Out of the Wilderness:

The First Earth Day

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April 2007
For
May, Bill, Jeremy, Jon, Phil, Robbie, and Will

step it up!

copyright
Jameson C. Henn
April 2007
# Out of the Wilderness: The First Earth Day

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Introduction

Across most of the United States, April 22, 1970 began as a beautiful, clear spring morning. Over the course of the day, approximately twenty million Americans participated in the largest demonstration in the country’s history: Earth Day. From small towns to major cities, people of every race, profession, age, and religion turned out to take part in a day to celebrate the planet, and protest threats against it. Schoolchildren went to special classes about new topics like “ecology” and planted trees around their schools. On college campuses, students attended teach-ins, protested environmental destruction, and listened to well-known authors and intellectuals. In New York City, the mayor mounted a bicycle and peddled around town to give speeches, while across the country in San Francisco, a group of three-hundred divers scoured the adjacent ocean shelf to collect trash. Even people who chose to stay at home and sit on the couch could watch the special “Earth Day” programming that was carried on nearly every network station. For one day at least, the nation seemed to have come together for a common cause: protection of the environment.

Earth Day 1970 was an important turning point in American history that deserves closer attention. Although Earth Day is mentioned in most histories of the environmental movement, scholars have not yet provided a narrative history of the day itself. The goal of this thesis is to explore the full complexity of Earth Day and provide such a history. It aims to give special consideration to those groups that have traditionally received less attention in scholarship on the subject: students, Blacks, and working class people. It also endeavors to provide a full analysis of the participation of politicians and businesses in
Earth Day. Finally, it attempts to determine the significance of Earth Day for the history of the American environmental movement.

A close study of Earth Day 1970 provides important insights into the history of the environmental movement. First, the events of Earth Day were a result of new environmental issues that the traditional conservation movement had not considered yet. The history of Earth Day reveals how during the 1960s a combination of increased scientific understanding, media coverage, and advocacy drew attention to a series of environmental crises, and helped develop a popular movement to address them.

Second, Earth Day hosted an unprecedented gathering of businesses, politicians, and leaders from the student movement, civil rights movement, and labor movement. Their speeches and reflections on the day suggest a diverse and complicated view of environmentalism at a critical juncture in its history. The majority of coalitions formed around Earth Day 1970 were tenuous to begin with and often very short-lived, but in retrospect they are important examples of how environmentalism can be a bridge between groups with different goals and agendas.

Third, Earth Day not only celebrated the environment and expressed a public desire to protect it, but it marked an important turning point in American political history, as well. The involvement of politicians in the day’s events demonstrated the potential of the environment as a major political issue for the first time. Earth Day also resulted in a stunning wave of legislation that created new government agencies, laid the foundation for subsequent environmental laws, and resulted in a healthier, safer environment.

Fourth, the massive public involvement in Earth Day forced businesses to consider the environment as an important issue. Although businesses had occasionally
made statements concerning the environment in the past, after Earth Day the for-profit sector would be a constant voice in the ongoing discussion of how best to care for, manage, or exploit the environment.

Fifth, the national, grassroots involvement in Earth Day transformed environmentalism into a mass social movement for the first time. The new movement forced traditional conservation organizations, such as the Sierra Club, to focus on a new set of issues that appealed to a new type of environmentalist. After Earth Day, the environment became a permanent, if not always respected, fixture of American cultural and political life.

As stated above, this thesis attempts to provide the full narrative of Earth Day 1970. The day’s events are spread throughout the following chapters and analyzed by topic, not always in chronological order. Chapter One, looks at the lead-up to Earth Day by focusing on a series of highly-publicized environmental crises during the 1960s. Chapter Two, follows the work of Senator Gaylord Nelson, who conceived of the idea for Earth Day, and Environmental Teach-In, Inc., the group that coordinated the day on the national level. Chapter Three, describes the unprecedented gathering of diverse groups around the issue of the environment. It focuses specifically on the involvement of students, Blacks, and working class people in Earth Day and the dialogue between these groups and the broader environmental movement. Chapter Four, discusses the involvement of politicians in Earth Day events and the reasons the day should be seen as a significant point in American political history. Chapter Five, analyzes business’ approach to Earth Day and the importance of their entrance into the public discussion of
environmental issues. Chapter Six, considers the results of Earth Day for the environmental movement, politics, businesses, and society at large.

Earth Day took place in the large context of the American environmental movement. Numerous authors have written extensively about the development of environmentalism in general during the 1960s and early 1970s. These writers generally fall into two categories: those who saw the environmental movement’s origins in the conservationism of earlier decades, and those who believed that the movement’s origins were a product of post-war economic shifts and had little to do with conservation and everything to do with consumerism and pollution.¹ Later writers have bridged these categories to some extent, pointing out that while environmentalism departed from conservationism in many ways, the two are connected ideologically, as well as by people and organizations tied to both. Conservationism, these sources tend to argue, provided an essential philosophical basis for environmentalism, but the environmental movement was shaped by a different set of issues that were unique to the post-war era.² Other scholars have criticized environmental histories for excluding minorities, working class people, 

² See, Philip Shabecoff, A Fierce Green Fire: The American Environmental Movement, revised edition, (Washington: Island Press, 2003); Benjamin Kline, First Along the River: A Brief History of the U.S. Environmental Movement (San Francisco: Acada Books, 1997); or, Adam Rome, The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Rome makes an especially interesting connection between the two, arguing that the suburban expansion that was a result of post-war affluence caused a resurgence of the conservationist movement, not for far off wilderness, but for nature just beyond the suburbs that was constantly falling to more development. The role of the suburban experience in the creation of environmental consciousness is a fascinating topic that is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is certainly another factor in the growing concern that fueled the movement behind Earth Day.
and the poor from their narratives. This thesis attempts to tell the story of Earth Day from multiple perspectives, including those of conservationists, militant environmentalists, black people, white people, union members, business leaders, student radicals, politicians and more.

The original Earth Day itself is frequently described by scholars as an important event, but given little particular attention. Often, Earth Day is viewed merely as the culmination of a decade of increasing environmental activism or only in the terms of the laws that were passed or organizations that were formed in its wake. For example, environmental journalist and author Phillip Shabecoff writes in his book, *A Fierce Green Fire: The American Environmental Movement*, “Although environmentalism certainly was born long before April 22, 1970, it takes no great license to proclaim that day the dawn of the environmental era.” Yet, despite this grand proclamation, Shabecoff spends little time analyzing the organizing effort for Earth Day, or the events of the day itself. In his account, and those of others, moreover, the arrival of Earth Day is presented as though it were simply the inevitable public expression of the growing environmental fervor of the time.

Earth Day deserves much more specific attention, however, than it has been given to date in environmental histories. This is not to dispute many of these histories’

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conclusions, or to argue with their focus on more extended historical time frames, but rather to point out that what was actually said, written, done, and demonstrated about on April 22, 1970 deserves more thorough exploration. In order to accomplish this goal, this study draws largely from primary sources concerning Earth Day. Two of its principal sources are the speeches of politicians, labor leaders, activists, and writers, and the coverage of the event in the print media. The primary reasons for focusing on these sources, quite apart from the fact that they also provide a fascinating snapshot of environmentalism at an important turning point, are that such sources reveal the intricate interplay between politics, business, and civil society in the creation of public environmental discourse, and they show that the environmental movement was a more diverse movement with a more expansive vision than is often understood.

Over the years and decades after 1970, corporate sponsorships, celebrity appearances, and tired slogans have obscured the significance of the original Earth Day. More recently, however, there has been a growing attempt to reclaim the “spirit” of that original day. The Earth Day Network, the current torch bearers of the April 22 holiday, wrote on their website in the run up to the 2007 celebration: “Earth Day was created in 1970 to spark a revolution against environmental abuse and the organizers . . . would not take no for an answer. Neither should we.”  

Recent debates over the potential “death of environmentalism,” sparked by a paper of the same name, opened a vein of frustration, anger, and questioning about the current state of the environmental movement.  

Considering the unprecedented challenge of global warming and the need for a strong

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social movement to counter it, there could not be a more important time to revisit with a fresh perspective the history of the original Earth Day.
1. **Shots Heard Round the World: Environmental Awareness in the 1960s**

The broad movement that momentarily coalesced on Earth Day was in large part a product of Americans’ direct experience with environmental problems during the previous decade. Throughout the 1960s, a series of environmental crises captured the imagination of the American people. From the increasingly dangerous problem of smog in major cities, to the near “death” of Lake Erie and fire on the Cuyahoga River, to the Santa Barbara oil spill, the nation’s environment seemed on the verge of collapse. Simultaneously, scientists’ understanding of ecology and humanity’s effect on the environment was rapidly expanding. With the help of the media, experts could explain the science behind environmental problems to those confronting them. The media also accomplished the important task of placing local environmental troubles in the larger context of a national environmental crisis. The combination of these factors resulted in a demand for change in communities across the country. While many of the old-guard conservation groups focused on wilderness issues, citizens and grassroots organizations mobilized against pollution in their communities. By the spring of 1970, a substantial portion of the American public was frightened and angry about the destruction of the environment and wanted to do something about it.

On Earth Day, millions of citizens protested the problem of air pollution. In Birmingham, Alabama, over which the region’s heavy industry had created a dense layer of pollution, an organization called the Greater Birmingham Alliance to Stop Pollution (or GASP) held a “right to live” rally at a local auditorium.\(^8\) The campus newspaper at the University of Texas came out with a fake news headline dated April 22, 1990 that

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read: “Noxious Smog Hits Houston; 6,000 Dead.” The real headline of the *Los Angeles Times* on Earth Day celebrated, “No Smog on L.A. Earth Day;” it was the first such day in weeks. Air pollution had been a problem in cities long before the 1960s, but during that decade a growth in scientific understanding of the problem resulted in a surge of public anger. Scientists' vocal role in explaining the smog crisis was essential to the success of Earth Day 1970 which capitalized on the public’s air pollution fears and their desire for change.

Since the Industrial Revolution, smog had plagued cities around the world. Smog, a combination of the words smoke and fog, originally was a result of burning coal, a process which mixed smoke and sulfur dioxide into a noxious, heavy mist. As new industries began to explore the uses of new chemicals, however, smog became a more toxic mix of ingredients including nitrogen dioxide, a range of volatile organic compounds, and tropospheric ozone. By the late 1940s, experts estimated that smog was costing $1.5 billion a year in the United States, mostly in crop loss and clean up costs. There was little public understanding of the effects on human health, however, because scientists had yet to come to a consensus about the problem. The *Los Angeles Times* reported from a meeting of medical and scientific experts in 1949, “Medical speakers at the sessions urged public understanding of the health aspect of the smog problem and united in stressing that there is no occasion for hysteria.”

Yet, as the pollution in cities increased, the public and media began to become increasingly worried about smog. In 1953, the *New York Times* reported that while there was little conclusive evidence about the exact health effects of smog, it was clear that at

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10 Ed Ainsworth, “Smog Costs $1,500,000,000 a Year in U.S., Meet Hears,” *Los Angeles Times*, 12 November 1969, pg. A1
least some damage to well-being was a result of the pollution and that this “may be the prime impetus – where all others have failed – to excite public interest in doing a real job on air pollution . . . While there are dozens of reasons why it is desirable to do this,” the article continued, “health has been moving to the foreground of these reasons demanding attention.”

From the 1940s on, the Los Angeles Times is filled with articles, letters to the editor, and editorials complaining about the air quality of the city and the lack of action. In 1967, a woman wrote in a letter to the editor, “Let us pay whatever necessary in time, work, and money to give Los Angeles rapid transit, electric vehicles, improved crank-case devices or any other possible solution to this growing menace.”

After years of watching the air grow thicker and thicker with smog, people in Los Angeles and around the country were becoming fed-up.

By the late 1960s, medical studies had begun to prove conclusively the dangerous effects of smog on human health. Citizens in Los Angeles had known this intuitively for years, but the medical proof helped catalyze public opposition to the problem. A Los Angeles Times special article in 1970, appearing just after Earth Day, laid out the medical and scientific evidence that had been mounting during the recent previous years, “Smog maims and kills in diverse ways. It degenerates and destroys the lungs. It cripples the blood, reducing the capacity of the red cells to carry oxygen about the body. It may do a lot of other damage.” The article included large format pictures of diseased lungs and hard hitting statements like, “Just breathing the air in some areas of Los Angeles is said to be equivalent to smoking two packs of cigarettes a day.” The reporter quoted Dr. Robert S. Eisenberg, assistant medical director of Altadena’s La Vina Hospital for

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Respiratory Diseases, “Medically, the whole of Southern California is in a disaster status. . . It’s been that way for years.” It took the public and government recognition of a scientific consensus on the issue, however, to make the push for change unstoppable.

On Earth Day, citizens also targeted water pollution as one of the country’s major crises. Across the country, school groups lead local river clean-ups. In Detroit, a group of forty women picketed in front of the Great Lakes Steel Corporation to protest the company’s industrial pollution and discharges into the Detroit River. In Miami, students dumped yellow dye into the nearby sewage treatment plants to track the progress of wastes into waterways. As with other concerns, much of the public concern over water pollution had been generated before Earth Day by the media’s extensive coverage of the problem. The potential of the media to inform the public about an environmental crisis and encourage them to take action is demonstrated by the role *Chicago Tribune* in cleaning up the Great Lakes and surrounding waterways.

Throughout the 20th century, the Great Lakes were home to many of the most productive industrial centers in the United States: Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland most importantly. Almost the entirety of the waste from these factories and plants was dumped directly into the nearest body of water. Raw sewage flooded in from slaughterhouses and city sewers, chemicals poured from heavy industries, and oil, the lubricant of the growing industrial economy, turned the area’s rivers into greasy sludge. By the late 1960s, the problem had become a regional crisis and the *Chicago Tribune* dispatched two reporters, Casey Bukro and William Jones, to cover the pollution of the

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Cuyahoga River and the Great Lakes. One of their early articles, published in the summer of 1967, described the horrific state of the Cuyahoga River. The Cuyahoga is approximately 100 miles long, flowing through Northeastern Ohio until it makes its way to Cleveland, running through the center of the city and emptying into Lake Erie. Over the course of the century, the river had become the most polluted waterway in the United States. “The polluted Cuyahoga River running thru the heart of this city is one of the few rivers in the world that is a fire hazard,” reported Bukro and Jones. People in Cleveland joked that anyone who fell into the Cuyahoga did not drown, but decayed. Bukro and Jones’ article included a series of pictures, the most shocking of which was a picture of Jones’ hand covered in thick, slimy oil after he had dunked it in the river. The two concluded, “The only resemblance the river has to ordinary water is that it is wet.”

Three days later, the Chicago Tribune published an article entitled, “A Chilling Warning from Lake Eerie.” The paper wrote, “In the last few days the news columns of The Tribune have contained horrifying stories and pictures of pollution in Lake Eerie. As a result, we can understand why the experts have been warning that Lake Eerie is dying.” The paper announced plans to publish a series of articles called “Save Our Lakes” that would cover the pollution crisis. The Tribune then went a step further and called on politicians and citizens to come together and help save the Great Lakes. “Congress has neglected the greatest treasure of the North American continent – the Great Lakes, the largest body of fresh water in the world . . . If this continues much longer it will be one of the greatest acts of folly in the world.”

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The response from the paper’s readership was explosive. Throughout the fall of 1967, the Tribune was flooded with letters commending its new environmental focus. “When I see such articles as your ‘Save Our Lake’ series, I become convinced that you are earning the title to ‘The World’s Greatest Newspaper,’ even though I sometimes disagree with your political views. I hope something can be done to stop polluting the lake – immediately,” wrote one man.18 Another reader responded, “Your ‘Save Our Lake’ campaign could well be one of the most significant public services ever undertaken by The Tribune, so that you deserve the support of every American.”19 Others credited the newspaper with showing them the threat of pollution for the first time. One family wrote, “You have awakened our family from our apathetic dream that nature is ours to enjoy and abuse.”20 The positive citizen response convinced the paper to continue the “Save Our Lake” series, make bumper stickers with the slogan, create compilations of the articles which were presented to other cities, and publish lists of the major officials from the four states touching Lake Michigan, encouraging readers to write letters expressing their concerns. The series eventually became a full campaign to protect the areas waterways and played an important role in fueling a growing environmental concern among Chicagoans and people around the country.

The politicians responded. In October, 1967, the Illinois Senate unanimously passed a bill intended to ban the dumping of pollutants in Lake Michigan. The Senate also congratulated the Tribune for its coverage of the crisis and its “Save Our Lake” campaign. The paper, the Senate wrote, had “thrown the searchlight of publicity, without
intermission, upon an imminent catastrophe hanging like Damocles’ sword over the people of Chicagoland.”

One Senator later wrote in an editorial for the paper, “As an elected representative of our county, I know it is necessary to be for a ‘war on pollution.’” Through its ambitious coverage, the paper had not only awakened people to the threat of pollution but shown them that politicians would respond to environmental issues.

In 1970, the Chicago Tribune named Bukro, the young reporter whose articles had sparked the “Save Our Lakes” campaign, as its first editor on the environment. “In the newly-created post, Bukro will devote full time coverage of environmental problems facing the nation. For three years he has delved extensively into the shocking tangles of air and water pollution.” Bukro would continue to cover the environment for the Tribune throughout the 1970s. On Earth Day, the Chicago Tribune published a full page ad with a large picture of an eagle with its wings stuck to the ground in oil, looking up at dark gray clouds. Below the picture, the word “STOP!” was printed in bold letters. The text of the advertisement read, “The Chicago Tribune wants you to stop breathing the second dirtiest air of any city in the United States . . . That’s also why we appointed specialist Casey Bukro as Chicago’s first full-time environmental reporter.” The paper went on to applaud itself, “The Tribune has been waging a war on the poisoning of our air and water long before this became a popular crusade.”

The Tribune’s coverage of the pollution of the Cuyahoga and the Great Lakes is an important example of the role of the media in increasing public consciousness about

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23 Marks, pg. 20.
the environment in the 1960s. Environmental problems had never received the in-depth and often sensational reporting that they did during the decade before Earth Day.

Incidents such as the Cuyahoga River catching fire were picked up by media outlets around the country, including popular national magazines like *Time*, which ran a special on the story. Large and graphic pictures of polluted rivers, dead animals covered in oil, and smog hanging over American cities, conveyed that the country was facing a national environmental collapse. Gaylord Nelson, the founder of Earth Day, remembers the image of the Cuyahoga River burning as one of the most powerful of the era, “That image, widely circulated in the popular press, burned its way into the nation’s collective memory as the poster child for the environmental atrocities of the time.” Just as the images of young people being hosed down in Montgomery or the beaten face of Emmet Till had enraged the public and helped create massive support for the Civil Rights movement, the environmental movement benefited immensely from the media’s coverage of environmental issues.

