

## Earth Day

Elsa Devienne

### *Brief summary about the first Earth Day*

The first “Earth Day” was held on 22 April 1970. While the original idea of an environmental “teach-in” belonged to Senator Gaylord Nelson, the organization of “Earth Day” events was devolved to local committees, which encouraged creative responses to what many were already calling “the environmental crisis.” From New Yorkers flocking to Fifth Avenue for a massive march, to Denver students leading a bike ride across the city, participants celebrated Earth Day in various ways. The message of Earth Day resonated widely. In total, over 20 million Americans took part in 12,000 events held over the month of April 1970. After two decades of affluence and economic growth, many Americans were coming to the realization that the planet’s limited resources were being plundered while air quality and other environmental metrics were becoming worse. On the heels of the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill, one of the worst environmental disasters in modern history, the first Earth Day brought together people from across the political spectrum to demand pollution regulation and, for the most radical participants, a new relationship between humans and the planet. Was Earth Day a turning point in the emergence of the modern environmental movement? Historians are divided on this question, but all agree that it put pressure on the Congress to act. In the following years, several environmental legislation landmarks were passed.

Look at the documents and answer the following questions:

1. What has changed and what hasn’t changed in terms of how we think about the environment today compared to 1970?
2. How did visual material about Earth Day shape popular understandings of the environmental movement?

**List of documents with brief description**



**Document 1.** A year after Earth Day, President Nixon and First Lady Pat Nixon planted a tree on the White House south lawn to commemorate the event (1971). This photograph reminds us that, in the 1970s, environmental issues were a bipartisan concern shared by Democratic and Republican politicians alike, including President Nixon. In 1970, Nixon passed the Clean Air Act and created the Environmental Protection Agency. Planting a tree was a largely symbolic action, but it echoed the many other ceremonial planting of trees and plants that took place across the US on the first Earth Day. Starting in the late 1970s, following the energy crisis, many Republicans turned against environmental regulation policies. Today, climate denialism is rampant among US Republicans.

Earth Day-Lenin Day Splits L.A. Council

Los Angeles Times (1923-1995):

## TEPID SUPPORT

# Earth Day-Lenin Day Splits L.A. Council

BY ERWIN BAKER  
Times Staff Writer

Los Angeles city councilmen Monday gave lukewarm support to the observance of Earth Day Wednesday after one councilman noted with alarm the date was on Lenin's birthday and another warned it would promote Soviet-type radicalism.

Other councilmen, however, claimed the charges were "ridiculous" and accused their colleagues of using "scare tactics" in attempting to "intimidate" supporters of the observance.

The council has no objection to part of a proposed resolution expressing its "enthusiasm for this mobilization of constructive energies to unite campus and community in ecological education efforts."

But Councilman James B. Potter balked at endorsing the second part of the resolution.

It urged Los Angeles departments, especially Library and Recreation and Parks, to "cooperate in every way possible in marking this important and ongoing effort to better understand our surroundings."

Potter read a lengthy newspaper report asserting far left groups were planning to take control of the planned teach-ins and convert them into demonstrations honoring the 100th birthday of the leader of the 1917 Communist revolution.

Potter offered an amendment which stated that while the council was enthusiastic on goals of the program "it expresses its concern that the April 22 date was chosen . . . and expresses its hope that in the future a different and more desirable date may be selected."

Councilman Marvin Braude ridiculed the amendment, arguing that the date was only coincidental.

Braude was supported by Councilman Thomas Bradley, who told the council it would look like "a bunch of irresponsible public officials who were being intimidated by someone who was having a birthday . . ."

"St. Peter was born on April 22 — should we

change his birthday?" Bradley asked.

"By no implication can we be supporting Lenin Day," he said. "Either you vote for the Braude resolution or you run scared."

Councilman Robert M. Wilkinson, however, said the council should not be "intimidated into promoting radicals who have taken actions against our own government."

