

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Long before 1607, when Europeans began to settle in the so-called New World, the people of the First Nations on the soil now called North America lived with nature. Nature was their spiritual and physical home, and their footprint on the land was barely noticeable.

The Europeans increased in number and brought with them their empire’s shameful institution of slavery, the genocide of those First Nations and the impetus of the Industrial Revolution and, by the late 18th century, the declaration of a new nation.

As this new nation developed economically in the first half of the 19th century, a few enlightened voices were beginning to be heard over the clamor of the new machines—despite the growing influence of the monied few.

These early voices of what is today called the environmental movement warned of the imminent destruction of the very natural resources this economic growth was built upon. Perhaps more important, they saw environmental degradation as a precursor to the destruction of the human spirit itself.

These were the Transcendentalists—Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau—who, in the 1840s and 1850s, wrote about the intrinsic value of nature and regarded it as God’s temple to the spiritual world. They asserted that nature should be preserved.

Several prominent figures, espousing this environmentalism in varying degrees, bridged the 19th and early 20th centuries: John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club; Gifford Pinchot, the first head of the U.S. Forest Service; Theodore Roosevelt, the first U.S. President to advocate for the sustainable use of natural resources and who set aside areas to be untouched for their intrinsic value—influenced by Muir and Pinchot; Aldo Leopold, often called the father of wildlife conservation; and, Mary Hunter Austin, whose book about the Mojave Desert, *The Land of Little Rain*, was nearly forgotten.

The byproducts of post–World War II prosperity and economic expansion in the United States included the fouling of our air and waterways, as our cars and trucks spewed mostly uncontrolled pollutants into the atmosphere, and as industry and agriculture dumped industrial waste and chemicals into our rivers with impunity.

The groundbreaking book *Silent Spring*, published in 1962 by marine biologist and conservationist Rachel Carson, warned the American public of the danger of the misuse of chemical pesticides such as DDT.

Several disastrous pollution episodes made the news headlines in a two-decade period: Industrial air pollution killed 20 people and made thousands sick in Donora, Penn., in October 1948; an offshore oil well blew out off the coast of Santa Barbara in January 1969 that took nearly two years to clean up; and a fire on the Cuyahoga River near Cleveland, Ohio, in June 1969 was caused by chemical waste.

Just one month prior to the Santa Barbara oil spill, in December 1968, Apollo 8 astronauts snapped an iconic photograph called “Earthrise,” which punctuated the fragile nature of our planet.

Although several acts and executive orders were implemented for environmental protection in the United States in the 1960s, it wasn’t enough for a demanding public. Hundreds of thousands organized across the nation, using strategies that gave rise to the anti–Vietnam War movement, producing a crucial nexus, leading to the first ever national teach-in on environmental issues: Earth Day, held on April 22, 1970.

Concerns were not limited to regional environmental pollution issues. There was also a rising consciousness regarding what was politely called *Inadvertent Climate Modification*. This was the title of the first comprehensive collection of studies on anthropogenic climate change, published by MIT in 1971.

The American public wanted their government to take action, and take action it did. Nearly 30 major acts, breathtaking in scope, either establishing new laws or strengthening existing ones, along with numerous executive orders for environmental protection, were implemented in the United States from 1963 to 1980.

That list includes the National Environmental Policy Act (1969); the Clean Air Act (1970 amendment, and extension of the original one, passed in 1963); the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (1970 executive order); the Occupational Safety and Health Act (1970); and other acts for safe drinking water, endangered species, acts governing the transportation of toxic materials and more.

Many of these actions were bipartisan and signed into law by Republican President: Richard Nixon. California led the way with the strictest emission standards for motor vehicles and the passage of the sweeping California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), which was signed into law by Governor Ronald Reagan, a Republican! For the most part, this mostly bipartisan momentum for environmental protection continued for the next three decades.

Fast forward to the 2010s. By then, toxicity of another sort entered our political discourse. Hundreds of millions of dollars in dark money polluted the conversation, blowing doubt into climate science and vilifying climate scientists themselves. Much of this dark money came from the fossil fuel industry and the Koch Brothers.

President Donald Trump, making good on his promise to reduce the EPA to “little tidbits,” rolled back nearly 125 environmental safeguards during his time in office. What took nearly 50 years to build was being destroyed in just four years. On his third day in office, President Joe Biden signed an executive order to implement a plan to either reverse, or put the brakes on, many of those damaging actions of the Trump administration.

As we approach Earth Day #52, one thing is clear: The Democratic Party is the party that wants to protect the environment and take action to mitigate anthropogenic climate change. Republicans in general have demonstrated in the past two decades that they are not aligned in this way.

Some Republicans are quietly members of the Citizens Climate Lobby’s Climate Solutions Caucus in the House, but they are outnumbered by Democrats nearly 2 to 1 in that caucus, and those Republicans do so at their peril, lest they be “primaried” by more right-wing and extreme Republicans in their districts in 2022. While there are equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans in a similar CCL Caucus in the Senate, meaningful near-term movement in that chamber is not anticipated.

Depending on signals from the Biden administration, the House might reintroduce HR 763, the Energy Innovation and Carbon Dividend Act (EIDCA), which, if implemented, would charge a fee per ton on carbon-based fuels against oil, coal and gas mining companies, the moment they are harvested, and return that money to consumers as a dividend. Whether there is support for the bill’s reintroduction in the House in this Congress, and whether there is similar support in the Senate, remains to be seen.

In all this, let’s not forget the issues of environmental justice—not only globally but locally as well. There is a battle now between residents of southwest Fresno and owners of a 92-acre parcel. The property owners want the land to be rezoned from “neighborhood mixed use” to “light industrial use.”

Southwest Fresno residents fought hard for the Southwest Fresno Specific Plan, approved in 2017, which designated this land as “neighborhood mixed use.” Residents there are tired of their neighborhood being used as a dumping ground for our area’s most polluting industries.

Recently, the California Department of Toxic Substance Control ordered the owners of a metal recycling facility near Calwa to fix damage it had caused due to the illegal disposal of toxic waste. Cal EnviroScreen reports that the 93725 zip code is one of the most polluted zip codes in California.

The bottom line: Your elected leaders at all levels of government must be nudged—even pushed—to do what is necessary to protect the environment on a local, regional, state, federal and global level.

In the spirit of that first Earth Day, activist groups must relentlessly push their elected officials to take action. Little will get done unless that 1970 nexus, which brought forth that first Earth Day 51 years ago, is repeated.

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VOLUNTEER CALL TO ACTION

