

The Celebration of Earth Day: Perspectives on an Environmental Movement

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Introduction

On April 22, 2000, half a billion people around the world on five continents will be celebrating the 30th annual Earth Day. The theme proposed by the Earth Day Action Network and its supporters is global warming and the environmental crises caused by the use of fossil fuels.

The day's events will explore the following seven areas of concern:

1. Investment in clean, renewable technologies that are culturally and economically viable.
2. Adoption of higher national standards and programs for energy efficiency to stop the waste of energy.
3. Halting construction of all new nuclear power plants and decommissioning existing ones.
4. Establishing innovative, efficient transportation systems that minimize air pollution and protect human health.
5. Increasing investments in clean energy projects by the World Bank and other publicly supported aid institutions. Rapidly phase out funding for fossil fuel projects.
6. Stop the exploration for and development of new oil, gas, and coal reserves where such projects would harm ecosystems and human communities.
7. Securing national commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to levels at or below those agreed upon in the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. (Earth Day Network 2000)

How Earth Day Began

The establishment of Earth Day began with an idea proposed in October 1969 by John McConnell, a San Francisco resident. McConnell approached the San Francisco Board of Supervisors with a resolution to devote one day a year to public awareness dedicated to nature and the fragile ecosystem that comprises it. The day's events would emphasize the urgency of all inhabitants of the planet to take responsibility for building a healthy and ecologically sustainable planet for the present and long into the future. The board was impressed with McConnell's idea and declared Earth Day an annual celebration to be held on March 21, the date of the vernal equinox. McConnell stated "This

is the moment when night and day are equal throughout the earth - reminding us of Earth's beautiful systems of balance which humanity has partially upset and must restore." Earth Day was established as a national day of celebration in the United States in 1970 and was embraced by the United Nations in 1971 when it declared an Earth Day ceremony to be held each year on the day of the March Equinox (McConnell, 2000). In 1970, Senator Gaylord Nelson, proposed an Earth Week for the third week in April and together with Bruce Anderson, an architect of solar energy and environmental author, co-founded Earth Day USA (Hayes, 2000). The first national Earth Day was celebrated in the United States on April 22, 1970. Twenty million participants nationwide took part in teach-ins, street demonstrations, and workshops in 2,000 communities and 12,000 college and high school campuses. The major public concern at that time was industrial pollution and its effect on the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the health of the planet we live on. Those celebrations led to overwhelming public outcries for legislation mandating ecologically sound environmental policies and rigid controls on industrial pollution. Over the years, the issues of concern have expanded greatly into all aspects of air, water, soil, and noise pollution. Whether it comes from vehicles, factories, agriculture, housing, or private property, public concern and activism continues unabated with citizens from around the world involved in efforts to achieve a sustainable and enduring ecosystem (Hayes, 2000).

Earth day activities are supported and sponsored by a large network of organizations, government agencies, businesses, universities, and institutions. They work diligently each year to make Earth Day events meaningful and relevant to the inhabitants of Planet Earth. The regular observance of this holiday inculcates environmental values into the national consciousness and provides an opportunity to introduce environmental issues into schools, media and public events (Fried 1998). It should be noted that Earth Day activities have been instrumental in bringing about many of the significant environmental changes that have taken place in the last three decades.

Environmental Public Opinion

After 30 years of political battles, since the first Earth Day in 1969, public opinion in forums around the country focuses upon how to improve the environment, how much will it cost and who will pay for it? Environmental issues remain hot topics with powerful interests arrayed against one another. The Federal government grapples with landowner lawsuits and constitutional challenges and states are trying to achieve prosperity and provide decent life styles for their citizens but they are squeezed between taxpayer revolts and federal budget constraints. Skeptics claim that the business community gives lip service to environmental improvement, but very few companies go beyond compliance with governmental mandates or relegate their environmental

decisions to managers who are not able to make significant changes (Graham, 1998, p. 51-89).

Critics of Earth Day claim that the environmental movement is a middle class, anti-business movement that deals in mainstream conservation politics. It allegedly overlooks the needs of minorities and the poor who are victims of environmental racism and classism. Nevertheless, it boasts high media visibility, support from tens of thousands of groups, memberships in the millions and massive financial resources (Darnovsky 1992a).