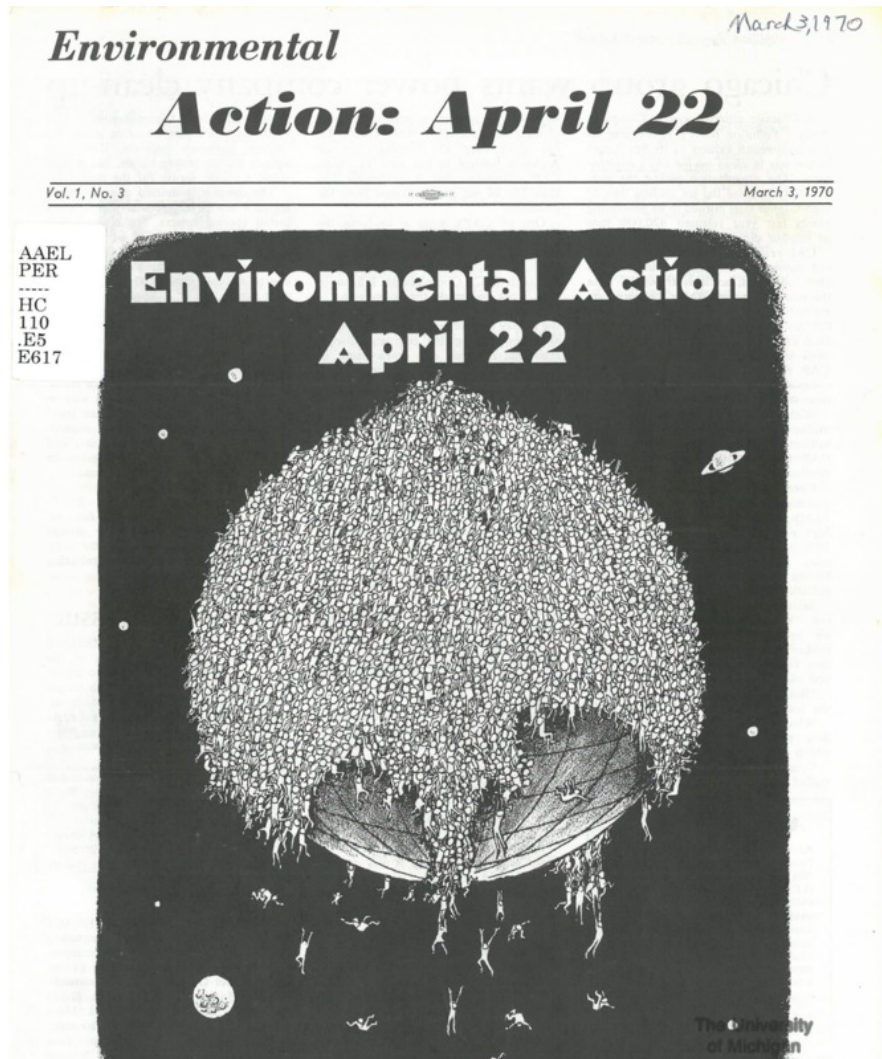
Wilkinson claimed he went to a dinner meeting on environment recently and heard young people urge a change in the American form of government.

"They didn't even salute the Flag," he declared.

Potter's amendment was defeated on one roll call, 7 to 7, but later was approved 8 to 6 after Councilman Gilbert W. Lindsay changed his vote.

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**Document 2.** This article from the *Los Angeles Times* was published on 21 April 1970. It shows that some politicians were suspicious of the intentions of Earth Day's organisers. Because Earth Day happened to coincide with Lenin's birthday (on 22 April 1870), the Russian revolutionary, they spread the false rumour according to which Earth Day was supported by the Soviet Union and its sympathisers. As consensual as Earth Day may have been, it still riled up some politicians who opposed anything popular with student activists.