The rise of organized citizen action against pollution also contributed to the momentum leading up to Earth Day. The most militant actions on April 22, 1970 were protests against oil companies. In San Francisco, a group who called themselves the “Environmental Vigilantes” dumped oil in the reflecting pool of the Standard Oil

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27 There has been a fairly extensive analysis of the importance of certain images and photographs for the development of environmentalism in the United States. The most iconic image of the movement is of the complete Earth from outer-space. Partial images of the planet were available before the first Earth Day, but not the complete image, as some authors have suggested. Other scholars have emphasized the importance of the large format photography books created by David Brower for the conservation movement, including Brower himself; see David Brower, *For Earth’s Sake: The Life and Times of David Brower* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1990). There has been less written about the effect of disturbing images for the movement, however. In the case of Earth Day, photographs and television images before the event helped convey the full damage that had been wrought on the U.S. environment and convince people that there was a national crisis.
Company of California. In Washington, D.C., 2,500 people marched on the Department of the Interior to protest the government’s granting of oil leases. The demonstrator’s demonstrated outside the building and chanted “Off the oil!” and “Stop the muck!”

While scientific consensus and media coverage had contributed to the public awareness about air and water pollution, it was citizen action that awakened the nation to the risks of oil drilling and production. In 1969, an oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara, a community on the California coast that prided itself on its beautiful location, caused massive environmental damage in the area. It was a terrible catastrophe and would have generated substantial media coverage on its own. The crisis became a national scandal, however, when citizens in Santa Barbara organized, directly confronted the United States government and the oil industry over their negligence, and demanded change. The Santa Barbara incident demonstrated the power of citizen action and showed the utility of the kind of mobilization that the proposed Earth Day called for.

In 1968, the federal government had leased the Santa Barbara Channel to the oil industry for nearly $603 million. Secretary of Interior, Stewart Udall, later called the decision one of the worst he ever made, referring to it as a “conservation Bay of Pigs.” Two of the oil platforms in the channel were run by Union Oil. On January 28, 1969, a rapid change in pressure in one of the oil wells at Platform A caused a massive underwater explosion. The workers quickly capped the well, but the pressure of the rising gas was too great. Just when the problem seemed to be under control, oil and gas began to burst from cracks on the sea floor. There was nothing the workers could do but evacuate the platform as millions of barrels of oil bubbled to the surface.

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before the public fully realized the extent of the catastrophe. Platform A was located almost five miles out to sea, but as the currents changed, large tides of oil began to sweep up onto the Santa Barbara shore. Six days after the spill, the *Los Angeles Times* reported in an article entitled “Oil, Oil, everywhere . . .” that, “The tons of oil that oozed into the ocean from offshore drilling operations at Santa Barbara represents one of the most serious water pollution emergencies in California history.”

Once the citizens of Santa Barbara realized the full extent of the catastrophe, they were outraged and called on the government to take immediate action against the oil industry. President Nixon dispatched Walter Hickel, his new and controversial Secretary of the Interior, to survey the damage. Hickel, the former Governor of Alaska had been instrumental in opening Prudhoe Bay for oil drilling and was criticized by many as being a friend of the oil industry. The Secretary immediately created a controversy when he arrived in Santa Barbara by placing the blame for the spill on the shoulders of the federal government rather than blaming the oil industry. “It is as much the fault of the federal government,” Hickel said soon after the spill. “The oil company was following federal regulations.” The statement let the industry off the hook, both for cleaning up the mess and loosing their drilling licenses. Hickel suspended drilling in the channel, but only temporarily, angering many local residents who thought that at least until the mess was cleaned up, if not forever, oil drilling should be banned in the area.

In the months following the blowout, oil continued to surge onto the Santa Barbara coastline and into the city’s harbor, the heart of the city. “Yachtsmen and fisherman stood on the pier and watched the blackness take it all,” recalled two local

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residents. “Some of them were crying . . . . The worst of it was that the horror kept recurring, and the oil came in on nearly every tide for weeks and months.” To the shock of the Santa Barbara community, the federal government dragged its feet in responding to the crisis. Citizens who had never been especially concerned about environmental issues began to become more vocal about the pollution of their home. The Sierra Club became especially involved, in part because their national director, Fred Eisler was a teacher at Santa Barbara high school. A citizens group was quickly formed, naming itself “Get Oil Out,” or GOO. “The resistance movement has radicalized the community,” said local organizers. “Life in Santa Barbara today is somewhat reminiscent of civilian life in a war zone.”

When President Nixon finally visited Santa Barbara in March of 1969, thousands of citizens protested his arrival, some with signs reading, “Visit Santa Barbara’s Dead Sea: A Project of Your Federal Government.” At a mass meeting on a wharf in the harbor, a local professor demanded, “What we need is an environmental-rights movement along with a civil rights movement.” Over the next year, students and others in the Santa Barbara community continued to demonstrate, calling on the federal government to stop drilling in the channel and clean up the oil spill. On June 8, 1969 nearly 1,500 people demonstrated in La Playa Stadium. In January 1970, on the one year anniversary of the spill, over 150 students occupied the Santa Barbara municipal pier, demanding an end to oil drilling in the channel. In the “Santa Barbara Declaration of Environmental Rights,” an alliance of citizen groups wrote, “We propose a revolution in conduct toward an

33 Ibid, pg. SM32.
34 Ibid, pg. SM32.
environment which is rising in revolt against us. Granted that ideas and institutions long established are not easily changed; yet today is the first day of the rest of our life on this planet.”35 The protests seemed to have little effect on the federal government, however. “But it may come too late to save Santa Barbara,” citizens were forced to conclude. “Then the best the city can do,” they continued, “is to serve as an example of how something beautiful can be destroyed.”36

The massive, angry protest in Santa Barbara against pollution primed the national media to recognize the potential of Earth Day 1970. In an article marking the one year anniversary of the Santa Barbara oil spill, Gladwin Hill of the New York Times, referred to the event as the “ecological shot heard ‘round the world.” After Santa Barbara, the media and the public began to connect the independent anti-pollution work of different citizen groups around the country with a growing national environmental movement. Senator Nelson remembered that at the time, “everybody around the country saw something going to pot in their local areas, some lovely spot, some lovely stream, some lovely lake you couldn’t swim in anymore.”37 America’s drive to economic wealth had drastically impoverished the nation’s environment. By the end of the 1960s, citizens around the country were angry and ready for a change.

It took more than local environmental crises, however, to catalyze the nationwide protest on Earth Day 1970. Two issues in particular provided a larger context that added meaning to people’s local environmental problems: the threat of nuclear war and the fight

37 Gaylord Nelson, interviewed in Shabecoff, 106.
against DDT. Historian Steven Stoll writes, “The threat of fallout represented a new and disturbing kind of human unity, one in which the fate of all people became intertwined with the fate of the earth under the new regime of technological warfare.”\textsuperscript{38} Rachel Carson’s groundbreaking book \textit{Silent Spring} further opened the public’s eyes to the daily war waged against the planet by DDT and other chemical pollutants. In the larger context of the sometimes disturbing unity that ecology revealed, individual environmental problems could be seen as the signs of a society wide environmental crisis. Not every event on Earth Day 1970 addressed nuclear war and DDT, but the day was only possible because of the consciousness these twin problems brought.

The threat of nuclear war and insidious, chemical pollution expanded the vision of environmentalism beyond the traditional conservation movement, which was largely known at the time for wilderness preservation. Many authors have written about the profound effect the advent of nuclear weapons had on society.\textsuperscript{39} For this account, two points are especially useful. First, the advent of nuclear weapons profoundly shifted humans’ understanding of their relationship with the natural world. The bomb was initially seen as the epitome of society’s triumph over nature. J. Robert Oppenheimer explained this feeling at the first nuclear test by quoting the \textit{Bhagavad Gita}, “I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.” The feeling was tempered, however, by the utter destruction unleashed by nuclear weapons during the Second World War. A 1985 \textit{Time Magazine} article reflected, “Yet it did not take long for the realization to sink in that the splitting of the atom not only gave people no greater authority over nature than they had

\textsuperscript{38} Stoll, 1.
\textsuperscript{39} A particularly interesting and useful account is, Margot A. Henricksen, \textit{Dr. Strangelove’s America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
before, it proved how helpless they were when handling natural forces. On Earth Day, prominent physicists, politicians, and citizens railed against nuclear weapons and called on the government to ban them. Many more speakers spoke of society wide extinction, a threat that seemed all too real after the advent of the bomb.

In *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, Rachel Carson brought the new understanding of the world that had developed after the bomb to bear on the environmental problem of chemical pollution. The connection, while in retrospect obvious, was groundbreaking for its time, and its invaluable role in the creation of the environmental movement has been noted by many historians. Carson’s subject in *Silent Spring* was DDT, a pesticide that was widely used at the time. The name of Carson’s book was a warning; DDT and other poisons were causing massive damage to bird populations around the country and threatened to wipe out some species entirely. Chemical pollutants, Carson contended, were also a threat to human life:

> Along with the possibility of the extinction of mankind by nuclear war, the central problem of our age has therefore become the contamination of man’s total environment with such substances of incredible potential for harm – substances that accumulate in the tissues of plants and animals and even penetrate the germ cells to shatter and alter the very material of heredity upon which the shape of the future depends.

Environmental problems were no longer limited to external challenges that humans could avoid, but were penetrating into people’s bodies and affecting their health.

> “Future generations are unlikely to condone our lack of prudent concern for the integrity of the natural world that supports all life,” Carson wrote. Change would not be

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43 For an extensive account of Carson’s understanding of her work, her personal philosophy, and her struggle with cancer, an extensive collection of Carson’s letters to her best friend, Dorothy Freeman, is an invaluable resource. See, Martha Freeman, ed. *Always, Rachel: The Letters of Rachel Carson and Dorothy Freeman, 1952-1964*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
possible, Carson said, until the public learned the full dimensions of the environmental crisis. It was an uphill battle. At nearly every turn, Carson was attacked by the chemical industry and others who accused her concerns as womanly, meek, or unimportant. Despite the baseless attacks on Carson’s credibility, *Silent Spring* became a sensation. Linda Lear, Carson’s biographer, reflects, “She wrote a revolutionary book in terms that were acceptable to a middle class emerging from the lethargy of postwar affluence and woke them to their neglected responsibilities.” By bringing the degradation of the environment back into the public eye and shifting the debate from conservation to ecology, Carson set the stage for Earth Day and the writing and activism to come. Phillip Shabecoff writes, “With *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson lit the fuse.”

When an estimated twenty million people took to the streets on Earth Day, they did so for numerous reasons. Many were personal: a child’s asthma caused by smog, the pollution of a favorite stream or lake, the loss of a treasured place to industrial exploitation. Others were concerned with the fate of society as a whole, including the threat nuclear weapons or the daily abuse wrecked by chemical pollution. A new scientific understanding of ecology and humanity’s relationship with the natural world, the media’s attentive coverage, and a growing number of local environmental groups had connected the dots between a series of individual environmental problems and revealed a national environmental crisis. In every corner of the country people were concerned about the state of the world around them and wanted to do something about it. Earth Day’s ability to connect local actions to a larger narrative of a national movement proved to be exactly what concerned citizens had been waiting for.

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44 Carson, 13.
46 Shabecoff, 102.
2.  “Earth Day Organized Itself”:
The Lead-up to April 22, 1970

On April 22, 1970, the office of Senator Gaylord Nelson received a letter from a young boy named Jay Fogg. It read:

Dear Senator Nelson,

I would hate to die when I am so young. I would like to help stop pollution. I went about 1½ miles last night picking up trash, today I am going about 2 miles. In the 4-H club we are going to take a picture of the trash and if it turns out I will send you one. Keep up the good work.

Your friend,
Jay Fogg

Fogg’s letter was one of thousands that poured into Senator Nelson’s office in the weeks and months surrounding Earth Day 1970. Nelson had become a hero to environmentalists, young and old, around the country. A long time supporter of conservation and the environment, Nelson’s work on Earth Day brought him new fame and recognition. Nelson’s life and his essential role in creating Earth Day also reveal a great deal about the day itself.

Nelson’s environmental work began long before he had the idea for Earth Day. He used to say he had developed his lifelong dedication to environmentalism “by osmosis” while growing up in Clear Lake, Wisconsin. As a child, Nelson spent much of his time in the outdoors surrounding Clear Lake. While his parents encouraged his interest in nature and animals, they also included him and his siblings in constant political discussion around the dinner tale. Looking back on his small-town upbringing, Nelson reflected that the familiarity of Clear Lake encouraged both individuality and civility, two

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characteristics that would mark his political career. Nelson went on to university at San Jose State in California and the University of Wisconsin Law School. Graduating in 1942, he joined the military, serving overseas for four years. After the war, Nelson returned to Wisconsin where he practiced law and was elected to the state senate in 1948. Ten years later, Nelson was sworn in as the 35th Governor of Wisconsin.

Governor Nelson was known for his seemingly unbounded energy and ambition. One reporter wrote of a post-election party at the governor’s residence, “And in the midst of the crush, scotch and water in one hand and a mentholated cigarette in the other, the new governor of Wisconsin engaged in sharp debate with a fisheries biologist.” Nelson interrogated that biologist until three-thirty in the morning. While during his first term he was limited by the normal demands of state business, and a vicious debate over taxes with the Republican dominated state senate, Nelson was able after his reelection in 1961 to commence an ambitious conservation program for the state, which was named the “Outdoor Recreation Action Program.” The principal component of this program was legislation intended to greatly expand Wisconsin’s recreational land holdings. After a good deal of backroom maneuvering, the program was enacted, earning Nelson the name, “the Conservation Governor.”

In 1962, Gaylord Nelson was elected to the U.S. Senate, where he would serve for almost twenty years. Once in office, Nelson made the environment a focus of his senate tenure. Nelson’s biographer, Bill Christofferson, writes, “Nelson went to the U.S. Senate with a clear and ambitious objective: to make environmental issues a part of the

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49 Ibid, 27.
50 “The Governor,” Let’s See (Milwaukee), 6-19 February 1959, in Christofferson, 98.
In an era when few legislators saw the environment as a top priority, Nelson was a leader in both traditional conservation issues and the newer problems of air and water pollution. Included in his accomplishments were helping protect the Appalachian Trail, fighting against detergents that were seriously threatening water quality around the country, preserving the Apostle Islands and the Saint Croix River in Wisconsin, sounding the alarm on pollution in the Great Lakes, and leading the long fight in Congress against DDT. His strong record in the Senate gave Nelson the credibility he needed both in Washington and throughout the country to be the key organizer of the first Earth Day.

Nelson worked on a variety of other issues in the Senate as well, including civil rights, poverty, and the war in Vietnam. During his first months in office, Nelson signed on as a co-sponsor for five civil rights bills. In 1964, when President Johnson declared a “war on poverty,” Nelson declared, “I am enlisting to serve in that war for the duration.” He would continue to fight for the poor, pushing for federal grants to set up poverty programs and enlisting unemployed workers to work on conservation and recreation projects. Nelson also came out against the war in Vietnam and in 1965 was one of only three senators to vote against the appropriations President Johnson wanted to increase troops in the region. “Members of the Senate, known as the world’s greatest deliberative body, are stumbling over each other to see who can say ‘yea’ the quickest and the loudest,” Nelson said. “I regret it, and I think that someday we shall all regret it.”

Nelson’s work in these areas -- the Vietnam War, poverty, and civil rights -- was not,

51 Christofferson, 175.
52 Ibid, 223.
however, on totally different tracts from his environmental work, but rather contributed to his vision for what Earth Day should be.

Nelson’s personal qualities also contributed to his effectiveness as promoter of the first Earth Day. He and his wife, Carrie Lee, were famous in Washington for their socializing and dinner parties. Having grown up with a tradition of healthy but not bitter debate at the family dining room table, Nelson carried that debate tradition to Washington, and hosted some of the loudest and most notorious gatherings in the Capitol. Unafraid of confrontation, Nelson was known to yell at his guests, “Where the hell did you ever come up with a stupid idea like that?” Debate was always in good humor, however, and most guests would yell right back at him. Nelson always insisted that the parties were strictly social affairs, but they clearly had a political benefit, unintended or not. Along with his standing as an honest, hardworking senator, Nelson’s reputation as an intelligent, good-natured friend was an important part of his success. While any senator could have proposed the idea for Earth Day, few could have garnered the wide support that Nelson was able to achieve.\textsuperscript{53}

In 1963, Nelson organized an eleven state conservation tour for President Kennedy. Nelson was convinced that the tour would bring the issue of conservation to the forefront of American politics. In a five-page letter to the president, an effort to persuade him of the urgency of the issue, Nelson wrote, “Though the public is dimly aware that all around them, here and there, outdoor assets are disappearing, they really don’t see the awful dimension of the catastrophe.” Nelson believed that it was essential to awaken the public to the larger context of environmental problems. The task was not one to be left

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, 191.
only to scientists and writers, however, but was the responsibility of politicians as well. He continued, “The real failure has been in political leadership. This is a political issue to be settled at the political level, but strangely politicians seldom talk about it.”

Kennedy agreed to the conservation tour, but perhaps for different reasons than Nelson had hoped. While Kennedy mentioned conservation at every stop, the tour quickly became an opportunity to build up support for his entire political agenda and the Democratic Party. The New York Times reported, “It is billed as nonpolitical, but most of the stops are in states where the President’s political support is shaky and where Democratic Senators face reelection contests next year.” Conservation was not getting the attention Nelson had hoped for. He recalled, “I assumed if the President did a tour and said this was an important issue the press would believe him, but there weren’t any reporters who understood the issue, and no environmental reporters anywhere in the country.” The first environmental reporter was not created until the late 1960s, when Chicago Tribune reassigned Casey Bukro, who had covered the pollution of the Great Lakes. Nelson said, “Every place we went, the press peppered the president with questions on foreign policy. They didn’t really care what he had to say about the environment.”

Before the trip had begun, Nelson had encouraged the president to say that he was making the trip because it was “America’s last chance,” to save its environment. Kennedy and his speechwriters strayed away from this message, however, and struck a more generically hopeful tone. Had Kennedy brought the same energy and

54 Gaylord Nelson to John Fitzgerald Kennedy, 29 August 1963, Name File, White House Central Files, LBJ Library, in Christofferson, 177.
56 Christofferson, 180.
57 Ibid., 177.
sense of urgency to the issue as he did to his election run or the Apollo space program, perhaps the tour would have made more headlines. As Nelson observed, however, the fault lay with the press just as much as the president. The conservation tour taught Nelson an important lesson: the environment needed an educated and committed press to make it a national issue.