Starr (1999) asserts that Earth Day is a "feel good" holiday that touts anti-consumerism and shows contempt for the working class. "Earth Day promises salvation through consumerism: If only we would buy the right stuff - electric cars, herbal remedies, hemp-fiber clothing, biodegradable detergent, the world would be drenched in virtue. It presumes that individual purchasing and packaging decisions trump the effects of volcanoes, earthquakes, tidal waves, tornadoes, ice ages, meteor storms, and solar flares. Earth Day's hallmark is contempt for the poor, especially the working poor, for whom photo-ops are low on the agenda, and for business people and workers in general. Only those who value consumption above production can so disdain the folks who create value" (Starr, 1999).

Earth Day agendas

There are over 10,000 environmental groups in the United States with members and supporters who come from a mix of activist and political movements inspired by ecology, animal liberation, Gaia hypothesis, ecofeminism, and nature based spiritual ideas. The wide ranging priorities and differing agendas among environmental groups sometimes pose a serious obstacle to cooperative efforts for environmental change. Some focus upon population control as the key to a sound ecological system, others devote their time to forest and wildlife conservation, still others are already overworked attempting to convince the public about the threats of nuclear disaster from unregulated atomic energy plants. The areas of interest run a wide gamut that includes baby seals, free trade agreements, ozone holes, land use regulations, tree spikers, green marketers, antitoxins, safe food, and a host of other concerns (Darnovsky, 1992a). Some environmental groups have formed alliances with business groups in hopes of working together for changes like manufacturing emissions and green marketing (Graham, 1999, p. 84-85).

Secretary of State Madeline Albright speaking at the Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC identified some of the consequences of failing to heed the signs of a changing planet. Sea levels will continue to rise putting

millions of people at greater risk to coastal storms. Significant changes in agricultural production and forest ecosystems will occur leading to modified migrations of wildlife and larger migrations of people. There will be more heat-related deaths; more serious air-quality problems; increased allergic disorders; and more widespread malaria, cholera, and other infectious diseases. In Africa, Asia, and Mexico, the effects of El Niño have had a devastating impact on coastal populations. Globally, 9 of the last 11 years have been among the warmest in this century. In the United States, heavy downpours of rain are up 20%. In recent years, we have seen floods in California, the Pacific Northwest, and along the Mississippi; drought in the Plains States; and tornadoes in Florida, Alabama, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Kentucky. The human and financial costs of such environmental disasters are staggering. According to Albright, the Clinton administration has taken steps to address global environmental problems and will continue in its efforts to create a livable planet. One major effort has been a comprehensive global climate change agreement in which nations consent to binding targets on future greenhouse gas emissions with meaningful participation from poor and industrialized nations. These vary from country to country, with the United States pledging to meet a standard 7% below 1990 levels within the next 10 to 14 years. Some less developed nations are among the leading supporters of efforts to combat climate change. Many developing nations have constituencies who understand the dangers of global warming and want the world, including their own governments, to respond. Many developing countries, are taking steps to combat global warming. China, for example, is increasing reliance on co-generation; Mexico, is establishing energy-efficiency standards; Brazil, is making greater use of ethanol. Such steps cut energy costs, save natural resources, reduce health care expenses, and increase competitiveness (Albright, 1998).

The Clean Air Act of 1970 was enacted to satisfy public demands to clean the air we breathe and put curbs on the excesses of industry. Cahn (1995, p.51-59) argues that the act was symbolic and appeared to appease public outrage but was never adequately enforced. The 1990 amendments to the act addressed ozone based smog, acid rain, chlorinated fluorocarbons (CFCs) and air toxins. The act identifies 189 chemicals considered hazardous to human health. Manufacturing industries are required to cut emissions of those substances to a level equal to the average of the twelve cleanest similar facilities by 2003 or face closure.

Cahn (1995, p. 42-45) cites the following seven major areas of air pollution identified by EPA.

1. Carbon Monoxide - Emitted from vehicle and stationary sources and can cause angina, impaired vision, poor coordination and dizziness. It

contributes to global warming by altering the equilibrium of the earth's temperature balance.

