

ADAM ROME

the genius of
EARTH DAY

ABSTRACT

In spring 1970, millions of people took part in thousands of Earth Day teach-ins, protests, and celebrations across the United States. Yet we know remarkably little about those events. We also have not thought enough about the significance of the first Earth Day. Earth Day 1970 was not just an unprecedented demonstration of public support for environmental protection. Earth Day was a massive mobilizing effort: In many ways, Earth Day nurtured the first green generation.

I'VE COME TO BELIEVE that the first Earth Day is the most famous little-known event in modern U.S. history. Historians routinely use Earth Day to symbolize the maturing of the environmental movement. Yet we know remarkably little about what happened in 1970. We also haven't thought enough about why Earth Day mattered.¹

The basic facts are startling. The first Earth Day was bigger by far than any civil-rights march or antiwar demonstration or woman's liberation protest in the 1960s. Earth Day was not just one event, and—despite the name—Earth Day did not happen only on April 22, 1970. In many places, the events lasted a week. A more accurate name would be Earth Spring, since some events were held in late March and early April. About fifteen hundred colleges held Earth Day teach-ins. So did roughly ten thousand schools. Earth Day activities also

© 2010 The Author. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Society for Environmental History and the Forest History Society. All rights reserved. For Permissions, please email: journals.permissions@oxfordjournals.org

Adam Rome, "The Genius of Earth Day," *Environmental History* 15 (April 2010): 194–205.
doi:10.1093/envhis/emq036
Advance Access publication on May 11, 2010

took place in churches and temples, in city parks, and in front of corporate and government offices. Millions of Americans took part.

The huge turnout was a dramatic demonstration of public support for the environmental cause. But Earth Day did much more than focus attention on environmental problems. The event inspired the formation of lobbying groups, recycling centers, and environmental-studies programs. Earth Day also turned thousands of participants into committed environmentalists.

Why was Earth Day so powerful a catalyst? The time was right. Earth Day was part of the great surge of reform in the 1960s. Many environmental problems also were getting worse. But why was Earth Day so effective in mobilizing the optimism and anger of the moment?

Tens of thousands of people spoke at Earth Day events, and the involvement of so many speakers was a stunning achievement. Earth Day radically increased the number of participants in public discussion of environmental issues. In 1970, the nation had few renowned experts in the field. Yet Earth Day proved that many more people had something to say about the environmental crisis. Though the exact number of speakers is impossible to determine, 35,000 is a conservative estimate.

The speakers were quite diverse. From anthropologists to zoologists, professors were the biggest group. Students—from junior high schoolers to graduate students—spoke too. Bureaucrats from every level of government probably were second to professors in the speaking ranks. The U.S. Department of the Interior alone provided more than one thousand speakers. Politicians often were headliners. Congress took the day off so that members could speak around the country, and roughly two-thirds did. Several governors gave major Earth Day addresses. Thousands of state legislators and local officials also spoke. Activists were part of many Earth Day programs. Some were involved in national organizations—the Sierra Club, the National Wildlife Federation, the Audubon Society, the Izaak Walton League, or the Wilderness Society. Most were active in local groups, from Stamp Out Smog in Los Angeles to Help Eliminate Pollution in Houston. Many members of the League of Women Voters took part as well. Architects, doctors, engineers, and other professionals whose work involved them in environmental issues were among the speakers. Though only a handful of Fortune 500 executives addressed Earth Day crowds, many local business leaders offered their perspective. So did some union members. Religious leaders gave sermons as well as speeches—the National Council of Churches encouraged members to devote the Sunday before Earth Day to the environment. Artists, writers, musicians, and celebrities spoke. The roster of speakers also included countercultural gurus, leftists old and new, community organizers, feminists, and civil-rights leaders.

To journalists eager to sound suitably skeptical, all the talk was something to mock. The oratory, one wrote, was “as thick as smog at rush hour.” Another concluded that “Earth Day drew the kind of nearly unanimous blather usually

given only to the flag—or to motherhood, before motherhood ran afoul of the population explosion.” But the knowing dismissals were too glib.

