sewage into waterways. After establishing a committee to study the problem, Nelson supported legislation that made Wisconsin one of the first states



As governor of Wisconsin, Nelson promoted the purchase of wilderness areas across the state, and supported legislation to halt pollution so that these areas would remain clean enough to be enjoyed.

(Courtesy of the Wilderness Society)

to regulate detergent pollution. He also signed into law restrictions on trash dumping and littering.

In 1962 Nelson decided to carry his program to the national level. In that year he ran for and won a seat in the U.S. Senate. Unlike other candidates, he talked a lot about the environment during the campaign, and he continued to discuss the issue even after election.

On March 25, 1963, in his first speech before the U.S. Senate, Nelson focused on the environment. "We need a comprehensive and nationwide program to save the national resources of America," he said. "We cannot be blind to the growing crisis of our environment. Our soil, our water, and our air are becoming more polluted every day. Our most priceless natural resources—trees, lakes, rivers, wildlife habitats, scenic landscapes—are being destroyed." He immediately made it clear that he supported a nationwide ban on nonbiodegradable detergents.

He also listened to what people had to say about the environment. He heard many older people speaking sadly of favorite childhood nature spots that were now either badly polluted or converted into shopping malls and parking lots.

As he listened he saw the connections between the stories. He saw that many of the environment's problems had grown too big for local and state governments to handle alone. He saw what he called "the awful dimensions of the catastrophes."

When other politicians asked him why he kept talking about the environment he said, "Because people care." But his remained a lonely voice in the political arena. Neither presidential candidates nor senators or members of Congress wanted to talk about it. Nelson figured that in 1963 probably only about 20 of the 535 members of Congress would have called themselves environmentalists. As late as 1968 Nelson did not hear a single speech on the environment given by a presidential candidate.

Still, Nelson continued to work on behalf of the environment. In 1963 he convinced President John Kennedy to make a "resource and conservation" tour of the United States. He hoped that this would draw national media attention to the environment. Of course he made sure that the president's trip would include a stop in northern Wisconsin. When he viewed some of the undeveloped land that had been set aside for future generations in Nelson's home state, Kennedy praised the efforts saying, "What has been done here must be done in every state in the country."

Reporters did not seem to think that this was big news, however, for it did not get much attention in the national press. A few weeks later, Kennedy was assassinated and Lyndon Johnson became president. Nelson continued to try to find support for his environmental initiatives.

Thus the problems of the environment weighed heavy on his mind as he visited the Santa Barbara coast in August 1969, and as he flew on to Berkeley. The idea he had in flight, that perhaps a teach-in on the environment was called for, was an idea that would spark a resurgence in environmentalism. It would provide individuals across the country with the opportunity to say "we care" in a voice loud enough to be heard.

When Nelson arrived in Berkeley, he mentioned his idea to some of the students and teachers he talked to, and their response was enthusiastic. He returned to Washington after the conference was over and announced his plan in the Senate. "The youth of today face an ugly world of the future," he said, "with dangerously and deadly polluted air and water. I am proposing a national teach-in on the crisis of the environment."

He began raising funds and recruiting people to help him, though he was not yet sure exactly what form this "teach-in" would take. He sent letters to the governors of all the states and to the mayors of major cities, asking them to issue Earth Day Proclamations. He wrote an Earth Day article to appear in college newspapers and *Scholastic* magazine. A few weeks later he gave a speech in Seattle, Washington, in which he announced that on April 22, 1970, there would be "an event in honor of the earth," that on this day people would be able "to present the facts about our environment clearly and dramatically."

Before he could make it back to Washington, D.C., the phones in his office were ringing with people calling to see how they could help. "It was the grass-roots support that made it," says Nelson. "With it you can do anything—without it, nothing."

A young law student named Denis Hayes was one of those who volunteered to help handle inquiries. He managed the national office that was set up as a clearing house for information. Thousands of colleges, high schools, and elementary schools planned their own activities. Says Nelson, "We had neither the time nor resources to organize the ten thousand grade schools and high schools and one thousand communities that participated. They simply organized themselves. That was the remarkable thing about Earth Day."

Finally the preparations were all made and the day for the festivities drew near. Congress was adjourned so that the people's representatives could learn along with their constituents about environmental problems.

On the evening before Earth Day, Nelson was in Madison, Wisconsin. Speaking before a large crowd he said

Earth Day can be the birth date of a new way of thinking that says "This land was not put here for us to use up." Earth Day can be the beginning of a way of thinking that says, "Even a country as rich as ours must depend on the natural systems that preserve the air, the water, and the land." The future can be preserved only if we change, only if we change our attitudes toward nature and nature's works. . . . It will take a commitment far beyond any effort ever made before.

He asked the rhetorical question, "Are we able to do this?" and answered emphatically, yes. "But are we *willing* to do this?" he continued. "That's the unanswered question."