2. Hydrocarbons - Released by the incomplete combustion of gasoline and evaporation from petroleum based fuels, solvents, and paints. They react with oxygen and nitrogen dioxide to form ozone and other photochemical oxidants
3. Ozone - the main component of smog contains hundreds of chemicals and causes irritation of mucus membranes, reduced lung capacity and aggravates asthma, bronchitis and emphysema. Ozone also damages trees, crops and building materials.
4. Lead - Used as an antiknock additive in some gasolines and as a stabilizing agent in household and industrial paints and is a component of pipes and roofing materials. Some smelters and battery plants also emit lead into the atmosphere. Lead accumulates in the fat, bone, and other soft tissues of the body and can lead to nausea, severe stomach pains, and deterioration of organs, kidneys, and the nervous system.
5. Nitrogen Oxide - A product of industrial and vehicle exhaust is a main contributor to acid rain and creates ozone when mixed with hydrocarbons.
6. Particulate matter - Smoke, dust, and soot emitted from industrial processes, heating boilers, gasoline and diesel engines, coal and diesel burning utilities, cigarette smoke, and dusts.
7. Sulfur dioxide - Released in coal and oil burning processes. These pollutants weaken the ability of the immune system to protect the body from poisons, viruses, and bacteria and can cause diseases such as cancer, asthma, bronchitis, and emphysema. Acid rain, global warming and ozone depletion are consequences of air pollution that have devastating effects on forests, lakes, rivers, water tables, buildings, bridges, train tracks, and other natural and man-made structures.

Financial support of environmentalism

The need for funds to carry out their programs has forced environmental organizations to depend upon the largesse of industry. Membership dues and voluntary contributions do not meet the financial obligations and some of the high salaries that the organizations pay their officials. Corporations have learned that they can buy into the corporate movement through tax deductible contributions in attempts to improve their image and gain acceptance by the public as environmentally active. Consequently, corporate contributions enable those industries to exert influence over the activities of the organizations and the directions of environmental policy. Annual reports of several environmental organizations reveal some telling connections with industry. The National Audubon Society receives monetary support from Bechtel, AT&T, Citibank, Honda, Martin Marietta, Wheelabrator, Ciba-Geigy,

Dow and Scott Paper. Other contributors include Monsanto, Mobil and Shell Oil. Corporate contributors to the World Wildlife Fund include Bank of America, Kodak and J.P. Morgan, Bank of Tokyo, Philip Morris, WMX, DuPont and others. The National Wildlife Federation includes among its corporate donors Bristol Myers Squibb, Ciba-Geigy, DuPont, Pennzoil and an additional 161 other companies (Tokar, 1997). Companies like Waste Management Inc, Chevron, Exxon, General Electric, Union Carbide Weyerhaeuser and others have contributed large sums to groups like the National Wildlife Federation, Audubon Society and The Conservation Foundation. In addition, a 1997 study found that 23 directors and council members from Audubon, NRDC, the Wilderness Society and World Wildlife Fund were associated with 19 corporations cited in a study of the 500 worst industrial polluters (Greider, 1995,p.220, Tokar, 1997).

A poll of 2000 manufacturers conducted by the National Association of Manufacturers indicated an awareness that concern for the environment is good for communities and for business. The survey revealed that 80% of the polled companies have voluntarily changed manufacturing processes to reduce pollution; 76% claim to have a good relationship with environmental agencies; and 51% have voluntarily performed environmental improvements in their communities (Manufacturers see green, 1999).

Industry support for Earth Day and its environmental initiatives poses a dilemma for organizers of the event. Monetary support and sponsorship of Earth Day by the business community is viewed by some as detrimental to the environmental movement. They assert that these are ploys by the polluters to give the impression that they are concerned about the environment and are applying good ecological management in their companies. Others claim that this commercializes Earth Day and serves as way to do green marketing while diverting the public from the real issues that matter. Carothers (1995) believes that supporters of the environmental movement do not share the same interests as big business since they think that businesses will oppose environmental changes if it leads to diminishing economic returns. But Senator Gaylord Nelson who initiated the legislation designating Earth Day, asserts that every political and economic interest must be involved in this effort including corporations, farmers, religious people, academia, and the general public. Some corporations have great reputations for helping environmental causes, others do not have admirable reputations but getting them involved goes a long way toward changing their practices. As Nelson states "My view is that if a business or corporation has an internal program based on improving environmental performance and are complying with it, or seeking conscientiously to comply with it and believe in sustainability, they ought to be able to participate". However, Nelson pointed out in 1999 that we still have a long way to go in order to achieve sustainability. He is concerned

that we are degrading and depleting our resource base that he refers to as, "consuming our capital." Overpopulation, deforestation, aquifer depletion, air pollution, water pollution, depletion of fisheries, and urbanization is consuming our capital and leading to erosion of our living standards and quality of life (Motavalli, 1995, Nelson, 1999).