Earth Day was not the Fourth of July. The issues were too new—and too contentious—to provide a well-stocked larder of platitudes. Yes, everyone was against pollution, but the most basic questions about the environment were far from settled. In fact, there was a lot to talk about. A year after Earth Day, Barry Commoner wrote about the multiple explanations for environmental problems in 1970. Was the root cause of the environmental crisis population growth, religion, capitalism, technology, affluence, or human nature? The list of potential solutions was similarly long. Though some of the Earth Day talk was just rhetoric, most of the speakers genuinely hoped to contribute to an unprecedented debate about environmental issues.

The experience of speaking on Earth Day deepened the commitment of many speakers. Some had never before given a speech about environmental issues. What did they really think? As they pondered that question, they often concluded that the stakes were higher than they had realized. Experienced speakers also were stretched by the occasion. Often, they faced a bigger and more diverse audience than any they had addressed before. They had to go beyond their expertise—to ponder new issues and articulate new ideas. Many felt compelled to adopt a new tone. Some spoke more intimately, while others found a more prophetic voice. Either way, they were acknowledging that the issues really mattered.

The planning for Earth Day also involved thousands of people. Often, their involvement was intense and life-changing. Yet historians have told only part of the story of the Earth Day organizing effort.

Earth Day was the great achievement of Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin. The more I think about that, the more remarkable the story seems. Nelson was in his 50s, balding, a pillar of the establishment—yet he launched a mass protest. He found a way to join the power of the capital with the energy of the grassroots.

Nelson already had worked on environmental issues for more than a decade. He had championed the conservation cause while serving as governor in the early 1960s, and he had proposed legislation in the Senate to ban DDT and non-biodegradable detergents, preserve wild rivers, and clean up the Great Lakes. But he found few allies. What could lead the government to act, boldly and decisively, to protect the environment? Reading about the history of antiwar teach-ins in August 1969, Nelson imagined that the teach-ins might be a model for environmentalists. The antiwar teach-ins had been empowering. They pushed students and faculty to think more clearly, and then to act. An environmental teach-in, Nelson thought, would be even more likely to empower people.

But could a senator organize a nationwide teach-in? Nelson sought advice about how to approach that task from a veteran Democratic Party operative, Fred Dutton, and Nelson took many of Dutton’s suggestions. But he rejected

Dutton's recommendation that the teach-in be a top-down event. Nelson understood that the teach-in could not be an extension of his will. Though he conceived the idea, he was not a helicopter parent: He did not hover, trying to direct every movement on the ground below. Instead, he allowed others to take ownership of the teach-in. That critical decision enabled Earth Day to engage the energies of thousands of people.

Nelson announced his plans for the teach-in in September 1969, and his staff publicized the idea through the fall. The teach-in quickly caught fire. "The phone was just ringing and ringing," recalled Nelson staff member John Heritage. "I was working 16 hours a day, and I worked those hours for months." In November, Nelson set up a separate entity to help organize the event. With seed money from a variety of sources, including the United Auto Workers and the Conservation Foundation, the office of Environmental Teach-In Inc. opened in December. To head the operation, Nelson hired a Harvard law student enrolled in a joint master's program in public policy, Denis Hayes, and Hayes quickly assembled a small staff of young activists.

The teach-in staff all believed that young people could change the direction of the nation. Hayes joined a passion for the land with a sense of justice. While serving as student-body president at Stanford, he had castigated the university trustees for hiring a president with a questionable record on race. He considered the environmental cause and the antiwar movement to be facets of a larger struggle for Life, and he drew much of his inspiration as Earth Day coordinator from the 1969 Vietnam Moratorium. The other key members of the staff all were veterans of sixties campaigns. Arturo Sandoval was a Chicano activist in New Mexico, Barbara Reid worked for Robert Kennedy in 1968, Sam Love was a civil-rights organizer in Mississippi, Andy Garling founded a medical-students-for-peace group in Boston, and Steve Cotton worked for a biracial, not-for-profit newspaper in the South. The oldest staff member, 28-year-old Bryce Hamilton, served in the Peace Corps in the early 1960s.

