



One Earth Sangha

A Half Century of Earth Day

Reflections on a Still-Unfolding Legacy

This is a transcript of a talk given by Lou Leonard on April 19, 2020 to participants in One Earth Sangha's [EcoSattva Training](#). Watch the video [here](#).

We thought that given that it is the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, that it would be useful to take a moment to look back at that time 50 years ago and reflect a little on the role of that particular moment, and on rallies, and more generally on the movements that are shaped by them. So take a walk with me down memory lane.

The first Earth Day, as we know, was April 22nd, 1970. As I was refreshing my memory about this and doing some extra research to prepare for this talk, I was struck by the fact that the event itself was really driven by a couple of politicians in Congress, and in particular, believe it or not, Senator Gaylord Nelson, who was a Democratic Senator from Wisconsin, and he really was the driving force behind this particular event.

It was envisioned as a national teach-in on college campuses. He recruited Dennis Hayes who is still around and is the chair emeritus of the Earth Day Network now, 50 years later. He at that time was a young activist, and his job was to organize campus teach-ins. They chose April 22nd because it was on a weekday and it was between the end of spring break, college spring break, and the end of term. They were hoping to drive as much student participation as possible. According to the organizers, that day 20 million Americans, which would have been about 10% of the total population of the United States, participated and there were events all over the country. I think that was what I got out of looking at some of the coverage again, that this really wasn't a rally in a single place or a couple of big places. It really was events that happened all over the country. There was a lot of media attention; if we have time, I might try to show a video from the nightly news at that time.

Then of course Earth Day went beyond that first day. There were other significant Earth Days. Another one of note was in 1990 when Earth Day became global and there were actions in over 140 countries. It was done at that time with an eye towards the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, which was a big year globally for environmental action. The Montreal protocol on protecting the ozone was reached there, as well as the first climate treaty. For the last 20 years, Earth Day has been celebrated every year as a moment for rallies and media attention.

This year the organizers had planned an amazing global in-person set of events structured around supporting a global Green New Deal. They had been working for two years to bring



together partners all over the world and organize in-person events and bring leaders—political leaders, faith leaders, corporate leaders, everybody—into the space, with a focus on the youth on college campuses again. Now with COVID that has been transformed into a series of online events this coming week, including 24 hours of online events on Earth Day itself; you can go to their website, EarthDay.org, and there's a neat digital map of these events. You can look and see if any of them are of interest to you this week, as we try to manage our days of being on virtual events.

I think the other thing that has happened since this shift, there has been a focus on trying to think of the in-person quality of Earth Day really being fast forwarded, especially in the United States but even in other places, to Election Day for 2020. This feeling of trying to point people at an important moment in the future and say, for this year Earth Day will actually be on Election Day. I thought that was interesting.

That's a little bit about the history and what's happening now. But you might ask, and I was reflecting, do these marches and mobilizations like Earth Day matter, and if they do, why? As I was thinking about the question, it seemed like an obvious question, but also then the wrong question, because if we're just looking at a particular single event or rally, it can have some impact, but not really lasting power.

More often these rallies and protests and marches are linked to broader movements, either mature movements that use them as a tactic or emerging movements. In the case of Earth Day 50 years ago it really was, in my view, a moment that represented the birth of a movement that had been building for at least a decade and of course much longer in some ways of thinking. But that decade before Earth Day was really powerful. In 1962, Rachel Carson writes *Silent Spring*; it grabs public attention in an enormous way, sells half a million copies in the first year. In 1966 the Sierra Club has this huge campaign, including full page ads in the *New York Times* and other national papers, drawing attention to plans to build dams in the Grand Canyon, one of their biggest campaigns. In 1967 iconic groups like the Environmental Defense Fund and the Natural Resources Defense Council were established. My old organization, WWF, was established in 1961. 1969 was a big year—the Santa Barbara oil spill, which at that time was the largest oil spill in American history actually, until 20 years after that, when the Exxon Valdez happened. Then that was the largest until 20 years after that, when the Deepwater Horizon happened, which now was almost 10 years ago. But that moment really captured the attention of the country. Then in June 1969, the famous Cuyahoga River fire, the river in Cleveland catching fire. So there was this sort of surge of activity and awareness that was building ahead of the first Earth Day, and looking at it, my sense is that in the years after Earth Day, we could see that this movement had arrived in a way that was having significant impact.



First, the environment became a major political issue. A raft of federal environmental legislation was passed within the few years after Earth Day. It transformed the way government decisions were made; environmental assessment and review was born. The environment as a political matter really was one of the most concrete things that came out of the first Earth Day, as a campaign. The first Dirty Dozen campaign was launched to try to unseat members of Congress who were anti-environment, and seven of those 12 sitting members of Congress were defeated in that first campaign.

The second thing, the emergence of this movement brought together strains of activity and even sub-movements that had been percolating for a while, but brought them together under a single banner, in some sense at least, for the first time—the conservation movement, which had been around for almost a hundred years, but was focused just on protecting wild lands and wild animals. That movement was largely rich and white and male. There also was this growing kind of grassroots activity that connected public health and the environment, really embodied by this poor woman from western Pennsylvania, who wrote *Silent Spring* and brought attention to the connection between the earth body and our bodies. Even though Earth Day rallies were largely white and young people, issues of pollution and public health were really growing in the concerns of urban communities, including black and brown communities. Going back to that Cuyahoga River fire, the African American mayor of Cleveland, Carl Stokes, really used that burning to rally support in his community, in his largely black community, to really drive urban environmental issues. So the movement was starting to bring together these different strains under one roof.