**Document 3.** Volume 1-3, *Environmental Action Newsletter*, March 3, 1970 (source: <http://michiganintheworld.history.lsa.umich.edu/environmentalism/items/show/288>). Environmental Action was an environmentalist group created in 1970 in Washington, DC to “promote educational programs on the environment.” On this cover of the group’s newsletter from March 1970 advertising the first Earth Day, a cartoon shows an overcrowded planet Earth with small human-like figures desperately trying to hang on to it. In the 1970s, some people involved in Earth Day events believed overpopulation to be the main cause of the environmental crisis. But, the zero-population movement was also vehemently criticized by some on the left who believed that the problem was not population growth, but the destruction wrought on by capitalism and greed; population stabilization programs also gave off racist and eugenicist overtones: was the goal to stop all humans from procreating or only those deemed inferior (due to their race or class)? Today,

most environmentalists have distanced themselves from calls for population control. Metrics show that the super-rich have disproportionately contributed to the climate crisis compared to the rest of humanity by emitting a far higher share of carbon emissions per capita. In that sense, what matters is not so much how many children people have, but how they live and use natural resources.

*Ernest B. Furgurson*

## The Black Version of Earth Day

*Washington.*  
A week from tomorrow is Earth Day, the time of the national environmental teach-in. As many of us said months ago, the state of our environment is an issue that should bring together Americans who line up on all sides of other questions—hawks and doves, blacks and whites, liberals and conservatives.

But it hasn't turned out that simply.

The reason, for starters, is that environment means something different to a man who lives on a suburban acre with trees and to a housewife who raises a flock of children in a downtown tenement; to an outdoorsman concerned over what strip mining does to the trout streams and to a steel worker who lives in the shadow of his mill.

It means something different to a black man and to his white contemporary.

Richard Hatcher, the black mayor of Gary, was in town not long ago and denounced an audience of mostly white liberals for their current turn toward the environmental crusade. In doing so, he said, they are turning their backs on the still painful problems of the blacks in the ghettos. To them, a group that has talked so much about re-ordering the nation's priorities, he

said you'd better do some thinking about priorities yourselves.

From the roster of organizations planning to take part in Earth Day, it is clear that many black activists agree with Hatcher. Their participation is the exception rather than the rule. The only nationwide group committed to the day is the chain of welfare recipients' organizations, and that in a spotty way.

But in St. Louis, a black community worker named Mrs. Freddie Mae Brown saw Earth Day as an opportunity rather than something to be put down and ignored. She chairs the Metropolitan Black Survival Committee, and is using Earth Day as a vehicle to show all who will listen just what environment means to the blacks of America. Notes from her prospectus:

"The definition of environmental pollution for the black community must include areas that whites seldom or never include in their definitions. Non-existence of adequate housing, lead poisoning, health, unemployment and other problems that make up the general slum habitat must necessarily be included along with land pollution. Pollution to the black community is thus a phenomenon that encompasses the total physical, sociological and physiological environment. . . . Thus, if the white community

commits itself to work with the black community on environmental problems, it is saying that it is not only going to work on air and water pollution but also unemployment, health, general welfare and the total slum problems."

Blacks like Mayor Hatcher may be right, she says, but "we are also aware of the fact that blacks are insulted by environmental pollution to a far greater degree than whites, and to stand by and let the whites solve their own problems would not mean that the black problems would also be solved or even reduced. . . ."

White affluence, creating demands for more products and the accompanying waste from them, is the major cause of environmental pollution.

Yet, Mrs. Brown declares, air pollution is most concentrated in the inner city where most blacks live. Automobiles, most numerous there, cause 60 to 85 per cent of all air pollution.

Proportionately, fewer blacks than whites work in the plants that cause industrial pollution. Yet they, because they live where they do, pay most in terms of property depreciation, days lost from work, cost of health care, household and personal cleaning costs, and general physiological depression.

Blacks often have higher concentrations of DDT in their bodies because of their unending fight with roaches—insects that have developed high resistance to pesticides—in their tenement homes.

