

Name: _____

The History of Earth Day: How a Global Movement Began

Long before Earth Day became a worldwide celebration, our planet was facing serious problems. In the 1960s, many factories pumped thick, black smoke into the air, and cars filled the streets with smog. Rivers were so polluted that in 1969, the Cuyahoga River in Ohio actually caught fire! Most people didn't recycle, and trash was piling up everywhere. Few Americans realized how much damage this was causing to the environment.



The story of Earth Day began with a determined U.S. Senator named Gaylord Nelson from Wisconsin. After seeing the devastating effects of a massive oil spill in California in 1969, Senator Nelson came up with a bold idea. He wanted to organize a national "teach-in" about environmental issues, similar to the anti-war protests happening at that time. With help from a young activist named Denis Hayes, they planned the first Earth Day for April 22, 1970 - a date chosen because it fell between spring break and final exams, ensuring maximum student participation.

That first Earth Day was more successful than anyone imagined. On April 22, 1970, an incredible 20 million Americans - nearly 10% of the country's population at the time - took to the streets, parks, and auditoriums to demonstrate for a healthy environment. Students from thousands of colleges and schools organized protests against pollution. In New York City, Mayor John Lindsay closed Fifth Avenue to traffic and spoke to crowds in Union Square. In Philadelphia, people celebrated with a huge block party. Even Congress took the day off as politicians spoke at events across the nation.



The impact of that first Earth Day was enormous. By the end of 1970, the United States had created the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and passed important new laws like the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, and Endangered Species Act. These laws completely changed how America protected its environment. Earth Day showed that ordinary people could make a real difference when they worked together.

As the years passed, Earth Day grew into a global movement. By 1990, Earth Day went international, with 200 million people in 141 countries participating. Today, Earth Day is celebrated by more than 1 billion people in over 190 countries - making it the largest secular observance in the world! Modern Earth Day events include massive clean-up projects, tree planting campaigns, and educational programs about climate change. Many cities host Earth Day festivals with music, food, and activities for families.

The Earth Day movement continues to evolve. Recent Earth Days have focused on specific environmental challenges, like reducing plastic pollution or promoting renewable energy. The 50th anniversary of Earth Day in 2020 was celebrated digitally due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with virtual events connecting people across the globe. This proved that even when we can't gather in person, we can still work together to protect our planet.

Earth Day teaches us that everyone can make a difference. Whether it's planting a tree, starting a recycling program at school, or simply turning off lights when you leave a room, small actions add up to big changes. As Senator Nelson said, "The ultimate test of man's conscience may be his willingness to sacrifice something today for future generations whose words of thanks will not be heard." Thanks to Earth Day, millions of people now work year-round to keep our planet healthy for all the tomorrows to come.

1. List 3 environmental problems from the first paragraph that led to the creation of Earth Day. _____

2. Why did Senator Nelson choose April 22 for Earth Day? _____

3. Which modern problem would EARTH DAY 1970 activists fight today?

a) Too much screen time

b) Plastic in oceans

c) Video game prices

d) Short lunch periods

4. If you organized Earth Day at your school, which activity would be MOST effective?

a) A trash clean-up competition

b) An Earth-themed fashion show

c) A documentary movie night

d) A bake sale with green cupcakes