Five members of the staff were organizers. One focused on schools, and four were regional coordinators. The original idea was that the national staff would help local organizers by providing ideas and contacts. But the flow of information quickly reversed. In many communities, organizers already were at work before the national office opened. With each week of publicity, more people became involved around the country, and the national office became less a center of organizing than a clearinghouse for the media—the quickest place to find out what people were planning in Biloxi, Dubuque, Hartford, San Antonio, and Walla Walla.

Some of the local organizers were housewives. Often, they saw environmental activism as a natural extension of their work as mothers and homemakers. The organizing effort also relied on young professionals—doctors, landscape architects, lawyers, and urban planners, among others. In Cleveland, Earth Week was largely the work of one member of the mayor's staff. At the other extreme, Earth Week in Philadelphia was planned by a steering committee

that secured a huge donation from the Chamber of Commerce and hired a project director, a 30-something lawyer and city planner with experience in media. The steering committee included an advertising guru who made several hip television ads. One had a businessman explaining why he hoped Earth Week would flop. Another had a fish complaining about his health—"Oy, don't ask!" A third depicted an island in Philadelphia that was so polluted that only one man lived there. "This was brought to you by the Earth Week Committee," the tag line said. "They feel that maybe there's a message here."

Graduate students in the sciences often led the way at universities. Some of the undergraduate organizers were leaders in student government, some were campus activists, and some had become concerned about the environmental crisis through course work. In schools, teachers sometimes took the initiative, but students also formed groups to organize Earth Day events. The school groups often had classic 1960s acronyms. State College, Pennsylvania, had SLOP (Student League Opposing Pollution); Schenectady, New York, had YUK (Youth Uncovering Crud); and Cloquet, Minnesota, had SCARE (Students Concerned about a Ravaged Environment). The organizers in some schools were lefty students who thought that Earth Day would be a cool new way to challenge the establishment. But many high-school organizers were science or nature kids.

The involvement of so many people at the grassroots was critical. Earth Day was superb leadership training. In weeks or months of planning, the local organizers were tested repeatedly. What counted as an environmental issue? Was the goal to advance an agenda or to involve as many people as possible? Would the emphasis be on education, activism, or media spectacle? What relationship would the Earth Day effort have to other social movements, if any? Should the program feature local speakers or outsiders? Were any sources of funding off limits? Almost every question was potentially divisive. Yet the experience gave thousands of people a chance to develop the skills, contacts, and sense of mission that provided a foundation for future activism.

Though I can't offer more than anecdotal evidence, I'm impressed by how many of the local organizers I've tracked down still are involved in the environmental cause. They defend rivers, promote green building, administer environmental-protection agencies, do research on alternative transportation, host eco programs on radio and television, and much more. Some already were environmentalists before Earth Day, but many were not: Earth Day was a profound source of inspiration.

This may seem abstract. Let me give one example to suggest the character of the grassroots effort—the University of Michigan teach-in on the environment, March 11-15. I don't claim that the Michigan event was typical. The teach-in was the Big 10 champ, and perhaps the best in the nation! Yet the organizers of countless smaller and less prominent events had similar experiences.

The organizing committee at first was only six graduate students in the School of Natural Resources. In October 1969, a planning meeting drew 350 people,

and more than 1,000 eventually helped to make the teach-in happen. The planning was not all peace and love. The campus black-power organization threatened a boycott because the organizers were not devoting enough attention to the problems of the ghetto, while members of Students for a Democratic Society mocked the “not-so-liberal liberalism” of the featured speakers. But the event blossomed. The two-day teach-in became five days, with more than 125 activities. To raise environmental consciousness in the community, housewives hosted teas and businessmen sponsored lunches. High-school students urged consumers at Ann Arbor grocery stores to boycott pesticides. On campus, a guerrilla theater troupe put a 1959 Ford sedan on trial for crimes against the environment. At a “scream-out,” participants debated whether the environment would deflect attention from the Vietnam war, the civil-rights struggle, and the movement for woman’s liberation. One workshop provided a Republican take on the environmental crisis, while another offered a socialist perspective. Technical sessions focused on everything from the future of the Great Lakes to the role of engineers in preventing pollution. The headliners included three U.S. senators, Friends of the Earth founder David Brower, consumer activist Ralph Nader, United Auto Workers president Walter Reuther, entertainers Arthur Godfrey and Eddie Albert, several noted scientists, the chief executives of Dow Chemical and Consolidated Edison, and Richard Hatcher, one of the nation’s first black mayors. The cast of “Hair” opened the teach-in by singing “The Age of Aquarius.” The kickoff drew 14,000 people, and total attendance topped 50,000. The week’s activities received national and even international attention. A television crew came from Japan. The teach-in was the subject of a documentary shown on network television just before Earth Day. The *New York Times*, *Business Week*, and *Science* ran feature stories. Syndicated columnist Joseph Kraft wrote about the event.