Lead poisoning causes much illness and death among pre-school slum children, because so many of them live in dilapidated housing with peeling paint and falling plaster.

To dramatize these and other points that prove blacks should be more rather than less active in the environmental crusade, the Black Survival Committee is staging a series of skits on Earth Day, under the general title, "Once there was, but now there is."

It takes that line from a poem by a young black poet named Thaddeus Honeycutt, which says:

*Once there were trees, green grass and flowers,  
Now there is asphalt, concrete and buildings that tower;  
Once there was clean food to eat and water to drink,  
And now the food has DDT and the water stinks . . .  
Once there was tomorrow, but then man created dope,  
Now there is death, so what is left for them to hope. . . .  
And goes on from there.*

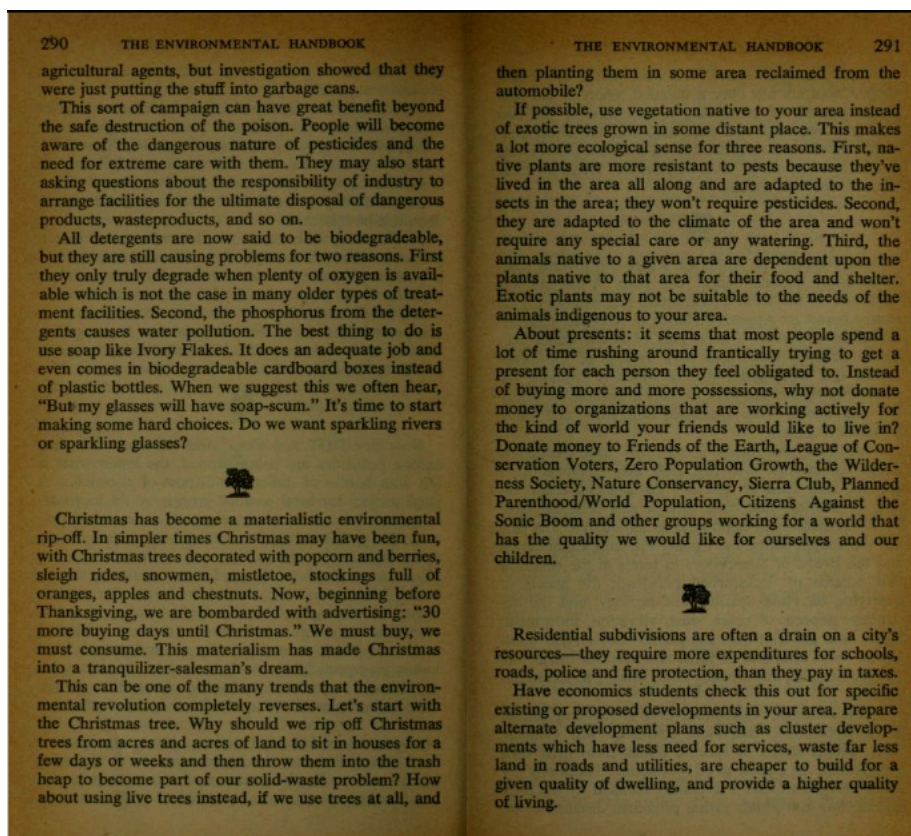
**Document 4.** This article published on 14 April 1970 in the *Baltimore Sun* shows that Earth Day divided African Americans. For some, the event was a distraction from the real problems African Americans had to contend with, including poverty, lower educational achievements, and unemployment. But others believed environmental pollution was a widespread problem and sought to raise awareness of its impact. For instance, in St. Louis, the Black Survival Committee used Earth Day to talk about environmental problems encountered by African Americans living in cities, including lead poisoning and inadequate housing.



