



Earth Day Recollections

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Earth Day Recollections: Where We Were And Where We Are

by Gaylord Nelson

Of all the issues that challenge mankind on the planet, the one that stands out above all others concerns man and his environment. No other issue is more relevant to our physical well-being than the status of our natural resources.

Unfortunately, we are preoccupied with responding to pressures of daily events, postponing hard decisions on pervasive, long-term problems under the delusion that delay won't cost very much, and that we can address the problem at some other time. Until we understand that the problems of the environment are urgent—that every delay exacts a price, levies a hidden tax, imposes a cost which will ultimately impoverish us—until we understand that, and believe, and are willing to act on the proposition that the highest and first priority of our society must be to preserve the integrity and viability of those ecosystems that sustain us and all other creatures: until then, we will continue to delude ourselves with the seductive notion that we are addressing the heart of the matter when, in fact, we are merely tinkering at the periphery of the problem.

I don't mean to suggest that we haven't made significant progress in the last decade and a half or so. Indeed we have come a long way, much more quickly than I thought possible in 1970 and '71. A whole series of legislative initiatives have been adopted involving air pollution, water pollution, pesticides, hazardous wastes. We have designated 90 million acres of public lands a wilderness. We have made extensive additions to our National Park System and Wildlife Refuges. We have an endangered species protection act which is a modest success but needs to be improved. We are close to agreement on a national program on acid rain control.

Most important of all, there has been a revolutionary change in the public



The Santa Barbara oil spill of 1969 was one event that helped catalyze the new environmental consciousness of Earth Day and the 1970s. The full measure of social and ecological costs to be borne in the wake of environmental contamination is not easily quantifiable in cost-benefit terms. *Santa Barbara News-Press* photo.

attitude and understanding of environmental issues. For the first time, the environment is part of the political dialogue of the nation. No politician can totally ignore it. Even those who have no serious interest in the issue pay lip service to it because they need to respond to the concerns of their constituents. But one more revolution is needed. That will come when our President, the Congress, and the public put this issue on the agenda of top national priorities along with the economy and war and peace.

That is bound to happen, but will it be soon enough? We still have to deal with those powerful forces in the

country who do not believe the problem is serious, and therefore that the environmental laws and standards are unnecessary and should not be enforced. There are others who think we cannot afford a clean environment, and there are those who oppose any governmental interference in the marketplace. They believe good intentions and competition will somehow resolve this problem in due time.

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There are those—"supply side environmentalists"—who believe that self-help, free market, do-it-yourself environmentalism will work if we all just calm down and give it a chance for a decade or two. If you go into the free marketplace to buy some fresh air and none is available, just hold your breath, and as the demand increases, the price will rise and the classic forces of supply and demand will take over. Then there will be an abundant supply, the price will fall, and even the poor people will be able to buy some. It all sounds pretty good if you don't think about it too hard.

Over the past four or five years we have, ever more frequently, heard the argument that high environmental standards cost too much. They put an excessive and unnecessary burden on business and industry. The costs exceed the benefits. They want to institute a system that weighs benefits against costs to provide ammunition in support of proposals to weaken environmental standards. And on the other hand, there are others who support such assessment because they believe that the overwhelming weight of the evidence will demonstrate that most environmental mandates need to be strengthened.

The reason the two parties reach opposite conclusions while appearing to support the same proposition is that they, in fact, are not supporting the same kind of benefit-cost assessment. Those who want to use the benefit-cost approach to weaken support for environmental mandates do not include all societal costs and benefits, only those that are easily quantifiable in current dollar costs to the polluter and measurable on the consumer price index. They do not include the societal cost of a polluted river, a lake or forest destroyed by acid rain, an aquifer poisoned by toxic chemicals, or a wildlife refuge destroyed by selenium.

If all such costs and benefits are included, the case is clear beyond question that preserving a clean environment is a profitable investment.



Litter in Yosemite National Park. National Park Service photo.

This argument is aimed at a major proposition being advanced by some environmental critics who insist that at some point we must make a choice between a prosperous economy and a dirty environment, or a clean environment and a poor economy.

Those who would dramatically weaken environmental protection claim we must, indeed, make a choice between the two, assuming the two are separable and must be addressed as discrete entities standing alone. They are wrong by every rational standard of measurement. I assume we are using the word "environment" in its broadest context to include all physical resources. They are all part of the environment. The appropriate generalization to be made is that the economy and the environment are inextricably intertwined; a degraded environment and a poor economy travel hand-in-hand. While you can have a country rich in resources with a poor economy, you cannot have a rich economy in a country poor in its resources or its access to them. Each incremental degradation of nature's resources—the air, the water, the soil, forests, scenic beauty, habitats—is a

dissipation of capital assets which will ultimately be paid for by a lower standard of living and a lower-quality environment.

