

Earth Day Evolution

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In a poster for the first Earth Day in 1970, Pogo trumpeted: “We have met the enemy, and he is us.” Earth Day evolved from the ashes of the Cuyahoga River fiercely burning in Ohio, from bewildered marine birds sagging under the weight of the massive Santa Barbara oil spill, and from the spreading silence beneath the surface of the dying Great Lakes. With a hard look at our faults and the best of intentions, we adopted a new environmental legal system that we thought would rein in our most destructive tendencies. New, threat-specific laws slowly picked off the most obvious insults, such as raw sewage discharges, free-flowing industrial wastewater, and ubiquitous toxic waste dumping.

Despite these efforts, four decades of experience later we again face large-scale environmental revolt, but now on a global scale. Earth-wide climate change, shrinking rivers and aquifers, accelerating extinction rates, and other, potentially irreversible transformations raise searching questions. Our current laws simply did not envision that we could fundamentally change the structure of entire ecosystems, let alone change the climate globally. Even with full implementation, current environmental laws will fall short because they mistakenly assume that that water, land, forests, air and wildlife are “resources” to be extracted and “managed.” At the turn of the 20th century, the first Chief of the U.S. Forest Service, Gifford Pinchot, firmly established the growing nation’s “conservation ethic” as “the art of producing from the forest whatever it can yield for the service of man.” His contemporary, John Muir, took a different view, writing about the reality of the interwoven relationships among people and environment:

When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe. One fancies a heart like our own must be beating in every crystal and cell

The sun shines not on us but in us. The rivers flow not past, but through us ... The trees wave and the flowers bloom in our bodies as well as our souls...

Today in California, waterways do not hold rights to even the minimum amount of clean water they need to survive. California’s ecosystems increasingly rely on a last-gasp application of the Endangered Species Act when other strategies fail. Taking the environment’s share of water not only destroys ecosystems with which we are inextricably linked, it also delays the day of reckoning with our own water limits. We must break our dangerously well-trod path of use, overuse, environmental decline, then hasty and unplanned reaction, and chart a better course.

Meaningful change will begin once we let go of tightly-held but flawed assumptions that we are somehow separate from a “second-class” natural world, and that we can manipulate it, however benevolently, to our ends. This task will become ever more urgent as we increasingly “hit the wall” on essential ingredients for life like water. Rather than reacting from fear, we can and must learn to plan with the wisdom borne out of respect for our connections with the world around us.

As we reflect on this fortieth anniversary of Earth Day, our challenge – and our duty to coming generations – is to develop an evolved body of “Earth law,” one that acknowledges and nurtures the rights of the natural world, and respectfully allows the natural world to nurture us in turn. These efforts will lead us, at the end of the next 40 years, toward a vibrant, joyous Earth Day every day.