Those who defend the participation of industry in the environmental movement say that corporate support does not undermine the movement or its goals. It usually has the positive effect of making the companies more environmentally aware and leads to changes in how they manufacture, package, and sell their products (Fried, 1998). Chilton (1999) takes issue with those who blame capitalism and free market economies for the slowness in environmental reforms. In his view, the environmental disasters of planned economies result from the inability of those political and economic systems to provide their citizens with a quality of life that would give them the opportunity to place environmental protection on their lists of priorities. A capitalist economy efficiently allocates scarce resources to the goods and services that consumers desire. The economy responds to the price signals and private payoffs that produce the motivation to strive for a sustainable economy. Chilton cites a study at Princeton University that examined 14 environmental indicators and found that economic growth does not cause unavoidable harm to the natural habitat. But his view that the market alone will determine the kind of environmental changes that industry will undertake is only part of the picture. Citizen and governmental action such as boycotts, legislation, regulatory sanctions, and public exposure also play a role in motivating change in industrial practices.

According to Odum (1998), the key to solving the environmental problems that plague the planet is to go beyond the small environmental decisions to a holistic view of the world. Such a view, therefore, makes it imperative that all players in the environmental arena participate and cooperate to fit their small decisions into a whole system approach. Future capitalism should integrate nature's capital with human capital since each is dependent upon the other. He is encouraged by those industries that are willing to transcend a strict market philosophy by incorporating non-market values into the economic system. If atmosphere, oceans, wetlands, soils, forests, croplands and other natural resources are valued and protected, sustainable development is achievable. The road to sustainability requires that all segments of the society participate in a cooperative manner to save the planet.

The agricultural industry has also been a target of environmentalists who are concerned about the effects of pollution from synthetic chemicals, runoff and drainage of farm wastes, and soil erosion. John K. Lawson, a Senior Vice President of John Deere & Company, also believes that market forces provide

a stimulus for change in agricultural practices. Factors that make farmers environmentally sensitive such as limiting emissions, preserving the soil, controlling chemical runoff and animal waste are more profitable (Lawson, 1998). The wide acceptance of sustainable agriculture by farmers in all 50 states is a sure sign of a commitment by the industry to achieve sustainability in order to feed growing populations well into the future. A sustainable food and agriculture system is environmentally sound, economically viable, and socially responsible. It fosters an ethic of land stewardship, humane treatment of animals, viable rural communities, and public confidence in the food supply. Environmentally sound farming practices are good for the society and enable farmers to prosper by providing high quality, uncontaminated food products from land that is nurtured with renewable resources.

Environmental democracy

Democratic societies that permit all stakeholders to participate in the debate on the environment provide the best avenues to redress grievances. Yosie (1999) points to six factors that serve as momentum for greater democracy and choice in environmental policy:

1. Lack of public confidence and trust in major public and private institutions.
2. Increased public awareness and availability of information.
3. Greater societal expectation for improved environmental quality
4. Limitations of the traditional regulatory approach
5. Expanded capabilities of many individuals and groups to participate in environmental decision-making
6. Policy commitment to expand stakeholder participation.

Yosie emphasizes that effective communication requires continually improved performance, a free flow of information and a willingness to enable stakeholders to participate more directly in establishing environmental policy. Democratizing environmental decision-making requires an understanding of the Nation's diverse environmental needs and a willingness to invest the resources to meet those challenges.

Conclusion

The prime concern of the environmental movement is Nature in all its manifestations. The realization that human activities can upset the ecological balance and destroy life on earth demands that all citizens of every political, social, and cultural persuasion join in the effort to save the planet. Darnovsky (199b) observes that it can emerge in a number of ways from "an elite technocracy of corporate environmentalists to a global radical democracy

committed to environmental and social justice." The choice is ours. Now is the time to for all of us to get involved in cleaning our planet and striving for a day when global cooperation and ecological values are inherent in environmental planning and policy implementation.

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