Can anyone tell us what the economic and recreational loss to the nation will be unless we move now to save our lakes from acid rain? What is the economic value of the protein sources in the oceans and the water in our rivers? If we continue to destroy the salt water marshes and pollute the estuaries and the shallow waters of the continental shelf which provide the breeding habitat of most marine creatures, we ultimately will destroy the productivity of the oceans. Has that been factored into the economic equation in the debate over clean water standards?

These and other questions can be asked and every time the answer will be that it is far better for the economy and cheaper to maintain a clean environment than a dirty one. In the short run, some very modest temporary benefit to the economy might result from relaxed air and water quality standards, but it would be dangerous and enormously expensive. If we do that, it simply means we are borrowing capital from future generations and counting it on the profit side of the ledger.

Quite apart from the ethical questions involved, there is simply no way that a future generation could replace the capital we borrow from them, because we cannot restore a polluted ocean or a polluted lake. The ultimate test of a man's conscience is his willingness to sacrifice something today for a future generation whose words of thanks will never be heard. □

(Nelson, a former U.S. Senator from Wisconsin, was the founder of Earth Day, which first took place in April 1970. He is now Counselor of the Wilderness Society and associated with the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point.)

Earth Day Recollections: What It Was Like When The Movement Took Off

by John C. Whitaker



Concerned students wore masks and decorated garbage trees to pay homage to Earth Day, 1970. Where are they now?
Don Hogan Charles photo, NYT Pictures.

When President Nixon and his staff walked into the White House on January 20, 1969, we were totally unprepared for the tidal wave of public opinion in favor of cleaning the nation's environment that was about to engulf us. If Hubert Humphrey had become President, the result would have been the same.

During the 1968 presidential campaign, neither the Nixon nor Humphrey campaign gave more than lip service to environmental issues. Rather, their thoughts focused on such issues as Vietnam, prosperity, the rising crime rate, and inflation. Nixon made one radio speech on natural resources and the quality of the environment, which seemed adequate to cover an issue that stirred little interest among the electorate.

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In the Humphrey camp, things were just as quiet. He dedicated a park in San Antonio, Texas, and the John Day Dam in Oregon, using both occasions to discuss the environment and conservation. Otherwise, Humphrey said nothing on the issue.

If the candidates showed little interest in the issue, so did the national press corps. In fact, Nixon staff members do not recall even one question put to him about the environment.

Yet only 17 months after the election, on April 22, 1970, the country celebrated Earth Day, with a national outpouring of concern for cleaning up the environment. Politicians of both parties jumped on the issue. So many politicians were on the stump on Earth Day that Congress was forced to close down. The oratory, one of the wire services observed, was "as thick as smog at rush hour."

A comparison of White House polls (done by Opinion Research of Princeton, New Jersey) taken in May 1969, and just two years later in May 1971, showed that concern for the environment had leaped to the forefront of our national psyche. In May 1971, fully a quarter of the public thought that protecting the environment was important, yet only 1 percent had thought so just two years earlier. In the Gallup polls, public

concern over air and water pollution jumped from tenth place in the summer of 1969 to fifth place in the summer of 1970, and was perceived as more important than "race," "crime," and "teenage" problems, but not as important as the perennial poll leaders, "peace" and the "pocketbook" issues.

In the White House, we pondered this sudden surge of public concern about cleaning up America and providing more open spaces for parks, and a heightened awareness of the necessity to dedicate more land for wildlife habitat. Why, we asked, after it was so long delayed, was the environmentalist awakening so much more advanced in the United States than in other countries? What motivated millions to so much activity so long after publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962? Many factors seem to have been involved.

First, the environmental movement probably bloomed at the time it did mainly because of affluence. Americans have long been relatively much better off than people of other nations, but nothing in all history compares even remotely to the prosperity we have

enjoyed since the end of World War II, and which became visibly evident by the mid-fifties. An affluent economy yields things like the 40-hour week, three-day weekends, the two-week paid vacation, plus every kind of labor-saving gadget imaginable to shorten the hours that used to be devoted to household chores. The combination of spare money and spare time created an ambience for the growth of causes that absorb both money and time.