The four principal organizers of the Michigan event all have vivid memories. In different ways, all continued to work on environmental issues. John Turner is a striking example of someone whose life was changed by Earth Day organizing. He grew up in a conservative ranching family in Wyoming, and he was working toward a PhD in wildlife ecology. He might have gone back to the ranch or become a professor. Instead, the Earth Day experience convinced him to enter politics. “I was challenged daily,” he recalled. “I was targeted as a supporter of Nixon, a lackey, a Republican.” The attacks shook him but ultimately gave him new resolve. He became convinced of the need for leaders who were level-headed and practical, not bomb-throwers. He ran successfully for the Wyoming legislature. In nineteen years as a state representative and senator, he was a forceful advocate for environmental protection. He then served as director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under Bush I, president of the Conservation Foundation in the Clinton years, and assistant secretary of state for global environmental issues under Bush II.

For the other three organizers—Doug Scott, David Allan, and Art Hanson—the teach-in had subtler effects. Scott had written a thesis on the legislative history

of the Wilderness Act and worked as a lobbyist in Washington, and the teach-in expanded his network: He now is a grassroots organizer for the Campaign for America's Wilderness. Allan became a professor of stream ecology. The teach-in pushed him to do more policy-oriented research, not just the straight science he did in graduate school. Hanson also earned a PhD, but he became more of an academic entrepreneur, and he recently retired as director of an international institute on sustainable development. "For me, the most important legacy was a sense of empowerment," Hanson told me. "When I went to Michigan, I saw myself as someone basically oriented to the sciences, but the teach-in gave me the sense that if you really wanted to do something, you could. Just go ahead and do it."

Multiply that can-do spirit by twenty thousand—maybe more—and you get a powerful movement.

Not just over the years, but right away.

Many of the Earth Day organizing groups did not break up. Some campaigned for environmental legislation. Especially in university towns, the Earth Day organizing effort sometimes led to the establishment of ecology centers, often funded by recycling programs—at the time, recycling was not a responsibility of government. Some of the college and high-school groups pressed for changes in the curriculum.

The national Earth Day staff also used the network of organizers to create a new kind of environmental lobby. That was important, in ways scholars have not appreciated. Though a number of environmental organizations were decades old in 1970, the older groups were wary of lobbying, because lobbying might jeopardize the tax-deductibility of donations. The Wilderness Society struggled with that issue during the campaign for passage of the Wilderness Act. Even more famously, the Sierra Club went too far in its anti-dam campaigns in the 1960s, and the club's loss of its status as a charitable and educational organization was one reason why the board fired David Brower. When the Earth Day staff decided to stay in business after April 22, however, they announced that their group—Environmental Action—would be a lobbying organization. They soon became a force in Congress. "We worked our tails off to turn the energy of Earth Day into legislative success," said Barbara Reid. Because they had a Rolodex with activists in every state, they could marshal letters, phone calls, and office visits to every representative and senator, and they did. The lobbying of Environmental Action was critical in the passage of the 1970 Clean Air Act. Environmental Action also was important in the stunning defeat of the supersonic transport in 1971.

In addition to lobbying, Environmental Action targeted anti-environmentalist members of Congress in the elections of 1970, 1972, and 1974. Each year, the group announced a "Dirty Dozen," provided information about the environmental voting records of the 12 incumbents to their opponents, and mobilized the Environmental Action network to help in each campaign. In 1970, seven of the Dirty Dozen were defeated—two Democrats

and five Republicans. One lost in a primary by just one hundred votes. In 1972, four of the targeted incumbents lost, including a twelve-term representative who headed the powerful House Interior committee. Eight more were defeated in 1974. That year, Environmental Action sent a handful of staff members into the field, but otherwise the group's only power was its huge Earth Day list of local organizers.