When April 22 dawned on the United States, very nearly every town had planned some sort of recognition of Earth Day. There were marches and concerts, nature walks and picnics. In some places streets were blocked off to encourage people to walk. In many places trees were planted and litter was picked up.

It is estimated that some 20 million Americans participated in Earth Day events, making it one of the largest one-day demonstrations in this nation's history. Nelson himself was a little bit surprised at the response generated by his call for an Earth Day. "I knew it would be a big event," he said, "but it was even bigger than I thought."

Nelson was extremely heartened by the huge success of Earth Day. "Across America," he said, "there is a disgust, a rising anger, a demand for action. Earth Day demonstrates the widespread concern for a livable world. It makes me believe for the first time that we can wage a successful fight to save the earth."

Earth Day may have been a one-day demonstration, but it was to spark many, many days of activity. When the speeches and classes were over, it was time for people to go to work. "We need action," said Nelson. "We need political action nationwide to restore the quality of our environment."

Suddenly politicians were talking about the environment. This was just what Nelson had hoped for. "My major objective in planning Earth Day was to organize a nationwide public demon-

ation so large it would finally get the attention of the politicians
 l force the environmental issue into the political dialogue of
 nation," says Nelson. "It worked," he adds.

cross the nation an educated public was taking its concerns to
 ernment. New laws were passed regulating chemical pesticide
 Cleanup programs for air and waterways were introduced.
 Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was established to
 that these cleanups took place. Nelson sponsored the Water
 Quality Act, which sought to end the dumping of toxic wastes in
 world's oceans, and the National Lakes Preservation Act,
 which would begin cleanup of badly polluted lakes. In November
 '81, *Environmental Quality* magazine called Nelson "the leading
 environmentalist in the U.S. Senate."

reservation of wilderness areas continued to be one of Nelson's
 priorities. Mountain slopes and river shores were priceless resources
 endangered as the air and water and wildlife. Nelson was
 instrumental in the development of a federally protected nation-
 e system of hiking trails, including the 2,000-mile-long Appa-
 nian Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail, which winds through
 western mountains from Canada to Mexico. Of course, north-
 Wisconsin was never far from his thoughts, and he was
 used to have the Ice Age Trail included in the system, preserv-
 some of the rugged terrain carved by glaciers long ago.

e deplored the continuing pressure of development on fields
 marshlands. He once had his staff figure out how many miles
 merican land were paved with highways. The figure came out
 e 76,000 square miles, enough to cover the entire state of
 onsin plus 20,000 square miles more.

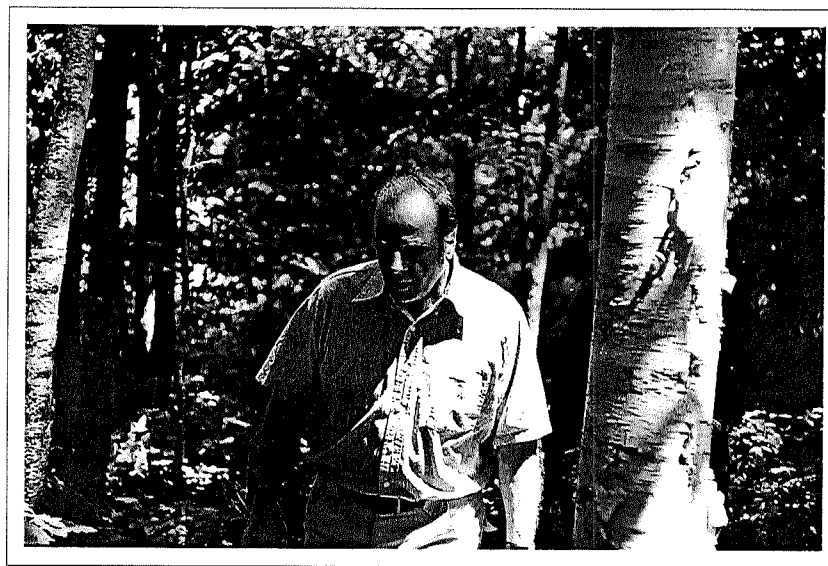
or 18 years he served as a senator from Wisconsin, fighting for
 environment from start to finish. In 1980 he was defeated in
 id for re-election to a fourth term. Though he had been
 oared to serve again, he accepted defeat as an inevitable part
 olitical life. His children were grown and he looked forward
 ending time with them and their children. And he found that
 ould continue to fight for the environment as counselor of the
 erness Society, the organization co-founded by Aldo Leopold,
 onservationalist he so admired. In 1982 he was presented with
 "Environmental Leadership Award" by the United Nations
 ironmental Programme (UNEP).

the 20th anniversary of the first Earth Day approached,
 le looked around and took stock of all that had occurred.
 e had been some improvements, but in many places, things

had gotten worse. A group of people (including Denis Hayes,
 who had worked so hard on the first Earth Day) went to work
 organizing Earth Day 1990. They came up with the motto
 "Think Globally, Act Locally" to show that this Earth Day was for
 all the world. Gaylord Nelson was asked to be honorary chairman.
 Again he was called upon to make speeches and urge action.

