

## Special Feature: “Earth Day 2021: Reflecting on the Past, Looking to the Future”

[Editor’s Note] The following is a public lecture on the occasion of Earth Day, April 22, 2021, delivered by Sarah Hamilton, whose background is in world and environmental history. She has here provided a short recommended reading list that appears at the end of this brief essay. It is being shared via *World History Connected*’s social media presence on Facebook and LinkedIn as well as presented here as a means of recounting the role of Earth Day—its growth and critics—in the environmental movement, which developed in the United States, but soon went global. An increasing number of world history courses are addressing this subject.

### Beginnings: Earth Day 1970

The first Earth Day is often cited as the genesis of what we refer to as the “environmental movement.” For broad sectors of the population, it brought about a dawning understanding of wilderness preservation, public health, nuclear energy, urban sprawl, toxic contamination, and population growth as symptoms of a larger problem with the way humans interacted with natural systems. This understanding was itself a product of the postwar realization that modern technologies, from nuclear energy to industrial agriculture, gave us the power us to radically and permanently reshape the physical world. Key events in the 1960s drove this point home, including headline-grabbing moments such as the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962; the burning of the Cuyahoga River in 1968; and the Santa Barbara oil spill in 1969. Less spectacular contributors were the myriad local and national efforts to address concerns of daily life: public health, food safety, suburban sprawl, air and water pollution, poor housing and urban conditions, failing education, increasingly costly health care, and racial discrimination. These factors converged against the backdrop of the

Civil Rights and antiwar movements, both of which reflected and intensified the sense that something had gone very, very wrong with modern American society.

The first Earth Day was an effort to bring together all these disparate strands of concern among the American public. The day itself was the brainchild of Senator Gaylord Nelson, who called for a nationwide teach-in that would portray a host of issues afflicting American society as part of a unified “environmental” crisis, all of which had to be tackled together for real changes to occur. Developed by the antiwar movement, teach-ins were designed to empower ordinary young people, primarily college students, and inspire them to act. Reflecting this history, the core organizers hired by Senator Nelson were all under the age of 25, and originally hoped to rally support for forty events on college campuses around the country. In the end, on April 22, 1970 somewhere between 12–13,000 events took place across the country and garnered media attention around the world. More than 20 million Americans took part. Taken as a whole, these events drove home the idea that ordinary people *could* make a difference in global environmental issues, and that they *ought* to do so, through consumer actions, education, and lifestyle changes. They were a clarion call for systemic change that would require personal sacrifice, corporate governance, and political action.

The most lasting impact of Earth Day was not the huge turnout on the day itself, however, but rather the momentum it generated. People who had organized events or formed local environmental groups for April 22nd kept working afterwards; organizing protests, education campaigns, and lobbying for legislative change. The public interest in environmental issues engendered by the first Earth Day were crucial to getting the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act passed in the early 1970s, as well as to the formation of administrations such as the Environmental Protection Agency and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Earth Day also marked the start of significant environmental education in schools, which in turn contributed to generations of students internalizing the message that individuals had both the ability and the responsibility to take action on environmental issues.

## Is Earth Day for Everyone?

Despite its widespread appeal, not everyone saw their concerns reflected in this new environmental movement. Of the seven core organizers of the original Earth Day, all were in their twenties, all but one were white, and all but one were male. Their principal target, and the single largest demographic of participants, was college students. The timing of the event itself made it difficult for non-students to take part: Wednesday, April 22 was selected specifically because it fell in the middle of the workweek, when it would not compete with other campus activities. The very factors that made this appealing for college

students discouraged participation by working people. While several organizers had experience in civil rights and urban reform campaigns, and marketed Earth Day as welcoming to all demographics, in practice this generally took the form of inviting working people and other activists to join a preexisting movement, rather than to collaboratively shape the agenda.

Even with this limited encouragement, some groups adapted the messages of Earth Day to meet their communities' needs. The Chicano community of Albuquerque, for instance, used Earth Day events to underscore their calls for reforms of urban living conditions, medical care, housing, and environmental justice. In Minneapolis, Washington, and elsewhere, speakers explicitly linked racial injustice, the Vietnam War, and environmental degradation to the common root cause of an unsustainable economic and ethical system. But for many civil rights activists, environmentalism was a distraction from the more urgent issues of poverty, violence, and systemic oppression facing Black communities.