The tour served the White House well, bolstering up support in important districts, but in the end Nelson was disappointed. In their wrap-up of the trip, the *New York Times* reported, “The ostensible purpose of the trip was to visit conservation sites, and during the first two days the President gave what reporters felt was lackluster performance as he droned through speeches on conservation and related matters, his mind and heart seemingly elsewhere.” Kennedy referred to the trip as a great educational experience, but it is unclear whether or not he really grasped the issue of conservation or environmental preservation. In his final speech, Kennedy called for a “third wave” conservation movement in the United States. As it turned out, Kennedy was talking about the aggressive development, not just conservation, of natural resources. In one speech on the tour, he stated, “In looking at nature, I have been impressed really more by man. Everything that I have seen was given to us by nature, but man did something about it.” Kennedy, it seemed, was willing to do something to increase his political capitol, but saw little advantage in pushing a conservation agenda. An editorial in the *New York Times* joked, “On his so-called ‘conservation’ trip, the President seems to have been more interested in the conservation of the Democratic Party than in the conservation of

61 Christofferson, p. 185.
America’s natural resources.” In Nelson’s eyes, the trip was a failure. The tour had put conservation into the spotlight for a few brief days, but the attention did not last. “It didn’t do what I had hoped for. But it was the germ of the idea that ultimately became Earth Day . . . finding some event that would be big enough to bring this issue to the attention of the political establishment.”

Six years passed before the idea for Earth Day came to Nelson. It was the summer of 1969 and on college campuses across the country anti-Vietnam War “teach-ins” were taking place. The “teach-ins” originated at the University of Michigan and had spread to hundreds of campuses in the course of a few months. The largest took place at the University of California, Berkeley where thousands of students attended lectures, speeches, and performances all day and through the night. At the time, Nelson was on another conservation tour on the West coast and the idea came to him, “Why not organize a huge, grassroots protest about what was happening to our environment?”

Although it was a relatively simple idea, it was a profound departure from the strategies of the conservation movement of the time. The great battles of the movement had been fought over specific issues, rather than broad ideas like “what is happening to the environment.” As well, conservationists had usually only appealed to the grassroots for two things: money and letter writing. Nelson, however, realized that much more than this was needed. He perceived among the public growing anger, frustration, and fear over environmental issues, and saw that these opinions and feelings had not yet been manifested in a large, public way. Nelson recalls, “I was satisfied that if we could tap into

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64 Nelson, Beyond Earth Day: Fulfilling the Promise, 5.
the environmental concerns of the public and infuse the student anti-war energy into the environmental cause, we could generate a demonstration that would force this issue onto the national political agenda.”

The next step for Nelson was finding a way to pull off such an event. Although Nelson later claimed that the grassroots response to Earth Day was so overwhelming and spontaneous that the day practically organized itself, behind the scenes it took a team of students working around the clock to make Nelson’s dream a reality. A month after declaring his plans for a nation-wide environmental teach-in, Nelson spoke at a national student conference in Virginia. During his speech, Nelson announced he was staffing an office to coordinate the teach-in effort. The next day, a group of students arrived at Nelson’s Washington, D.C. office and told him they were ready to get to work and had formed a committee to help run the teach-ins. The Senator was wary of student activism, however, and worried that his event would be taken in the wrong direction. He turned to a good friend, Bud Jordahl, then on the University of Wisconsin faculty, to help him organize the staffing effort. Jordhal recalled, “Campus militants . . . saw this as another opportunity to militantly bring to the attention of the country all the ills and negatives associated with capitalism and an unresponsive democratic system.” Already, word was traveling from campus to campus that a massive teach-in was in the works to protest the desecration of the environment. Nelson had his own priorities, however. Jordhal remembered, “These were bright, young, energetic, highly motivated students. They were not anarchists, but they wanted a militant Earth Day. Gaylord wanted a peaceful national teach-in.” At the behest of Nelson, Jordahl turned the students away and set about a formal recruitment process. “We didn’t want to alienate them,” he said. “We just wanted

65 Ibid., 7.
them to go away.” Nelson and Jordahl ended up hiring Dennis Hayes, an experienced, and they hoped less militant, graduate student at Harvard to be the national coordinator for the teach-ins.

Nelson and Hayes set about organizing Earth Day with a small budget and few ideas about how the entire day would take place. Nelson quickly brought in his friend Representative Paul McCloskey, a moderate Republican from California, to make the proceedings bi-partisan. McCloskey and Nelson decided on the organizational structure for the event’s planning over a beer at Washington’s Monocle restaurant and formed Environmental Teach-In, Inc. They also hired two more students with Hayes’ advice. Andrew Garling, who had organized Vietnam War moratorium protests among Boston area medical students, was assigned to be the Northeast coordinator for the group, and Stephen Cotton, who had worked as a civil rights reporter in Alabama and for Newsweek, became the press director. For money, the group relied on Nelson’s connections. Early donors included the Conservation Foundation, who provided start up money, and Walter Reuther, president of the United Auto Workers. Nelson was also able to use his connections in Washington to obtain some federal financial assistance money for the project.

Environmental Teach-In, Inc., which also went by the name of Environmental Action, Inc., set up shop in Washington, D.C., in a cramped office over a cheap restaurant. The setting only added to the group’s allure in the eyes of the media. In one report, the restaurant downstairs was reported to be a budget Chinese place, while Stephen Cotton wrote in another article, that it was a quick-order restaurant named

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66 Christofferson, 304.
Buffalo Bills. The office was soon flooded with phone calls and letters about the proposed teach-ins. Nelson and the group had a struck a nerve, and plans for Earth Day, as the teach-ins began to be called, were being made all over the country. The group hired sixteen more paid staff members to handle the additional work. Volunteers, most of them high school and college students, also came down to work at the Environmental Teach-In, Inc.’s offices. Together, the army of young people sent out hundreds of mailings, made thousands of phone calls, and wrote almost constant press releases on their progress. The Los Angeles Times reported, “A full-time staff of young people much like Hayes, plus a couple hundred volunteers, keep Environmental Action headquarters near Washington’s youthful hangout, DuPont circle, humming around the clock.”

The early media attention that Earth Day received was a significant reason for its success. Stephen Cotton writes, “We began with no mailing list and very little money . . . We had instead an enormous amount of free publicity, and we did our best to take advantage of it.” While Senator Nelson’s conservation tour with President Kennedy had done little to interest the media, the idea of a nationwide teach-in became the focal point for a larger story about the desecration of the environment and the growing movement to save it. By setting a date for the arrival of a new environmentalism, April 22, 1970, Nelson gave the media a point to measure the movement by – the unnamed mix of rage and excitement that kept building over the environment now had something to move towards. One of the earliest articles about the growing movement was by Gladwin Hill at the New York Times. On November 30, 1969, Hill published a front page article entitled,

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69 Ibid, pg. 33.
71 Cotton, pg. 33.
“Environment May Eclipse Vietnam as College Issue.” The piece described the new student interest on campus in environmental issues as explosive. Hill quoted one professor as saying, “I’ve been floored by the intensity of [the student’s] actions and feelings. The student group is going like a bomb.” Everyone, the article suggested, was focused on the upcoming teach-ins. Hill wrote, “Already students are looking forward to the first ‘D-Day’ of the movement, next April 22 . . . .”\textsuperscript{72}

Although Senator Nelson and the staff of Environmental Teach-In, Inc. did not organize the local Earth Day actions, the day certainly did not “organize itself” as Nelson liked to say. The comment, however, demonstrated the Senator’s modest, almost amateur, approach to the organization of Earth Day. Nelson’s unbounded energy, ambition, and tireless commitment to the environment, not any specially honed organizing or movement building skills, persuaded him and others that Earth Day could succeed. The same held true for Hayes, Cotton, and the rest of the team behind Environmental Teach-In, Inc. Their youthful, amateur approach to organizing Earth Day attracted important media attention early on in the campaign. The group’s nonattachment to traditional conservationism allowed them to expand the vision of Earth Day to include issues beyond ecology and the natural world. This willingness to let individuals and groups around the country determine what exactly Earth Day meant for them, drew a broad coalition of interests and concerns to the event.

3. **A Chaotic Meeting Place: Building the Movement**

“A Secular Revival Meeting”

Although the momentum and media coverage for Earth Day had been building for months, few people expected it would involve such extensive activities across the entire country. Simply put, Earth Day turned out to be an enormous occasion. An estimated twenty million people participated in the day’s events, including students at nearly ten thousand schools. This participation was especially impressive not only because of its numbers, but because of its geographic extent. Dennis Hayes reflected a year later that it was impossible to know exactly the number of people who were involved, “But I’ve been on the road at least three days a week this last year, and I have never been in a city or school which didn’t take part in Earth Day.” Earth Day was clearly the beginning of a new and unique movement, but exactly what the movement stood for and what form it would take was unclear at the time.

In some places, the day took on the characteristic of a massive celebration rather than a protest. *Time Magazine* reported, “Much of Earth Day was festive and faddish.”

Perhaps the most carefree celebration of Earth Day was in New York City, where the Mayor’s office had taken over the event planning. For two hours, the city shut down Fifth Avenue, between 59th St. and 14th St. and turned the usually busy thoroughfare into a pedestrian mall. Employees at an architectural firm on the avenue spread out a yellow and white quilt on the asphalt to enjoy a picnic. A crowd soon gathered around them and sang, “Happy Earth Day to You!” A few blocks over, between Fourth and Seventh

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avenues, 14th St. was left free for pedestrians from noon to midnight and hosted an ecological carnival with many different booths on environmental issues. The center of the city’s activities was at Union Square, where about one hundred thousand people passed through over the course of the day and where many different activities and exhibits were hosted.

“Each visitor to the square had to improvise his own Earth Day, by deciding where to spend his time,” the *New York Times* reported. At one corner of the square, a giant sculpture of welded junk and trash had been brought in on a flatbread truck; in the park a non-stop Frisbee game was under way; and, over on 17th St., a block-long polyethylene “bubble” had been erected where people could breathe pure, filtered air. Within half an hour, the filtered air had taken on “unmistakable whiffs of marijuana.” Although there were a number of angry speeches made around the city, Earth Day in New York had a distinct celebratory feel.

Many people also saw Earth Day as a chance to express their anger over the condition of the environment. In Chicago, where eighteen groups had come together to form an Earth Day planning committee, five hundred students from Glenbard North High School paraded to protest air pollution. Another parade in Miami called itself the “dead orange parade,” a take-off on the annual Orange Bowl parade in the city. In West Virginia, a clean up was turned into a protest when a group of students collected five tons of garbage along a five-mile stretch of highway and dumped it all on the steps of the Harrison County courthouse. More traditional tactics were used in Detroit, where a group of forty women picketed in front of the Great Lakes Steel Corporation to protest the company’s industrial pollution and discharges into the Detroit River. Meanwhile, in

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76 Ibid., pg. 1
77 Ibid., pg. 1
78 Ibid., pg. 1
Boston, fifteen young people were arrested at Logan Airport for blocking a corridor in protest against the building of supersonic transport planes and the resulting noise pollution. The Boston arrests, however, comprised the majority of the remarkably few arrests associated with Earth Day. Compared to the civil rights, free speech, and anti-Vietnam demonstrations of the previous decade, April 22 was a docile gathering.

In fact, the majority of Earth Day activities were not in the nature of massive protest at all, but instead consisted of a variety of activities on a smaller scale. For example, small communities engaged in local trash pick-ups and river clean-ups, or hear local experts speak about environmental challenges. To be sure, most of the activities of the day emphasized dissatisfaction with the state of the environment. As Life magazine wrote of the day, “It sounds as if the land has gone mad and in a way some of it has: mad at man’s treatment of his environment.” (Life, April 24, 1970) In reality, however, there was little bitterness or anger in most places around the country, but a heartfelt desire to get to work cleaning up the community and local surroundings. “It is now time to give something in return for all we have taken from the Earth,” said one student in Oklahoma City.79 In Ripon, Wisconsin, for example, about three hundred and fifty school children collected discarded cans and handed them in to local businesses for one cent. Shopkeepers handed out over $250.54 over the course of the day.80 In Depew, New York, ninety high school students went to clean up the grounds of their school, but were told to go back inside because they were cutting specially arranged Earth Day science and social study classes.81 Even animals got involved: in Centralia, Washington a goat was seen

80 “Americans Rally to Make It Again Beautiful Land,” Chicago Tribune, 23 April 1970, pg. 3.
marching across a park with a sign that read: “I eat garbage, what are you doing for your community?”

The millions who attended Earth Day comprised a somewhat different and certainly broader group of people that the other protest movements of that era. While students, radical activists, and peace movement leaders participated in the day’s events, so did businessmen, grandmothers, children, and many “mainstream” Americans: the moderate, “silent majority” whom Nixon had defined in contrast to the radicals of the era. The *New York Times* reflected, “But for its sponsors and its youthful participants, Earth Day was less a demonstration than a secular revival meeting.”

Even the organizers of Environmental Action, who were quicker to celebrate Earth Day’s radicalism then its moderation, recognized that they had attracted a mixed crowd. They reflected, “A new kind of movement was born – a bizarre alliance that spans the ideological spectrum from campus militants to middle-Americans.” The unlikely alliance demonstrated amazingly broad support for the environment, but exactly what would result from such a coalition of different backgrounds, ideologies, and concerns was difficult to discern.

**Student Support**

Over 1,500 colleges and universities and over 10,000 schools took part in Earth Day. Students’ enthusiastic involvement in planning the event on their campuses had helped convince the media early on that Earth Day was going to be a success. The creative, dramatic, and sometimes controversial actions on campuses on April 22

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82 Ibid., pg. 1.
83 Lelyveld, pg. 1
85 “A Memento Mori to the Earth,” *Time Magazine*, 4 May 1970
increased media coverage of the day itself, as well. Colleges and universities also provided the space to explore the full possibilities of the new environmental movement.

In an article about the University of Michigan teach-in on the environment, the first of a series of events leading up to Earth Day, environmental author and scientist Barry Commoner observed, “So the environmental movement – and the teach-ins that signal its emergence as a major political force – has become a meeting place for the major issues that trouble American society.” He concluded, “This is its strength, and this is the importance of its future course.”86 Students’ open-mindedness, willingness to critique the entire system, and radicalism expanded the vision of environmentalism to include other important issues of the time. Their energy also popularized the new movement in a way that conservationism had never known.

The process, however, often proved chaotic: at the University of Michigan teach-in, student radicals tried to disrupt the proceedings at a number of points. A reporter for the Washington Post warned, “Environment as a political phenomenon is like a flywheel spinning fast and free. It must either be engaged in some direct drive machinery or it will fly apart into little pieces.”87 Although they could identify the same problems, students with different priorities often found it difficult to agree on joint solutions. Their arguments and debates, however, pushed the environmental movement to consider the relationship between many ecological and social problems. In a description of the recent teach-ins, the New York Times editorialized, “The rapidly rising interest of students in environmental reform promises a brilliant harnessing of youthful idealism to the

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desperate cause of checking the world’s physical deterioration.” The activity on campuses on and leading up to Earth Day also harnessed the environmental movement itself, however, shaping it to face the interconnected challenges of a new era.

The protest culture on campuses in the late 1960s provided fertile ground for the environmental movement to grow in. American students in the 1960s were part of an international uprising of sorts, a diffuse movement that challenged almost everything that was old and embraced anything that was new. The most well-known organizations of the era, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), focused student activist efforts on civil rights, participatory democracy, an end to the war in Vietnam, and free speech. SDS organized the first “teach-in,” in early 1965, a day long event at the University of Michigan in protest of the Vietnam War. The teach-in phenomenon soon spread as a tactic of protest. At the University of California, Berkeley, over 7,000 students turned out for a massive teach-in that brought in speakers from across the country. A Yale philosophy professor, Staughton Lynd, received a standing ovation when he called for a large campaign of civil disobedience: “I mean civil disobedience so massive that the luncheon club running this country, Johnson, McNamara, Bundy and Rusk, will resign.”

The student interest in the environment that Earth Day catalyzed was also a reaction to the problems that had developed with much of the student activism of the 1960s. In the late 1960s, student activists had begun to become more militant. Since Stokely Carmichael had declared “Black Power!” in 1965, SNCC had become increasingly radical, ejecting its white members and even criticizing any efforts directed

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toward racial integration. By 1970, the organization was bankrupt and had little influence with either black or white students. SDS suffered a similar fate. At their 1969 convention, the group fractured in a dramatic way, with radical factions taking control of the organization only to run it into the ground within a year or two. Students increasingly looked for something new. The head of a new environmental group at the University of California, Berkeley reported, “We got a lot of people who were totally frustrated by the old Peace and Freedom, S.D.S. kind of activity.” Campus activists were tired of losing, he continued, “It’s sad in a way, but we wouldn’t have gotten such a start if so many people hadn’t worried about the war for so many years and found themselves totally unable to get it stopped.” When Senator Nelson proposed the idea of a nationwide mobilization to organize a day of teach-ins on the environment, many students seized the opportunity to become involved in a new movement. The Berkeley student commented, “There really is only a limited attention span on any one issue, and all of a sudden here was another way to get it on, to make your concern known.”^91 Earth Day’s timing could not have been better.

The negative reaction of parents, politicians, and the media to the late 1960s campus radicalism also benefited the organizers of Earth Day. Moderate Americans heralded the arrival of environmental interest as an opportunity to turn student activism to a less controversial cause. The media quickly seized on the idea that a new movement was sweeping campuses and completely redirecting student energies. Gladwin Hill’s front page article, “Environment May Eclipse Vietnam as College Issue,” launched the coverage. Hill’s interviews must have sounded like music to the ears of many worried parents. “I doubt if you’ll find many anarchist ecologists,” assured a student at Yale.

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“Ecology is a system, and anarchy goes against that.” The “typical” environmental group, Hill reported, was led by students like Bruce Tissney, who was “Edwardian rather than hippie in appearance.” At a meeting of his group, Ecology Action at Boston University, Tisney sported a “trimmed red beard, wire rimmed spectacles” and affected “such sartorial accoutrements as a blue plaid vest and matching bow-tie, white shirt and gold watch and chain.” Environmentalism, the article suggested to parents, would not only redirect their students to a more productive cause, but it would get them to tuck in their shirts, as well. The media reported that even President Nixon and the government felt they had a stake in encouraging environmental activism. Business Week wrote, “Officials in the Administration and Democratic leaders in Congress see an opportunity to channel troublesome student energies into constructive reform efforts. Federal agencies are encouraging the formation of student pressure groups.” Stephen Cotton, the press director for Environmental Teach-In, Inc., mentioned the Hill article in particular when he described the media build-up to Earth Day. Cotton, who took on the role of cynical critic after his role in organizing the first Earth Day, wrote in the Washington Post in 1971, “The idea that students had discovered a new supercause was largely a myth. It was conjured up by the press and encouraged by a variety of well-intentioned and not-so-well-intentioned political figures.” Although Cotton overstated the claim, the media’s extensive coverage of campus environmentalism did create much of the momentum that culminated in Earth Day.

