

Earth Day as a Catalyst for Campus Environmental Leadership

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## **Introduction**

Earth Day, with its reverberating impact on campus environmental leaders, has a story to tell. It is a story of responding to urgent threats to the biosphere. It is equally a story of celebration. As an act of activism, Earth Day has ushered in sweeping changes in American environmental regulation; as a ceremonial event, it has also catalyzed campus environmental leadership for more than thirty five years. In the following interviews, today's academic environmental leaders examine Earth Day's evolving role as a force for change and wellspring of hope.

### **An Historical Account of the First Earth Day**

Founded by Senator Gaylord Nelson in 1970, Earth Day was born amid great political, environmental, and social strife.

In the waning months of the 1960s, environmental problems were proliferating like a many-headed hydra, a monster no one could understand, let alone tame or slay. Rampant air pollution was linked to disease and death in New York, Los Angeles, and elsewhere as noxious fumes, spewed out by cars and factories, made city life less and less bearable. In the wake of Rachel Carson's 1962 best-seller, *Silent Spring*, there was widespread concern over large-scale use of pesticides, often near densely populated communities. In addition, huge fish kills were reported on the Great Lakes, and the media carried the news that Lake Erie, one of America's largest bodies of fresh water, was in its death throes. Ohio had another jolt when

Cleveland's Cuyahoga River, an artery inundated with oil and toxic chemicals, burst into flames by spontaneous combustion.

In the face of such mounting environmental devastation, Democratic Senator Gaylord Nelson called for a national grassroots environmental demonstration, modeled on the earlier anti-Vietnam War teach-ins, to be held on April 22, 1970.<sup>1</sup> Word of the event spread like wildfire across the nation's colleges. The first Earth Day engaged more than 20 million people on over 2,000 college campuses. It was a watershed moment in the history of American environmentalism.

According to Denis Hayes, the Harvard Law School student who became the national coordinator of activities for the first Earth Day, it was "quite a day." A sunrise ceremony in Washington, D.C. was followed by speeches to crowds numbering in the hundreds of thousands in New York City and Chicago. Hayes describes Earth Day as holding a "deep emotional reservoir": "The success of Earth Day went vastly beyond what I dared to have hoped." Hayes characterizes Earth Day as a time when "people came together to understand each other's commonalities and diversities peacefully on a wide range of environmental issues." "Our goal [was] not to clean the air while leaving slums and ghettos, nor [was] it to provide a healthy world for oppression and war. We wish[ed] to make the probability of life greater,

and the quality of life higher.”<sup>1</sup> Virtually every community from Maine to California hosted Earth Day events. Congress adjourned for the day. Every television network gave it significant coverage.<sup>2</sup>

According to Hayes, Earth Day ushered in a “new conceptualization” of the environment and humans’ place within it, as demonstrated by a transformation in our national commitment from conservationism to environmentalism. The Sierra Club founded in California during 1892 by John Muir along with the Audubon Society founded around the same time in the East drew support for the conservation ethic. Out of the early conservationists grew utilitarian voices focused on the wise use of natural resources for the greatest number. The preservationists maintained a more idealistic ethic with respect to keeping nature pristine. After World War II concerns of air and water environmental impact led to associated pollution control legislation at the national level. By the early 1960’s beginning with the passage of The Clean Air Act, a wave of environmental legislation occurred. Senator Edmond S. Muskie (D-ME) chaired the subcommittee on air and water pollution. Mr. Don Nicoll, Chief of Staff to Senator Muskie states “That subcommittee, with strong bipartisan support, took the lead in developing and pushing air and water pollution efforts”. Prior to 1969,

“nobody knew the word ecology [and] environmental issues did not broadly resonate with Americans.” “Earth Day not only marked the replacement of [John Muir’s traditional focus solely on preservation of natural lands] with the full panoply of environmental issues, but it mobilized (albeit temporarily) a far broader base of support than had any of the prior waves of conservationism.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Earth Day in Historical Context with the Environmental Movement**

In Ausubel et al’s 1995 analysis of environmentalism as a social movement from 1970 to 1990, the first Earth Day has been characterized as a focal point during which “the environmental movement achieved enormous visibility within our society.... it has [since] remained a viable sociopolitical force for more than two decades.”<sup>4</sup> A wide range of environmental issues were brought to the forefront by Earth Day activism. There was growing concern over dwindling natural resources in the face of overpopulation and about producing enough energy to meet the demand of a booming world economy. With wide scale soil erosion and overharvesting of fish populations, both agricultural and fisheries issues were highlighted. Loss of biodiversity and the proliferation of acid rain caused by coal-fired power plants were brought to the public eye. Increasing concentrations of

atmospheric chloroflorocarbons and subsequent ozone depletion were noted with alarm.<sup>5</sup> Over the years, Earth Day became a vehicle for a national environmental dialogue, with the college campus a focal point of environmental action.

