

Remarks by Congressman David R. Obey  
Earth Day  
April 2006

On April 22 we will celebrate the 37th anniversary of Earth Day. It will be the first Earth Day we celebrate without its founder, Gaylord Nelson. His life's work places him in the pantheon of Wisconsin's environmental pioneers – on equal footing with John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Sigurd Olson.

For 40 years Gaylord was my mentor and teacher. For me, he defined what politics is supposed to be about and how it is supposed to be practiced. He was, in my lifetime, Wisconsin's greatest example of a public servant serving the greater good.

Many of Gaylord's friends and followers have been asking about the direction that Earth Day should take now that Gaylord is gone. Well, Gaylord took the lead on many aspects of environmental policy, but his thoughts on the issue were global. I think he would say that today the greatest challenge the planet faces is the problem of global warming because it involves nothing less than the eco system that sustains us all.

There are, of course, other challenges that require our attention as well, and I want to take a few moments to take note of them.



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During the years Gaylord served in Congress, a bipartisan coalition led by Gaylord, Scoop Jackson, Ed Muskie, and Bob Stafford in the Senate and Mo Udall, Phil Burton, Pete McCloskey, Henry Reuss, and Paul Rogers in the House won many victories on the environmental front:

The Clean Water and Clean Air Act

The Wilderness Act

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act

The National Trails System Act

Congressional Designation of the Ice Age Trail and North Country Scenic Trails

The Toxic Substance and Control Act

The Safe Drinking Water Act

Superfund Legislation and many more

But with the election of Ronald Reagan things became more difficult:

- James Watt put a lid on efforts to protect public lands
- President Carter's energy efficiency programs, begun at the height of the first energy crisis, were cut by 70 percent.

The situation got worse when Tom DeLay organized "Project Relief" when he and his allies came to power in the 1990s. The Washington Post, in a two-page story, chronicled how



DeLay made special interest, corporate lobbyists equal partners in a legislative effort to dismantle environmental regulations that had protected the public interest for decades. They rammed through the House – with yours truly at the center of the opposition – 17 actions which rolled back protections afforded by the Clean Air and Water Act and the Toxic Substance Control Act. When I read from that Washington Post article during House debate, DeLay literally took a poke at me on the House Floor.

During Clinton's presidency, Congressmen Norm Dicks and Ralph Regula and I negotiated a major expansion of the Land and Water Conservation Fund. But within three years the House Republican Majority walked away from that agreement and slashed funds for the program. Here in Wisconsin, Republican State Legislators, led by John Gard, attempted a similar effort to gut Wisconsin's Stewardship Fund, which had first been conceived by Gaylord Nelson when he was Governor and had later been expanded by a Republican successor, Warren Knowles.

When George Bush, Jr. Came to power, the Cheney energy transition team was appointed to set the stage for new policies. That 63 person panel contained 50 representatives from the giant energy companies, but only 1 from energy conservation organizations and 1 from consumer organizations. I suppose that is what Fox News would call "fair and balanced."

- Today our nation's parks are being starved for funds and are facing a maintenance backlog of over \$5 billion.



- The Administration's deceptively named Clear-Skies proposal would allow old technology coal fired power plants to avoid cleaning up their act. The new standards under that plan would allow twice as much carbon dioxide and 50 percent more sulphur dioxide to be emitted than would be allowable under existing law.

Just this month the EPA proposed a new rule weakening airborne toxic emission standards effecting toxins such as lead, arsenic, and mercury for refineries, hazardous waste incinerators, chemical plants, and steel mills, effectively allowing tons of additional toxic burdens into the atmosphere. Seven of EPA's regional offices disagreed with the proposal so strongly that they said it would allow polluters to "virtually avoid regulation and greatly complicate any enforcement."

These are all serious environmental challenges, but they represent only part of the challenge that we confront as we think about the potential catastrophe of global warming.

Aldo Leopold, Gaylord Nelson, Sigurd Olson all understood that the most fundamental bond between us as biological organisms is the bond we share because of the common air we breathe, the water that we drink, the land we walk. The most basic test of our respect for each other and respect for ourselves is the way we fulfill our stewardship responsibilities to the global environment that sustains us all.



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In the last conversation Gaylord and I had about the environment before he died, he repeated his often stated observation that mankind needed to understand that 50 percent increase in global population did not just mean there would be a 50 percent increase in the number of people. There would be a 50 percent increase in everything: houses, automobiles, roads, traffic jams, timber cutting, mining, and pollution. And such changes will put the planet's eco-system at risk.

Gaylord believed that the three greatest moral and political challenges facing us were the ease with which our country could become mired in war, the growing chasm between rich and poor and the challenge of global warming and that in the long-term the most consequential of the three was global warming. He was right, but unfortunately the people who run our government today do not agree.

