

Editorial
Number 32: Has Earth Day Made a Difference?

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Celebrating the existence of the beauty and riches of our planet, Earth, has been an integral part of the lives of many people. Perhaps the idealism of youth from that very first Earth Day on April 22, 1970 sparked an interest for a life-long commitment to explore new ways to understand the Earth and the dynamics of the processes that keep our environment vibrant. Maybe it took more than a few years to change the way we live our daily lives to be more embracing of an Earth ethic to protect and conserve.

The *USA Today* Snapshots article on Earth Day featured an "Earth Day Lesson Plan," telling readers that adults say it is important to teach children to: preserve natural resources (36%), reduce air pollution (23%), conserve energy (20%), and protect wildlife habitats (16%) ("Snapshots," *USA Today*, April 22, 2002, p. 1D).

A March 2002 CBS poll indicates that 56% of the respondents stated that protecting the environment is so important that improvements must be made regardless of cost (CBS News Poll, March 12, 2002, "Poll: The Home Front," scroll to "Public Priorities at: <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/01/25/opinion/polls/main325709.shtml>).

A recent Care2 Poll indicates the general public's perception about the environment reflects an overall negative feeling with 75% of respondents feeling the status of the environment is much worse off (48%) or worse off (27%) than it was 30 years ago (a little better off-11%, don't know 5%, the same 3%, much better off 3% (Care2 Environment Supersite at: <http://www.care2.com/polling/results/110>).

Public concern for the environment remains, at least on paper, a priority issue. But, how has this public concern for the environment reflected changes to our lives since over the 32 years we have celebrated Earth Day?

First, new career paths were provided by the quest to understand our environment and the intricacies of its ecosystems, to protect and conserve the natural resources contained within it, and to advocate protecting the environment from the spoils of excess, greed, and exploitation. Traditional

opportunities in the sciences blossomed into career paths for ecologists, environmental scientists, botanists, zoologists, chemists, and geologists, to explore the dynamic intricacies of the environment. Social and political scientists found a means to more closely examine the human dimensions of the environment and the impacts of humankind on the environment and the natural resources provided in it. Environmental law, economics, and environmental policy-making were new career paths that sprouted forth from the seeds planted by Earth Day 1970. Environmental education was a new field essentially birthed from the first Earth Day. Artists put the wonder, the magic, and beauty of the environment into rhymes, prose, music, paintings, sculptures, and lyrics. In 1999, Island Press published *The Complete Guide to Environmental Careers in the 21st Century* (John R. Cook, et al., Washington, DC: Island Press, 1999, 447 pp.) listing careers as planners, educators, communicators, protectors, managers, restorers, and informers. All because that first day of enhanced awareness for the environment has matured, prompting a greater understanding of its intricacies across many disciplines, lines of work, and personal feelings.

Earth Day 1970 provided a lasting imprint on the landscape it set out to protect. Other than tremendous impacts on careers in the study and appreciation of the Earth, what on April 22, 2002 indicated, that Earth Day has made a lasting impact on our society? Perhaps, more importantly, does Earth Day 2002 have the same impact as original day of celebrating Earth and its riches and its frailties?

I would like to make some observations as a person who as a college student attended the first teach-ins Earth Day, spent nearly his entire adult life preaching a gospel of protecting our environment, and shared a podium with Denis Hayes examining the roles of libraries and future Earth Days (Hayes, 2001). How widely spread is the message of Earth Day? Many people measure the importance of a topic or subject or event by how widely disseminated it is on the World Wide Web. On a day in May 2002, here is a *BRIEF* chart indicating the number of hits that the phrase "Earth Day" resulted in:

Alta Vista	180,467
Google	415,000
Hotbot	240,200
Lycos	425,655

There is a LOT of information on the Web about Earth Day. The BIG question is, "Is it good information?" That it is a difficult question to answer, but the answer is both, "Yes!" and, "No!" Some recommended Earth Day sites are:

Earth Day Network (www.earthday.net/), EnviroLink Network (earthday.envirolink.org/), Earth Day Canada (www.earthday.ca/), and Earth Day US EPA (www.epa.gov/earthday/).

What are we doing to foster a greater sense of the environment? I look no farther than some of the local Earth Day 2002 activities here at the University at Buffalo and in western New York. First was a very interesting cover story, "Earth Day Commentary: Moon Shoot, Earth Shot-and a Pause," appearing in the progressive Buffalo weekly *Artvoice* (v.1 n. 16, April 18-24, 2002, p. 6). Companion articles included "It's All or Nothing at All: Urban Planner Anton Nelessen speaks of Buffalo's Future" (p. 7, 10) and "Making Buffalo Beautiful: A Look at the Green Team" (p. 10). It was nice to see that western New York has grown beyond the re-telling of the story of Love Canal.

