



*Evolution of the Earth
Dmy Idea -*

THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

Statement of Gaylord Nelson
at Madison Beyond War Ceremony
Madison, WI
December 8, 1990

I regret I am unable to be present for your Award Ceremony but nonetheless, I am honored to be one of the recipients of the Beyond War Award.

My primary purpose in organizing Earth Day was political.

For many years prior to Earth Day it had been troubling to me that the critical matter of the state of our environment was, simply, a non issue in the politics of our country. The President, the Congress the economic power structure of the nation and the press paid almost no attention to this issue which is of such staggering import to our future. It was clear that until we somehow got this matter into the political arena, until it became part of the national political dialogue not much would ever be achieved - This is so because it is primarily a political issue and must be addressed in that forum. The puzzling challenge was to think up some dramatic event that would focus national attention on the environment. Finally, in 1962 an idea occurred to me that was, I thought, a virtual cinch to get the environment into the political lime light once and for all.

That idea was to persuade President Kennedy to give national visibility to this issue by going on a nationwide conservation tour spelling out in dramatic language the serious and deteriorating condition of our environment and proposing a comprehensive agenda to begin addressing the problem. No President had ever made such a tour and I was satisfied this would finally force the issue onto the nation's political agenda. I proposed the idea to Attorney General Robert Kennedy in late 1962 and again at a meeting with him in 1963. We thoroughly discussed it and he concluded it was a good idea. He then recommended the tour to the President who agreed. President Kennedy began the tour in the fall of 1963 and invited Senators Hubert Humphrey, Gene McCarthy, Joe Clark and me to join him on the first leg of the trip to Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Minnesota. The President's environmental speeches on the first leg of his tour didn't have much sweep or drama to them. They were mostly of local interest. Then, in a speech in the West he made some foreign policy comment that received national attention. For all practical purposes that was the end of a poorly conceived conservation tour. The press was more interested in foreign policy than the environment. Thus the tour didn't achieve what I had hoped for - it did not succeed in making the environment a national political issue. However, it was the germ of the idea that ultimately flowered into Earth Day.



While the President's tour was a disappointment I continued to hope for some idea that would thrust the environment into the political main stream. Six years would pass before the idea for Earth Day occurred to me in late July 1969 while on a conservation speaking tour out west.

At that time there was a great deal of turmoil on the college campuses over the Vietnam War. Protests called anti-war teach-ins were being widely held on campuses across the nation. On a flight from Santa Barbara to the University of California Berkeley I read an article on the teach-ins and it suddenly occurred to me, why not have a nationwide teach-in on the environment? That was the origin of Earth Day.

In a speech in Seattle in September I formally announced that there would be a national environmental teach-in sometime in the Spring of 1977. The wire services carried the story nationwide. The response was explosive. It took off like gang busters. Telegrams, letters and telephone inquiries poured in from all over the nation. Using my Senate Staff I ran Earth Day activities out of my office. By December the movement had expanded so rapidly that it became necessary to open an office in downtown Washington. Although Earth Day was only 3 1/2 months away the movement was growing so fast that my Senate office couldn't continue serving as national clearing house for Earth Day inquiries and activities.

Earth Day achieved what I had hoped for and then some. The purpose of Earth Day was to get a nationwide demonstration of concern for the environment so large that it would shake the political establishment out of its lethargy and, finally, force this issue permanently into the political arena. Having criss-crossed the nation speaking on environmental issues during the previous eight or nine years it was clear to me that the public was far ahead of the politicians and given an opportunity they would demonstrate their interest. It was a gamble but it worked. It got the attention of the politicians. An estimated twenty million people participated in peaceful demonstrations all across the country. Ten thousand schools, to thousand colleges and one thousand communities were involved.

It was truly an astonishing grassroots explosion. For the first time people were given the opportunity to demonstrate their deep concern about what was happening in their own communities and across the nation - polluted air, rivers, lakes and oceans; health threatening hazardous wastes; urban blight; pesticide and herbicide poisoning of people, plants, birds and animals; the destruction of scenic beauty and wildlife habitats. All of this swirling around them and the politicians didn't seem to know, understand or care. But the people cared and Earth Day became the first opportunity they ever had to join in a nationwide demonstration to send a big message to the politicians - a message to tell them to wake up and do something.

It is time for another breakthrough. We are now at one of those rare points on the time frame of history when a remarkable combination of world events has come together opening a window of opportunity for statesmen with vision and courage to seize the moment and change the course of history for the better.



What is needed at this critical juncture is a much more vigorous imaginative leadership from President Bush, from our NATO allies and from President Gorbachev than we witnessed thus far. Now is the time for these leaders to seize the opportunity to spell out for the world a truly inspirational goal of massive arms reductions and re-allocation of resources to more sensible and productive enterprises. They have it in their power to alter dramatically the course of history if they will but grasp the opportunity.

They would inspire the world and give it the dramatic leadership it yearns for if they would propose a world wide reduction of at least 50% in military expenditures during the next half dozen years and another 50% in the following decade with half the annual savings allocated to husbanding the ecosystem of the planet. Furthermore, they have, jointly, the economic and political power and influence to persuade or pressure any reluctant nation to join in a worldwide arms reduction agreement.

At this late date we should at least re-affirm our support for the 1961 McCloy - Zorin Agreement between the United States and Soviet Union, supported unanimously by the United Nations, which endorsed the objective of a demilitarized world with no offensive weapons.

This is not idealism run amok; It is, plainly and simply, hard-nosed realism. How much longer are the United States and the Soviet Union going to lead a world parade that squanders almost a trillion dollars every year on weapon systems that put us all in greater jeopardy while we continue to degrade and dissipate the resource base that sustains us?

