

The History of Earth Day

Submitted by Alexis Baker, Environmental Programs Coordinator

The first Earth Day was celebrated on April 22, 1970. However, it evolved seven years prior in 1962. U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin, who served in the senate from 1963-1981, was troubled by the fact that no attention was focused on environmental degradation and approached President Kennedy about leading a five-day, eleven-state conservation tour. The 1963 conservation tour, unfortunately, failed at putting the environment on the national political agenda.

Senator Nelson was not to be discouraged. He continued to speak to audiences across the country. He came to the conclusion that average citizens actually saw the evidence of environmental degradation in their communities and cared immensely about their water, soil, and air. At a conference in Seattle in September 1969, he announced a nationwide grassroots demonstration to protect the environment. The response was amazing. At least 20 million demonstrators and thousands of schools and local communities participated in the first Earth Day.

Public pressure generated from the days leading up to Earth Day resulted in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) being signed into law on January 1, 1970. The NEPA process involves evaluations of all environmental effects of a federal project or action. Projects funded by a federal agency are also required to meet NEPA guidelines. On December 2 of that same year, the United State Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was established. Today all states in the U.S have a local agency, which reports to the EPA, to oversee local compliance with environmental laws and regulations.

Ten years after the first Earth Day, other important environmental legislations were also signed into law. These new laws included the Clean Air Acts, the Clean Water Acts, the Endangered Species Act, the Toxic Substances Control Act, and the Federal Land Policy and Management Act.

The success of Earth Day, while there is still a long way to go before our country can consider itself environmentally sustainable, is obvious. This has shown itself in the environmental and community civic responsibility of our children. This year, Henderson County held its first Earth Day Environmental Stewardship Drawing Contest. The winner of the contest, Stephanie Cope, has shown through her words and actions that anyone can be a good environmental steward. The many wonderful drawings submitted for the contest demonstrates that future leaders in the environmental field may be just a few doors down from us. While we should protect the environment for future generations, we also need to instill and nurture environmental stewardship in our children.

Today, when we think of Earth Day, we are reminded to do our part for our planet and community. In the past, this column has attempted to show several ways that we can be good environmental stewards. Easy ways to “celebrate Earth Day everyday” is to practice the three Rs: Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle. Other ways to help the environment

can include driving less and cutting energy usage at home and in your workplace. Of course, there are many ways to help the environment. Some people choose to lobby their congressmen to bring stronger rules and legislation to improve water, air, and soil. Others work to conserve or preserve sensitive natural environments with endangered or threatened species. Some choose to pick up trash along the highway or clean streams.

While awareness is important to protecting the environment, like Senator Nelson realized 40 years ago, action is also important. Bring your friends and family out to the ECO 40th Anniversary Earth Day Celebration at Blue Ridge Community College on April 24th and learn more ways from local environmental groups as well as your local government representatives about how to protect the environment.

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