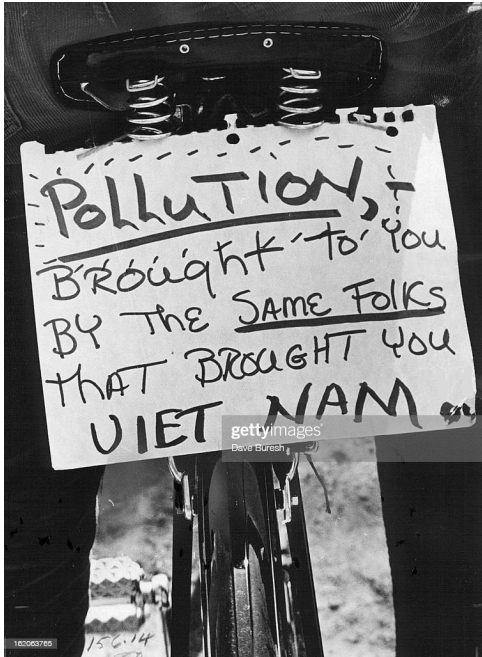
**Document 5.** Photograph of children from the Convent of the Sacred Heart School (New York City) cleaning up Union Square with brooms in April 1970. (Associated Press). Millions of school children took part in Earth Day. Litter picking was, no doubt, considered to be a safe, consensual way for them to celebrate the occasion. Yet such actions failed to bring beverage and packaging companies to account for their role in polluting the nation. Why were these companies not providing consumers with opportunities to return single-use plastic and glass bottles? Actions like this one brought attention to individual behaviour change. The trickier problem of corporate responsibility remained unaddressed.



**Document 6.** Photograph of sixth-grader Brad Frank, 11, wearing a gas mask, during an Earth Day march on Wilshire Boulevard (Los Angeles) on the first Earth Day, 22 April 1970. (George Fry / *Los Angeles Times*). Source: <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-los-angeles-first-earth-day-20150422-htmlstory.html> Air pollution was a major concern in the early 1970s. Participants in the first Earth Day expressed their anguish over air quality by wearing gas masks and surgical masks.



**Document 7.** An excerpt from *The Environmental Handbook*. This collective book (edited by Garrett De Bell) was published in the run-up to the first Earth Day to help budding environmentalists learn about ecology and organise events in their communities. The book can be consulted for free on [archive.org](https://archive.org) (with a free subscriber's account). This particular excerpt criticises the materialism and wastefulness of Christmas celebrations in the US.



**Document 8.** Photograph of a sign dangling from a bike saddle reading, “Pollution, brought to you by the same folks that brought you Viet Nam.” (Photo By Dave Buresh/The Denver Post via Getty Images). The humorous sign made the connection between the fight against pollution and the anti-Vietnam war movement. In both cases, the rider seemed to imply, rampant capitalism and the interests of US companies had brought sufferings and devastation to the masses. It is worth mentioning that historians have since uncovered the enormous environmental destruction caused by the use of Agent Orange (a chemical herbicide) by the US military during the conflict.



**Document 9.** Students taking part in a “Bike Hike” from Boulder to Denver in Colorado (DUANE HOWELL/THE DENVER POST/GETTY IMAGES). Many Earth Day events denounced the harmful pollution caused by cars and celebrated the use of alternative modes of transport, including bicycles. In 1970, the passage of the Clean Air Act brought new regulations and enforcement mechanisms that significantly raised air quality standards. Historian Charles Halvorson writes that “over the past 50 years, Environmental Protection Agency regulations sharply reduced emissions of nearly every major pollutant (the glaring outlier being carbon dioxide) despite significant increases in population and economic output.” See Charles Halvorson, *Valuing Clean Air: The EPA and the Economics of Environmental Protection* (OUP, 2021).



**Document 10.** A button with the slogan “Give Earth A Chance”. This Earth Day slogan was inspired by another popular slogan of the period - “Give Peace A Chance” - used in anti-Vietnam war protests. The 1960s witnessed an effervescence of political activism in US universities and high schools. Earth Day was part of this broader trend.