Reflecting on the power of numbers, I see one more important facet of Earth Day. Media coverage was unprecedented. Because Gaylord Nelson announced his plan six months before April 22, the media had a lot of time to gear up, and they did: Earth Day became a "peg," in news parlance, for thousands of stories about environmental issues. The peg was sturdy for several reasons. The environment was a relatively fresh subject, and the news business thrives on the new: As Todd Gitlin argues, what's old is done. The environment also was a cause with potentially wide appeal.

Magazine after magazine published special issues on the environment in the months before Earth Day. By the end of February, a typical barbershop or beauty parlor or doctor's office would have at least three or four magazines with cover stories about the environmental crisis. *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Fortune*, *Look*, *Life*, women's magazines—you could take your pick. Even *Sports Illustrated* had a cover story on the subject.

Newspapers gave great play to the environment as well. Before 1970, only a handful of papers had environmental reporters. Gladwin Hill of the *New York Times* was one. Robert Cahn of the *Christian Science Monitor* was another. Betty Klaric of the *Cleveland Press* was a third. Earth Day inspired more papers to assign reporters to the environmental beat. Many big-city papers published special sections on the environment in April. In some places, the planning of Earth Day events also became news. Cleveland is perhaps the best example. "Betty Klaric was key," recalled the organizer of Earth Week there. "Every time we blew our noses, she wrote about it!"

The television coverage also was extraordinary. Though the networks did not do much early in 1970, all broadcast something special in April. National Educational Television—the precursor of PBS—devoted all of its programming on April 22 to Earth Day. Even *Sesame Street* and *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* were about the environment. That was unprecedented. To promote the day's programming, network affiliates took out ads in many newspapers, from the *New York Times* to the *Penn State Collegian*. On NBC, the "Today Show" focused on the environment for the entire week of April 20-24. Its ten hours of broadcasts were remarkably free of fluff—a teach-in with a stunning array of guests, from Margaret Mead to Barry Commoner, the scientist *Time* magazine called "the Paul Revere of ecology." The broadcasts then appeared as a paperback with commentary by Frank Herbert, author of the science-fiction classic *Dune*. ABC had three prime-time environmental specials during the week of Earth Day. In addition, the network devoted its Sunday "Issues and Answers" program to the subject on April 12 and 19. CBS, which

already ran a periodic feature on the environment on its evening news, devoted an hour to Earth Day on the night of April 22. Many local affiliates broadcast multi-part eco-shows. So did a number of regional networks.

The importance of Earth Day in drawing attention to environmental issues went beyond the news media, because book publishers capitalized on the mass excitement by releasing dozens of eco titles. Several of the eco-books were paperback originals rushed into print to coincide with Earth Day. Pocket Books published *Ecotactics*, the Sierra Club's handbook for environmental activists, in April 1970. The most successful of the paperback originals, *The Environmental Handbook*, appeared three months earlier. Commissioned by David Brower and published as a Ballantine / Friends of the Earth book, *The Environmental Handbook* had advertising that tied the book to "the first national teach-in on the environment," and it sold more than a million copies before the end of April. That's astounding.

But numbers alone can't explain the power of Earth Day. To understand why Earth Day was so powerful a catalyst, you need to look closely at the events themselves. What happened on Earth Day often was part of a story that started well before April 22 and continued long after. In some cases, Earth Day changed the dynamic of those stories. Birmingham, Alabama, is a great example.

That may seem odd. Birmingham in the 1960s was notorious as a place of civil-rights strife, and Alabama was a poor state, backward in many ways. The environmental movement was weakest in the South. The southern organizer for Environmental Action scraped and scraped to come up with events to boast about, while the other organizers scrambled to keep up with all the activity in their regions. But the South was not a desert for environmentalists. The South was more like a dismal swamp, slow-going but not impassable! Hundreds of southern communities celebrated Earth Day. The celebrations there often were simpler and more muted than in the northeast and Midwest, but they still could matter, as the story of Birmingham shows: Birmingham celebrated Right to Live Week, which culminated in a powerful Earth Day.