Although students may not have considered environmentalism a “supercause,” they took it on with relish in the lead up to Earth Day 1970. As students released reports

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93 “Nixon, Congress backs students on environment,” Business Week, 10 January 1970, pg. 43.
on their plans for April 22, the media coverage of the efforts began to shift. It became increasingly clear that not all student environmentalists fit the image of the bow-tie and gold-watch-wearing Bruce Tissney. Not only friendly discussions were being planned, it turned out, but so too were demonstrations, marches, symbolic “car bashings,” and undefined “militant street activities.” The threat that the environmental movement might succumb to the same radical students that had supposedly dominated campus culture throughout the 1960s only increased media coverage and public speculation. Some reports highlighted the work of students like David Hawkins, the founder of the Environmental Law Council at Colombia. Hawkins, who went on to become a prominent lawyer for the National Resource Defense Council, described his group at Colombia as an alternative for students who did not want to become involved with the more radical environmental groups on campus. Many articles, however, got their quotes from the staff at Environmental Teach-In, Inc. who did their best to promote Earth Day as a potentially militant affair on campuses. The Los Angeles Times reported, “April 22 may destroy the patronizing attitude that still remains in some places toward the young environmental radicals.” Politicians, the article suggested, should expect tough questions from students at the teach-ins. “I’m not sure that any of them have the vaguest notion as to what we’re all about,” Dennis Hayes told the reporter. Stephen Cotton, the publicity director of Environmental Action, told the New York Times, “There’s no doubt that the White House looks at this as a pacifying issue. But they’re wrong.”

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96 Abramson, pg. 1.
The media and public waited in anticipation to see what the students would do on Earth Day. When the day came, student activities broke down into two roughly defined categories: actions and teach-ins. The student actions were almost always creative, dramatic, and aimed at getting media attention. Earlier in the spring, the staff at Environmental Teach-In, Inc. had sent a letter to high-school students across the country that encouraged them to promote environmental awareness in the most visible way they could. “It’s up to you to stimulate your classmates, teachers and community to come up with project ideas suitable for your local situation,” the letter encouraged.98 At Cleveland State University, students worked all day picking up garbage, and then marched to the Cuyahoga River in protest of water pollution. In rural Letcher County, Kentucky, 1,200 students also collected trash, and then buried it underground in a casket.99 Thirty girls at a high school in New York City donned surgical masks and dragged white sheets along the sidewalk to show how dirty it was. In another part of the city, 1,000 students symbolically dumped into the Hudson River a casket containing the names of America’s most polluted rivers. They then symbolically resurrected them and called on the government to do the same.100 On the other side of the country in California, a group of students at San Jose State College buried a 1970 Ford Maverick they had dragged fourteen miles to the burial site in a protest against carbon monoxide pollution.101 In Los Angeles, students did not bother with the burial and instead sold tickets to a “car

smashing,” to people who wanted to “vent their feelings about cars.” At Indiana University, twenty members of the campus Women’s Liberation Movement dressed as witches pelted Earth Day participants with birth control pills chanting “Free our bodies, free our minds.” They were part of a nationwide movement called, “zero population growth,” that advocated population control, a popular issue on campuses. These creative actions, along with thousands of others like them, helped garner significant media coverage for Earth Day and demonstrated the sheer variety of ways people could express their environmental concerns.

Students also ran day-long teach-ins that attempted to explore the full dimensions of the environmental crisis and its potential solutions. At most campuses, the day’s events were a mix of protest and discussion as students, professors, guest speakers, and performers covered the topics they considered important. The University of Wisconsin held a series of fifty-eight separate programs, including a dawn “earth service” of Sanskrit incantations. At a teach-in at Michigan State University, Former Interior Secretary Steward Udall was heckled by students until he donated his speaker’s honorarium to the local ecology club on campus. The most representative and best reported of the campus teach-ins was at the University of Michigan in the weeks leading up to Earth Day. The Michigan teach-in illustrates the tension between the desire of students to form diverse coalitions and the disagreements within those coalitions that threatened to pull them apart.

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In an effort to build momentum for Earth Day, the organizers at the university planned the major teach-in for March 11-14. The kick off rally was attended by 15,000 students and attracted Michigan’s governor, republican William Milliken, and a number of state and federal officials. Also in attendance were celebrities, Arthur Godfrey and Eddie Albert; corporations, Detroit Edison Company, Ford Motor Company and Dow Chemical Company; labor, represented by Walter Reuther and the UAW; and, the usual cadre of biologists, ecologists, engineers, scientists, and other experts. Richard Hatcher, the first black mayor of Gary, Indiana, closed the teach-in with a speech that focused on the environmental problems in his mostly African-American city. Even the Chicago cast of *Hair*, the musical (which sounded an ecological theme in one number), was there to entertain the crowd. Some of the topics that were covered included conservation, consumerism, industrial pollution, the need for a more humane life-style, urban decay and problems facing the urban poor, the Vietnam war, and the need to restructure the entire social and economic system of the nation. Covering the event for *Saturday Review*, Barry Commoner observed, “Somehow, the issue of environmental quality touches all these separate facets of the crisis of American society.”

The interaction of issues and advocates at the University of Michigan was not without conflict, however, and alliances and partnerships were often held together by little more than a thread of mutual concern. The *Washington Post* wrote of the Michigan teach-in, “The question posed so emphatically during the talkathon was whether the present loose coalition of ‘ecology freaks’ – as they call themselves – can stay together long enough to decide on a common course of direct action.” If not, the article concluded, the sheer stress of balancing so many causes seemed certain to break the

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107 Commoner, “Beyond the Teach-in,” pg. 51.
groups apart.\textsuperscript{108} To many involved in the Michigan Teach-In, it seemed as if this was bound to happen. One organizer complained, “Ecology is so hard to get a hold of. It’s so complicated. But we’ve got to show some action, to win something.” Organizers struggled to hold the broad coalition of businesses, politicians, activists, and artists together and avoid infighting. Many of the non-student speakers did their best to emphasize common concerns and attempt to articulate joint solutions, but the more radical student groups would have none of it. Walter Reuther, a strong advocate for the cooperation of workers and students, could begin his speech before a group of SDS students began passing out leaflets accusing him of being a pawn of the industry. The man who had consistently opposed the business establishment was now being lambasted for working with them.\textsuperscript{109} The Michigan teach-in ended without any more direct confrontation, but much confusion about what exactly had happened and where the movement would proceed from there.

**Crossing the Race Divide**

Environmental historians have written little about the participation of racial minorities, African-Americans in particular, in Earth Day 1970. Traditional scholarship highlights the rise of Environmental Justice in the 1980s as the first important encounter between people of color and the environmental movement. The analysis of Robert D. Bullard, a leading scholar in the field, is typical. Bullard writes that in the 1960s and 1970s, Black people fought against negative environmental impacts on their communities for many years, usually without success, while the mostly white, middle-class


\textsuperscript{109} Wilson, pg. 34.
environmental movement worked on their own issues. Bullard concludes, “Thus, two parallel and sometimes conflicting movements emerged, and it has taken nearly two decades for any significant convergence to occur between these two efforts.” While it is impossible to know the exact demographic breakdown of the participants in Earth Day 1970, the list of speakers, performers, and activities confirms that black people definitely took part: the environment was not simply a White concern for the day. Indeed, many speakers articulated the possibility of a joint movement for environmental and social justice, urging different races to find common ground in their mutual concerns. Although it was only momentary, Earth Day was an important, early convergence of the Black and White movements for environmental quality and social justice.

The first hand experience of environmental problems by African-Americans gave them a unique perspective on the recent public concern for the environment, and also provided them with ample credibility to speak to the problems facing the American urban environment. In a speech at the culminating event of Earth Day at the Sylvan Theater on the capitol mall, the Reverend Channing Phillips, president of the Housing and Development Corporation of Washington D.C., addressed the difference between white and black understandings of environmental concerns. The majority of whites, he said, tended to think that the environment was suddenly in a crisis, that the end of the world was nigh. Blacks, on the other hand, saw that it was not environmental problems that were new, but white awareness of them. Phillips said, “It is not an occasion for panic; it is an

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occasion for deep concern. Black people who have lived in this filth for decades can tell you that man can live in far worse environments than you think.”¹¹¹

Blacks in urban neighborhoods had lived with pollution, lead paint, pests, and improper waste management for years, but it was not until the late 1960s that these problems were identified as “environmental issues.” Earth Day became a chance for black leaders to educate their communities about the environment and explain that the news they heard about new interest in “ecology” and the “environment” connected to the problems urban blacks faced everyday. At the Page Park YMCA in St. Louis on the evening of April 22, Freddie Mae Brown directed a group of young people in a series of skits about the urban environment. Brown headed the St. Louis Metropolitan Black Survival Committee and wanted the skits to emphasize to her audience the amount of pollution they lived in and how it affected their health.¹¹²

In the second skit of the evening, four students have just taken their final exams and are thrilled to be going on a two-week spring break. On their way out a college building, they run into their teacher, Professor Wilson, who explains to them that during spring break he will be working to organize a local fight against pollution. The students are not impressed and when their Professor asks them if they want to get involved, one of the students, Will, responds, “No, I heard about the movement for a better environment and I feel like it’s a cop-out from dealing with the real problems which are education and employment. No, that just ain’t my bag. I let you and whitey take care of that.” The students walk off and begin to talk about what they are going to do for spring break. It turns out, each student is staying at school because of the bad environmental conditions

in their inner city neighborhoods. In a moment of revelation, Will says, “You know what we have all said? We have all said that we hate to go home because our home areas are not fit to live in.” The others agree and note that there are no good government programs to deal with the problem. Will continues, “It seems to me that our efforts to better the black conditions have been too narrow to help all people. . . . I think we must begin to fight all the problems that make for our slum environment. Even pollution!” The crew walks back to talk with Professor Wilson again, who explains to them that he has two goals: educate the black community about environmental problems and tell the white community about the black community’s definitions of pollution so that the two groups can find common ground. That sounds good to this group of students. James turns to the other three and asks, “Prof Wilson is a pretty mellow dude after all isn’t he?” Will gives him a high-five and concludes, “Right on!”

Many Blacks pointed out that Earth Day provided the first occasion when Whites had ever taken an interest in urban environmental issues and doubted the durability of whites’ commitment to finding solutions. At the YMCA in St. Louis, the Black Survival Committee’s skits dealt with the anger and frustration Blacks felt at having their urban environmental problems ignored by Whites. Over the course of the evening, the actors portrayed the typical environmental problems facing Blacks in city neighborhoods: pollution, chemical pollution, trash, lead paint, and rats. In the final skit of the evening, one character, Mike, stands over the spot where his sister recently collapsed from a respiratory ailment. He delivers a monologue that begins by outlining the growing environmental problems and then calls on God to hear “the cry of the people.” White people, he continues, have never cared about the problems facing black people until

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113 Brown, 99.
recently. “As a matter of fact,” he says, “they never cared at all about the problems until they started calling them environmental problems and saw that the mess in the food, water, and air wasn’t just killing poor folk but was killing them too.” Mike assures the audience that if these problems are not solved black people will rise up in violent protest. He explains his rationale, “And if we can’t get [white people] to help us clean up this environment and give poor people their rights, then what good is law and order.” As the skit ends, smoke billows onstage, and the narrator asks the audience, “What would you do if suddenly a loved one of yours became too weak to breathe our air?"114

In some ways, Mike’s question had been answered a few years earlier by the massive urban riots that swept across the country during the summer of 1968. While the riots were predominantly fueled by black anger over police brutality and direct oppression, indirectly epitomized by the King assassination, pollution and terrible living conditions of the inner city were also motivations. The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, a group assembled by the president to explore the cause of the 1968 riots, found that among their most common complaints, blacks listed pollution, rats, and rundown housing.115 The commission concluded that America was still a greatly divided nation. Some leaders, black and white alike, saw environmentalism as a chance to bridge this divide. Pollution made little distinction between races: the sewage dumped in the water on the south side of Chicago, blacks wryly noted, would eventually make its way to the yacht clubs on the more northern shore of the lake. The Rev. Channing Phillips saw this potential and told his audience in Washington, D.C., “But now that White America is being threatened, perhaps we can deal with black needs and white needs – human needs –

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114 Ibid., 104.
in a united effort to remedy the value system that has brought us to this Earth Day.”\textsuperscript{116} Phillips and others saw the potential of a joint movement to solve the common problems identified by environmentalists and blacks. Phillips said, “. . . I am convinced that the solution to your problem will also help solve the black man’s problem, confined as he is in urban squalor – or to use your language, environmental pollution” (emphasis added).\textsuperscript{117}

There was some precedent for blacks and whites cooperating on environmental issues. In an Earth Day special program, Channel 13 aired a documentary called “Before the Mountain Was Moved.”\textsuperscript{118} The documentary focused on strip mining in West Virginia and described the mining’s devastating effects on both black and white communities in the area. The program then showed how poor blacks and whites could forget their color differences and come together to fight the problem, lobbying at the state capitol to stop the mining. In his Earth Day speech, Phillips explained that blacks and whites not only had similar concerns, but that their problems came from the same source: the exploitative economic system. Environmentalism, he told his audience, was “a medicine chest in the eyes of all who ‘seek a newer world,’ the decent and humane society where men live in harmony with each other and with nature.”\textsuperscript{119} By recognizing their common problems, Phillips believed, blacks and whites could form a powerful new alliance to change the system at large.

Many black people, however, remained mistrustful of the environmental fervor surrounding Earth Day. They worried that the movement was simply a way for whites to

\textsuperscript{116} Phillips, 72.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 74.
\textsuperscript{119} Phillips, 75.
“cop out” from dealing with other social problems. In Philadelphia, the two thousand members of the Young Great Society, a Black organization that was respected for its work rehabilitating slum houses and delinquent orphans, boycotted the city’s Earth Day events. Herman Wrice, the head of the organization publicly asked, “What about the pollution of the mind, the pollution of the houses, the pollution of the dirty, uncared-for systems left to the poor?” Richard G. Hatcher, the mayor of Gary, Indiana who had spoken at the University of Michigan teach-in earlier in the spring, echoed Wrice’s feelings, stating, “The nation’s concern with environment has done what George Wallace was unable to do: distract the nation from the human problems of the black and brown American, living in just as much misery as ever.” Wrice believed that White interest in the environment was only temporary, however, “How many weekends are those college kids going to go out with their boats and nets to fish for trash? Meanwhile we’ve still got sewers stopped up with rats.” The best thing for Black people to do, he concluded, was to ignore the wave of concern for the environment, “The best way to let something temporary die is not to mess with it.”

Other Black leaders, however, worried that even if Blacks did not mess with the environmental movement, the environmental movement might mess with them. Specifically, they were concerned that the solutions being put forward by the movement would negatively impact poor people and communities of color. One outspoken critic of the new environmental movement was George Wiley, the director of the National Welfare Rights Organization. Wiley spoke at Harvard University the day before Earth Day. He warned, “For a substantial number of people to approach this problem in a half-serious way is going to do grave injury to black people and to poor people in this country.

120 Ibid, pg. 36.
and throughout the world.” Wiley worried that poor people were going to have to bear the cost of cleaning up air pollution because these costs would be passed along to consumers rather than forced onto corporations. Not only that, but in their desperation for victories, environmentalists would go after poor people since they were unable to defend themselves like large corporations.

Wiley told his audience that from his experience he found it unlikely that environmentalists would listen to the voices coming from poor communities. “So far,” he said, “to be invited to participate in a program on the environment is the exception rather than the rule for poor people or black community organizations.” Wiley asked, “Is the ecology movement planning to place any serious priority on the problems of environment of the ghetto and the barrio, of our urban areas, where pollution is worse?” Such priorities needed to be set from the beginning, he argued. One important step would be to push for a national program that guaranteed a minimum adequate income for every citizen. Another would be to demand that the funding necessary for environmental programs come from money that would have been spent on the war in Vietnam rather than taxes that placed an additional burden on the poor. There was great mistrust in among poor and black communities, Wiley explained, because of the country’s long history of racism and injustice. While it was important for the new movement to develop sophisticated environmental and population control programs, he said, environmentalists also must “deal initially with the problem of racism in the United States of America.”

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122 Ibid, 216.
An Alliance to Change Industry

The labor movement also considered itself on the frontline of facing environmental problems in America, but many of its union members themselves worried that environmentalism would be a distraction from their top priorities: good salaries and jobs. Environmentalists hoped for labor’s support in the struggle against industrial pollution, especially in the fight over air pollution from automobiles. Yet, their dialogue with the labor movement rarely extended beyond communicating with the movement’s union leaders. While especially prominent and progressive union heads, like Walter Reuther, president of the United Auto Workers, recognized the potential of an environmental and labor coalition, they found it difficult to translate the opportunity to their supporters in a way that sounded convincing. For their part, environmentalists did little to extend their vision and goals to include workers. Both groups identified mutual concerns, but struggled to find mutual solutions.

The labor leaders who spoke on Earth Day were quick to position workers as those who had the most to lose from environmental degradation. Charles A. Hayes, vice-president of the Amalgamated Meatcutters and Butcher Workmen of North America, told a crowd at the Civic Center plaza in Chicago that in many ways, the labor movement had been working on environmental issues for years. “Working people, black people, and poor people have known about pollution long before it became so fashionable to talk about it.”¹²³ In New York City, Ron Linton, president of Linton, Mields and Coston, Inc., a group of environmental consultants, noted that workers were the first to bear the health implications of industrial pollution. “There is growing evidence,” he explained, “to indicate that occupation may directly contribute to the incidence of various chronic or

deteriorating diseases . . . .” Yet, nearly seventy percent of workers were not provided with sufficient in-plant health services. Addressing worker health and safety would have to be a top priority of the environmental movement if they expected labor to participate.

The environmental movement, speakers warned, risked ignoring and being ignored by workers and the poor. In Buffalo, Adam Walinsky, a Democratic candidate for attorney general of New York and an adviser to the late Robert F. Kennedy, addressed a crowd of students at the State University of New York. Like Linton, he stressed the importance of standing in solidarity with the most oppressed in society. The struggle of these groups against environmental injustices had gone unnoticed to date, Walinsky explained, because of a “silent conspiracy of ignorance” that covered up industrial accidents and health hazards. He cited numerous examples to back up his argument, including the struggle of mine workers in West Virginia to get compensation for black lung, the lack of enforcement of plant safety regulations, and the concerted efforts of Union Carbide officials to obstruct state prosecutors from investigating workers’ complaints that they were being exposed to asbestos, carbon monoxide, and other dangerous substances. So far, Walinsky criticized, the environmental movement had done little to help workers. “The central problem of liberal politics today,” he said, “is how to rebuild a coalition of decency.” It was essential, Walinsky argued, that the environmental movement play a major role in this task. He explained,

If we now allow the environment movement to become – as it is in real danger of becoming – a pretty plaything of the affluent, if we now ignore the real environmental problems of the ghetto and the farm laborer, and the blue-collar worker in his factory, then we will have thrown away one of the best chances for political change in this decade.