Earth Day 1990 marked a transition in strategy. The focus of the first Earth Day had been on awareness-raising activities such as teach-ins, rallies, and protests.<sup>6</sup> In 1990, however, students began to organize and conduct environmental audits at their campuses, quantifying their environmental footprint in terms of solid waste, hazardous waste, and pesticide use.<sup>7</sup> A number of campuses participated in these environmental audits including Drew University, Rutgers University, the University of Colorado at Boulder, the University of Michigan, Washington University, and Yale University.<sup>8</sup> According to student organizer Jodie P. Goldman, the “goal was to show students how their daily lives could have a direct impact on our environment – either positive or negative.”<sup>9</sup>

## **Voices from the Field: Earth Day as Seen Through the Eyes of Campus Environmental Leaders**

Following the first Earth Day, the 1970's energy crisis focused even greater awareness on environmental challenges; in addition to lowering thermostats and reducing gasoline use, groundbreaking national environmental legislation emerged. The 1970s became "the environmental decade."<sup>10</sup> Twenty-three major pieces of environmental legislation were passed by Congress during that time, including the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Endangered Species Acts. These shifts toward greater environmental accountability were echoed in various campus efforts to establish environmental studies departments, preserve green space, and promote hiking and outdoor activities as dimensions of physical education.<sup>11</sup> The following personal insights from college presidents and other campus environmental leaders attest to Earth Day's significance as a catalyst of change.

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Theodora J. Kalikow, President of the University of Maine at Farmington, recalls the first Earth Day as "a perfect moment in time." Demonstrations, speeches, and parties focused on the war in Vietnam, civil rights, the

women's movement and, now, environmentalism melted together in a way that "changed people's heads," and Kalikow was beginning to see the political ramifications of environmental activism in a global context, a view she would carry with her on her rise in academic administration.. Today, she asserts that "campus greening would not exist without Earth Day."

Although Earth Day's radical activism "went to sleep for awhile," Kalikow still sees it as a rallying day of celebration, which might be carried forth in a new generation by Al Gore's recent Nobel Prize-winning efforts to mitigate climate change.

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Thomas C. Jorling, Visiting Distinguished Professor of Environmental Studies at Williams College, recalls Earth Day's initial impact on undergraduates. Students had been drawn to study the environment at Williams College out of personal concerns for the future of the planet, and the grassroots nature of Earth Day enabled them to formulate a peaceful response to the turmoil of the time. He characterizes the event as "channeling positive achievement ... across the social, racial, and political divide."

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The original Earth Day was significant to University of Maine-Presque Isle President Donald N. Zillman because it linked his varied interests in environmental law, natural resources, and environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin. Earth Day attracted students that were not necessarily politically active, and introduced them to the world of environmental activism. Zillman also noted that the first Earth Day “enhanced the United States’ credibility internationally, as related to environmental leadership.” He further characterizes Earth Day as “a source of consistent enthusiasm,” “always out there to unite strong passion for a sustained movement, which is now reaching a third generation.” Zillman is also quick to note that “student passion for the environment needs to be embraced with good science and economics....The real players coming to the table know the science and economics while possessing a humanist broad picture perspective.”

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Earth Day also brought together 1960’s countercultural activists, who argued that “changes needed to occur both in terms of values as well as institutions.”<sup>12</sup> An example of this was the rapid establishment of recycling

centers as cultural gathering places, “where ideas and practice – elaborating the new lifestyle – could be joined.”<sup>13</sup> This form of activism was initially seen as a threat by traditional conservationists. According to the National Wildlife Federation’s Thomas Kimball, NWF “wanted to protect a lifestyle based on appreciation of scenic resources or untouched wilderness.”<sup>14</sup> Kimball and his colleagues welcomed Earth Day because it appeared to reinforce the idea of the environment needing protection, yet it was also “troublesome because it drew attention to approaches other than those the traditional movement had pioneered and known best.”<sup>15</sup> In the end, Earth Day helped to forge common ground between these disparate political, environmental, and countercultural groups.