Another product of affluence has been the emergence of an "activist" upper middle class—college-educated, affluent, concerned, and youthful for its financial circumstances. The nation has never had anything like this "mass elite" before. Sophisticated, resourceful, politically potent, and dedicated to change, to "involvement," it formed the backbone of the environmentalist movement in the United States.

Other factors included the rise of television and the opportunities it provides for advocacy journalism.

Also, science contributed another dimension to the national agitation. To the obvious signs of pollution that people could see, feel, and smell,

science added a panoply of invisible threats: radiation, heavy metal poisons, chlorinated hydrocarbons in the water, acidic radicals in the atmosphere, all potentially more insidious, more pervasive, and more dangerous than the familiar nuisances. This could happen only in a country able to support a large, advanced scientific community with an immense laboratory infrastructure, marvelously sensitive instruments, intensive funding, computers, data banks, and vast interchanges of information able to isolate and trace the progress through the ecosystem of elements and compounds at concentrations measured in parts per billion, and to establish their effects upon living organisms in the biosphere.

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The press served the pollinating function of a honey bee, transporting the latest scientific findings to the public, which reacted with fear and misgivings. These in turn were relayed by the press back to the scientific community, which was stimulated by public concern to intensify its investigations, leading to more discoveries of new perils, and so on. This in itself provided a climate in which support for environmentally related causes could be elicited.

The feverish pitch of Earth Day 1970 passed, but the environmental movement did not go away. Instead, the drive for a cleaner environment became part of our national ethic. Now it is taken for granted, the best possible testimonial that progress is being made. Our nation's thinking has changed. Endorsing growth without regard to the quality of that growth seems forever behind us. The failure of the economy to take into full account the social costs of environmental pollution is being rectified. Not only are environmental considerations now factored into federal government decision-making but over and over again Americans pay for

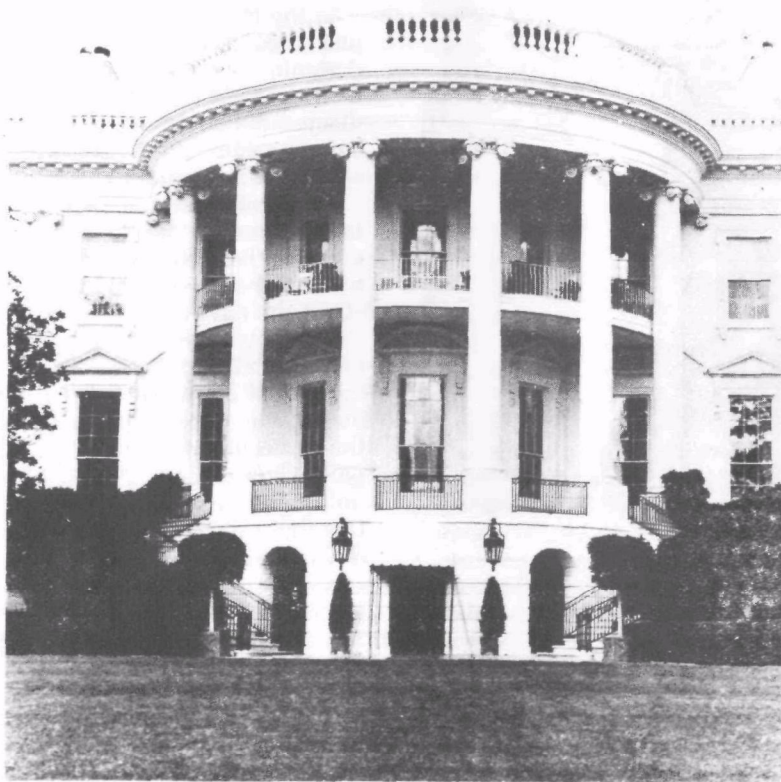
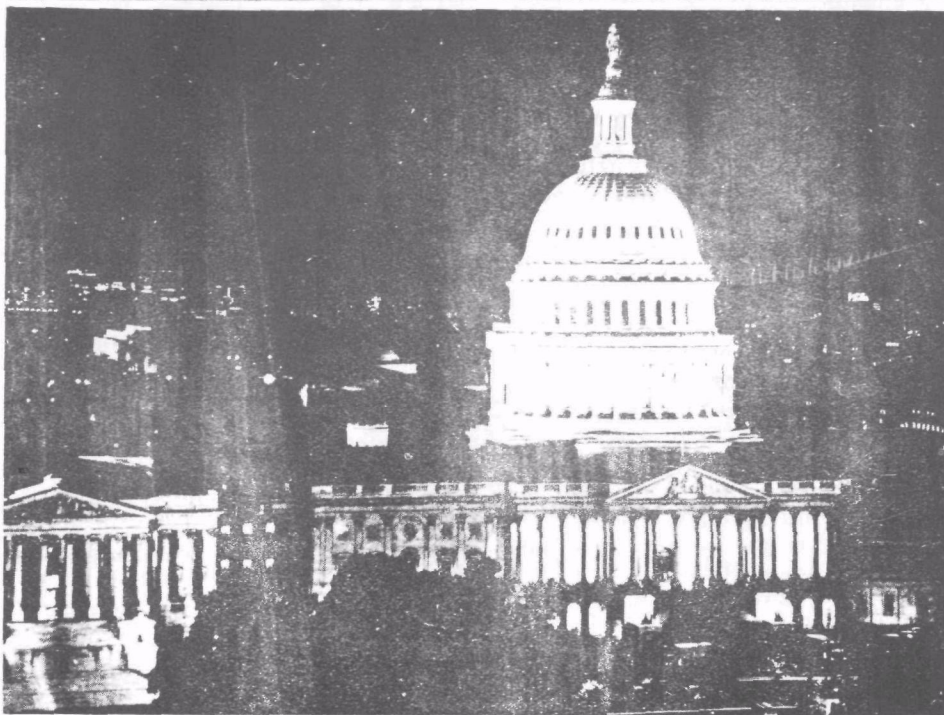


