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Earth Day Q & A with Gaylord Nelson

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By Nikki Kallio

The first Earth Day, celebrated in 1970, was designed to put the environment into the political spotlight, says former U.S. senator and Earth Day founder Gaylord Nelson.

The idea worked. The 20 million people that turned out for the inaugural Earth Day made environmental issues a national priority and helped shape government policy in the process. More environmental legislation was passed in the 10 years following the first celebration than in the 175 previous years. New laws ran the gamut from the [Clean Air Act](#) to the [Clean Water Act](#).

According to Nelson, now a consultant for the Wilderness Society, the idea for Earth Day evolved over several years. Frustrated that the environment was on a political back burner, he convinced President John F. Kennedy to conduct an 11-state conservation tour in September 1963. The tour didn't generate the fire Nelson had hoped, but a quiet fire was lit.

On a speaking tour in 1969, Nelson was inspired by the anti-Vietnam War "teach-ins" happening on college campuses. He decided that a grass-roots effort was the way to go.

In September of that year, Nelson told the world that a nationwide "teach-in" about the environment would take place on April 22, 1970. As spring renewed the planet, Earth Day was born.

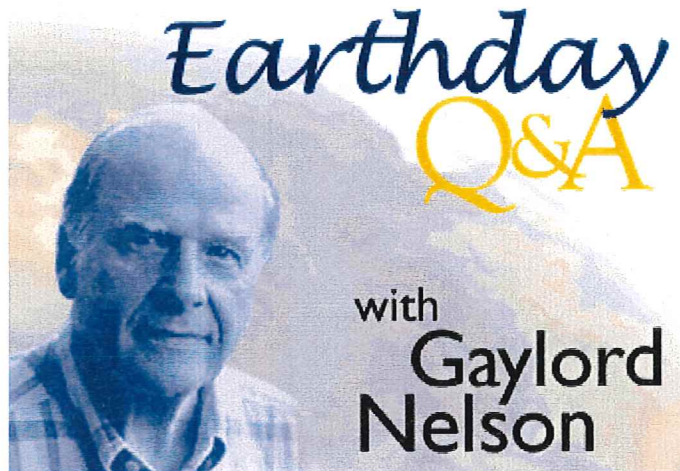
In an interview with the Environmental News Network, Nelson explained how, 30 years later, Earth Day has fulfilled his original vision.

Q: How have people's attitudes about the environment changed since the first Earth Day was celebrated in 1970?

A: I think the most important change has been the dramatic increase in the

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... I think the most important change has been the dramatic increase in the public understanding, public concern and public sensitivity to environmental issues. Another dramatic change that most people don't know is in 1970 there was no environmental education in the grade schools and the high schools in the country. Now you have hundreds and hundreds of schools teaching environmental education. There was also almost no environmental law taught in any law school. I only ran into — in all of 1969 and 1970 — just one environmental reporter in the whole country. But now every paper has somebody that covers environmental issues. There were no regular environmental programs on TV. Once a year or so you might get something by National Geographic. Now you turn on the TV and find an environmental program or two every single day. That makes a difference. People are much more sophisticated and much more concerned today. That, in general, is the biggest development to come out of Earth Day.

Q: What were the most pressing environmental problems in 1970?

A: There were things then that still are problems now. Air pollution and water pollution were the obvious ones. I drove down to Washington sometime after the second World War, about 1947 or 1948, and you could see Pittsburgh pollution from 100 or 200 miles away. There was a huge, ugly, yellow cloud. People started wearing gas masks in Los Angeles and putting out smog alerts saying that little kids shouldn't be out playing on certain days. So air pollution and water pollution were the big and obvious problems that everybody saw and felt.

Q: Have we made progress?

A: What would it be like if we hadn't done anything? In many ways we've held our own only because we are doing a lot more to protect the environment, so we've kept it from getting worse in some ways. I think that most all scientists would agree that we're incrementally continuing to degrade the life-sustaining ecosystems of the world.

Q. What are the most pressing environmental problems facing the world today?

A: I think the most pressing problem is political. In other words, a lot of people say, 'This is a worldwide problem, we can't solve it.' But if everyone takes that attitude there will be no solution. I think the most important thing we need to do is to nurture a society, a generation, that is imbued with a guiding environmental ethic.

Q: What do you think the future holds for our world?

A: I think everything that is necessary to be done to forge a sustainable society can be done. Would it be a sacrifice if finally we could produce automobiles that run mostly on solar energy? They won't go from zero to 60 miles an hour in four seconds — oh, what a sacrifice. We can do everything necessary to forge a sustainable society without any sacrifices that my grandpa and grandma would have thought were an imposition. But it becomes an imposition when you think you can't live without those foolish conveniences. I never heard my father complain about lack of air conditioning in the car. There just wasn't any.

Q: What's the most important thing an individual can do to help protect the environment?

A: Again that's an ethical question. I don't think there is just one single thing to

... Again, that's an ethical question & don't think there is just one single thing to do. However, there is a single thought to keep in mind: If I intrude here in the environment, or if my county board or the state government or the federal government does, what will be the consequence? That's what we all need to remember.

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