They still act as though the threat of global warming is just a theory and not a scientific reality. But the evidence is all around us and is visible to all but those who have an economic interest in not seeing it:

- Leading scientists at NASA have reported in a multi-year study involving global and environmental monitoring that even if we hold greenhouse gases at their present level global temperatures will continue to rise and could increase as much as 10 degrees in the next hundred years.
- Temperature readings in the U.S. have increased markedly in the last 140 years.

- Core drillings in glaciers around the world enable us to study bubbles in the ice that hold air samples going back hundreds of thousands of years. They tell us that the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is higher now than it has been in more than 300,000 years.
- Other measurements of temperature, atmospheric chemical content, and historic readings of atmospheric phenomena tell us that the past few decades are radically different from any previous measurable era.
- Since 1970 the duration and intensity of hurricanes has increased by 50 percent.
- Records show that oceans are getting warmer, consistent with the warnings scientists have provided throughout the past two decades.
- The number of tornados in the U.S. is now the highest in recorded history – 1700 in one year.
- Two hundred western cities have broken heat records in the past two years.

Glaciers are like the proverbial canaries in the mines – they are the early warning system of global climate change and they are telling us something:

- Alaskan glaciers have receded dramatically in the past 100 years as surface temperature has risen.
- Twenty-seven of thirty-eight glaciers in Glacier Park are gone, and all of them are likely to be gone long before this century reaches its halfway point.
- Ninety percent of the earth's fresh water is held captive in the Antarctic ice cap



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and it is showing signs of instability. The Larson ice shelf, 700 feet thick, was expected to last 100 years. It suddenly collapsed in two weeks.

- If west Antarctica were to break up the world's oceans levels could rise 20 feet or more – not 2 feet, but 20 feet – goodbye Bangladesh – New Orleans will become the norm for every coastal city in the world.

In the Northern hemisphere heat is transferred from the Equator to the Polar regions by ocean currents, including the Gulf Stream. Those currents are driven by differences in temperature and salinity of the world's oceans:

- The Arctic ice cap has lost half of its thickness in the last half century.
- Greenland's ice cap is melting at a highly accelerated rate. If it goes, one-third of Florida will be underwater. If it goes, it could shut down the major Atlantic ocean currents. The current that drives the Gulf Stream has already decreased 30 percent in 50 years.
- Algae blooms have now been seen in the Baltic.
- Water temperatures that are way outside normal fluctuations are raising the strength of hurricanes. Do we really want Katrina to be the norm?
- Even if we could stop the increase in pollution now, it will take hundreds of years to return the earth to normal atmospheric ranges. How many more warnings do we need?



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This is not just an environmental problem; it is a moral problem:

- My generation will be gone in 20 years. We will not see the worse consequences like you will begin to, and your children's generation will be hit the hardest unless we break the hold that inertia has on America's policy makers and begin to make hard choices now.
- We must have a Manhattan Project-like effort to develop alternative energy sources.
- We must get serious about alternate energy sources and energy conservation.
- We must double mileage standards for automobiles and find ways to either radically modify or else abolish the use of the internal combustion engine in the automobile. Gaylord called for that 30 years ago.
- We must stabilize the earth's population numbers.

Those actions are no longer optional; they are fundamental and must be taken now.

The collapse of the Antarctic shelf, the collapse of the Greenland ice cap, the elimination of the Polar ice cap in summer would be a big deal. Together the possibility represents the most serious national security issue we face. It will radically disrupt the world's climate, its geography, its civilization, so we have plenty of work to do. First we must recognize that this is the most important long-range problem facing mankind. Second, we must educate the public on the issue. Third, we must act as though our future depends on it because it does.



It is time to recognize that the politicians who are still in a state of wishful denial are a danger to our children's future. When a United States Senator from Oklahoma says that "global warming is the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people," he must be recognized for the national security risk that he really is. And when the President of the United States pursues policies that prevent us from facing mankind's largest problem, he is also a huge security risk to America's and the Earth itself. We can no longer accept wishful denial. Nobel Laureate Thomas Schilling has said that "the uncertainty surrounding global warming is not mainly about whether it is going to be real, but is rather about the magnitude and speed of warming." The late John Sawhill, who served us in many capacities, including a chairmanship of Nature Conservancy once said, "In the end, our society will be defined, not only by what we create, but by what we refuse to destroy."

In our lifetime we will be defined by what we do to preserve the earth itself and as James Hanson of NASA has warned us, we do not have much time – perhaps fewer than 10 years to take the action needed to avoid a catastrophic tipping point.

As Franklin Roosevelt said when he took the oath of office in 1933 at the depths of the worst economic crisis in the history of the country, "We need action and we need it now."

