

# The History of Earth Day

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Jordyn Blosser (right) and her friend, both second-grade students from Ramstein Elementary School, plant a tree together in honor of Earth Day on April 22, 2015, at Ramstein Air Base, Germany. Photo by: U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. Sara Keller

Earth Day was founded in 1970 as a day of education about environmental issues in the United States. Today, Earth Day is celebrated around the world. Sometimes it even extends into Earth Week, a full seven days of events focused on environmental awareness. Created by Senator Gaylord Nelson and inspired by the antiwar protests of the late 1960s, Earth Day was originally aimed at creating a mass environmental movement. It began as a "national teach-in on the environment" and was held on April 22 to maximize the number of students that could be reached on university campuses. By raising public awareness of air and water pollution, Nelson hoped to bring environmental causes into the national spotlight.

By the early 1960s, Americans were becoming increasingly aware of the effects of pollution. Rachel Carson's 1962 bestselling book "Silent Spring" created awareness of the dangerous effects of pesticides. Later, a 1969 fire on Cleveland's Cuyahoga River shed light on the problem of chemical waste disposal.

## **Large, grassroots environmental demonstration**

Until that time, protecting the planet was not a topic of political debates. The number of activists working on large-scale issues such as air pollution was quite small. Factories pumped pollutants into the air, lakes and rivers without any repercussions. Big, gas-guzzling cars were considered to be a sign of success. Only a small portion of the American population was even familiar with recycling. Even fewer actually practiced it themselves.

Senator Gaylord Nelson, elected to the U.S. Senate in 1962, was a Democrat from Wisconsin. He was determined to convince the federal government that the planet was at risk and in need of protection. Nelson is considered one of the leaders of the modern environmental movement. In 1969, he developed the idea for Earth Day. He was inspired by the anti-Vietnam War protests that were taking place on college campuses around the United States. These events, called teach-ins, brought together thousands of people to protest the United States' war with Vietnam. Nelson envisioned a large-scale, grassroots environmental demonstration "to shake up the political establishment" and force America to take the issue seriously.

### **Earth Day organized itself**

Nelson announced the Earth Day idea at a conference in Seattle in the fall of 1969. He invited the entire nation to get involved. As he later recalled, "The response was electric." Telegrams, letters and telephone calls poured in from all across the country. He felt the American people finally had a way to express their concern about what was happening to the land, rivers, lakes and air. Dennis Hayes, a young activist who had served as student president at Stanford University, was selected as Earth Day's national coordinator. He worked with an army of student volunteers and several staff members from Nelson's Senate office to organize the project. According to Nelson, Earth Day worked because of the sudden response at the grassroots level. "That was the remarkable thing about Earth Day," Nelson said. "It organized itself." They could not have organized the 20 million demonstrators and the thousands of schools and local communities that participated on their own.

On April 22, rallies were held in most American cities, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. New York City closed off a portion of Fifth Avenue to traffic for several hours. The mayor spoke at a rally in Union Square with actors Paul Newman and Ali McGraw. In Washington, D.C., thousands of people listened to speeches. Singer Pete Seeger and others performed. Congress declared a recess so its members could speak to their voters at Earth Day events.



The first Earth Day was effective. It raised awareness about environmental issues and transformed public attitudes. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, Earth Day vastly increased the number of people who believed that protecting the environment was important.

During the 1970s, a number of important environmental laws were passed. They included the Clean Air Act, the Water Quality Improvement Act and the Endangered Species Act. Another key development was the establishment in December 1970 of the Environmental Protection Agency, or

EPA. The EPA was tasked with protecting human health and safeguarding the natural environment.

### **Celebrating the Earth all around the world**

Since 1970, Earth Day celebrations have grown. In 1990, Earth Day went global. 200 million people in over 140 nations participated, according to the Earth Day Network (EDN), a nonprofit organization that coordinates Earth Day activities. In 2000, Earth Day focused on clean energy and involved hundreds of millions of people in 184 countries and 5,000 environmental groups, according to EDN. Activities even included a traveling, talking drum chain in the small African country of Gabon. In the United States, hundreds of thousands of people gathered on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.



Today, the Earth Day Network works with more than 17,000 partners and organizations in 174 countries. According to EDN, more than 1 billion people are involved in Earth Day activities, making it the largest non-religious event in the world.

## Quiz

- 1 Select the paragraph from the section "Earth Day organized itself" that suggests Earth Day was so successful that it even changed the government.
- 2 Which piece of evidence from the article BEST proves that Earth Day is a significant event to this day?
- (A) Today, Earth Day is celebrated around the world.
  - (B) Sometimes it even extends into Earth Week, a full seven days of events focused on environmental awareness.
  - (C) Since 1970, Earth Day celebrations have grown. In 1990, Earth Day went global.
  - (D) Earth Day is the largest non-religious event in the world with over 1 billion participants.
- 3 Fill in the blank. The author MAINLY explains the importance of Earth Day \_\_\_\_\_.
- (A) by describing the context and consequences of the first Earth Day and how it spread worldwide
  - (B) by focusing the article on the destruction of the Earth that was happening prior to Earth Day
  - (C) by highlighting the success of the Environmental Protection Agency at stopping pollution
  - (D) by explaining how hard Senator Gaylord Nelson and Dennis Hayes had to work to put on the first Earth Day
- 4 According to the article, Senator Gaylord Nelson would MOST LIKELY agree with which of the following statements?
- (A) Americans need to stop driving cars to save the environment.
  - (B) Rallies and protests can make a powerful difference in society and government.
  - (C) The only way to make a change is by getting college students involved.
  - (D) It might be too late to save the environment because the problems are too big.