

The important legacy of Earth Day

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HIDE CAPTION –

1 / 2

Oak Prairie on Joint Base Lewis-McChord in April with Common Camas in full bloom recently. *(Photo Credit: Rod Gilbert)*
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This year, more than 1 billion people will celebrate the 49th Earth Day in no less than 192 countries. Earth Day, which falls on April, 22nd, is the culmination of a week's worth of activities geared toward the protection and improvement of the environment.

Today, two generations of Americans no longer remember the environmental impacts which led to that first Earth Day in 1970. To better understand the importance of this important celebration we have to first understand the reasons behind why it exists.

First, we take a trip back in time to 1958 when a Massachusetts resident named Olga Owens Huckins wrote a letter to her good friend, Rachel Carson. In the letter, she described how the state had recently sprayed her neighborhood to control rodents and pests.

After the spraying, Huckins discovered the birds in her bird sanctuary were dying as well. This letter prompted Rachel Carson to conduct four years of research into pesticide use.

Her research culminated in 1962 with the publication of her ground-breaking book, "Silent Spring," which advocated for the responsible use of pesticides in the United States. The nationwide outrage that resulted from the publication of her book forced then President John Kennedy to form a special commission of scientists charged with studying Rachel Carson's claims. The committee agreed with her findings.

That was Strike One.

Next, we move forward in time to 1969. We also travel from Massachusetts to an oil platform 6 miles off the coast of Santa Barbara, Calif., operated by a company called Union Oil. In January 1969, this particular platform had a blowout which resulted in an oil spill that affected more than 800 square miles of ocean, killed sea life and would continue to seep millions of gallons of oil into the channel for years after it was capped.

This incident showcased the indifference shown by an American industry that believed pollution was a side effect of prosperity, with the president of Union Oil saying, "I don't like to call it a disaster, because there has been no loss of human life. I am amazed at the publicity for the loss of a few birds."

This was Strike Two.

Strike three occurred just a few months later on Cleveland's Cuyahoga River. The Cuyahoga, like many industrial rivers, was so polluted that if you fell in the locals said you did not drown, you dissolved.

In June of 1969, the Cuyahoga River caught on fire thanks to the pollution it contained. Incredibly, this was not the first time that the Cuyahoga caught on fire, but this year the fire made the cover of "Time" magazine.

Thanks to the magazine article, the Cuyahoga River became a national talking point.

These three major events alongside many smaller environmental events throughout the country led to the first Earth Day April 22, 1970. Although it is a celebration today, in 1970 it was a protest movement directed at forcing the government to take action.

As a result of this first Earth Day, then President Richard Nixon directed the establishment of an organization charged with the protection of the environment, and on December 2, 1970, the United States Environmental Protection Agency officially opened its doors. Throughout the next decade, this organization would establish many of the environmental laws such as the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, and the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act which, with amendments, are still enforced today.

In 1970, many of our parents and grandparents saw the degradation of the environment around them, demanded change, and the government listened. Many of the environmental laws which were passed in the post-1970-era have been extremely effective.

An unintended side effect of these laws, however, is that for today's youth the environmental damage of the past is just an abstract thought. Because many Americans do not have the firsthand experience of burning rivers, black oceans and toxic skies, they have forgotten the devastation of the past and, as a result, have begun to question the need for these laws or the Environmental Protection Agency.

It is important that we remember the past and do not forget. When the mistakes of the past are forgotten, they are bound to be repeated.

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