124 Adam Walinsky, “The Blue-collar Movement,” in Earth Day – A Beginning, 149.
before it starts; we will be choosing political suicide, and the name of our sword will be irrelevance.” (150-152).

A joint movement would require that workers and environmentalists achieve a mutual acknowledgement of common concerns and goals. Charles Hayes noted, “The black people and poor of this country can understand and join in the fight for a better environment, so long as that fight recognizes the need for joint action on all the basic evils of our environment.” (154).

The partnership between the United Auto Workers and environmentalists that formed to plan Earth Day activities is one of the most interesting alliances in the history of both movements. Their joint struggle for industry wide pollution controls, although short lived, is especially important in the context of current fights to limit greenhouse gas pollution from automobiles. The way in which union leadership adapted environmental issues to suit the priorities of their supporters is an interesting example of how environmentalism can extend beyond its normal constituencies. Finally, the partnership also demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses of alliances that are orchestrated from the top down.

The first person to write a check to the Environmental Teach-In, inc. was Walter Reuther, head of the United Auto Workers, and one of the most effective labor organizers in American history. Reuther had been in Detroit, capitol of the U.S. auto-industry, since the 1930s. Along with his brothers, Reuther fought for workers rights in the streets, factories, and bargaining rooms of the Motor City. His willingness to put his own life on the line for the union and his effective bargaining skills earned him the loyal support of workers throughout the labor movement. In 1946, workers elected him head of the UAW. At the helm of one of the most important unions in the entire labor movement, Reuther
artfully brought proposal after proposal for better working conditions to the bargaining table. One manufacturer said of the organizer, “Walter Reuther is the most dangerous man in Detroit because no one is more skillful in bringing about the revolution without seeming to disturb the existing forms of society.”\footnote{Nelson Lichtenstein, \textit{The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor} (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p. iii.}

Reuther also possessed a genuine concern for the environment and the rights of all people to enjoy the natural world. In the late 1950s, he publicly opposed nuclear power. He also worked on the local level, organizing his neighbors to stop their county from running a sewer line through a popular stream.\footnote{Ibid., 437.} In 1969, as the Earth Day approached, Reuther worked hard designing and managing the construction of a project called the UAW Family Education Center. The center, on the shores of Black Lake in northern Michigan, became Reuther’s labor of love. Victor Reuther, Walter’s brother recalled, “At the Black Lake site, Walter tramped for hours, identifying trees that must not be disturbed, marking them with yellow plastic bands . . . There was not a single achievement in Walter’s life that gave him more joy than the Black Lake center.”\footnote{Victor G. Reuther, \textit{The Brothers Reuther: And the Story of the UAW} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 459.}

Walter Reuther declared the center, “a thing of beauty where man and nature can live in harmony.”\footnote{Lichtenstein, 437.} The center symbolized the larger role that Reuther and his brother’s envisioned for the union. Victor Reuther wrote, “But our union was not the run-of-the-mill union. It was concerned about the brotherhood of man and all phases of the life and well-being of men, women, families. That was the meaning of the new Family Education

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\item[126] Ibid., 437.
\item[128] Lichtenstein, 437.
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Walter Reuther immediately recognized Earth Day as a part of this larger vision for his union.

Reuther identified the automobile industry as both an enemy and a possible ally in the fight against air pollution. Two days before Earth Day 1970, Reuther addressed the United Auto Workers Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. In his speech, Reuther sounded a strong ecological theme. In the fight for environmental survival, he said, “We must recognize that . . . we cannot rely upon the selfish, socially irresponsible blind forces of the market-place.” Reuther targeted the auto-industry as a major target in the fight against air pollution: “The auto industry is one of the worst culprits and it has failed to meet its public responsibility.” He saw a role for the industry, however, in building a new mass-transit system for the country. Reuther envisioned a partnership between industry and government to create the most extensive, modern mass-transit system in the world. Such a project would be beneficial for the environment and create good union jobs at the same time. Reuther showed his audience the possibility of remaining committed to the industry and to workers without chaining oneself to the automobile. In fact, the latter, he said, was outdated and foolish. “It is asinine (I don’t know of a better word to describe it),” Reuther proclaimed, “to have hundreds of thousands of people all going to the same place at the same time for the same purpose and all of them dragging two tons of gadgets with them.”

While many in the union leadership disagreed with his priorities, Reuther’s tremendous sway and popularity in the UAW drew the union into the fight for air quality. The union clearly saw the issue as not only an environmental threat, but a threat to their

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129 Reuther, 466.
130 Walter P. Reuther, “Two Ton Gadgets,” in *Earth Day – A Beginning*, 162.
job security as well. On April 28, the UAW passed the following collective bargaining resolution, explaining, “Unchecked pollution by the automobile and related industries is of direct concern to auto workers not only because they are citizens concerned for their environment but because there is a direct threat to their jobs and their job security.” If the government imposed strong pollution controls and the industry was not prepared to respond quickly, union members would surely lose their jobs. The resolution concluded:

> In light of this, we shall insist that the problem of pollution will be a matter of collective bargaining in 1970 negotiations. The workers’ stake in resolving this problem for society and the nation is compounded by the stake in his own job. We shall raise this issue sharply in 1970 negotiations in discussions with the companies.  

With Reuther’s leadership, the union adopted a policy that still seems revolutionary today. Reuther’s explanation of the pollution issue as fundamentally a matter of worker’s health and job security seemed to resonate among workers.

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131 Reuther, “Two Ton Gadgets,” 163.
4. **The Motherhood Issue: Political Responses to Earth Day**

In 1970, the media often referred to the environment as a “motherhood” issue, something with which everyone could agree. Indeed, politicians of every persuasion spoke at Earth Day events, from Senator Edward Kennedy to Senator Barry Goldwater. The day after Earth Day, the *New York Times* wrote, “If the environment had any enemies they did not make themselves known.” The only elected official reported to be in opposition to the event was the Comptroller General of Atlanta, James L. Bentley, who spent $1,600 of taxpayers’ money on telegrams, charging that Earth Day might be a communist plot because it occurred on Lenin’s birthday. After he witnessed the day, Bentley became convinced he had made a mistake and repaid the sum he had taken from his office’s budget. While politicians across the board supported the general sentiment of Earth Day, there occurred a great deal of debate about exactly what should be done to confront the environmental crisis. The coverage and transcripts of politicians’ speeches on Earth Day and their subsequent actions reveal a wide range of opinions as to the importance of the environment and the measures that should be taken to protect it.

Many politicians saw the environmental issue as a welcome opportunity to talk about something other than the controversial topics of civil rights, the Vietnam War, and student protests. *Time Magazine* reported, “Dozens of politicians seized upon Earth Day as a new – and safe – issue.” National politics in the years leading up to Earth Day had been especially acrimonious. Early in 1968, it had seemed as if the country might have been coming together again politically around the candidacy of Robert F. Kennedy. His assassination, preceded a few months earlier by that of Martin Luther King, signified for

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132 Lelyveld, pg. 1.
many the loss of any such hope. In contrast, Richard Nixon’s campaign for president highlighted the growing divide in American society between what Nixon referred to as the “silent majority” of conservative, main-stream Americans, and the world of anti-war and pro-civil rights protesters, especially students.

The environment seemed like the perfect subject to bridge the gap for two reasons. First, the environmental issue carried none of the baggage of years of disagreement that attended other matters. Before the public attention that led up to and then encompassed Earth Day, only a few politicians, both on the federal and he state level, were conscious of the environment as a political concern; most had never had the occasion to support or oppose legislation directed to the subject. Second, environmental protection was then seen as an apparently safe political issue because everyone seemed to support it, at least as a general proposition. Even a delegate at the Continental Congress of the Daughters of the American Revolution joked about Earth Day, “Subversive elements plan to make American children live in an environment that is good for them.”*134 Nothing seemed to cut across political divisions like the desire for clean air or clean water. All of a sudden, politicians who had not dared walk onto a college campus for years, could march into a teach-in, declare himself an environmental champion, and be, however skeptically, momentarily accepted.

The Earth Day organizers originally intended for the national day of teach-ins to be a non-political event. Environmental Teach-In, Inc. turned down numerous offers by politicians to speak because of their lingering mistrust of the political process, despite Senator Nelson’s role in generating the idea and momentum for Earth Day. The

Environmental Teach-In, Inc. staff believed that if politicians became involved, they

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*134 Ibid.
would try to use the day to turn attention away from other important social issues and
downplay what the organizers saw as the revolutionary potential of environmental
activism. The media coverage leading up to Earth Day only confirmed their suspicions.
*Business Week* wrote, “Officials in the administration and Democratic leaders in
Congress see an opportunity to channel troublesome student energies into constructive
reform efforts.”135 The Environmental Action organizers had very different intentions.
Stephen Cotton, reflected, “Both students and reporters naturally tended to be suspicious
that we were out to co-opt the antiwar movement. We weren’t; actually, we were trying
to co-opt the administration’s Silent Majority.”136

In the end, the involvement of politicians proved beyond the organizers’ control.
Senators spoke at Earth Day around the country, including Sen. Edward Kennedy at Yale
University, Senator Barry Goldwater at Adelphia University, Senator Clifford Case –
who made a total of seven speeches at different locations on Earth Day - Senator Edward
Muskie at Princeton University, and Senator Ralph Yarborough at Rice University in
Houston. Senator Nelson spoke on nine campuses in the days surrounding Earth Day.
Indeed, so many politicians wanted to take part in the day’s events that Congress
canceled its legislative sessions for the day. Even the U.S. Armed Forces were involved.
At the University of Rhode Island, John H. Chafee, Secretary of the Navy, assured his
audience that the U.S. Navy was “deeply involved in the battle against pollution.”137 The
navy had instituted waste-water clean up programs at their shore stations, installed a
garbage incinerator to produce steam at the Norfolk base, overhauled certain ships with

136 Cotton, pg. 33.
pollution abatement devices, and planned to install more incinerators at bases up and down the coast.

Politicians who considered themselves longtime supporters of conservation issues attempted on Earth Day to separate themselves from those that they intimated were recent opportunists. Representative Richard L. Ottinger, a Democrat from New York, said in a speech, “Unanimity raises the danger of a new kind of pollution . . . political pollution. It could undermine all the concern that has been focused and mobilized in this new movement.” The public, he said, should discriminate more in its support for candidates and investigate their actual accomplishments before labeling them an environmental supporter. Ottinger concluded, “If the list of our nation’s outstanding conservationists now includes Richard Nixon and the corps of engineers, next thing you know, the President of Chevron Oil Company will be applying for membership in the Sierra Club.”

At the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, Democratic Senator Frank E. Moss questioned the political commitment of his fellow congressman, many of whom had recently opposed any pollution controls, and wondered aloud if they could really have changed their opinions. He said, “The answer will come when we move from rhetoric to money, from legislation to enforcement, from convenience to sacrifice. That is when the crunch will come for us in Congress and for you in the Earth Day movement.” Other politicians warned that real change might not come as easy as a nominal support. Senator James Pearson, Republican from Kansas, said “I want to warn that antipollution is not what we politicians call a ‘warm puppy’ issue, one which if we pass enough laws, spend enough money and have a good heart, happiness is assured and soon America will be

139 Frank E. Moss, “We Don’t Own the Place,” in Earth Day – A Beginning, 109.
beautiful again.” He anticipated a struggle in Washington to pass meaningful legislation. Pearson continued, “Profits must be cut, comforts reduced, taxes raised, sacrifices endured. And, as in all human struggles, the powerful will fight the hardest to be hurt the least.”

Politicians had a wide variety of suggestions for new legislation, laws, or government institutions. The governor of Vermont, Dean Davis, announced his intentions of passing a law that banned non-returnable containers. Former Vice President Hubert Humphrey gave a speech at a high school in Bloomington, MN, where he suggested that the UN should establish a global agency to monitor environmental issues around the world. In Philadelphia, Senator Edmund Muskie, one of the strongest supporters of the environment in the Senate, suggested that the government should invest in environmental projects rather than the war in Vietnam. Muskie was at the time the leading contender for the Democratic Presidential nomination in 1972, having been the vice-presidential nominee in 1968, and he clearly saw the environment as a strong issue for him to run on. Senator Frank Moss had perhaps the most extensive suggestions for important next steps after Earth Day. He proposed an organizational restructuring of the federal government to centralize the administrative authority necessary to control pollution and other environmental threats. His plan contained radical ideas, including the abolition of the Department of the Interior and the transfer of its responsibilities to a new Department of Natural Resources and Environment or to other agencies. Senator Moss explained that the reason existing environmental legislation had little impact was not because it was weak, but because it was under-funded. He warned that new legislation would likely fall victim to the same lack of funding, citing as evidence President Nixon’s planned fiscal budget

for 1971 that recommended $73.5 billion for the military and only $1.1 billion for pollution control. Moss explained that when it came to the question of spending priorities many senators would abandon the environmental cause. “They will talk environment, but vote for more guns,” he concluded. “They really won’t have changed very much.”

Politicians on Earth Day did not limit themselves entirely to rhetoric, however. Many state and local politicians passed important legislation for environmental programs. In New York, Governor Nelson Rockefeller approved $60 million for antipollution grants around the state. Rockefeller and New Jersey Governor William also created state environmental departments. In Maryland, Governor Marvin Mandel signed a total of twenty-one bills and resolutions dealing with environmental controls. The Michigan House of Representatives passed legislation assuring citizen groups the legal standing in court to bring environmental complaints. In Massachusetts, Senator Nelson gave a speech to the state legislature on April 22, stating “A polluted countryside represents the antithesis of freedom.” On Earth Day, the Massachusetts legislature passed an Environmental Bill of Rights, the first of its kind.

At the federal level, the Assistant Secretary of the Interior, Hollis M. Doyle, promised oil companies that regulations would be more stringent and enforcement more rigorous to avoid further oil spills. In the House of Representatives, the Commerce subcommittee approved a bill that would nearly triple Federal spending of $45 million on clean air research, especially in the field of testing equipment to control auto emissions.

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141 Moss, 112.
146 Hill, pg. 1
Not all of the political decisions announced on Earth Day were positive ones, though. Secretary of the Interior, Walter Hickel, the top government official to attend an Earth Day event, announced the most controversial government plan. The Department of the Interior had dispatched more than 500 representatives to participate in Earth Day events. Hickel himself went to the University of Alaska. On April 21, Hickel told the *New York Times*, “I am optimistic about Earth Day and I hope it will not be the finale following one year of increased environmental awareness.” The following day, Hickel announced the government’s plans to construct an eight-hundred-mile hot oil pipeline from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez. The move was widely criticized by conservationists who worried that the pipeline would be structurally unstable, pass through regions subject to earthquake, interfere with caribou and other migratory animals, and violate Native land rights. They also charged that Hickel had gone back on his pledge to hold public hearings before moving ahead with the project. Others noted Hickel’s poor handling of the Santa Barbara oil spill. During his speech, Hickel requested that the crowd trust in the government’s decision, assuring them that in the Department of Interior there were “*hundreds* of men and women who feel strongly about our environmental problems.”

The most interesting political response to the environmental activism surrounding Earth Day came from none other than President Richard Nixon. In his excellent and comprehensive study of the Nixon administrations approach to environmental issues, J. Brooks Flippen writes, “Inside the White House, the approach of the first Earth Day

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147 Ibid, pg. 1.
148 Walter J. Hickel, “Taps,” in *Earth Day – A Beginning*, 112. In 1989, the oil tanker *Exxon Valdez*, having filled its tanks in Valdez with oil brought along the pipeline from Prudhoe Bay, ran aground on the Bligh Reef in the Prince William Sound. The resulting oil spill caused massive environmental damage and was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of animals in the following months.
posed a dilemma for President Richard Nixon.”\textsuperscript{149} Nixon recognized that the environment was the “glamour issue” of American politics at the time, but he was cautious of giving his support to the Earth Day proceedings.\textsuperscript{150} While the president had much to gain from supporting the cause, there was also substantial risk involved. Nixon was especially worried about loosing conservative allies, particularly those involved in industry. Nixon’s closest aides were also divided over how to advise their president. On one side were an aide Christopher DeMuth and Deputy Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs, John Whitaker, who recommended that Nixon take a strong stance in support of Earth Day and environmental initiatives. Opposing this idea, was one of Nixon’s closest advisors, John P. Ehrlichman, Assistant to the President, who was not convinced that the Earth Day preparations were genuinely nonpartisan and believed Nixon could be caught supporting a distinctly anti-administration event.\textsuperscript{151}

Nixon had reason to doubt that the environment would become a major issue for his presidency. The president had hardly covered the topic in his election two years before. In fact, Nixon only mentioned the topic once in the course of his eighteen “Nixon Speaks Out” radio addresses.\textsuperscript{152} The war in Vietnam, student protests, the economy, and urban uprisings had proved to be much more important. Even the White House was not immune from the environmental fervor sweeping the country in the late 1960s, however. Fillipen writes, “Ever the astute politician, Nixon had recognized the potential power of the new environmentalism sweeping the country even before Hayes and others began

\textsuperscript{151} Flippen, 10.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 19.
molding their ‘teach-in’ into the truly momentous event it became.”

Early in his presidency, however, Nixon was repeatedly criticized by environmental groups for his failures on environmental issues, including in particular his slow response to the Santa Barbara Oil Spill, his lukewarm support for the protection of the Everglades, and his lack of action on eliminating DDT. When asked their opinion of the administration’s record, the staff of Environmental Teach In, Inc. publicly insulted the White House’s attempts at environmental protection as a “billow of smog.”

By the end of 1969, however, Nixon had passed two important environmental bills and gained political capitol. In December, Nixon signed the “Endangered Species Act of 1969” which extended protection to mollusks and crustaceans as well as banning the importation of species on the endangered list. Environmental groups had fought for the bill for years and had to commend the President on his decision. More importantly, especially over the decades that followed, Nixon signed the groundbreaking bill, the National Environmental Policy Act, that mandated that the federal government provide a “detailed statement” of the environmental impacts of any potential government project. At the official signing ceremony on January 1, 1970, Nixon proclaimed, “It is particularly fitting that my first official act of this new decade is to approve the National Environmental Policy Act.” Omitting any mention of his original opposition to the act and important parts of its original content, Nixon continued, “By my participation . . . I have become convinced that the nineteen-seventies must be the years America pays its debt to the past by reclaiming the purity of its air, its waters and our living environment.”

