

All About Earth Day

from comments by Senator Gaylord Nelson, Founder of Earth Day

The first Earth Day was held on April 22, 1970. What is Earth Day? How did it start?

The idea for Earth Day evolved over a period of seven years starting in 1962. It had been troubling me that the state of our environment was simply a non-issue in the politics of the country. In November 1962 an idea occurred to me to persuade President Kennedy to give visibility to this issue by going on a national conservation tour, which he did in September 1963. For many reasons his tour did not succeed in putting the issue onto the national political agenda. However, it was the idea that ultimately flowered into Earth Day.

I continued to speak on environmental issues to a variety of audiences in 25 states. All across the country, evidence of environmental degradation was appearing everywhere, and everyone noticed except the political establishment. The people were concerned, but the politicians were not.

Six years would pass before the idea that became Earth Day occurred to me while on a conservation speaking tour out West in the summer of 1969. At the time, anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, called "teach-ins," had spread to college campuses all across the nation. Suddenly, the idea occurred to me—why not organize a huge grassroots protest over what was happening to our environment?

If we could tap into the environmental concerns of the general public and infuse student energy into the environmental cause, we could generate a demonstration that would force this issue onto the political agenda. It was a big gamble, but worth a try.

At a conference in Seattle in September 1969, I announced that in the spring of 1970 there would be a nationwide grassroots demonstration on behalf of the environment and invited everyone to participate. The wire services carried the story from coast to coast. The response was electric. Telegrams, letters, and telephone inquiries poured in from all across the country. The American people finally had a forum to express its concern about what was happening to the land, rivers, lakes, and air.

Five months before Earth Day, *The New York Times* carried a lengthy article reporting on the astonishing proliferation of environmental events: "Rising concern about the environmental crisis is sweeping the nation's campuses ... a national day of observance of environmental problems... is being planned for next spring... when a nationwide environmental 'teach-in'... coordinated from the office of Senator Gaylord Nelson is planned...."

It was obvious that we were headed for a spectacular success on Earth Day. It was also obvious that grassroots activities had ballooned beyond the capacity of my U.S. Senate office staff to keep up with the telephone calls, paper work, inquiries, etc. In mid-January, I was provided temporary space for a Washington, D.C. headquarters. I staffed the office with college students.

Earth Day worked because of the spontaneous response at the grassroots level. We had neither the time nor resources to organize 20 million demonstrators and the thousands of schools and local communities that participated. That was the remarkable thing about Earth Day. It organized itself.

The Presidential Medal of Freedom

"The Presidential Medal of Freedom is the highest honor given to civilians in the United States... Twenty-five years ago this year, Americans came together for the very first Earth Day ... because of one American: Gaylord Nelson. As the father of Earth Day... He inspired us to remember that the stewardship of our natural resources is the stewardship of the American Dream. He is the worthy heir of the tradition of Theodore Roosevelt... And I hope that Gaylord Nelson's shining example will illuminate all the debates in this city for years to come."

-- President Bill Clinton, 9/29/95