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Unity College President Mitchell S. Thomashow, former Chairperson of the Environmental Studies Department at Antioch University New England, does not count the first Earth Day as a defining moment for him as an individual, but he does believe that Earth Day has “pushed the field of environmental studies forward,” and exerted some influence on the issues of climate change, wilderness preservation, environmental pollution, and sustainability.

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Michael Edelstien, Professor of Environmental Psychology at Ramapo College, describes the arc of Earth Day's influence over time. In the beginning, it stood as a protest cry to address environmental issues. During 1973-and 1974, the focus was on the energy crisis and "an emerging holistic sensibility." Edelstein recalls an abrupt drop in environmental studies majors – and an increase in business students – during the 1980's, which he believes was a direct result of the Reagan era's emphasis on "beating the Reds." At his campus in northern New Jersey, "the environmental studies program went from having 400 students in 1981 to 40 students in 1983." This shift stood in stark contrast to the "self-reflective, human/nature, and spiritual element dominant during the 1960's," which led up to the original Earth Day in 1970. During the 1990's, Edelstein observed a newfound focus on sustainability, defined by the Brundtland Commission Report of 1987 as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."<sup>16</sup>

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College of the Atlantic President David Hales recalls Earth Day as

both an outgrowth of previous activism which captured much of the energy of civil rights and antiwar efforts, and a lens which focused that energy on outcomes which were more acceptable to mainstream society. It also helped create a context of citizen action, which added a positive political dimension, and enabled elected officials (and those who wanted to be) to leverage support for environmental measures.

When asked how he thought Earth Day influenced the campus greening movement, Hales reflected,

Earth Day has provided a target/rationale for campus organization, and excellent experience for students – including many at the secondary school level. It's often a place for organizers to cut their teeth and develop practical skills and experience at persuasion. More importantly, from the earlier celebrants of Earth Day came a large number of scholars and teachers, and, equally important, a universe of students who were drawn to their classes. Both the curriculum and on-campus interest [in environmental studies] have been revived in recent years by the growing awareness of the nature and potential impact of global warming.

Hales further highlighted the significance of Earth Day as a celebration.

In early years, Earth Day reflected its roots in protest movements far more than it does today. There was always some sense of a spring party in Earth Day events, but this has grown in more recent years, as has the reinforcement aspect of Earth Day – a time when the committed celebrate each other and their successes. In this regard it plays a very valuable role of adding “hope” to worldviews which are often somewhat darker and more pessimistic.

In the coming years, Hale anticipates that climate change activism will carry the Earth Day torch.

As the impact of Earth Day as a motivator of student interest and involvement has waned, awareness of climate issues and debates associated with The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change have reinvigorated curriculum growth and student interest, much as the events of the 60's and 70's were focused through Earth Day.

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Jack Byrne, the Campus Environmental Sustainability Coordinator for Middlebury College, believes that Earth Day provides “significant validation to [practice environmentalism] all the days of the year.” For him, the day signifies something about who we are, and the value we place on being part of something bigger. According to Byrne, Earth Day “sparked a movement having a great deal of influence and visibility. Its ongoing energy and influence lends support for environmentalism and activism, and keeps the environment in the consciousness of campus leadership.”

Byrne “views [Earth Day’s focus on] political action necessary for change as a valued part of being a citizen.” He sees Earth Day “taking on a broader social view, with respect to addressing poverty and meeting basic human needs [as]goals of sustainable development.”

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William Moomaw, Professor of International Environmental Policy at Tufts University, Director of the Center for International Environment and Resource Policy, and the convening lead author of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change for 2001 and 2003, remembers the first Earth Day as an emotionally charged event, marked by intense anti-establishment

sentiment, that had a “big impact on [his] career.” He sees the event as providing “external verification” for college greening and other environmental efforts, including increased awareness of the impacts of groundwater contamination, , and wide spread herbicide and pesticide use.

In the 1990’s, Moomaw perceived a shift toward issues of sustainable development and climate change. Today, he views “climate change [as] a huge driver pushing the momentum and action of the environmental movement forward,” with Earth Day encapsulated within this bigger movement.