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153 Ibid., 9.
154 Ibid., 9.
The media began referring to the environment as the president’s number one priority. President Nixon’s 1970 “State of the Union” address reveals a great deal about how a conservative politician like Nixon could make the environment a focus of his presidency. When Nixon gave the speech on January 22, 1970, he was at the height of his presidential powers. The next few months would be difficult ones for Nixon, but as he stood before Congress the president could look upon the new decade with hope and excitement. Nixon began the section of his speech on the environment by saying, “I now turn to a subject which, next to our desire for peace, may well become the major concern of the American people in the decade of the 70s.” He was quick to highlight the bipartisan potential of the issue, stating, “Restoring nature to its natural state is a cause beyond party and beyond factions. It has become a common cause of all the people in this country.” Nixon was also unafraid to admit the difficulties environmental problems posed, however. “We still think of air as free, but clean air is not free, and neither is clean water. The price tag on pollution control is high. Through our years of past carelessness we incurred a debt to nature, and now that debt is being called.” The President said he planned to introduce a immense and costly program to clean up the environment, but explained that such a program would not harm economic growth. “The answer is not to abandon growth, but to redirect it,” Nixon explained. “For example, we should turn

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155 Flippen skillfully makes the argument that Nixon did not fully recognize the significance of NEPA when he signed it into law - - few did. Although it was fairly simple in itself, NEPA lay the groundwork for the generation of environmental legislation that followed it. Nixon likely made his decision to sign the legislation into law because he considered it politically expedient, not because he fully grasped the content of the act. As Nixon told the president of the Sierra Club at the time, “All politics is a fad. Your fad is going right now. Get what you can and here is what I can get you” (Flippen, 102).
toward ending congestion and eliminating smog the same reservoir of inventive genius that created them in the first place.”

Echoing the tone and message of President Kennedy’s inaugural address, Nixon called on all American’s to take part in the nationwide movement to clean their local environment. Protecting national parks was not enough, rather, “Each of us must resolve that each day he will leave his home, his property, the public places of his city or town a little cleaner, a little better, a little more pleasant for himself and those around him.”

There was great potential in such collaboration, Nixon explained, “With the help of the people, we can do anything – and without their help, we can do nothing.” By inviting citizens to join him in the struggle for environmental protection, Nixon placed himself at the helm of such an effort. The President recognized, however, that despite the early rhetoric of his speech, he was likely to still be at odds with many environmentalists and the growing number of students concerned with the issue. In closing, Nixon suggested that the upcoming debates over specific environment protections, which he knew could not be avoided, were a sign of the strength of American democracy:

In the majesty of this great chamber we hear the echoes of America’s history, of debates that rocked the union and those that repaired it, of the summons to war and the search for peace, of the uniting of the people, the building of a nation.

Those echoes of history remind us of our roots and our strengths. They remind us also of that special genius of American democracy, which at one critical turning point after another has led us to spot the new road to the future and given us the wisdom and the courage to take it.  

Despite the overblown rhetoric of the speech, Nixon’s “State of the Union” cannot be dismissed as meaningless. Rather, it marks an important moment in American environmental history, when a Republican, conservative President found a way to come

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out in full support of a strong, environmental program. On February 10, Nixon sent a message to congress that outlined his program for the environment which included thirty-seven different measures to fight pollution. By identifying environmentalism with the history of the country, emphasizing the need for collective action, and assuring that stopping pollution would not harm but help the economy, Nixon was able to shape the issue in a way that suited his own political interests, but that nonetheless moved environmental protection onto the national political and legal agenda in powerful ways.

Nixon’s support for the environment was not enough to keep his presidency afloat, however. Soon after his “State of the Union” address, things began to go downhill for the President. First, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee repealed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, a clear signal of their lack of faith in the Commander in Chief’s ability to handle the Vietnam War. Next, the Senate rejected the second of Nixon’s nominees for the Supreme Court. The last time two consecutive presidential appointments had been denied was 1873. Finally, in the weeks leading up to Earth Day, the Apollo 13 crisis that nearly cost the lives of three astronauts, while by no means a fault of the White House, cast a shadow on the administration. Two weeks before Earth Day, a national poll showed that Nixon’s approval rating dropped from 66 at the beginning of the year to 53 percent, a significant decline in such a short period. Flippen concludes, “Despite the political gains Nixon had briefly enjoyed, his environmental record in the end paled in the strong light of war, race, money and other controversial issues of the day.”

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159 Flippen, 52.
environment in an attempt to bring the country together again around a common cause, only to be torn to pieces again by the loud and angry minority who opposed him.

The risk that Nixon would be openly ridiculed on Earth Day or labeled as trying to steal the spotlight for work he had not done convinced the president and his aides not to directly participate or otherwise come out in support of the day. Flippen writes, “Nixon, the consummate political animal, gave no indication of sharing the concerns and hopes of the thousands who gathered on that April day in 1970 but rather gauged his response according to political expediency.” Environmentalists and the media criticized the President for not taking part in Earth Day. In New York City, Kurt Vonnegut lambasted Nixon, “He said the other night that America has never lost a war, and he wasn’t going to be the first American president to lose one. He may be the first American president to loose a planet.” In retrospect, the decision was clearly a mistake. As demonstrated in his State of the Union and the positive response it received in the media, Nixon very likely had the skills to manipulate the environmental focus around Earth Day in a way that would have bolstered support for his ailing presidency. In the end, however, Nixon’s commitment to political maneuvering betrayed him, he misread the political situation, and he lost an opportunity to gain political support.

In his speeches surrounding Earth Day, Senator Muskie had called for “an environmental revolution.” While Earth Day did not precipitate any such shift in national priorities, it did play an essential role in making the environment an important political issue in American life. The day was not only a cultural celebration or expression of public sentiment, but an important turning point in American political history, as well.

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160 Ibid., 16.
161 Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. “Nixon’s the One,” in Earth Day – A Beginning, 64.
162 Hill, pg. 1
5. Target and Participant: The Response of Business

The first Earth Day marked the arrival of business as a both a major participant and a target in the public debate over environmental protection. Many activists, writers, and politicians accused businesses of lacking genuine concern for the environment, and of simply using the issue for good public relations. Businesses countered that they were committed to environmental protection and were in fact leaders in finding solutions, spending millions of dollars on research and programs to solve pollution problems. Neither side of the debate was wholly correct. While the activism surrounding Earth Day did not convince many businesses to reconsider their core activities, it did result in many changing some of their operating practices and products to become less environmentally harmful.

Business corporations did not have a good reputation among activists by the end of the 1960s, and their participation in Earth Day was met with wide scale resistance. For their part, Environmental Teach-In, Inc. refused to accept contributions from corporations toward the work needed in organizing Earth Day. Stephen Cotton, a staff member for the group, said, “Business may see this whole environment fuss as a big cleanup. But it’s really a question of our values and priorities. Pollution is just a symptom of what’s wrong.” On April 22, many speakers sounded a similar theme: that the problem was not with any particular company practice, but business’ entire economic approach. “It is irresponsible for business to say that they will support us,” said Fred Kent, the coordinator for New York’s Environmental Action Coalition. “They are just trying to co-

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opt us.”\textsuperscript{164} Dennis Hayes warned that company attempts to use the day as a public
relations stunt would largely fail, “I suspect that the politicians and businessmen who are
jumping on the environmental bandwagon don’t have the slightest idea of what they are
going into.”\textsuperscript{165}

More often than not, however, companies knew exactly what they were dealing
with and were willing to take the risk. Businesses often footed the bill for local events,
and sponsored many campus teach-ins. In its coverage leading up to Earth Day, \textit{Business
Week} wrote, “But while Earth Day is mainly a campus affair, business is smack in the
middle – both as target and participant.”\textsuperscript{166} The case of one corporation, Dow Chemical,
is particularly illustrative of the opportunity many businesses saw in Earth Day, as well
as the reactions they received on college campuses. For the anti-war movement, Dow
Chemical had been a primary corporate target due to its development and production of
napalm and agent-orange. Moreover, only months before Earth Day, it was disclosed that
the company had been spilling poisonous mercury into the St. Clair River in Ontario.

Instead of avoiding campuses on Earth Day, however, Dow chemical tried to be
as visible as possible. Executives saw an opportunity to mend the company’s image by
discussing its new ecological programs with students. “Napalm greatly sensitized us to
think outside ourselves,” one official said.\textsuperscript{167} Throughout the month of April, Dow
representatives went to a total of twenty-eight different teach-ins on campuses. The
representatives Dow sent onto campuses, however, were not all men in business suits.
Instead, the company encouraged its employees to dress in a way that would appeal to

\textsuperscript{165} Dennis Hayes, “The Beginning,” in \textit{Earth Day – The Beginning}, xiii.
students. One representative, John Soghigian, showed up to the pre-Earth Day teach-in at the University of Michigan unshaven, with messy hair, and wearing loafers, jeans, and an old sweater. He drifted from lectures to meetings over the course of the day, searching out students to talk with about Dow’s policies. “The longer their hair, the more anxious I am to get in contact with them,” he told the Wall Street Journal.168

Students were rarely convinced by Dow’s efforts to show a new sensitivity to environmental issues. At the University of Michigan, three Dow officials were met by several hundred students whom one representative described as a “howling mob.”169 The students hurled a variety of epithets at the officials, including “war-mongering capitalists,” “pigs” and “fascists.” Despite the company officials’ best efforts to change the subject, the students wanted to only hear about Dow’s use of herbicides in Vietnam. “I thought I was in the middle of the Vietcong,” said one official. On other campuses, officials were frequently booed from the stage. Dow seemed to think it was worth the effort just to try and explain their case. One official played down negative student responses, saying, “They’ve at least got to give us good marks for showing up.” The company’s attempts to present itself as a environmentally friendly corporation, however, seemed to only enrage students more. One student told the Wall Street Journal, “They should hire another pollution control engineer and get rid of the PR man.” Dow’s attempt to convince students of its new image as a socially responsible company largely failed.170

Businesses did not just participate in campus events, however, but were also present at Earth Day celebrations in major cities. Sometimes, their role was not out of choice, but out of necessity. Consolidated Edison had trained nearly 200 employees to

168 Glickman, pg. 1.
169 Ibid, pg. 1.
170 Ibid, pg. 1.
give presentations on college campuses around the country for Earth Day, but worried that protesters would march on their headquarters in New York during the city’s festivities. The company had been accused of polluting the Hudson River as well as contributing to air pollution with emissions from its power plants. In an attempt to counter any protests before they began, Con Edison footed the bill for decorations up and down the street outside of its office, donated an electric powered bus for the day to transport the city’s mayor and other speakers to Earth Day events around Manhattan, and gave complementary rakes and shovels to school children to clean up Union Square. Just to be safe, they also posted a number of armed guards at the one entrance to the company’s headquarters that they left open.

The response from the public was largely one of indifference. Despite Con Edison’s fears, there were only scattered incidents of protest. On Fourteenth Avenue, a street theater troupe put on a play in which a polar bear awakes to find that Con Edison had built a nuclear reactor above its cave. Over on Fifth Avenue, a group of students protested the company’s role in polluting the Hudson by carrying dead fish and shouting to onlookers, “Your next, people! You’re next!” At the company headquarters, visitors were greeted by smiling employees, once they made it through the security at the entrance. Most people did not bother visiting the building at all, however, preferring to wait in line for bratwurst at a popular sidewalk café across the street. Con Edison’s strategy of laying low instead of aggressively proselytizing its environmental image may have helped it avoid major protests. While students were sure to confront a company spokesperson on their campus, when presented with only smiling employees, activists apparently opted for the bratwurst instead.

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American automobile manufacturers were a different story. Little could have distracted environmental groups and citizens from going after them on Earth Day. The auto companies had been a target for activists since the mid-1960s when a young lawyer named Ralph Nader published *Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed-In Dangers of the American Automobile*, a scathing critique of auto manufacturer’s organized resistance to the imposition of safety measures on their cars.\(^{172}\) While the book did not address pollution specifically, its negative portrayal of the automobile manufacturing industry set up that industry as a target for future campaigns. Nader himself became a sensation, thanks in large part to the vicious attacks the auto industry launched against him, which included hiring private investigators to search for irregularities in anything from his drinking habits to his love life.\(^{173}\)

In 1969, Nader began to criticize the auto companies for their unwillingness to install pollution control devices.\(^{174}\) A few months before Earth Day, he helped launch a campaign against General Motors centered around an effort to convince GM shareholders to vote for three resolutions: one, that would add three “citizen representatives” to the board, a second, that would create a “committee for corporate responsibility” that would report on the company’s activities, and a third, that aimed to change GM’s corporate charter to include certain public-interest requirements. The resolutions had little chance of passing, but Nader and his supporters aimed to use the campaign to highlight GM’s failure to conduct proper auto-safety research and manage the air pollution from its cars.


and water pollution from its factories.¹⁷⁵ “If an individual cannot relieve himself in the Detroit River,” Nader said, “I don’t see any reason corporations can be allowed to.”¹⁷⁶ By 1970, Nader had successfully focused the American public on the proposition that there were serious problems with the automobile manufacturing industry.

On Earth Day, politicians, students, and unions rallied against the automobile industry. The car itself was the target of many demonstrations. Multiple campuses held car burials where students buried either an entire car or its engine. Perhaps the most creative action was at Florida Technological University, where the students held a trial for a Chevrolet and condemned it to destruction. The students’ subsequent attempts to destroy the convicted party with a sledgehammer failed and they ended up donating the car to an art class on campus.¹⁷⁷ In a speech at the University of Illinois, Senator Charles Percy cited the statistic that automobiles were responsible for nearly eighty percent of the air pollution in cities. “Considering the immense problem we are faced with,” he said, “we have to come up with some new, bold, different ideas.”¹⁷⁸

Earth Day participants were not only concerned about the automobile itself, but the entire system that surrounded it; and, they blamed the automobile industry for most of the problems. The first, and most common target, was leaded gasoline. “Lead is an industrial mystery story, with the outcome as yet not fully known,” said Paul P. Craig in a speech at the State University of New York in Stony Brook. Craig was the chairman of the Environmental Defense Fund’s committee on lead, a physicist at Brookhaven National Laboratory, and taught classes at the university. The poisonous effects of lead

¹⁷⁶ “Nader Urges Students to Push Pollution Fight,” Washington Post, 15 March 1970, pg. 2
¹⁷⁷ “A Memento Mori to the Earth,” Time Magazine, 4 May 1970
were well known at high levels of exposure, Craig explained, but there had been not
enough research on how small doses of lead were harmful over long periods of exposure.
This was no reason not to act, however, especially since it was becoming clear that
children were the most vulnerable to lead poisoning. Craig said, “As [research] unfolds, it
is becoming increasingly apparent that we have in lead another instance of inflicting
injury upon the most susceptible members of our society.”¹⁷⁹

The other major target associated with the automobile, was the continued
expansion of the nation’s highway system. The battle was particularly acute in the state
of California, where the population and number of automobiles was rapidly expanding,
causing serious smog in major cities. The California government was doing little to
alleviate the problem, however. Governor Ronald Reagan’s 1970 budget allocated $793
million for highway and freeway construction and only $237 thousand for rapid transit. In
a speech at UCLA, Jesse Unruh, the speaker of the California House of Representatives,
told the crowd that, “There is probably no better example of state government’s
complicity in the destruction of the environment that this continued insistence on the
freeway only solution to complex transportation problems.” Unruh blamed the powerful
“highway lobby,” a coalition that included the Division of Highways and oil, auto,
trucking, and construction interests. At the time, the state and federal taxes on gasoline
were used solely to build and maintain highways. “The result,” Unruh said, “is that our
cities are overrun by acres of concrete and choked by traffic and life-destroying smog.”¹⁸⁰

The automobile companies did not take the criticism sitting down, however, and
launching a massive public relations campaign especially for Earth Day. The companies

¹⁷⁹ Paul P. Craig, “Get the Lead Out,” in *Earth Day – A Beginning*, 166.
did not vilify the protestors: they had learned their lesson after their unpopular campaign against Ralph Nader. Instead, the companies attempted to convince concerned citizens that they were doing everything they could to combat pollution from their vehicles.

“Students need better communications from industry,” said one GM executive. “Most of their information comes from the media, which have a bias toward the sensational . . . The teach-ins help us balance what they think.”181 The information executives and representatives were trying to get across largely had to do with the hundreds of millions of dollars companies were investing into air pollution research programs. GM Executive, John Quick told Business Week that his company had spent $125-million over the last three years on pollution control devices, and had also supported mass-transit legislation.182 In an Earth Day speech at the University of California, Los Angeles, Donald Jensen, one of the members of the “air pollution control board” of the Ford Motor Company, told his audience, “Ladies and gentlemen, let me state at the outset that Ford Motor Company shares your concern over air pollution.” Ford was firmly committed to finding a solution to the problem, Jensen assured, and had dozens of research projects underway.183 While this was true, Ford and the other manufacturers were simultaneously funding a team of lobbyists and lawyers in Washington to defeat any pollution legislation affecting automobiles that might be put forward.

Other businesses also deployed public relations teams to promote token environmental gestures timed specifically with the lead up to Earth Day. Scott Paper announced a $36 million project to control its pollution, albeit at only one of its plants.184

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182 Ibid, pg. 22.
Beer companies and bottlers took out full page ads urging people not to litter. American Oil Company (AMOCO) released a “Super Premium” gasoline in twenty-five states that was lead-free and invited customers to “share in the new urgency in our country as Americans everywhere tackle the pollution problem.”185 Pepsi Cola produced a special “Keep America Beautiful” public relations kit for local bottlers. The kit contained a letter from Pepsi’s president, James B. Sommerhall, advising local bottlers to participate in local antilitter campaigns. “By doing so,” the president explained, “you will win many friends and influence those people who might otherwise attempt to push through legislation banning nonreturnables (bottles) and cans.”186 Some companies even changed their name to take advantage of the new environmental attention. Business Week reported that the Sproul Homes Corporation in Florida renamed itself the National Environment Corporation in the months leading up to Earth Day. The magazine sarcastically remarked, “National Environment serves man’s environment by operating a chain of restaurants, a candy maker, a liquor rectifier and bottler, a wholesale liquor distributor, and a chain of convalescent hospitals.”187 When it came to protecting the environment, it seemed that everyone could get a piece of the publicity pie.

Some environmentalists saw a middle-road between a completely anti-business, pro-government regulation stance and the not-our-responsibility attitude held by many corporations. Donald W. Lufkin, a businessman from New York City who held a seat on the board of Environmental Teach-In, Inc., said in an Earth Day speech at the Harvard Business School, “To suppose that Earth Day is an incident best handled by the public relations department is the surest evidence of the corporate shortsightedness which has

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led us to a need for Earth Day in the first place.” Lufkin said that businesses were going to have to take a leading role in salvaging the environment because government was not up to the task on its own. Government’s role, Lufkin argued, was to propose directions for society while it was the role of enterprise “to act, to manage, to innovate, and to bring about social change.” Lufkin called for a major shift in business priorities that would succeed in taking “the quality of life issue out of the public relations department and putting it right smack on the president’s desk, as top priority.” He assured the audience that it was possible for businesses to profit while doing the right thing for society.  

