

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## The 50th Anniversary of Earth Day

Allon Schoener · Wednesday, April 22nd, 2020

The 50th anniversary of Earth Day was celebrated on Wednesday, April 22. The idea of establishing one day each year to celebrate the Earth, the planet which we inhabit, was promulgated by Gaylord Nelson, Democratic Senator from Wisconsin. He envisioned a large-scale, grassroots environmental demonstration “to shake up the political establishment and force this issue onto the national agenda.” Perhaps one of the most enduring legacies of the revolutionary 1960s in the United States, it was a fringe issue endorsed by Hippies and a small coterie of environmental activists. I happened to be one of them!

We saw Earth Day as an opportunity to encourage respect for our natural environment as it was being violated increasingly by multi-national petrochemical conglomerates, the automotive industry and average human beings embracing our rapidly expanding waste prone consumer culture in which respect for natural resources was vanishing. In the beginning it was a fringe movement that managed to be politically neutral. It began as a national “teach-in on the environment” focusing attention on college campuses.

‘Environmental awareness,’ essentially a new concept, was accelerated by Rachel Carson’s articles in *The New Yorker* and her 1962 best seller, *Silent Spring*. Visualizing the Earth as a recognizable physical entity was enhanced by the wide distribution of NASA’s photographs of the Earth from outer space.

Nelson saw Earth Day as a “national teach-in on the environment” hoping to broaden awareness of environmental concerns. He was inspired by the anti-Vietnam War teach-ins taking place on college campuses across the country. That the environment was being violated became increasingly evident. When chemical waste deposited in Cleveland’s Cuyahoga River caught fire in 1969 and Los Angeles’s air became toxic, degradation of the environment could no longer be denied. General awareness was accelerated mostly among the college educated younger generation. However, the general population was somnolent – content to drive big gas-guzzling cars, and allow factories to pump pollution into our air, lakes and rivers.



Approximately one million people participated in the first Earth Day celebrations in New York City.

Photo: NYC Dept. of Records and Information Services

On the first Earth Day, April 22, 1970, rallies were held in Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York and many other American cities. Twenty million people across the country participated in Earth Day events in schools, colleges, universities and communities. In New York, Mayor John

Lindsay closed a portion of Fifth Avenue for several hours and spoke at a rally with actors Paul Newman and Ali McGraw. As Visual Arts Program Director at the New York State Council on the Arts, I was designated to be responsible for New York State's participation in the first Earth Day celebration in Union Square. We had the north end of Union Square which is now occupied by the Union Square Market three days a week. Video artists erected a 20 x 50 foot inflatable. There was a Ten Towns flatbed trash trailer that emanated from one Upstate community, stopping at nine more for additions. Audience participation was a big theme. I rented a milk trailer and filled it with "holy wate" from Max Yasgur's farm, site of the Woodstock Festival the previous year.

Although politicians have a mixed record of support for the environment, Earth Day's legacy is considerable. Directly and indirectly, all of these Federal legislative actions can be attributed to Earth Day: Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act and the Environmental Protection Agency which continue to serve succeeding generations, Unfortunately, the Trump administration has concentrated on emasculating and destroying this heritage.

*Top photo: The Blue Marble: The View From Apollo 17. Photo via NASA.*

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