

## ECOSense ~ Earth Day—Past to Present

Just last month, we 'celebrated' Earth Day (on April 22nd, 2014). Like Jazz and the Blues, Earth Day is an American creation that has been exported and adopted throughout the world. Today, there are Earth Day celebrations in almost every country of the world. While the focus has shifted from the personal to the political and back again, Earth Day remains as the anchor of the environmental movement and for good stewardship of the Earth's resources. But what does it really mean, why do we celebrate it, and when did it start?

When Earth Day started, many hoped it would become one of the most important national holidays in the country. There is a long history of valuing the natural resources of the country for their pure beauty. Teddy Roosevelt set aside the first national park in 1903, citing Yellowstone's majestic beauty. In spite of this historical value, there has always been tension between conservation and resource extraction. Many saw a tipping point between those competing interests in the early 1960s. National attention on the environment was needed, and Earth Day was created. Today, Earth Day is a celebration that continues to grow in participation across the country and across the world.

Many people did not give a second thought to the environment, particularly after WW II and the onset of the Cold War. Facing international threats was much more important to most people than being concerned about possible, long-term consequences to the environment. The natural resources of the country were seen as integral to the development of the industry and the winning of both WW II and the Cold War. This was troubling for a U.S. Senator named Gaylord Nelson.



The idea for Earth Day was actually gestating for many years before the inaugural celebration of April 22, 1970. In 1962, Senator Nelson approached President Kennedy and Attorney General Robert Kennedy about undertaking a national conservation tour that would highlight the current state of the environment. Unfortunately, neither the press nor the public latched on to the five-day tour of 11 states, and the environmental revolution that was hoped for did not materialize.

Although cataclysmic change did not materialize, Senator Nelson continued to address environmental issues in his travels and in his legislation. On a tour out West in 1969, Nelson witnessed anti-war demonstrations that featured 'teach-ins', sessions where those in the know could educate those interested in learning more. This seemed to be the perfect way to spread information about environmental degradation that could be organized at a grassroots level.

Senator Nelson announced a nationwide day of demonstrations and activism to take place in early 1970, and this time, the idea caught both the public and the media's attention. Senator Nelson was the standard bearer of rising concerns about the environment, and his office was responsible for coordinating the first Earth Day. However, it was a genuine grassroots movement across the country in response to perceived environmental degradation that really created the beginning of a sustained and massive movement. In all, over 20 million people participated in the first Earth Day, far exceeding any of the planners' expectations.

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