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Guest View: Earth Day ethos, now more than ever

By Tim Palmer

In 1970, it seemed like we were up against the impossible. A culture of exploitation had gone virtually unchecked since the dawn of the industrial age, where rivers burned, oil blackened beaches, clearcuts left everything dead as far as the eye could see and ozone from our own cars was killing off forests even before anyone had a chance to cut them down.

Earth Day changed all that.

It sparked a greater movement to chart a new course for America. Nothing, of course, is as simple as that, but in the wake of the celebrations, demonstrations, speeches, front-page headlines and political promises, laws were passed that corrected our collective path into the future.

An uprising of support led Congress to pass the Clean Water Act, National Environmental Policy Act, Endangered Species Act and new rules aiming to give equal treatment between wildlife habitat and commodity extraction on the public lands that every taxpayer owns.

I vividly remember Earth Day, as I was the student organizer at Penn State University. The day before, I shared the stage and speaking time with the event's founder, Sen. Gaylord Nelson, in front of the Pennsylvania state Legislature. Then on April 22, a massive team effort unfolded with 1,200 professors dedicating their class time to the environment. Three gubernatorial candidates came to the Old Main Lawn to compete for a reputation as the strongest advocate for conservation. We staged films, bands and community events celebrating all life on earth and making the case for caring about the future. Campuses all across the country did the same, and Earth Day, 1970, changed the culture of our nation.

We hoped that we'd be able to right the sinking ship and that in 50 years our home on planet earth would be safe. But today, once again, it seems that we're headed down. Now, we face the most serious threat ever to weaken the Endangered Species Act, which in 1973 had been a keystone accomplishment stemming from the humble belief that we are not the only creatures deserving to live. Today, we face a weakening of laws aimed at keeping arsenic out of our drinking water, pesticides out of our food and plastics out of every fish, bird and whale in the ocean. We are governed by an administration seeking to weaken the Clean Water Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and virtually every measure intended to ensure we have healthy water, air, food and communities.

Back then, we didn't even know about global warming. Today we do, though a majority of congressional members of one party still deny its existence or its causes. As a result, we've done little to curb the forces of fossil fuel burning and worldwide deforestation that bring intensified droughts and wildfires, increased hurricanes and floods, rising sea level that could top six feet in a century and the invasion of diseases that thrive on the new and warmer climate.

The most recent indicator of the wrong path taken is the coronavirus pandemic, brought to us through animals that should have been left in the wild and through encroachments on their habitat when the lines between us should have been drawn. We're reminded, once again, that we must change our ways if we are to pass a livable Earth to the next generation and, for that matter, if we're to live to our own life expectancy during this generation.

Correcting our course may again seem to be impossible. But it's not.

The lesson of Earth Day is this: Our society can change when people say that it must. Earth Day was born in outrage at what was happening and also in a deep love of place, which turned out to be a powerful combination. Both emotions endure, lingering among many of us who have lived through 50 tumultuous years and also sparking a new generation bracing for challenges like never imagined before.

That single day in the spring of 1970 broadcast a message that lasted for half a century. Now it's time to resolve again that the Earth must remain a place of sustenance, health and beauty for all.

Author and photographer Tim Palmer of Port Orford was an organizer of the original Earth Day in 1970.

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