The city's Earth Day events were organized by a recently formed group of young professionals and students, the Greater Birmingham Alliance to Stop Pollution. The group—usually called GASP—hoped especially to gain support for strong action against air pollution. Birmingham was one of the few industrial cities in Alabama, and the sky there often was brown. The city was second only to Gary, Indiana, in the national rankings for worst air quality. Like Gary, Birmingham was a steel town. The city also depended on coal. U.S. Steel—South was the city's most prominent employer, and Alabama Power was the state's most powerful corporation.

In 1969, the state had approved an Air Pollution Control Act that GASP considered "a license to pollute."

GASP was not the first environmental organization in Birmingham. In addition to a local chapter of the Audubon Society, Birmingham was home to

the Alabama Conservancy, founded in 1967. In its first years, however, the conservancy's top priority was a campaign to establish a wilderness area in the Bankhead National Forest. GASP also was not the only group concerned about the city's air quality. The local tuberculosis association long had sought to dramatize the health hazards of air pollution, with help from a committee of the county medical society. The founders of the conservancy and the head of the TB association encouraged the GASP activists. "We were mentored," one recalled. But GASP went well beyond anything that anyone had done before.

The boldness of GASP came from the two doctors who led the group—Marshall Brewer and Randy Cope. Neither were Alabama natives. They had come to Birmingham to work at the rapidly expanding university medical center, and they brought new ideas. That was critical. As a GASP member from a long-established Birmingham family explained, Alabamans grew up "knowing that dirty skies meant people were working, and clear skies meant people were out of work." But Brewer and Cope did not share the local habit of deference to industry. They argued that clean air was a right. Brewer also had a broad environmental vision. He was not just interested in wilderness preservation or public health. "We have incurred a huge debt to nature," he told the *Birmingham News*, "a debt which must be paid off if we are to survive—and the time for an accounting is drawing to a close."

The Right to Live schedule was a mix of club, college, and community events. Cope kicked off the week with a talk to a women's club about the sham of the 1969 anti-pollution law. GASP appealed to religious leaders to devote the Sunday before Earth Day to the environmental crisis. "Our duty to protect what God has given us is of utmost importance today," Brewer said. "The advent of new technologies without equal environmental advances places us in the same situation as in Jeremiah's time, when God chastised the people for spoiling the land. Isn't it time for us to think about our future and the future of others by protecting God's precious gifts?" Several colleges held teach-ins during the week, and the speakers included a local doctor and a Catholic priest from one of the area's steel communities. For the closing activities—a morning meeting of the Downtown Action Committee and an evening rally at the Municipal Auditorium—the outside speakers all were federal officials.

The closing rally was moving, especially a speech about pollution and health by Dr. A. H. Russakoff, a longtime activist. As the *Birmingham News* reported, Russakoff's activism had often sparked controversy but had won him "a wide following among young people and adults concerned about the environment." He received a standing ovation at the start of his talk, and again at the end. "I have received many accolades in my life," Russakoff told the audience, "but this is something I will remember the rest of my life."

The climax of Right to Live Week came earlier on Earth Day, however, when Brewer addressed the Downtown Action Committee. The invitation list included college presidents, high-school principals, labor leaders, Chamber of Commerce

officials, politicians, and presidents of civic and service organizations. Several hundred people attended, and Brewer challenged them to act. "We have two choices," he said. "We can spend, pollute and be as merry as we can or we can listen to what the experts and young people all over the country are saying today. You people right here in this room have the power to make the necessary changes if you want to." Brewer cited studies that blamed polluted air for an alarming rise of respiratory disease. He drew on the work of economist Kenneth Boulding to argue for a new kind of economic thinking. Because the earth was like the Apollo capsules, with a limited amount of air and water, industry needed to help build a conservation-oriented "spaceship economy" rather than a "devil-may care 'cowboy economy.'" The first step was "strong, uniform legislation to control pollution so that all industries can include this in their budgets and mark it off as a cost of production and still compete effectively." Brewer called on Birmingham's business leaders to allow the political candidates they supported "to vote their consciences" and repudiate the 1969 law "which is not only worse than no law at all but an affront to the people of Alabama." Brewer received a "tremendous ovation." The mayor proclaimed that GASP had made "the most aggressive assault on a problem" in decades.

