

Senator Nelson's

BIG IDEA

by Nicole Groeneweg



Senator Gaylord Nelson was the man behind the first Earth Day in 1970.

The plane's engines roared as Senator Gaylord Nelson thumbed through the airline's magazine. But his mind was not on the magazine's articles. Instead, scenes of a disastrous oil spill off the shores of Santa Barbara, California, tumbled in his mind.

Seals and seagulls smothered by oil.

Suffocated fish bobbing on waves.

Clumps of sticky oil coating miles of beaches.

200 gallons of spilled oil polluting the California shoreline.

Nelson had seen all those images during a tour of the devastation.

Ironically, he had just given a speech at a clean water conference. Now, he flipped through the magazine as he

headed to his next environmental speaking engagement in Seattle, Washington.

A Nature Lover From the Start

As a child, Nelson had spent most of his free time in the forests and ponds surrounding his home in Clear Lake, Wisconsin. In summer, he camped, hiked, and swam. Sledding, skating, and skiing filled the winter days.

A love of nature also influenced the way Nelson served Wisconsin. In 1958, after serving 10 years in the state senate, he was elected to two 2-year terms as governor. He created recreational parks, so his fellow Wisconsinites could also enjoy the

wildlife he loved. He set aside land as nature reserves to protect animals and forests.

A Fighter for the Environment

In 1962, Nelson won election to the U.S. Congress as Wisconsin's junior senator. In Washington, D.C., he focused on legislation to promote the environment. But other lawmakers in Congress were not interested. Nelson's attempts to pass laws to keep air and water clean failed. By 1969, the America Nelson had loved as a child had transformed into a polluted mess.

The Santa Barbara oil spill disaster had begun on January 28, 1969. On June 22, 1969, the Cuyahoga River in Ohio had burned. High levels of oil and pollution floating on the water had caused the river to catch on fire!

Other **tributaries** flowed like ribbons of bubble baths—filled with suds from washing machines.

Litter dotted America's highways and collected in once-**pristine** wilderness areas. Chemicals spewed from factory chimneys and **smog** hung over cities like brown fog. Air was hard to breathe, and the waterways were dying. Careless pollution was destroying America's nature.

An Idea Forms

On the airplane, Nelson's thumb paused on a magazine article about Vietnam War (1954–1975) sit-ins. He read how college students used nonviolent protests to express their beliefs that the United States should stop fighting in the war. The sit-ins successfully spread antiwar views when speakers and students gathered on university campuses.

Tributaries are streams or rivers that flow into a larger river or lake.

Pristine means unspoiled.

Smog is fog that has become mixed and polluted with smoke.

When an oil drilling platform off the coast of Santa Barbara, California, failed in 1969, it left behind a polluted mess—and motivated concerned citizens to take action.



Grassroots refers to people, not leaders, organizing for a cause or an event.

High levels of pollution, such as this debris-filled stream in Iowa (BELOW) and smog in New York City (BOTTOM), threatened the health of U.S. cities and the people living in them.



An idea began to form in Nelson's mind. It was a big idea, but it could work. Nelson would hold a "teach-in"—a day to inform Americans about the environment. As soon as he was back in Washington, D.C., he sprang into action.

Nelson realized that a grassroots effort would probably be most successful. So, he turned to the sit-in experts—the college students. He interviewed Denis Hayes, a Harvard law student and early environmental enthusiast. Nelson offered Hayes a job he couldn't refuse—coordinator of the teach-in's national outreach.

Nelson also called his fellow senators. He wrote letters to leaders and memos to the media. He opened an Earth Day office to help organize the teach-in event. He chose a date that made it easy for college activists to participate around their studies—April 22.

A Teach-In Moment

The response to Nelson's idea was astounding. On April 22, 1970, 20 million Americans turned out to help Earth. Communities organized marches. Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops planned cleanup events. Students painted Earth Day posters:



Americans protested. They chanted. And they cleaned up their neighborhoods.

In St. Louis, Missouri, students marched through the business district to bring attention to smog that polluted the air they breathed. A mile-long procession of environmental enthusiasts snaked through the streets of Philadelphia (nicknamed Filthydelphia, at the time) in support of its Earth Walk.

Nelson's daughter, Tia, joined her middle school class and picked up litter in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. Other participants paddled in canoes and pulled trash from the city's Potomac River.

In Denver, hundreds of high-school students rode their bikes to the state capitol to speak out against auto pollution. Two hundred Mexican Americans in Albuquerque, New Mexico, demonstrated to protest against the sewage that polluted their water.

One parade float included the Statue of Liberty wearing an antipollution mask. Surfers carrying painted slogans on their boards paraded through the streets of Florida's Miami Beach. Their boards said, "WE DON'T SURF IN YOUR TOILETS" and "SO DON'T POLLUTE OUR OCEANS."

Nelson's idea had worked! Americans from every corner of the United States showed that they cared about saving the environment.

A Lasting Legacy

In the 10 years after the first Earth Day, Nelson successfully supported many laws including the Environmental Protection Act, the Clean Water Act, and the Clean Air Act. Backpackers began

to enjoy hiking trails such as the Appalachian Trail because of Nelson's legislative efforts.

Nelson retired from the Senate in 1981. But he did not give up his crusade to bring awareness to environmental issues. He became chairman of The Wilderness Society. The Wilderness Society is a land conservation organization that works to protect wild natural places. For Nelson's tireless environmental work, President Bill Clinton presented him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1995. The medal is the nation's highest **civilian** honor.

Because Gaylord Nelson inspired the first Earth Day, billions of people from more than 180 countries work together to make our Earth better every April 22. His big idea changed the world in a big way. 🌍

Nicole Groeneweg is a freelance writer who travels the world to see animals in their natural habitats. Earth Day is her favorite day of the year!

A **civilian** is a person who is not in the military or on a police force.

Today, Earth Day is a day of action for the environment involving people of all ages and all nations.