I think it, perhaps most importantly, really brought the environment an opportunity to break through into public consciousness. Earth Day really helped to make that happen. So if it's better to see Earth Day as a movement, then maybe the question is, do movements matter? I think you probably know what I think about that, but social scientists and political scientists also say that movements matter. I read a study that looked at the impact of civil rights protests that happened before 1965. Looking back over 40 years later at the attitudes of white people in those communities where civil rights protests happened, what the study found is that, even 40 years later, it was more likely that whites would have less racial prejudice and more identification with racial justice, than in places where those protests didn't happen.

So when we look at movements, how do they work and what do experts say about what makes them powerful? What I've seen and read points to three ways in which movements use power: cultural power, disruptive power, and organizational power. The most powerful movements use all three, like the civil rights movement, but that's hard. If you can, though, you can have a lot of impact from it. Cultural power is the power to shape public opinion, shape the language that we use and the everyday behavior of people.



Occupy Wall Street might be an interesting example of that. A lot of people are debating how much of an impact the Occupy movement had overall, but studies showed that it really changed the way mainstream media covered income inequality. Maybe from the perspective of cultural power, that movement had an impact.

Disruptive power—that's the power to make business as usual actions more costly and therefore disrupt the status quo. The civil rights movement used sit-ins to great effect to try to increase the costs of businesses doing every-day business. I think an example in the modern environmental movement is Keep It in the Ground campaigns and the way that the Keystone XL campaign and the Dakota pipeline campaign have really changed the economics for pipeline companies. We just saw actually last month the Constitution Pipeline in New York state was canceled after years of protests; it just became too expensive for them to keep going.

Then organizational power—that's where organizations are built to sustain participation of individuals over the long haul. The Tea Party is a good example of that. I think in the modern environmental movement, the Sunrise Movement has been really effective at building coalitions with political leaders and trying to drive the agenda of their issue within politics.

So to close with some lessons that might begin a little discussion together around this, and there's so many lessons that I'm not going to try to say that this is the comprehensive list, but let me give you three. One is that connection matters. We all know that; we call it sangha here. Marches and rallies give us a jolt of community. We feel part of something bigger and there are organizing tools for broader efforts. But they also remind us of work we can do, especially as mindfulness practitioners, to cultivate a sense of community in other ways, even when we're not in physical connection with each other. Those of you that are in the Ecosattva training, it's a great example of that.

Second lesson—this is a long game, but change can happen. Now the challenge here is playing with urgency versus being okay that change takes time. Urgency is important and we need to stay connected to a sense of urgency. But I also find that the trick for me is to let go of that sense of needing to control even while staying energized. I think being in regular community, including mindful community, is really an important tool to do that, to play with that letting go while staying connected.

Then lastly—think big and help each other. I think that this connects to the videos that those of you in the Ecosattva training heard from Pennie Opal Plant and Noliwe Alexander about the intersectionality of the climate and environmental movements with other movements. Even though the first Earth Day didn't really live up to that, and we're still in some ways struggling with it, we need to understand that being connected across movements is what builds power. Even if we don't have to do everything together, we



need to help each other, and we need to push together. As practitioners we can do that work that Noliwe talked about, of decolonizing our minds, so that when we are connecting across movements and groups, we do so with as much wisdom and awareness as we can.

The man himself—Walter Cronkite. I think it's important as we look at this to remember that at this time, there were basically three news channels that everybody watched all the time. So this was being beamed into basically almost every house in America that had a television.

The hoopla of Earth Day is over. The problems remain. Only time will tell if these demonstrations accomplished anything. But let's summarize the points that were brought home today to a lot of people who have missed the points so far.

For instance, the militants who see all this as an establishment trick to divert attention from what to them are more urgent concerns like civil rights or like Vietnam; they seem to have missed the point that there are no civil rights or peace in a lifeless world.

For instance, the politicians who see this as a safe crusade; they seem to have missed the point that it would involve treading on more special interests than ever in our history. For the first time, they may even have to come out against motherhood.

For instance, those in industry who will see the crisis as only the hysterical creation of do-gooders. They've missed the point if they haven't heard the unanimous voice of the scientists warning that halfway measures and business as usual cannot possibly pull us back from the edge of the precipice.

For instance, the too silent majority; the greatest disappointment today, was the degree of nonparticipation across the country and especially the absence of adults. And the young people that did participate were in a skylark mood, which contrasted rudely with the messages of apocalypse. Those who ignored Earth Day, well, that's one thing. Those who ignore the crisis of our planet, that's quite another. The indifferent have missed the point, that to clean up the air and earth and water in the few years science says are left to us means personal involvement and may mean personal sacrifice the likes of which Americans have never been asked to make in time of peace. The sense of today's teaching was that America must undertake a revolution in its way of life. Affluent America will, we were told, almost certainly have to scale down its standards of living, give up having as many cars, as many children, as many conveniences, as much conspicuous consumption.



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Someday, we heard today, the world will be a better place, if it listens and acts. In the meantime, perhaps for a generation or more, it will be frighteningly costly to each of us to clean up the mess each of us has made. The cost of not doing so is more frightening. That's what today's message really means. And those who marched today, and those who slept, and those who scorned, are in this thing together. What is at stake and what is in question is survival.

This is Walter Cronkite, good night.