Photo courtesy of The White House.



East Terrace, U.S. Capitol. Washington Convention and Visitors Association photo.

low-polluting or pollution-free products like low-sulfur heating oil, unleaded gasoline, and coal from fully reclaimed strip mines, for automobile emission controls, for electricity from cleaner fuels, and for more parklands and wildlife refuges. More fundamentally, we are beginning to understand that the environment is an independent whole of which man is only a part.

But in the early 1970s it was clear that the executive branch could not respond to public demand to clean up the environment without first creating an organization to do the job. Better coordination of federal environmental programs was needed. There were 44 agencies in nine separate departments with responsibilities in the field of what was then loosely described as "the environment and natural resources." No department had enough expertise to take charge.

At cabinet meetings, HEW Secretary Bob Finch, responsible for air pollution controls, and Transportation Secretary John Volpe, argued over which department should take the lead in developing a research program for unconventional low-polluting

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automobiles. On pesticides, Walter Hickel at Interior and Finch argued for tighter pesticide controls, while Agriculture Secretary Clifford Hardin emphasized the increased crop productivity resulting from the application of pesticides. And Secretary of State Bill Rogers weighed in expressing concern on whether a ban on DDT in this country might restrict the supply of DDT to the developing countries. Hickel, who at the time handled water pollution control over at Interior, wanted more money for sewage treatment control; Bob Mayo, director of the Bureau of Budget would have none of it. Maurice Stans at Commerce was wary of tighter pollution controls and what effect this might have on corporate profits. Paul McCracken, Chairman of the President's Council of Economic Advisors, worried that we would be uncompetitive in international markets if our product prices reflected the costs of pollution abatement standards that were more stringent than those of other countries. There was hardly a Cabinet officer who did not have a stake in the environment issue. Even the Postmaster General joined the debate, offering to

use postal cars to test an experimental fleet of low-pollution cars.

The cabinet meeting left President Nixon dissatisfied. There was no overall strategy, too many unanswered questions. Should enforcement be done by regulation, or by user fees, or a combination of both? What were the overall costs to industry and the consumer in terms of both the increased price products for various pollution abatement schedules under varying standards and regulations? Finally, what would the various clean-up scenarios do to the federal budget? Nixon clearly needed a "pollution czar" and one agency to look to for the answers.

First, Nixon discarded the option of a Department of Environment and Natural Resources as well as several other reorganization plans. In July 1970 he submitted to Congress the Environmental Protection Agency plan; the new agency came into being on December 2, 1970. Meanwhile, I had interviewed a number of candidates to run the new agency and recommended Bill Ruckelshaus to the President. I've missed the mark on lots of things in my life, but Ruckelshaus was a "bull's eye."

Now, years later, the accomplishments of the Nixon years are plain to see. New clean air, water, solid waste, and pesticide laws, coastal zone management planning seed money, new national parks, including the great urban parks in New York City and San Francisco harbors. In addition, Nixon ordered federal agencies to shed spare federal acreage that would be converted into parks and recreation areas, especially in urban areas. More than 82,000 acres in all 50 states were converted into 642 parks, the majority of them in or very close to cities, really bringing parks to the people.