Seeing what Earth Day activities were taking place is to witness how Earth Day has changed us. We are still being educated and taught! A western New York Earth Day week-long celebration (see www.greatlakes.org/wnyearthday.html) featured a series of presentations and discussions by Anton Nelessen on "Creating a More Livable Western New York;" Sandra Steingraber, author of *Living Downstream: An Ecologist Looks at Cancer and the Environment*;" and by Winona Laduke, Green Party Vice Presidential Candidate, Native American environmental justice advocate, and environmental advocacy author, on "A Call for Environmental Justice." The University at Buffalo's Environment and Society Institute presented the Environmental Services Colloquium http://wings.buffalo.edu/provost/esi/earth_day_2002.htm as a means to examine the multidisciplinary environmental research interests of the University. In the days before and after Earth Day 2002, there were numerous expos, lectures, community programs, art gallery exhibits, lobby days, car-free days, and activists' events. At least western New Yorkers were doing many things related to improving an understanding and awareness of the environment. Conclusion: there is a lot of local activity taking place on Earth Day all around the United States and the world. Awareness about the environment is not wanting.

In various print media Earth Day editorials focused on community needs to preserve green space, recycle, be cautious about where and why we drill for oil, and a general need to respect the planet Earth. Newspaper articles on April 22nd and 23rd and broadcast news stories focused on two major national events. The first was a trip to New York's Adirondack Mountains by President Bush to unveil a new clean air strategy to combat acid rain. The second was a speech delivered by former vice president Al Gore at Vanderbilt University critical of the Bush Administration's environmental policies (which was prefaced by a Gore op-ed piece published in the *New*

York Times the Sunday before Earth Day). More telling in the major national newspapers were full-page advertisements that carried an Earth Day theme: an announcement of the winners of the 2002 Goldman Environmental Awards (*New York Times*, April 22, 2002, p. A31), Toyota promoting its Toyota Prius hybrid (gasoline-electric) automobile (*USA Today*, April 22, 2002, p. 12A; *New York Times*, April 22, 2002, p. 29A), environmental aspects of transportation fuels and commuting, and eco-friendly gardens (*New York Times*, April 22, 2002, P. 28A), and a Save our Environmental Action Center (<http://saveourenvironment.org/>) advertisement critical of the Bush Administration's anti-environmental and pro-industry posturing (*USA Today*, April 22, 2002, p. 10A). Their collective message-the environment remains critical, current, and controversial; actions are required to affect change.

One last telling sign that times are changing come from several cover stories appearing in places where one might not expect to find them. First was the cover story of the April 22, 2002, issue of *Chemical and Engineering News* (American Chemical Society, v. 80 n.16 pp. 15-22), "Sustainable Development: Producing Today and Preserving Tomorrow," which describes efforts undertaken by the chemical industry to remedy previous decades of practice by ushering in a new era of "Responsible Care." The American Institute of Architects (AIA) Committee on the Environment (COTE) announced its annual Top Ten Green Projects, examples of architectural design solutions that protect and enhance the environment; and the May 2002 *EDS: Environmental Design and Construction's* cover story, "Breaking the Green Ceiling," describes the new Manulife Financial US Headquarters building in South Boston, Massachusetts, which teaches designers how to reach for new heights in sustainable design. Last is the cover story, "Sandra Mendler: Way Out There Changing Conventional Wisdom with Unconventional Thinking," in the Spring 2002 issue of the *EnvironDesign Journal*, which describes another architect's attempt to bring environmentally friendly planning into the buildings where people work. Another conclusion: industry is taking notice and making changes.

This leads to one vexing observation about the 32nd Earth Day: Is the American Public willing to embrace lifestyle changes necessary to protect the environment? I look around and see a lot of environmentally concerned people driving SUVs and minivans, living far too distant from where they work (I admit to my own 70 mile distance between home and work as being the most unreasonable environmental sin I have and continue to commit), not saving energy at home or work, wasting resources through excessive consumption, not eating in an environmentally conscious fashion, not properly picking up after ourselves, and leaving far too much garbage in our wakes. The list goes on.

Yes, we are much more aware about the issues of our environment than in 1972. We are most likely as concerned about the environment as we were 32 years ago. We like to think our actions and lifestyles embrace an environmentally friendly existence. Here is where reality sinks in. We are not as environmentally in tune as we think, individually, culturally, and socially. We still have a long way to go to improve our planet Earth. We have a long journey ahead of use to truly embrace lifestyles that make our homes, places of work, communities, and or existences more friendly to the protection of our environment (start looking under your sink and your garage shelves), the conservation of our resources (start with look at your own consumptive behaviors), and an activism that begins with a commitment to modify and reduce our ecological foot print. Above all, we need Earth Days 33, 34, 35, and so on, to remind us that we have not reached the journey's end to the path on which we set on April 22, 1970.

Reference

Hayes, Denis. (2001, December). Editorial: Grassroots International Environmental Activism. *Electronic Green Journal*, 15. Retrieved from <http://egj.lib.uidaho.edu/egj15/hayes1.html>

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