7. “An Era of Concern”: Environmentalism after Earth Day

In 1980, the organizers of Earth Day’s ten year anniversary wrote, “Earth Day was . . . the first day of a decade of extraordinary environmental awareness. Of a powerful public pledge to improve the quality of life on the planet. It opened an era of concern that established an environmental ethic.” The decade after Earth Day also presented a host of new challenges. Many of the groups that had formed in the lead-up to Earth Day struggled to work together after the excitement of the day wore off. A resurgence of the anti-war movement and a backlash to the protestors shifted the attention of many students and other activists. The energy they had rallied, however, resulted in major changes in the environmental movement and remarkable political accomplishments. Environmentalism became a major force in Washington and at the state level. As professional environmental lobbyists fought to pass legislation on Capitol Hill, amateur organizers continued to launch new campaigns and citizens worked on environmental problems in their local communities. The dialogue and arguments with business also continued, including new efforts by businesses to portray themselves as environmentally responsible and continued campaigns by consumer advocates like Ralph Nader to expose corporate hypocrisies. Earth Day had sparked a new movement for the environment that continued long after the sun set on April 22, 1970.

Mainstream Environmentalism

Earth Day reshaped the conservation movement into a new environmental movement that gained in strength during the early 1970s. “We were taken aback by the speed or suddenness with which the new forces exploded,” recalled Michael McCloskey, the executive director of the Sierra Club at the time.\(^{190}\) Conservation groups quickly recognized the importance of the new movement, however, and the gap between those worried about pollution and public health and those concerned with the protection of the wilderness quickly closed. The expansion in vision resulted in a rapid growth in membership, as well. In 1959, the Sierra Club had been primarily an outing club with a membership of about 20,000. By 1980, it had become the most powerful environmental organization in the country with over 165,000 members.\(^{191}\) Many new environmental groups, often more radical then their predecessors, were also formed in aftermath of Earth Day, including: Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, League of Conservation Voters, Environmental Defense and the Sea Shepard Conservation Society.

The case of the Sierra Club is particularly interesting. In 1969, the club had fired their executive director, David Brower, a “militant conservationist,” who had become an icon around the country for his intensity and dedication to the environment. Brower had played a major role in expanding the club’s vision and in many ways embodied the “hybrid of professional and amateur” that had made the organizers of Earth Day so effective.\(^{192}\) He had also taken the club into too many battles that the board of directors

\(^{190}\) Shabecoff, 171.
\(^{192}\) Ibid, 568.
considered too far from the club’s purpose and strained the club’s capacity.\textsuperscript{193} One of the board members said in an interview, “There’s a recklessness to Dave that’s terrifying. It’s like driving down a city street with a man who’s going 90 miles an hour. For a couple of blocks you may be O.K. but pretty soon you’re gonna hit something.”\textsuperscript{194}

After Earth Day, however, having witnessed the immense uprising of citizens the Sierra Club changed course and pursued many of the issues it had chastised Brower for trying to drag it into. One board member remembers, “We wanted to take Earth Day and the social activism of the ecology movement and institutionalize it. I mean, we were trying to capture it. We were trying to bottle it so all the fizz wouldn’t go out, we’d have something left.”\textsuperscript{195} The club quickly changed its rhetoric to match the increased militancy that Earth Day had brought. “We’ve had it with industry’s complacent attitude,” said Philip Berry, the club’s president, in May of 1970. “Companies had better learn soon that it’s going to be all-out war.”\textsuperscript{196} Under Berry’s leadership, the club began to reach out to campus activists and took controversial stances against industry and government policy. In 1970, the club formed a legal defense branch to better go after polluters in the courts. It even began picketing its next door neighbor, the Standard Oil Corporation, whose headquarters had stood across from the Sierra Club’s offices in San Francisco for years.

\textsuperscript{193} It is important to note that the Sierra Club board of directors filed a long list of complaints against Brower, including an accusation that he had mismanaged the club’s funds. Brower was a controversial personality, as well, and many of the board members may have been motivated by personal animosity as well as philosophical disagreement. The root of the issue, however, seems to have centered around Brower’s unwillingness to stick to purely conservation issues and desire to see the club take on a broader vision and the fights that came along with it.

\textsuperscript{194} Robert A Jones, “Fratricide in the Sierra Club” The Nation, 5 May 1969, p. 568.


\textsuperscript{196} “Sierra Club mounts a new crusade,” Business Week, 23 May 1970, p. 64.
“There has to be a change in the whole system,” declared Berry. “We need a true revolution of ideas.”

**Student Support**

As signs with environmental messages were put away and anti-War placards came out of the closet again, the Earth Day teach-ins were quickly forgotten in the new wave of campus protest. President Nixon had given the order to U.S. troops to invade Cambodia on April 25 and announced the decision on television five days later. The Vietnam War, which only months before newspapers reported had been replaced by environmentalism, surged back to the forefront of students’ minds. A massive protest was organized in record speed and only days after Nixon’s announcement students walked out of classes on nearly five hundred campuses. At Kent State University, over the course of three days the student walk-out began to turn violent and the National Guard troops were called in to calm the situation. On May 4, the troops faced off with nearly 3,000 students and fired tear gas on a group of about five hundred of them who were throwing stones at the troops. In a moment of chaos, the national guardsmen, thinking they were under attack from a sniper as well as the barrage of rocks, opened fire on the crowd.  

*Time* magazine wrote about the shooting and the following protests that swept across the nation, “With an almost manic abruptness, the nation seemed, as Yeats once wrote, ‘all changed, changed utterly.’”

The massive student anti-war protests that followed the Kent State shootings also blew apart the tenuous coalitions that had formed on Earth Day, especially between

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197 Ibid, p. 65.
workers and students. Many union workers and other mainstream Americans had put aside their mistrust of student radicals to work with the new breed of environmental activist on campus who seemed to identify more with their concerns. They did not take kindly to the new wave of anti-war militancy. In Manhattan, a group of helmeted construction workers assaulted student anti-war demonstrators with lead pipes and fists, sending twenty people to the hospital. At Northwestern University, a man in working clothes, yelled at a student who was waving an upside-down American flag. “That’s my flag! I fought for it! You have no right to it!” When the student tried to reason with him, the man yelled back, “To hell with your movement! There are millions of people like me. We’re fed up with your movement. You’re forcing us into it. We’ll have to kill you. All I can see is a lot of kids blowing a chance I never had.”

The cooperation that seemed possible on Earth Day now seemed like a distant dream.

Although the massive student environmental movement was eclipsed by the new surge of protest against the Vietnam War, student activism continued on a smaller scale. Stephen Cotton, who after Earth Day had become rather cynical about the entire affair, described the state of student environmental activism in 1971 as pathetic. He quoted Ralph Nader who had accused students of a “profound hypocrisy” because of their “sudden lack of interest in ecology.” Cotton concluded, “. . . it is apparent to anyone within earshot of a major campus that the war, not ecology, is the dominant concern.”

In a response to the article, Dennis Hayes did not dispute that Vietnam had overtaken ecology on campuses, but noted that environmental work had continued. Nearly every college and many high schools in the country offered environmental classes, Hayes said,

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200 Ibid.
201 Cotton, pg. 33.
and many schools had established entire environmental studies departments at the urging of students.\footnote{Dennis Hayes, “Yes, there WAS an Earth Day,” *The Washington Post*, 2 May 1971, pg. 32.} Activists also continued to be involved in local pollution fights, he pointed out, and were busy doing the political organizing necessary to build off the momentum of Earth Day. The fervor of the previous year, Hayes and others argued, had been replaced with a more stable dedication.\footnote{“Earth Week, ’71, Is Muted Affair,” *New York Times*, 18 April 1971, pg. B101.}

Long after the latest round of protest against the war in Vietnam had ended, environmentalism on campus remained a steady, if not a top, student priority. Polls conflicted with each other, however, with respect to the importance of the environment at colleges and universities. When the *Chicago Tribune* asked students what the considered the single greatest issue facing America, only thirteen percent chose “ecology and pollution” compared to twenty-four percent who chose “Vietnam.”\footnote{Daniel C. Beggs and Henry A. Copeland, “Students Still See Viet Nam as Top Issue, Poll Finds,” *Chicago Tribune*, 9 October 1971, pg. 2.} A poll in the *Los Angeles Times* told a different story, however. The paper reported, “An annual survey of residence hall students at the Indiana University campus here reported that ecology had replaced sex as the students’ major interest. . . . Last year’s list had sex first and ecology second.”\footnote{“Sex Takes Back Seat to Ecology,” *Los Angeles Times*, 30 December 1971, pg. 11.} Although environmental activity quickly lost the intensity it found on Earth Day, students continued to play an important role in the environmental movement, strengthening environmentalism’s grassroots and ability to respond to new issues. As well, the new environmental classes and programs established around Earth Day helped train a new generation of environmental leaders to face the challenges of the decades to come.
The Struggle to Find Common Ground: The Racial Divide

After Earth Day, there was little communication between civil rights organizations and the newly confident and booming environmental movement. In the inner cities, Blacks continued to struggle against urban environmental problems, but rarely saw the use of appealing to environmentalists for help. In the 1980s, scholars and activists coined the term “environmental justice” to describe the fights of poor people and people of color against local environmental and social justice threats. Robert Bullard, a leading scholar of environmental justice, is quick to note that while the term was unknown at the time, there are examples of such struggles throughout the years surrounding Earth Day. He writes, “It should not be forgotten that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., went to Memphis in 1968 on an environmental and economic justice mission for the striking black garbage workers.”

On Earth Day, George Wiley, the director of the National Welfare Rights Organization, had warned his audience, “For a substantial number of people to approach this problem in a half-serious way is going to do grave injury to black people and to poor people in this country and throughout the world.” Wiley’s predictions proved to be all too true. While the benefits to society as a whole of the environmental legislation passed after Earth Day also benefited Blacks and working class people, many environmental justice scholars have pointed out that some of laws passed in the 1970s did more to transfer the burdens of environmental problems onto already disadvantaged groups than to solve the problems themselves. The environmental movement was complicit in the problem, as well. In his book Environmental Inequalities, Andrew Hurley writes that in

some cases the environmental activities of white suburbanites drove pollution away from their neighborhoods only by forcing industry to relocate into Black and poor communities.208 A groundbreaking study in 1987 concluded that the government regulated placement of hazardous waste dumps that had begun in 1970 consistently placed the dumps in low-income, minority communities. “Statistical association between race and the location of these facilities were stronger than any other association tested,” the study wrote. “The probability that this association occurred purely by chance is less than 1 in 10,000.”209

Other scholars note that environmental legislation often excluded key points that would have specifically helped minorities or working class people. For example, the 1970 Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA), which enforced certain standards of health and safety in the workplace, excluded farm-workers, a predominantly immigrant workforce that suffered from exposure to pesticides.210 Wiley had told environmental groups on Earth Day that if the movement was serious about working with black people, it would have to help confront racism in the United States, as well. Although no environmental groups consciously held racist policies, their failure to understand the full effects of the solutions they advocated often left minorities and poor people to confront the problems of pollution, toxic waste, and social injustice on their own.211

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Unwilling to Strike: Labor and Environmentalism

The coalition between environmentalists and labor also proved to be a temporary one. Only weeks after Earth Day, on a routine trip up to Black Lake to check in on his beloved education center, Walter Reuther was killed when his small plane crashed into the end of the runway. On May 13, at his memorial service, over thirty thousand autoworkers stayed away from work, and politicians, civil rights leaders, even automaker executives, celebrated Reuther’s life. The organizers of Environmental Action did their part, paying tribute to Reuther in their post-Earth Day book, *Earth Day- The Beginning*. The acknowledgement reads, “We would like to pay tribute to Walter Reuther, a friend and ally in the movement for peace, justice, and a livable environment. We admired his courage and his foresight, and we are deeply grateful for the help he gave us.” Reuther had been a powerful advocate for both workers and environmentalists because of his ability to unite their concerns around common goals. It was a unique skill that proved difficult to replace.

At first, it seemed as if the alliance between the UAW and environmental groups would continue even in Reuther’s absence. The summer following Earth Day, groups met at the newly completed Black Lake center to discuss their plans of how to move forward. The participants saw the meeting as an historic occasion. The *New York Times* reported, “Many participants regarded the beginnings of an alliance between trade union leaders and students and other activists on the environmental issue as the most significant

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development in the conference.”

A week before the conference, a coalition of environmental and union groups delivered a 19-point plan to each U.S. Senator. The plan called for the regulation of automobile and industrial emissions and the banning of the internal combustion engine after 1975. At times, however, the groups did not see entirely eye to eye. The UAW strongly emphasized the importance of worker safety and health, while environmental groups tended to focus on the need to create “auto-free zones,” if not ban the automobile all together. Both groups agreed that more resources should be invested in developing a new, mass transit system. Victor Reuther ended the weekend conference at Black Lake with a speech that received a standing ovation. “There are people in this country who are trying to divide the workers from the students. It is as cold and calculated a strategy as the Southern Strategy, but there are no two groups that have more in common than working people and students.”

Common concerns, however, did not necessarily result in joint solutions.

Once it came time for the UAW to begin negotiations with the auto companies, the gap between environmentalists’ concerns over pollution and union workers’ concerns over their pay and job security quickly widened. Less than a year after Earth Day, the Wall Street Journal published an article entitled, “Labor’s Pollution Campaign Goes Up in Smoke.” The article began, “Stagnant air has settled over organized labor’s highly touted efforts to involve itself in the war against pollution.” Leonard Woodcock, Reuther’s successor as head of the UAW, tried hard to continue his predecessor’s environmental initiatives. Under his leadership, the UAW proposed noise-abatement

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214 Ibid, pg. 52.
devices in some plants, enforcement of existing health and safety regulations, and a
pushed for a bigger say in environmental decision making. The union also asked for
assurances that the auto-makers were researching and developing new engines that either
reduced or eliminated pollution. The UAW did not have the confidence to propose more
binding, fundamental changes to the industry, however. Most of the unions’
environmental victories had concerned the health and safety of workers within the
workplace, and few union leaders felt they had the necessary support to fight for broader
pollution issues. As negotiations wore on, union members became increasingly frustrated
and labeled the fight over air quality “frivolous.” After weeks of negotiations, Woodcock
sacrificed the pollution issue in order to make a deal with the automakers.

In the end, the commitment of union leaders to the environment was not enough
without the support of their unions’ members. A leader of one of the nation’s largest
unions told the Wall Street Journal: “The first principle of collective bargaining is that
you can’t win a major concession from management unless your members are willing to
strike for it.” Union workers may have identified with environmental issues but they did
not consider them their own. The union leader continued, “Our members aren’t willing to
strike for clean air, and until they are, it won’t be a real bargaining issue.”216 The tenuous
collection of environmentalists and workers was no match for the united front of the
industry. At a news conference, Leonard Woodcock admitted defeat. “Very frankly,” he
said, “I don’t think that collective bargaining can handle those broader questions. Those
are social questions that must be handled by government and through political means.”217
In a practical sense, the UAW’s fight for environmental regulation was over.

216 Ibid., pg. 14.
217 Ibid., pg. 14.
**Political Successes**

Earth Day 1970 led to the enactment of a truly remarkable amount of federal environmental legislation -- the cornerstones of environmental protection for the rest of the century and beyond. The National Environmental Protection Act and resulting of the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Environmental Quality Act, the Clean Air Act, the Water Quality Improvement Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, the Toxic Substances Control Act, the Resources Conservation and Recovery Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Safe Water Drinking Act and the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act are only some of the most important accomplishments. Through these enactments and the programs and agencies they created, the first Earth Day led not only to a shift in public consciousness, but also to specific measures that have actually made the environment a cleaner and safer place.

While the series of enactments in the early 1970s was a direct result of the momentum created on Earth Day by essentially amateur environmentalists, it took a group of what authors have referred to as “policy professionals” to push through the laws.218 These environmentalists were more moderate than many of the students and activists on Earth Day who called for a complete reconsideration, if not overthrow, of the political and social system. One author writes, “Many sharply oppositional features of environmentalism were, indeed, smoothed over as the 1970s advanced.”219 The government’s willingness to pass new legislation in support of the environment tempered the cries for revolution and as law after law was institutionalized the voices of moderation began to prevail. In Washington, at least, environmental politics changed

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hands from the sometime radical amateurs who had pieced together Earth Day to professional environmental lobbyists who successfully worked and maneuvered within the political system.\textsuperscript{220}

The amateur organizers who had so skillfully coordinated Earth Day were not silent, however. They too went to work, not on crafting policy and legislation, but on electing the politicians who would pass it. After it finished organizing Earth Day, Environmental Teach-In, Inc. dropped its tax-exempt status, transformed into Environmental Action, Inc., and set about going after politicians who had poor records on the environment. “So far, the national office has been barred by the terms of its [tax] exemption from engaging in political activity,” said Dennis Hayes. The new organization would be “free to say and do whatever is necessary.”\textsuperscript{221} The group created a “Dirty Dozen” list of congressional candidates who had supported the war in Vietnam and had opposed environmental legislation. Through grassroots organizing and a creative media campaign, they succeeded in defeating seven out of the twelve candidates.

On Earth Day 1970, thus, the environment dramatically entered American politics. Although the political work it took to pass the important legislation differed greatly from the grassroots organizing that made Earth Day a success, the two were intimately connected. Ten years after Earth Day, Douglas M. Costle, the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency in the 1980s, reflected that “environmental concerns have become part of our political value system.”\textsuperscript{222} Senator Nelson had

\textsuperscript{220} For a more technical and thorough discussion of the role of “technical experts” in crafting environmental policy and its effect on the environmental movement and U.S. politics, see Hays. 
certainly succeeded in his original goal: making the environment a political issue for the president, politicians, and average Americans.

The Struggle with Business

By the close of the Earth Day activities, the discordant relationship between environmentalists and business had just begun. Dow Chemical remained a popular target, from continued protest over its development of herbicides to lawsuits over the dangers of the silicone breast implants it produced. Nader and others continued their war against automobile industry practices and fought the industry in both federal and state courts for its refusal to comply with applicable air quality standards. Many businesses changed some of their practices because of Earth Day, the most notable example being AMOCO’s release of lead-free gasoline. As well, Earth Day marked the entrance of businesses into the public dialogue on environmental protection. Although businesses had occasionally made statements concerning environmental issues in the past, after Earth Day the for-profit sector would be a constant voice in the ongoing discussion of how best to care for, manage, or exploit the environment.