More money was dedicated to buying wildlife habitat; Congress passed Nixon's controversial proposal to protect endangered species. Nixon's executive orders restricted ocean dumping and tightened environmental standards for off-shore oil drilling. To quell the insatiable development instincts of the Army Corps of Engineers he cancelled construction of the Cross-Florida Barge Canal.

What Nixon—and subsequent presidents—couldn't accomplish is to address in a rational way the cost of pollution abatement control: how fast should the nation clean up and at what cost? In the early 1970s, our polls clearly showed the public demanded a cleaner environment, but data on the public's willingness to pay was ambivalent. Our initial Opinion Research polls showed that about three-fourths of the public supported more government spending for air and water pollution abatement programs, that support existed in all population groups, and that it was particularly high among the young. But this did not mean that taxpayers had committed

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themselves to spending their own money to improve the quality of the environment. Spending for government programs never seems to equate in the public's mind with spending their own money. Opinion Research reported that in May 1971, three-fourths of the public would pay small price increases for pollution control, but six out of 10 opposed large price increases for that purpose.

A Harris poll in October 1971 indicated that 78 percent of the public would be willing to pay (how much was not specified) to have air and water pollution cleaned up, and 48 percent would accept a 10-percent reduction in jobs for a cleaner environment. Poll editor Hazel Erskine indicated that individuals were not "personally anxious" to foot the bill for correcting pollution damage, although willingness to pay for pollution control was growing.

Congress received even stronger messages. Twenty-two congressmen, in a survey of 300,000 Americans in varying kinds of congressional districts, asked constituents if they were willing to pay more for pollution control. Respondents in all but three districts answered affirmatively. Representative Gerald Ford asked his Michigan constituents, "Should the federal government expand efforts to control air and water pollution even if it costs you more in taxes and prices?" The answer:

68.3 percent yes, 27.5 percent no. Subsequently, Ford voted to override President Nixon's veto of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act Amendments of 1972. (Nixon vetoed it largely because of the very heavy federal expenditures, particularly for sewage treatment plants.) Not surprisingly, because the perspective almost always changes inside the oval office, President Ford later tried unsuccessfully to hold down sewage treatment expenditures, as has every president since then.

Nixon knew he would pay a political price by not proposing the "toughest" and costliest pollution control standards, but after looking at the federal budget and the macro-economic impact, he chose a more moderate course. As it turned out, Congress, fanned by the political hurricane of the environmental movement, enacted deadlines that could never be met, like the 1977 deadline for secondary treatment of municipal waste, and an \$18 billion appropriation over the three-year life of the law, which couldn't even be dispensed under the law's cumbersome grant system. Similarly, Congress legislated technology that didn't exist by setting emission standards for automobiles that couldn't be met and later had to be postponed. The missed 1987 year-end ozone deadlines is another glaring example of Congress' tendency to legislate non-existent technology.

Early in the process we recognized that Congress and the executive branch mistrusted each other's cost impact figures for various pollution reduction strategies. Even in executive branch meetings, the EPA staff repeatedly seemed to minimize pollution costs, while other agencies weighed in with high costs to meet the identical pollution standard. Often, we halved the difference, relaxing the standard more than EPA wanted, but keeping it much tighter than Commerce, for example, found acceptable.

We might have missed a chance in those early days to help resolve the debate. Russ Train, chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality, and I proposed setting up a national body with think tank funds plus matching federal funds to study cost-benefit analysis for pollution controls. We hoped that if a body removed from Congress and the executive branch did the number crunching, then perhaps the results would be more acceptable to all parties inside the beltway. The idea never reached the President, largely because Chuck Colson opposed our candidate to head this study group, and Colson beat me out in the White House staff warfare that goes on in any Administration.

Today Americans spend \$77 billion annually for environmental improvements and that cost could easily reach \$100 billion by the end of the century. Rather than ask where the next billion dollars can be spent, we must pause and again ask how clean and how fast? Today we have infinitely more scientific capability and sophisticated cost-benefit analysis to steer a course toward a cleaner environment. The question is, will our elected officials and executive branch regulators be willing to lean into the political winds, as we did, and act on the basis of objective information? □

(Whitaker was President Nixon's Cabinet Secretary (1969); associate director of the White House Domestic Council for environment, energy, and natural resources policy (1969-1972); and Undersecretary of the Department of the Interior (1973-1975). He is now Vice President, Public Affairs, for Union Camp Corporation.)