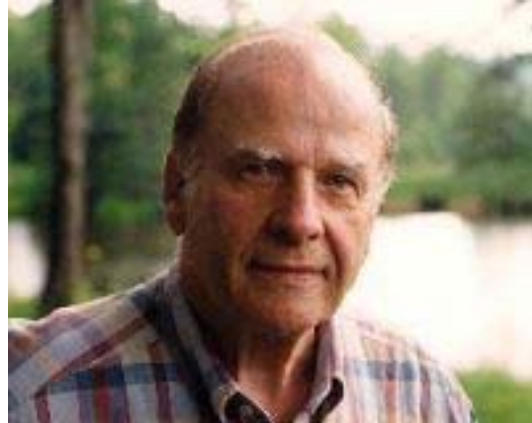




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SENATOR GAYLORD NELSON (1916-2005) *The Founder of Earth Day*

In 1969, as a U.S. Senator from Wisconsin, Gaylord Nelson came up with one of the most powerful ideas of his time: Earth Day. Inspired by the teach-ins dealing with the Vietnam War, Earth Day was an instant success, drawing 20 million participants the first year (1970). American Heritage Magazine called the first Earth Day "one of the most remarkable happenings in the history of democracy."



Gaylord Nelson was born in Clear Lake, Wisconsin on June 4, 1916. The son of a country doctor, Nelson sometimes made house calls with his father. After high school, he attended the University of Wisconsin, gaining his law degree there. When America got into World War II, Nelson got into the Army, serving in the Pacific. When the war ended, he practiced law in Madison.

In 1948, Nelson began his political career. He served as the Dane County State Senator, then became the governor of Wisconsin in 1958, serving for two terms. During this time period, Governor Nelson created the Outdoor Recreation Acquisition Program— where a penny-a-pack tax on cigarettes funded the acquisition of one million acres of Wisconsin Park land.

In 1962, Nelson was elected to the U.S. Senate where he represented Wisconsin for 18 years. He authored legislation to create a national hiking trails system, and the 2,100-mile Appalachian Trail System. He also sponsored or cosponsored several key pieces of environmental legislation, including the Wilderness Act.

Senator Nelson recalled the first seeds of Earth Day, in 1962. "That year an idea occurred to me that was, I thought, something that would put the environment into the political spotlight once and for all." The idea was to persuade President Kennedy to go on a national conservation tour. "As it turns out, President Kennedy liked the idea and in September, 1963, he began a five day, eleven state tour talking about conservation." But President Kennedy's tour did not succeed in making the environment a national political issue, as I had hoped.

“Six years later, during anti-Vietnam War protests called teach-ins, the idea for Earth Day suddenly occurred to me,” Nelson remembers. “Why not organize a huge grassroots demonstration -- a teach-in -- that would focus on what was happening to our environment?”

On April 22, 1970 the first Earth Day was a success, fulfilling Senator Nelson’s goal of “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 onto the national political agenda.”

An estimated 20 million Americans participated in the first Earth Day. Each year since, Earth Day has been celebrated around the world.

When Senator Nelson received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1995, President Clinton noted, “as the founder of Earth Day, he is the grandfather of all that grew out of that event— the Environmental Protection Act, the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act. He also set a standard for people in public service to care about the environment and try to do something about it.”

Sen. Nelson died on July 3, 2005, at his home in Bethesda, MD, at the age of 89.