

Emergence of Environmentalism in the 1970s

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Although it has been referred to as the “forgotten decade,” several important social movements occurred during the 1970s. One of them is the environmental movement. The celebration of the first Earth Day in April 1970 indicated that an increasing number of Americans were concerned with environmental issues, including clean water and air. These issues had gained attention before the first Earth Day, but it was during the early 1970s that environmentalists began to win federal protection for the environment.

This tutorial examines the 1970s—the “environmental decade”—in four parts:

1. Earth Day

On April 22, 1970, more than 20 million Americans participated in demonstrations in support of the environment. The event was called **Earth Day**, and it has been celebrated annually ever since.



TERM TO KNOW

Earth Day

An annual event to demonstrate support for the environment.

Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson often receives credit as the originator of Earth Day. At a speech in Seattle in the fall of 1969, he proposed a national “teach-in” on the environment. Nelson relied on student volunteers, including a law student from Harvard named Denis Hayes, to organize the event.

Earth Day involved more than student participation, however.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Major corporations, including automobile manufacturers (e.g., Ford) and pesticide producers (e.g., Monsanto and Dow Chemical), sponsored Earth Day rallies.

Government officials, labor organizers, community groups, and environmental organizations (e.g., the Sierra Club) also participated in the first Earth Day.



A Girl Scout picks trash out of the Potomac River near Washington, DC, on Earth Day, 1970.

Rather than a single event, Earth Day observances included a variety of peaceful gatherings on college campuses and elsewhere, even in large cities like New York. These events showed that many Americans supported environmental quality in order to have clean and healthy places in which to live, work, and play.

2. *Silent Spring*

The first Earth Day was not the beginning of the modern environmental movement. Instead, it was the culmination of more than a decade's worth of environmental activism that challenged Cold War conformity and opposed the commercial development of natural areas.

➤ EXAMPLE During the 1950s and 1960s, the Sierra Club defeated the Federal Bureau of Reclamation's proposals to construct hydroelectric dams on the Colorado River in Dinosaur National Monument in Utah and in Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona.

Some Americans had also expressed concerns about radioactive fallout and other negative effects of nuclear weapons testing.

➤ EXAMPLE During the early 1960s, the Committee on Nuclear Information, led by scientist Barry Commoner, discovered increased levels of radiation poisoning in American children by testing baby teeth. The committee's findings contributed to the ratification of a Nuclear Atmospheric Test Ban Treaty in 1963.

The publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962 was another important catalyst for the development of the modern environmental movement. Written by the marine biologist **Rachel Carson**, the book exposed the

environmental effects of widespread chemical use.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Rachel Carson

Former marine biologist and author of *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, which dramatically exposed the environmental effects of widespread chemical use and raised the consciousness of the environmental movement.



A photograph of Rachel Carson in 1940, when she worked for the federal Fish and Wildlife Service. Carson held a master's degree in biology and worked in the publications division of the Fish and Wildlife Service until 1952. In the course of her employment, Carson and other scientists discovered the potentially harmful effects of pesticides on animal and human health.

Silent Spring focused on the effects of a chemical known as DDT.



TERM TO KNOW

DDT

A pesticide that was widely used in the United States to kill insects following World War II.



DID YOU KNOW

DDT was used as a delousing agent for American soldiers during World War II.

Upon entering the market after World War II, DDT was easily obtainable throughout the United States during the early 1960s.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In 1957, the U.S. Department of Agriculture applied large amounts of DDT in the South (often through aerial spraying) to eradicate the fire ant.

➞ **EXAMPLE** During the 1950s and 1960s, trucks spraying DDT and other pesticides regularly drove through suburban neighborhoods to kill mosquitos and other insect pests.

Carson, along with other scientists and a growing number of homeowners, noticed some unanticipated environmental effects of these spraying campaigns.

➞ **EXAMPLE** By the late 1950s, homeowners in Massachusetts and elsewhere complained to local newspapers that local birds were dying at alarming rates following the aerial spraying of DDT and other pesticides.

In addition, Carson and others expressed concern that DDT and other chemicals could enter the food chain and, ultimately, affect human health in the form of cancer and other diseases.

Carson revealed the ubiquitous presence of chemicals in Americans' lives to millions of readers in 1962 by publishing *Silent Spring*.

Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*

"The chemicals to which life is asked to make its adjustments . . . are the synthetic creations of man's inventive mind, brewed in his laboratories, and having no counterparts in nature.

To adjust to these chemicals would require time on the scale that is nature's; it would require not merely the years of a man's life but the life of generations. And even this, if it by some miracle possible, would be futile, for the new chemicals come from our laboratories in an endless stream; almost five hundred annually find their way into actual use in the United States alone . . .

Among them are many that are used in man's war against nature. Since the mid-1940s, over 200 basic chemicals have been created for use in killing insects, weeds, rodents, and other organisms described in the modern vernacular as 'pests' . . ."



THINK ABOUT IT

What did Carson find most alarming about the development of new chemicals in the United States? Why did she write that many of these chemicals are used in a "war against nature"?

Carson also described the potentially detrimental effects that these chemicals could have on environmental and human health.

“These sprays, dusts, and aerosols are now applied almost universally to farms, gardens, forests, and homes—nonselective chemicals that have the power to kill every insect, the ‘good’ and the ‘bad,’ to still the song of birds and the leaping of fish in the streams, to coat the leaves with a deadly film, and to linger on in soil—all this though the intended target may be only a few weeds or insects . . . They should not be called ‘insecticides,’ but ‘biocides’ . . .

Along with the possibility of the extinction of mankind by nuclear war, the central problem of our age has therefore become the contamination of man’s total environment with such substances of incredible potential for harm—substances that accumulate in the tissues of plants and animals and even penetrate the germ cells to shatter or alter the very material of heredity upon which the shape of the future depends.”



THINK ABOUT IT

Why did Carson refer to pesticides as “biocides” rather than as “insecticides”?



BRAINSTORM

Silent Spring is widely credited for its effective combination of scientific observation and advocacy. With this in mind, respond to the following questions:

1. How did Carson combine science and advocacy in these selections?
2. How might someone who used household pesticides without considering the consequences have reacted to Carson’s writing?



DID YOU KNOW

After the publication of *Silent Spring*, chemical companies including Du Pont and Dow Chemical launched campaigns to discredit Carson and her research.

Rachel Carson died of cancer in April 1964, but her book and activism raised important questions about public health and the quality of life in America. In addition to pesticide use, other environmental problems, including air and water pollution, were addressed by scientists and activists. Their observations and awareness of potential consequences for environmental and human health reflected a growing acceptance of **ecology** and the concept that all living things and their environments are connected.



TERM TO KNOW

Ecology

The science of the interactions between organisms and their environment.

Participants in the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s relied on scientific evidence to prove the harmful effects of DDT and other contaminants. They also adopted the methods of other activist movements, including the civil rights movement, to organize events like Earth Day. Like the civil rights activists who demanded government enforcement of equal rights, environmentalists insisted that it was the government’s responsibility to protect the environment and promote public health.

3. The Environmental Decade

President Nixon would not have referred to himself as an environmentalist, but he did recognize the growing public concern about the environment.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In 1969, the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland caught fire because of excessive pollution. In the same year, an oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara, California, killed a large number of sea creatures.



The Harshaw Chemical Company in Cleveland, Ohio, releases wastewater directly into the Cuyahoga River in a 1973 photograph taken by the Environmental Protection Agency. By discharging water directly into the river, the company violated the Clean Water Act of 1972.

During his 1970 State of the Union Address, Nixon acknowledged that the environment would be one of the most important issues in the new decade:

President Richard Nixon, State of the Union Address, 1970

“The great question of the seventies is, shall we surrender to our surroundings, or shall we make our peace with nature and begin to make reparations for the damage we have done to our air, to our land, and to our water?”

Restoring nature to its natural state is a cause beyond party and beyond factions. It has become a common cause of all the people of this country. It is a cause of particular concern to young Americans, because they more than we will reap the grim consequences of our failure to act on programs that are needed now if we are to prevent disaster later.

Clean air, clean water, open spaces—these should once again be the birthright of every American. If we act now, they can be.”



THINK ABOUT IT

According to President Nixon, why should the United States enact environmental regulations?

Politics also help to explain why President Nixon addressed environmental concerns and oversaw an expansion of environmental regulations. During his administration, the Democratic Party maintained significant influence in Congress. Rather than fight with Democratic legislators who introduced environmental measures in Congress, Nixon worked with them. This enabled him to focus his attention on foreign policy and the economy. As a result of cooperation with Democrats in Congress, the Nixon administration significantly expanded federal oversight of the environment.