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Nan Jenks-Jay, Director of Environmental Affairs and Professor of Environmental Studies at Middlebury College, has been actively involved in re-focusing higher education on regional sustainability issues for twenty years. Although Vietnam War activism took precedence over Earth Day for her in her undergraduate years, she notes that Earth Day has had a considerable influence on students and faculty at Middlebury College since that time.. She credits Earth Day with “providing a source of strength and insight to rejuvenate and move [the environmental studies curriculum] forward.” As she sees it, the initial success of Earth Day was to “create a

national urgency that led to innovative action demonstrated on the college campus.” It also served as “a means for students and faculty to get together and share stories of progress and challenges.”

Jenks-Jay sees Earth Day as a “consistent ceremonial event marking an American tradition.” She characterizes it as a “greater celebration...a joyous event.” Although the focus of Earth Day changes from year to year, its significance as a celebratory event remains a source of renewal and reflection, which she feels is especially important in a country that has “lost...celebration as part of its culture.”

Cultural theorist Frank E. Manning argues that such celebrations represent a “text” or a vivid aesthetic event that “depicts, interprets, informs, and celebrates social truths.”<sup>17</sup> Anthropologist Carole Farber holds that community festivals “provide ideal entrees into a community’s symbolic, economic, social, and political life,”<sup>18</sup> and cultural anthropologist Robert H. Lavenda maintains that festivals are one of the few moments in the annual cycle when...a public culture emerges.”<sup>19</sup> On the first Earth Day, a collective social experience and, to some extent, a new public culture emerged. The event’s annual nature serves to continually reinforce national

festival as a means toward environmental change. Mr. Nicoll states “Earth Day was a catalyst and a symbol of a new paradigm, based on the concept of ecological integrity”. The cultural reinforcing nature of Earth Day transcended the catalytic nature of the event itself.

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Richard Barringer, Professor at The Muskie School of Public Service – University of Southern Maine and former Maine Commissioner of Conservation, recalls teaching at Harvard during the first Earth Day. At that time, he perceived “a vast [cultural] underestimation of how people felt – much vaster than [what indeed] student bodies felt deeply about across the country.”

Barringer sees “change [as] something less to be managed than to be led,” and maintains the necessity of reaching consensus on college campuses with regard to sustainability initiatives. To be successful, Barringer maintains that such initiatives require student interest, administrative leadership, and faculty engagement. With the “principal occupation of faculty being with teaching and research, any sustainability measures must match faculty interests with those of the sustainability goals.” In essence, this process is a “search for common ground and for shaping sustainability policy and

implementation in a way that appeals to the interests of faculty, administrators, and students alike.”.

Barringer views Earth Day as a socially significant opportunity for these groups to come together. At the original Earth Day, this coming together changed people’s perceptions about public concern for the environment. This legacy continues in a far greater expanded form to this day on campuses across the country.

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Sean Miller, Director of Education at Earth Day Network (EDN), is responsible for EDN’s student education programs and a network of teachers interested in environmental issues, as well as the management of the organization’s National Civic Education Project and Green Schools Campaign.

Through EDN, activists connect, interact, and have an impact on their communities, and create positive change in local, national, and global policies. EDN’s international network reaches over 17,000 organizations in 174 countries, while the domestic program engages 5,000 groups and over 25,000 educators coordinating millions of community development and environmental protection activities throughout the year.<sup>20</sup>

Miller has seen the impact of Earth Day expand into a number of innovative environmental projects, including PowerShift 2007, a national youth summit focused on climate change. He reflects:

On the first Earth Day in 1970, we witnessed a groundbreaking moment where millions of ordinary people took action on behalf of the environment. Now, this momentum has continued to grow, and it has broadened to the reach, scope, and depth of an entire social movement. All one has to do is pick up the daily newspaper and most articles concern an environmental subject matter... We can hardly act in the 21<sup>st</sup> century without encountering the “green” lifestyle, from campus greening to green building and environmental health awareness.

### **Conclusion**

Earth Day is a shining legacy, begun at a critical juncture in history and now a growing example of peaceful civic engagement. Born of a turbulent era, it convened diverse voices from across the nation, and resonated with hope, celebration, and deep concern for the future of our planet. In the consciousness of campus environmental leaders, Earth Day is firmly rooted as a place of renewal. As a catalyst for campus environmental leadership, this visionary event helped to channel activist energy into new programs, classes, and a lasting legacy of campus environmental stewardship.

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