

Earth Day Celebrates Green Way Of Life

22 April 2010, By Audrey Hoffer



This wide angle view of the Earth is centered on the Atlantic Ocean between South America and Africa.

The 40-year anniversary of Earth Day is sparking a renewed commitment to protecting natural resources. Across the country people recognize there are successes to laud, but also new challenges to confront.

Wisconsin Sen. Gaylord Nelson organized the first national environmental call-to-arms on April 22, 1970, when approximately 20 million Americans from all walks of life and political stripes gathered in parks, on streets and in auditoriums to call for government action to improve environmental quality. The [Environmental Protection Agency](#) grew out of this movement, leading to the Clean Air, [Clean Water](#) and [Endangered Species](#) Acts that continues to safeguard our environment today.

"Some attitudes towards the environment are constant over the years such as the necessity for clean air and clean water," said Gordon T. Geballe, associate dean of the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies in New Haven, Conn. "And some attitudes have changed dramatically."

"Today the private sector and municipal governments are important players in the quest for environmentally quality. In the beginning we focused mostly on non-profits such as NRDC and

the Sierra Club to champion environmental concerns," Geballe said. "Today many professionals leave the work force from positions in corporations, state and local government to seek a master's degree and intend to go back to their jobs."

Environmental quality is linked to international issues such as oil, water, agriculture, natural resources and famine. And each has a set of environmental issues that have to be taken into account.

"There's also the realization that the environment is a big global concern and not a disparate set of issues," said Geballe. "What's new is the rise in understanding that the environment is part of global concerns."

"Being green has been woven into our daily lives, and taking actions that are beneficial to our environment is accepted and encouraged. This is certainly in stark contrast to the state of our environment on that first Earth Day in 1970," wrote New Hampshire department of environmental services commissioner Tom Burack in an editorial on the department's website.

Maintaining a high level of environmental quality and a sustainable lifestyle are inspiring younger generations to be more conscious of how they live.

"Attitudes have changed," said Joel Helmer, a geography professor at Concordia University in Seward, Neb. "These young adults have a lot of information at their fingertips and are skeptical about what they hear in the press. They are environmentally-minded and want to do the right thing."

Wisconsin is working to inject environmental learning into the public school curriculum to give the future generation a more solid foundation from which to make environmental decisions, said Robert Manwell, senior public affairs manager for the Wisconsin department of natural resources.

There's a tremendous "growth in awareness of being conscious of the environment in our daily lives, at work, in our homes, our transportation and the buildings we inhabit," Manwell said heading to a press conference where DNR secretary Matt Frank announced a vehicle swap. Wisconsin purchased 21 electric-powered vehicles for their state parks that cost only 2 cents per mile to operate -- replacing 21 traditional vehicles that cost 60 cents per mile. "This is part of an ongoing effort to reduce our footprint in daily state operations and to use green technology wherever possible," Manwell said.

Both Oregon and Washington state conduct stewardship programs that encourage the return of old computers, televisions, cell phones and paint for recycling. Mississippi collaborates with the Jackson chamber of commerce in an electronic waste recycling program for businesses and is being pressured by the public to offer a similar program according to Robbie Wilbur of the Mississippi department of environmental quality.

"This is all about creating wonderful new markets, new products that produce less, consume less and have a lighter footprint on the environment," said Joanie Stevens-Schwenger, communications manager at the Oregon department of environmental protection.

In recent years the realization that we need to get our own house in order is prevalent, said Geballe. "If you want to go out and preach to the world that the environment must be safeguarded then you better live that way. Do you fill your own mug with coffee or do you take a paper cup," he asked rhetorically. "This is the level of detail we're getting down to."

There's also the recognition that environmental quality is linked to financial issues. Burack wrote "Being green could be as simple as the fact that green is the color of money and connecting to the environment is a cost-saving matter. Businesses, municipalities and individuals alike can all save money by making cost-effective, green choices."

But new environmental problems are more complex than in years past.

"Previously concern focused on visible pollution that came from industrial and commercial operations such as TVs floating down the river and smoke stacks spewing black clouds," said Stevens-Schwenger.

Now attention is turned, among other concerns, to toxic pollutants from wood combustion, benzene, pharmaceuticals and personal care products.

"Earth Day is celebrated every year on April 22nd, but there is no reason why we can't celebrate [Earth Day](#) every day by being green in our own particular way," Burack said.

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