MAKE THE CONNECTION

President Nixon’s environmental agenda was different from the Republican Party platform’s statement on the subject in 2016. That document called for a modernized environmental policy that would begin with changes in Washington, DC. Most notably, the platform called for a shift of responsibility for environmental regulation from federal agencies to state governments.

The wave of environmental laws and agencies created during the 1970s has led observers to refer to this period as the “environmental decade.” There was overwhelming bipartisan support in Congress for environmental initiatives at that time. Much of the era’s legislation remains in effect today:

- The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which President Nixon signed into law in January 1970, requires the completion of “environmental assessments” or “environmental impact statements” before any significant federal project can get underway. It also led to the creation of the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), a federal agency that advises the president on environmental policy.
- The Clean Air Act of 1970 established air quality standards for pollutants, including carbon monoxide and lead.



DID YOU KNOW

Federal clean air regulations caused lead emissions to decrease by 98% by the 1990s.

- The Water Pollution Control Act of 1972 (also known as the Clean Water Act) requires businesses to obtain permits before discharging pollutants into the nation’s waterways.
- The Energy Policy and Conservation Act of 1975 established fuel economy standards for automobiles for the first time.

➞ **EXAMPLE** The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) was created in 1971 to ensure safe and healthy workplaces.

4. Regulating the Environment

One of the most notable components of President Nixon’s environmental legacy was the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The EPA regulates and enforces many of the federal government’s environmental mandates.

The EPA was formed in late 1970, based on the recommendations of the President’s Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ). In a memo to President Nixon, members of the CEQ acknowledged the following:

Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), Memo to President Nixon

“Our National Government is neither structured nor oriented to sustain a well-articulated attack on the practices which debase the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the land that grows our food. Indeed, the present departmental structure for dealing with environmental protection defies effective and concerted action.

The environment, despite its infinite complexity, must be perceived as a unified, interrelated system.”



THINK ABOUT IT

How does the CEQ’s recommendation for the creation of the EPA reflect the acceptance of ecology? As a result of the CEQ’s recommendations, the EPA became part of the federal government. Its responsibilities included the following:

1. Conduct research on the effects of pollution and gather information about changing environmental conditions
2. Establish and enforce environmental standards consistent with federal law
3. Coordinate pollution control and other environmental regulations with private industries, local and state governments, and federal agencies

To ensure that the EPA has the freedom to meet its responsibilities, it is an independent agency that reports directly to the president. This gives it significant oversight and regulatory power.

➞ **EXAMPLE** The EPA oversees pesticide use by agencies in the U.S. Department of Agriculture. By conducting an independent scientific investigation of pesticide use, and based on its regulatory authority, the EPA banned the department’s use of DDT in 1972—10 years after the publication of *Silent Spring*.

The EPA’s oversight authority has been challenged from all sides. These challenges have continued to occur during the 21st century. Environmental groups pressure the EPA to enforce clean air and water laws. Homeowners and neighborhood associations complain about red tape and the slow pace of EPA research. Political conservatives and business advocates criticize the agency for enforcing regulations that hinder free enterprise and economic development.

Opinions of the work—and the authority—of the EPA are often based, at least in part, on beliefs regarding the proper role of government in citizens’ lives. The principles of the environmental movement of the 1960s and early 1970s, which contributed to the enactment of environmental laws and the creation of the EPA, began to be questioned during the late 1970s and early 1980s when opposition to “big government” and excessive regulations became major political issues.



SUMMARY

Gaylord Nelson wrote that his most important objective for the first Earth Day “was to show the political leadership of the Nation that there was broad and deep support for the environmental movement.” Earth Day in 1970 was the culmination of more than a decade’s worth of environmental activism. That activism produced a number of legislative victories during the 1970s that, as a result, became known as the “environmental decade.” The most notable of these victories was the creation of the EPA, which is responsible for protecting the environment and public health. As political views regarding the proper role of government change, the EPA and environmental issues continue to be the subject of partisan debate.

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ATTRIBUTIONS

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TERMS TO KNOW

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Ecology

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Rachel Carson

Former marine biologist and author of *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, which dramatically exposed the environmental effects of widespread chemical use and raised the consciousness of the environmental movement.