

Earth Day

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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?

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List of documents with brief description



Figure 1 Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain

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.

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Document 2: Follow this link to see the first three volumes of the *Environmental Action Newsletter*, published on March 3, 1970:

<http://michiganintheworld.history.lsa.umich.edu/environmentalism/items/show/288>

Environmental Action is 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.

Document 3: On this AP Historical Images blogpost, the first photograph is of children from the Convent of the Sacred Heart School (New York City) cleaning up Union Square with brooms in April 1970: <https://apimagesblog.com/historical/50th-anniversary-of-earth-day>

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.

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Document 4: The LA Times published an image 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, taken by George Fry. See it here:

<https://www.latimes.com/visuals/photography/la-me-fw-archives-earth-day-1970-story.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 5: A photograph by Dave Buresh, for the Denver Post, shows a sign dangling from a bike saddle reading, “Pollution, brought to you by the same folks that brought you Viet Nam.” It is available to view here: <https://www.gettyimages.in/detail/news-photo/this-sign-hung-behind-bike-saddle-expressed-one-earth-day-news-photo/162063765?adppopup=false>

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 6: View this image from a slideshow on Earth Day, from Rolling Stone:

<https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-pictures/earth-day-1970-gallery-pictures-new-york-philadelphia-boston-california-987057/apr-22-1970-peter-cohen-of-the-university-of-colorado-leads-260-cyclists-from-capitol-of-teach-in/>

It shows students taking part in a “Bike Hike” from Boulder to Denver in Colorado, taken by Duane Howell for The Denver Post. 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).

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Document 7: ‘Give Earth A Chance’ logo, seen on this pin button at the Henry Ford collection: <https://www.thehenryford.org/collections-and-research/digital-collections/artifact/364010>

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.