The conflict that epitomized the struggle between environmentalists and industry was Ralph Nader’s continued crusade against the automobile business. After Earth Day, Nader’s campaign continued with renewed vigor. While Nader’s proposals for shareholder resolutions General Motors failed to garner sufficient shareholder support to pass, they did generate a lot of publicity and create a large amount of pressure GM and other automobile companies. In May 1970, the president of the influential Carnegie Corporation released the text of a letter he had sent to GM Chairman James M. Roche
that criticized the company for its inadequate efforts in combating tailpipe emissions. While the Carnegie Corporation did not support Nader’s proposed shareholder resolutions because it did not approve of the tactics, it did advise that the company take immediate action to clean up its act even if it meant a temporary loss in profits. “If this is the consequence,” the letter read, “we accept it because of the immense, overriding urgency of bringing environmental pollution under control as speedily as possible.”

By 1971, however, the fight had moved from the boardrooms in Detroit to the courts in Washington, D.C.

The Clean Air Act which congress passed in 1970 had authorized the administrator of the EPA, William Ruckelshaus, to require the auto companies to reduce their emissions by the mid-1970s. Specifically, the act directed the auto companies to reduce their cars’ emissions of carbon monoxide and hydrocarbons 90 percent below 1970 emission levels. The companies were also directed to reduce nitrogen-oxide emissions 90 percent from 1971-model levels by 1976. The act also contained an important loophole, however, that authorized the EPA to extend the deadlines by one year if the auto companies were unable to meet their targets. This is exactly what happened, despite Nader and others’ complaints. The automakers refusal to meet the standards made them, according to Nader, “the most militant radicals in the country, in that they deviate most from the laws and ideals of the country.”

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226 Joseph McLaughlin, “Nader Hits Lobbyists on Anti-Pollution Bill,” Chicago Tribune, 24 May 1970, pg. 1. By the writing of this thesis, the auto companies have not come close to meeting the original air quality
industry would continue to claim environmental leadership, exhibiting new products or placing the blame for pollution on oil companies, and for each claim, environmentalists would work hard to expose it as hypocrisy. After its involvement in Earth Day, business became a permanent voice in the public discussion over the environment.
Conclusion

In 1995, Senator Gaylord Nelson received the highest civilian award in the nation, the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his environmental work. Upon bestowing the award, President Clinton described Nelson’s career as “marked by integrity, civility, and vision. His legacy is inscribed in legislation, including the National Environmental Education Act and the 1964 Wilderness Act. As the father of Earth Day, he is the grandfather of all that grew out of that event.”

Nelson had originally hoped that Earth Day would spread to at least twenty or so campuses; instead, it swept the entire nation and resulted in the largest, public demonstration in the history of the United States. Earth Day became an important turning point for the environmental movement and the history of the country as a whole.

The national holiday that grew out of Earth Day, now celebrated every year on April 22, has obscured the complexity of the original event. The first Earth Day was not an expression of the public’s mild, good-will towards the environment, but a demonstration of genuine concern, anger, and desire for change, catalyzed by a series of environmental crises in the preceding decade. Its participants represented a wide range on the public spectrum of age, race, ideology, and profession. Students, in dramatic actions and often controversial teach-ins, questioned the limited meaning of conservationism and attempted to extend the movement’s vision of the environment to include issues of population control, war, social justice, racism, and more. Blacks, who, along with other racial minorities, such as predominantly Mexican migrant farm workers, had struggled against environmental problems for years, came to the movement with a mixture of

\[\text{Christofferson, 348.}\]
mistrust, frustration, and hope. Working class people, also on the frontlines of fights for environmental health and social justice, were encouraged by their leaders to take part in an unprecedented coalition whose goal was to fundamentally alter American industry. Politicians, confronted with a new issue to pontificate on, struck out to give speeches in cities and on campuses across the country, where they were met with a mixture of applause and resistance. Even President Nixon, who had previously treated the environment with indifference, became involved and signed into law some of the most important environmental legislation of the century. Businesses also saw an opportunity to improve their image with consumers and launched massive public relations campaigns about their environmental accomplishments, some of which turned out to be true. By the time the sun set, Earth Day had witnessed a full expression of the country’s concerns, ideas, and hopes for the environment.

Decades later, the public is once again awakening to a new crisis: global warming. Many parallels can be drawn to the original Earth Day, from the potential of a crisis to focus national attention to the efforts of business to respond to new concerns. The original Earth Day demonstrated the unique ability of the environment to serve as a gathering place for a wide array of concerns and hopes for the future. The partnerships formed on Earth Day, however momentary, suggested the potential for a movement that would work to secure a healthy environment for all people, regardless of social condition. As citizens come together to face new environmental challenges, that potential still exists. It would be a great contribution to its legacy, if Earth Day could help serve as a guide.


Coincidentally, Nixon would pass away on April 22, 1994, the twenty-four year anniversary of the original Earth Day.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

Newspapers and Magazines

*Business Week* (New York City, New York)

*Business Week* is a useful resource for coverage of Earth Day and the involvement of business.

*Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, Illinois)

The *Chicago Tribune’s* coverage of Earth Day was extensive, thanks in large part to their environmental reporter Casey Bukro, who had been assigned to his position after his extensive coverage of the pollution of the Great Lakes. The Tribune’s are also a good resource for understanding the potential of media to educate its readership about environmental problems and encourage them to act.

*Christian Science Monitor* (Boston, Massachusetts)

The coverage of Earth Day in the *Christian Science Monitor* focuses primarily on the role of students in the day’s events.

*Life Magazine* (New York City, New York)

*Life Magazine* is a useful resource for more in-depth articles about Earth Day and the environmental movement of the time. Although *Life* rarely provided breaking news, it did synthesize other media coverage and identify the major issues of the time. Originally a photography magazine, *Life* is also useful in understanding how images of environmental crises in the 1960s could shock people around the country into action.

*Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, California)

Based in what was the most polluted city in the country during the 1960s, the *Los Angeles Times* provides an excellent resource for coverage about air pollution. It also gave extensive coverage to Earth Day activities in California.

*New York Times* (New York City, New York)

The *New York Times* had the most far-reaching coverage of Earth Day, from early in its planning stages to the event itself. Particularly interesting are the articles by Gladwin Hill which often went beyond the issue of the day and tried to draw conclusions about the larger environmental movement that Hill saw developing.
Saturday Review (New York City, New York)

The Saturday Review magazine, like Life and Time, provided more in-depth coverage of the growing environmental movement and Earth Day. Particularly interesting are the magazine’s special “Environmental Report” sections that it began in the lead-up to Earth Day. The Saturday Review also published articles by popular authors and experts, such as Barry Commoner, about Earth Day and the movement.

Time Magazine (New York City, New York)

Time Magazine provided extensive coverage of Earth Day, but is not as useful a resource for understanding the broader environmental movement. The magazine did, however, give special attention to campus activism in the late 1960s and is useful in understanding that era and the dramatic effect the shootings at Kent State had on the nation.

The Nation (New York City, New York)

A long-time progressive voice, The Nation was quick to recognize the environment as a political issue. Its articles are helpful in understanding how environmentalism developed as a new movement, distinct from conservationism, in the lead-up to Earth Day.

U.S. News and World Report (Washington, D.C)

U.S. News and World Report is particularly useful because it reprinted important speeches and documents, like Nixon’s State of the Union and 1971 Environmental Program.

Wall Street Journal (New York City, New York)

Along with Business Week, the Wall Street Journal is useful because of its coverage of the debates between businesses and environmentalists over the proper management of the environment. It also provided insightful, and often humorous, coverage of the attempts of corporate public relations teams to convince students of their company’s environmental ethics.

Washington Post (Washington, D.C.)

The Washington Post provided extensive coverage of Earth Day, especially events at the capitol. It also is a useful resource in understanding the political implications of Earth Day and its successive wave of legislation.

Reports:
Nixon’s 1971 Environmental Program is striking in its depth, breadth, and ambition. Many scholars have rightly argued that Nixon’s commitment to the environment was more out of smart politics then genuine concern, but nevertheless, Nixon’s program is an interesting example of how a conservative president, forced into passing environmental legislation, can draft an ambitious agenda.

The report contains an interesting reflection on the connection between poor environmental conditions in the inner city during the 1960s and the riots and uprisings that the report covers.

The EPA has compiled a useful, if somewhat limited, database of press releases, statements, and oral histories of its creation and role in shaping U.S. environmental policy. This particular document discusses the Clean Air Act and plans to regulate the automobile industry.

**Books:**


This is an interesting and diverse collection of documents from the late 1960s that explores the era’s causes of conflict. There is an unusually substantial selection of environmentally related pieces, perhaps because the collection was published soon after Earth Day.


Ehrlich’s follow-up to the *Population Bomb* is just as sensational and doomsday-oriented as his original work, but is more solution oriented. Ehrlich gives a brief, but interesting account of the student activism after Earth Day despite the general decline in interest.

Many of Ehrlich’s predictions in this book, his most famous, have been proven wrong. *The Population Bomb*, however, is a useful resource to understand both the “zero population growth” movement and the larger environmental movement in the late 1960s. The ZPG movement attracted a great number of followers, especially on college campuses. Ehrlich’s writing is also useful because it demonstrates the often sensational, and sometimes downright apocalyptical, style that many environmental writers used during the period.


Environmental Action, Inc.’s compilation of speeches, articles, and reflections from April 22, 1970 is an unparalleled collection of primary resources from the day, although the selection of speeches is certainly biased towards making Earth Day seem like a powerful and important event. The book includes many different voices, including politicians, business leaders, labor leaders, environmentalists, and activists, and demonstrates the diversity and breadth of Earth Day speakers, attitudes, and events.


The letters of Rachel Carson to her best friend, Dorothy Freeman, span the most important decade of Carson’s career. They contain important insights into her work, struggle with cancer, and reflections on the impact of *Silent Spring*.


An important document to understand the Sierra Club’s change in tactics and approach from a conservation organization to a group dedicated to environmental activism. The book was published to coincide with Earth Day 1970.


This is a useful collection of primary sources, both for sources from the Earth Day era and environmental justice sources that provide critical reflection on the environmental movement preceding them.

Nader’s groundbreaking book revealed the organized opposition of the automobile industry to government safety regulations and made Nader an instant celebrity. The book set the stage for later environmental critiques of the industry and corporations in general.

**Pamphlets**

Earth Day Folder, Sierra Club Records, University of California, Berkeley, Bancroft Library, 71/103c Carton 132.

The Earth Day folder from the Sierra Club Records at the Bancroft Library contains only a few resources, but is one of the few places to find pamphlets and documents from the original Earth Day. The lack of sources is testament to the Sierra Club’s lack of involvement in planning Earth Day.

**Oral Histories**


William Futrell served on the board of directors of the Sierra Club. His reflections on the club’s desire to capture the spirit of Earth Day emphasize the day’s effect on the broader environmental movement.

**Secondary Sources**

**Books:**


This collection of essays from environmental justice scholars provides a critical look at the environmental movement and its effect on minorities and poor people in the United States. None of the works directly mention Earth Day, but they are important reflections on the legacy of the environmental movement for groups of people who are often excluded from traditional narratives. Bullard’s extensive scholarship and use of government studies make him a reliable source.

Bullard is a leading scholar of environmental justice and this essay is a good overview of the principles of the movement and its interpretation of the history of the environmental movement.


Christofferson’s biography of Gaylord Nelson is a good resource to understand the Senator’s life and his role in the creation of Earth Day. The book contains little criticism of Nelson, who was never particularly controversial.


Commoner’s insightful book about the role of science in shaping society and its approach to nature influenced many people early in the environmental movement. This thesis used the book as a secondary source to help analyze the importance of scientists in shaping public understanding and the culture of the 1960s. It could also be used as a primary source, however, considering Commoner’s important role in the movement of the period. Commoner is clearly biased against environmental pollution and destruction.


In *The Closing Circle*, Commoner provides perhaps the most insightful analysis of Earth Day of any commentator from the period. In the opening chapter, he describes the variety of causes and concerns that environmentalism attracted in the late 1960s and attempts to understand why.


Davies book, published shortly after Earth Day, is a useful look at the pollution issues of the time. It provides important insights into how environmental activists targeted both government and corporations as responsible for pollution problems.


A short, but informative account of the Santa Barbara oil spill, Dye’s book is a useful resource for anyone attempting to understand the significance of this particular catastrophe for the growth of environmental concern in the late 1960s. Dye perhaps sensationalizes government negligence in an attempt to influence other pollution issues of the time.

Flippen’s book is an entertaining and insightful account into President Nixon’s unlikely role of presiding over some of the most important environmental legislation in the 20th century. Flippen argues that while Nixon was thrust into the responsibility by the circumstances, not by choice, he still deserves to, at the least, be seen as an important part of the history of the American environmental movement. Flippen’s balanced, at times ironic, tone make him a reliable commentator on the subject.


This is a useful look at the protest culture on campuses during the 1960s. Freeman and Johnson have collected an interesting array of essays by people who lived through the history of the period. Few deal directly with environmental issues, but many speak to a growing concern over the state of the country and the desire for change.


Gottlieb’s work is a useful overview of the environmental movement and provides a good context for Earth Day, although it does not provide much insight into the day itself. His extensive use of source material make him a reliable factual source, although the book is clearly a celebration of the movement.


Published shortly after Earth Day, Graham’s work is a good account of the legacy of *Silent Spring* and its incredible effect on the environmental movement and American society at large. Graham clearly comes down on the side of Carson, but it is difficult to find a source that supports the chemical industry.


This book is a creative and insightful account of the effects of nuclear technology on American society. Although she does not discuss environmentalism in particular, Henricksen’s work provides an important context for Earth Day and the public’s worries about impending catastrophe. Henricksen sites extensively from primary source material, but some of her conclusions strain too far to make connections between her subject and the broader context.

Hays’ insightful, if technical, look at environmentalism and environmental politics is an important work in shaping my understanding of environmental historiography. Hays believes that Earth Day was not particularly important in itself, but merely a mass demonstration that punctuated a continuous stream of concern.


An interesting account of regional environmental politics, Huffman’s work emphasizes the importance of Gaylord Nelson’s leadership on environmental issues in the region and beyond.


Hurley’s account of nearly forty years of environmental inequalities in Gary, Indiana has become a landmark text in understanding the intersections of class, race and industrial pollution. For this text, it was essential in helping to understand how Earth Day, an event that attempted to please everyone, could result in legislation that placed the burden of pollution on vulnerable communities. Hurley’s extensive use of primary source material and reputation as a credible environmental historian make him a reliable source.


Kline’s book is an overview of the environmental movement and does not contain much specific information about Earth Day. It is useful in understanding the broader context of the day.


Carson’s official biographer, Lear provides a detailed account of Carson’s life and work. Of particular interest is Lear’s analysis of Carson’s ability to appeal to many segments of the American public with her writing and persona.


McPhee’s eulogy of David R. Brower, executive director of the Sierra Club, offers three snapshots of Brower at work protecting wilderness areas in America. While the book makes no mention of Earth Day, its description of Brower as an often militant, always committed, mix of amateur and professional environmentalist was useful for considering the important qualities of a successful
environmental organizer. McPhee’s account, while biased in Brower’s favor, also intentionally reveals many of the acerbic and controversial sides of Brower’s personality.


Nash’s survey of environmental ethics demonstrates the important shift that took place between the conservation movement and the environmental movement.


Nelson’s recommendations to a new generation of environmentalists on how to save the planet are both touching and practical. For this thesis, Nelson’s reflection on Earth Day were useful, especially his emphasis on the importance of the environmental crises of the 1960s in building public environmental concern. Nelson perhaps gives Earth Day too much credit in permanently shifting the public’s opinion about the environment: the 1980s showed a remarkable apathy and backlash among certain parts of the population.


Obach’s book focuses mostly on the labor and environmental movements’ contemporary struggles to find common ground and work together. Although it is not useful as a source for information about the momentary coalition between workers and environmentalists around Earth Day, the context it provides demonstrates the uniqueness and importance of the brief, historical partnership.


Paulsen and Denhardt’s collection of readings is a complex look at the pollution problems and policy solutions of the early 1970s. If anything, it demonstrates the sheer amount of public policy that was generated after Earth Day.


Rathlesberger’s scathing critique describes Nixon’s about-face on environmental issues soon after Earth Day. Although Nixon had signed in the most ambitious environmental legislation of the century, he did so for political reasons, Rathlesberger argues, rather than any genuine environmental concern. The book clearly sets out to discredit Nixon, but uses solid evidence to do so.

Walter Reuther’s brother, Victor, provides an insightful account of the history of the United Auto Workers. It explains the Reuther brothers’ expansive vision for the union, and is one of the few sources that mention Walter Reuther’s environmental commitment, a factor in the success of Earth Day.


Rome’s book contributes to the debate over the origins of the environmental movement in the post-war era. He argues the divisions between conservationism and environmentalism are overstated, and focuses instead on the role of the suburbs in shaping middle-class Americans’ environmental consciousness. Rome’s extensive analysis makes him a reliable source.


A useful overview of its subject matter, Rosenbaum’s book emphasizes the sheer amount of legislation that was passed after Earth Day and its continuing influence on environmental politics and policy.


Sale’s work is especially useful in analyzing the effect of Earth Day on the broader environmental movement. The book includes tables of statistics that show environmental group’s immense membership growth after Earth Day and into the 1970s.


Shabecoff, who covered the events of Earth Day as a journalist, provides perhaps the best general history of the environmental movement. Although he does not spend a significant amount of time on Earth Day, he certainly recognizes that it was a turning point in the history of the movement. Shabecoff clearly identifies with the environmental movement and hopes for its success, but his journalistic training keeps him a relatively unbiased source: the book describes many of the movement’s failures as well as its successes.

**Articles and Essays**

Ingalsbee provides an interesting account of the radical environmentalism in the two decades after Earth Day. Although it is not directly related to the subject matter of this thesis, it is important material to help understand, first, why the history of the environmental movement deserves a fresh perspective and, second, the lasting influence of militant students on the movement.


This essay argues that the media plays an important role in helping to make the environment a concern in the public’s eye. The author’s argue that while the media’s coverage of environmental problems is often sensationalized, it is one of the few ways for citizens to gain a better understanding of the degradation of the world around them and provides the necessary knowledge for them to take action.


Shellenberger and Nordhaus’ sensational 2004 paper launched a debate over the identity and effectiveness of environmentalism. Although clearly written to cause a controversy, the paper makes, at times, an elegant critique and backs it up with substantial research. It is an important document in understanding the current debates over environmentalism and the need to look at Earth Day, a pivotal turning point in the movement, with a fresh perspective.


Torgerson’s essay is a highly technical, even esoteric, look at the differences between “policy professionals” who worked to pass environmental legislation in Washington and more “amateur” activists who worked with the grassroots.