He remembered when he had first realized that environmen-
 tal problems were too big for local governments to handle alone.
 Now he knew that even the federal government was not big
 enough. He called for an attitude of "environmental citizen-
 ship," for Americans to think of themselves as citizens of Earth as
 well as of the United States. That took care of the "global" part.

Millions of people stepped forward to carry out the "local"
 part. Recycling centers were established in many cities. People
 were encouraged to separate materials such as glass, plastic,
 aluminum, and paper from their other garbage so that they
 could be recycled into new materials. Not only would this save
 on energy and raw materials, it would help alleviate the problem
 of landfills overflowing with waste.



*As counselor for the Wilderness Society, Nelson continues to work on behalf
 of the wilderness areas of our country. He believes that all children have the
 right to inherit "rich land, clean air, and safe water."*

(Courtesy of the Wilderness Society)

oolchildren planted trees and picked up garbage. Envi-
ental education was added to the curriculum of many
ols. Many people decided that Earth Day should be an
al occurrence so that people will not forget how important
o change our attitude and our behavior toward the Earth.
arth Day 1992, Nelson was again honored by the United
ns Environmental Programme, this time with the "Only
arth Award."

s not an accident that much of the Earth Day activity takes
in schools. Nelson has great hopes that with sufficient
tion the next generation may be the "conservation genera-
o vital to our future." He wants to see environmental educa-
ught in all the elementary and high school classrooms. He
es that this is the only way we will have citizens with the
ledge and the ethics to face the difficult decisions ahead.
hopes that some of the children thus educated will become
cal leaders. Of Bill Clinton and Al Gore he says, "We finally
o both a president and a vice-president deeply concerned about
trongly committed to the environment." He adds that "pres-
ial leadership [in environmental issues] is not merely impor-
-it is crucial."

oking back over the years since that first Earth Day, Nelson
"There are more people who care each year and they know
ore than they used to know. The most important difference
at fewer and fewer people hold to the old belief that the
l is too huge to be damaged by us."
son has helped educate the people of the United States
t the environment, and, as he told a reporter for *Mother*
magazine, "I'm now thinking about a worldwide demon-
on that forces this issue onto the agenda of politicians all
the world." To help make that vision a reality, he has been
d chairman of Earth Day U.S.A. for the 25th anniversary of
Day in 1995. Millions of people across the United States
tens of millions worldwide are expected to participate.
r content with what has already been done, Nelson contin-
o deliver speeches entitled "Where Do We Go From Here?"

Chronology

- June 4, 1916** Gaylord Nelson is born in Clear Lake, Wisconsin
- 1942** graduates from University of Wisconsin Law School; enters the U.S. Army
- 1946** discharged from army; loses bid for election to Wisconsin State Assembly
- 1947** marries Carrie Lee Dotson; enters law practice in Madison, Wisconsin
- 1948** elected to Wisconsin Senate
- 1958** elected governor of Wisconsin
- 1960** initiates purchase of wilderness areas
- 1962** elected to the U.S. Senate
- 1969** calls for a national "teach-in" on the environment
- April 22, 1970** Earth Day, an "event to honor the Earth" is held
- 1970-1980** Nelson works for passage of environmental cleanup and wilderness preservation legislation
- 1980** defeated in bid for re-election; becomes counselor of the Wilderness Society
- 1982** honored with "Environmental Leadership Award" by UNEP
- April 22, 1990** serves as honorary chair, Earth Day 1990
- 1992** honored with "Only One Earth Award" by UNEP
- 1993** prepares to chair Earth Day U.S.A. to recognize 25th anniversary of Earth Day in 1995

Further Reading

Works by Gaylord Nelson

The Environmental Challenge—Where Do We Go From Here?" Speech given by Nelson as Counselor of the Wilderness Society, at the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries, Inc., March 13, 1992. Describes changes in behavior that must be made to conserve our resource base and achieve a sustainable economy.

Brief History of Earth Day." Short description of the development of Earth Day. Includes a quote from the *New York Times* about Earth Day, and an excerpt from Nelson's speech at the University of Wisconsin, April 21, 1970.

Other works

Lowery, Linda. *Earth Day* (Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books, 1991). Written for very young students. A short, clear explanation of the origins of the first Earth Day and why we continue to honor it.

Mulman, Jeffrey and Teresa Rogers. *Gaylord Nelson, A Day for the Earth* (Frederick, MD: Twenty-First Century Books, 1992). Biography for schoolchildren. Describes Nelson's youth in Clear Lake, Wisconsin, his political career, and his concern for the environment every step of the way.

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