

Celebrate Earth

By Daphne Liu

One cool April 22 morning, people started the day as usual. Yet it was not a normal day. In Australia, a group of people went to a beach. The beach was covered with garbage. Bottles, rusty cans, and other trash lay in the sand. For the next few hours, people removed all the litter and trash. Soon beautiful, clean sand stretched as far as the eye could see.

That same April 22 morning in Kenya, students hiked deep into an endangered forest. They planted a thousand new trees there.

What's so special about April 22? The answer is simple. It is Earth Day. People all over the world celebrate this important day. Let's find out how Earth Day started and see how people have protected the planet in the past. Then let's explore ways to keep Earth in good health for the future. We can all help!

A Planet in Need

The idea of having a special day to celebrate Earth began in the 1960s. Life was very different then. Few people talked or even thought about the **environment**. They didn't **recycle**. Most people had no idea how dirty our air and water were.

This attitude bothered Gaylord Nelson. He was a senator from Wisconsin. Senator Nelson started asking the government to take better care of the environment. He knew the job would not be easy. There were so many problems facing the planet. No one seemed to know where to begin.

Then Senator Nelson had an idea. If people knew the planet was in danger, they might work harder to save it. He just needed to get their attention. He worked with a team. They found a name for their project: Earth Day.

Earth Day Begins

On April 22, 1970, Senator Nelson's dream came true. Twenty million Americans joined the first Earth Day activities. They showed that people really did want to do something about the environment.

On the first Earth Day, people gathered to hear lectures about smog and other kinds of pollution. Other groups got together to clean rivers, plant trees, and pick up trash. People held parades and gave speeches. Even senators and congressmen spent the day learning about ways to protect the planet.

Making Changes

As Senator Nelson hoped, Earth Day proved that many Americans truly cared about the environment. The government got the message—and got to work. It passed laws to protect the air, water, land, and animals. Let's look at some of these laws.

The **vehicles** you ride in must pass tests to make sure they don't cause too much pollution. Thanks to this law, cars today release about half as many harmful chemicals as cars did back in 1970. As a result, the air we breathe is cleaner than it once was.

Rivers and lakes are also cleaner today than they were in the 1970s. It's a good thing because they needed a lot of help. The Cuyahoga River in Ohio was a dramatic example. In 1960, the river was so polluted that floating trash and oil actually caught fire! Today, the river is cleaner. It no longer burns. It's now a healthy habitat for birds, fish, and other animals.

At one time, our nation's symbol—the bald eagle—was near extinction. That means it almost died out. The government saw that many other animals were in trouble, too. In 1973, it passed the Endangered Species Act. Thanks to **conservation** work, the bald eagle flew off the endangered list.

Earth Day and Beyond

Senator Nelson had met his goal. The nation's air, water, and land were cleaner. Animals were protected. Yet Senator Nelson didn't want people to forget these important issues. So Earth Day became a yearly event.

Now the celebration has spread to other countries. More than 175 countries take part each year. Mexico and Egypt celebrated Earth Day by cleaning up their coral reefs. Trash littered the reefs, so scuba divers picked it up.

In 2006, Russia celebrated Earth Day for the first time. People hosted a huge bike event in a park. They wanted to remind people to bike more and drive less.

Last Earth Day, people in China focused on a big problem. People there were throwing away 27 million plastic bags a day! People organized "Bye-Bye Throwaway Culture Week." They wanted everyone to see how wasteful it was to use so many bags. In 2008, China passed new laws against plastic bags.

This April 22, millions will gather again to clean and protect Earth. They'll also celebrate how far we have come. Today, we understand more about the environment. We know how to care for it. Our job is to put this knowledge to work. You can help keep our planet healthy too!

Wordwise

conservation: protection of forests, wildlife, and other natural resources

environment: natural world on which plants, animals, and humans depend

recycle: to put something, such as plastic, through a process so it can be used again

vehicle: machine in which people ride, such as a car, truck, or bus

Pitch In!

In 1970, Senator Nelson proved that one dedicated person could help the planet. The same is true today. Find simple ways to make a difference for planet Earth.

At Home

- Turn out lights when you leave a room. Set your computer to the sleep setting when you're not using it. These steps will save energy.
- Save water by shutting off the faucet while you brush your teeth. Take shorter showers.

At School

- Make sure that your school has bins for recycling. Use recycled paper. Doing so will save trees.
- Carpool or ride a bike. You can cut down on air pollution and have fun at the same time.

In Your Community

- Plant trees. This helps clean the air.
- Write letters to leaders. Tell them you care about the environment.