Of course, the applause did not lead immediately to reform. The editorial position of the *Birmingham News* made clear that many obstacles remained. The paper covered the Right to Live events in detail, and the editorial page offered qualified support for critics of the 1969 pollution law. When city officials refused to allow a GASP representative to speak at a high-school forum on pollution, the newspaper argued that people needed to "hear all views," not just U.S. Steel's argument that the 1969 measure would "get the job done if we give it a chance." During Right to Live Week, two editorial cartoons mocked legislators for opposing sin and supporting motherhood while ducking the hard issues, including pollution. The paper also editorialized in support of a statewide effort by the Coordinating Committee for an Improved Environment to force every candidate for state office to take a stand on the pollution issue before the May primary. But on Earth Day, the editors warned against emotionalism in dealing with air pollution. "Before the issue of the environment is settled," they wrote, "the representatives of the taxpayers and wage earners will have to make some hard choices in weighing the public's interest in clean air against its interest in technological advance and industrial productivity. The choices may be very hard: What, for example, if the demand for clean air threatens a community with the loss of an industry reluctant or unable to meet pollution standards?"

GASP kept at it. Members spoke to dozens of groups, especially students and women's clubs. The GASP speakers did not shy from working-class audiences. "I especially remember talking to garden clubs in the steel district," one recalled. "The women were terrified about the environmental movement, because of the fear that their husbands would lose their jobs. It was hard to talk with them."

They felt “that an industry that had put bread and butter on the table couldn’t be bad.” Yet “some of the women came around.”

In addition to grassroots organizing in Birmingham, GASP lobbied the legislature to pass a tough anti-pollution law. Several women in the group used their Christmas card list as a Rolodex to recruit activists. Because 18- to 21-year-olds were about to gain the vote, GASP sent busloads of students to the capitol with a simple message: We are upset about pollution, and we will vote against you in the next election if you don’t show that you are upset too. The lobbying worked. The 1971 legislature approved a Clean Air Act that remedied many of the shortcomings of the 1969 measure.

Few Earth Day events were as focused on a single issue as Right to Live Week. But the story of Birmingham still speaks to the genius of Earth Day. Right to Live Week did not come and go, like a comet. The event had lasting consequences.

The same was true in many communities. Earth Day was not just “a demonstration of public will,” as Gaylord Nelson liked to say. Earth Day also was not just about education. The event was a massive mobilizing effort. Many participants became more committed to the cause. By giving tens of thousands of speakers and organizers a chance to make a difference, Earth Day nurtured a generation of activists, and more.

Adam Rome, associate professor of history at Pennsylvania State University, is finishing a book about Earth Day to be published by Hill and Wang. His first book, The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism, won the Organization of American Historians’ Frederick Jackson Turner Award.

NOTE

I have spoken about Earth Day at four universities, and I am grateful to my hosts: Gregg Mitman and Bill Cronon (Wisconsin), Nancy Shoemaker (Connecticut), Steven Epstein (Kansas), and Brian Balogh (Virginia). I also thank LeAnne Stuver of Menorah Park Center for Senior Living in Beachwood, Ohio, where I gave four talks about Earth Day as a scholar on campus in 2008. I learned much from the questions at each workshop and talk.

1. The short discussions of Earth Day in histories of the environmental movement rely on material from a few newspapers, weekly magazines, and network news broadcasts. This essay derives from a soon-to-be-finished book about Earth Day. In addition to coverage in thirty-five metropolitan newspapers, I have drawn extensively on a subscription database, NewspaperArchive.com, that includes hundreds of newspapers from small and medium-sized communities. The Gaylord Nelson papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society were a rich source. I also have interviewed more than fifty organizers of Earth Day events, and several of my interviewees gave me access to private archives. My book will provide complete documentation.