In the decades since the first Earth Day the same critique has persisted, but new generations of activists have also worked to redefine the environmental movement as one that addresses a wider range of related concerns. The Environmental Justice movement took shape over the course of the 1980s, with widely-publicized research on the disproportionate environmental burdens placed on poor communities and particularly communities of color. The integrated concept of "sustainability," with its emphasis on the interconnections between social, economic, and environmental systems, encompassed inequalities that went far beyond environmental health and reflected the need for integrated solutions to seemingly disparate problems.

Earth Day 1990, twenty years after the original event, was focused on bringing such concerns to the forefront: through international planning and coordination, an estimated 200 million people in 141 different countries took part in the day's lectures, festivals, manifestos, and protests. Again, this Earth Day generated momentum that contributed to real progress. In the US, the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit met in October 1991, bringing together hundreds of environmental justice leaders from around the world and demonstrating that environmental justice had entered the American mainstream. In 1994, an executive order from President Clinton directed federal agencies to address environmental justice in the form of disparate impacts on low-income communities and communities of color. Internationally, Earth Day 1990 paved the way for the United Nation's Conference on Environment and Development, held in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, at which representatives of 179 countries spent two weeks discussing the links between social, economic, and environmental problems and developed a blueprint for international action to address them. That blueprint (known as Agenda 21) centered around the concept of "sustainable development," and has guided international environmental policies over the past thirty years.

## Looking to the Future

Today, fifty-one years after the first Earth Day, our progress, by any measure, is mixed. Undoubtedly, the awareness of environmental problems is significantly higher than ever before, perhaps the most lasting legacy of the first Earth Day. Environmental education has been integrated into primary and secondary schools worldwide, and university programs in environmental studies and sustainability have proliferated. Thousands of students leave these programs each year armed with the skills and knowledge necessary for a variety of high-demand careers, and with a firm understanding of social justice and environmental protection as parts of a unified whole.

Outside of academia, some of the environmental problems that motivated earlier Earth Days have been addressed. Legislation in the United States and around the world has ensured that our air and water carry fewer of the hazardous pollutants that worried people in 1970, though new risks have emerged. States now treat environmental issues as global issues requiring transboundary solutions, and not merely as isolated local concerns. But the world faces new challenges, such as climate change, and persistent problems, such as systemic racism, that we have thus far failed to address. More today than ever before, we are seeing how these problems are connected. Climate change will exacerbate the inequalities we already see around the world and in our own communities. People are already fleeing the poorest and hottest parts of the world to find more livable spaces, creating conflicts around issues of immigration, land rights, and national sovereignty. As oceans rise, storms intensify, and crops fail, the most vulnerable populations will always be the hardest-hit.

As citizens of the wealthiest country in the world, Americans have often assumed these changes do not apply to us. We have been confident in technology's ability to save us, or perhaps in our wealth to protect us from the worst consequences. But as recent events and current conditions have clearly shown, this is not the case. We are all in this together—inequality hurts everyone by weakening social relationships, increasing factionalism and frustration, and eroding faith in our public institutions. Sustainable communities, and a sustainable world, is a basic need for everyone.

If we want to honor the spirit of Earth Day, and save ourselves into the bargain, we have to take action. Just as it did in 1970, to some extent this will require individual sacrifices: everyone who cuts down on their beef consumption, produces less waste, uses less water or energy, is making a difference. But it also requires us to work continuously for real, systemic change at the corporate and regulatory levels. The most important thing each of us can do is to educate ourselves and others on issues of sustainability, and to actively participate in our democratic systems. This is real work that extends well beyond the ballot box. We are all responsible for paying attention to the news; attending information sessions, rallies, protests, and city council meetings; starting and participating in petitions or boycotts; holding companies and legislatures responsible for their actions. Most crucially, we

must all listen to people with different experiences, and think about how addressing their concerns can make life better for everyone. These are the only ways to affect real change, and the best way to honor the millions of men, women, and children around the world who have worked in the spirit of Earth Day for fifty-one years.

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### Recommended Further Reading

Adam Rome, *The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-In Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2014).

UNECD, *Agenda 21* (1992), accessed March 22, 2021, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/outcomedocuments/agenda21>.

Robert D. Bullard, *Just Sustainabilities: Development in an Unequal World* (MIT Press, 2003).