

# The Founding Father of 'Earth Day'

## *An interview with Sen. Gaylord Nelson*

by Guest Editor John F. Rohe

Today is Thursday, March 20, 2003. My name is John Rohe. On the phone is Senator Gaylord Nelson, founder of Earth Day 1970. Senator Nelson is at The Wilderness Society office in Washington, D.C.

*John Rohe: Good morning, Senator.*

Senator Gaylord Nelson: Good morning, John.

*JFR: Thank you for making time for this interview for The Social Contract. Senator, could you discuss the history of the first Earth Day in 1970?*

GN: Well, I had been concerned for several years that the political establishment of the country was paying no attention to the environment. This is the most important challenge we have. So back in 1962, I got the idea that if President Kennedy could be persuaded to do a national conservation tour, we would force the issue onto the national political agenda, where it had to be. In other words, it had to be on the national agenda with social security, employment, and all of the other major issues.

*JFR: Senator, how did you begin working on this conservation tour?*

GN: I went to Washington and discussed it with Attorney General Robert Kennedy. He liked the idea. The president liked the idea. So, he went on a national tour starting in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and then to the west.

*JFR: How long was this conservation tour to last?*

GN: As I recall, it was a five-day eleven state tour.

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*JFR: This would have taken quite a commitment from President Kennedy to take a week out of his life. Did you or others plan to accompany him on this conservation tour?*

GN: He invited Senator Humphrey of Minnesota, Gene McCarthy of Minnesota, Joe Clark, PA and me to go with him on the first leg of the trip.

*JFR: Was this aboard Air Force One?*

GN: Yes.

*JFR: Was the press invited?*

GN: Yes. There were about 60 to 80 press and TV people aboard.

*JFR: Did it generate publicity for conservation?*

GN: Not much. On the day he selected to begin the tour, the Senate had scheduled a vote on the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Since Senator Clark of Pennsylvania, Gene McCarthy, Hubert Humphrey and I had to vote on the treaty, the President held up his plane until we had voted. Then we took off on *Air Force One* to start the tour. However, the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was front-page news; most of the press didn't have an interest in the environment, nor did their publishers. So it didn't achieve what I had hoped. It did not force the issue onto the national political agenda. Another six years would pass before I thought of the idea for a national grassroots demonstration on behalf of the environment.

*JFR: That would be the six years between 1963 and 1969. How did the planning for Earth Day actually begin?*

GN: Well, in 1969, at a conference in Seattle, I announced that there would be national grassroots demonstrations on behalf of the environment. The response was overwhelming. The public was concerned about the deterioration around them; water pollution, air pollution, and so forth. And they responded enthusiastically.

*JFR: Paul Ehrlich had already written The Population Bomb in 1968. Rachel Carson's Silent Spring was released in the early 1960s. What other influences might have set the stage for this gracious public reception?*

GN: It was at the grassroots. Almost every single community in the United States had some environmental problem. You will recall that hundreds of swimming beaches were closed. In my state, Milwaukee closed its beaches because of pollution. Everybody had experienced air pollution, water pollution, and so forth. It was noticed by the public. They were concerned. But it eluded the political establishment. By tackling air pollution and water pollution, they would have to tackle the automobile industry, the steel industry, and every manufacturing industry. The political establishment was not prepared for this.

*JFR: Was that true for both Democrats and Republicans at the time?*

GN: It was totally bipartisan.

*JFR: How many participated in the first Earth Day?*

GN: On the evening news, Walter Cronkite estimated twenty million people came out on Earth Day to demonstrate their concerns.

*JFR: Were you surprised by those numbers, 20 million?*

GN: I never thought of it in numbers. I knew from speaking around the country that the public was concerned, and the political establishment was not. There was no political leadership on this issue. But finally, the political establishment saw twenty million people. When they saw the interest nationwide, then the political establishment was awakened. In the next ten years, the congress passed more important environmental legislation than had even been considered in our previous history.

*JFR: So Earth Day basically made it politically feasible for politicians to embrace environmental causes.*

GN: Yes.

*JFR: And at that stage, was the reception for environmental causes equal, from your perspective, among the Republicans and the Democrats?*

GN: The political parties were both expressing concerns, but when it got down to the nitty-gritty of passing

legislation, more Democrats supported legislation to address the question of air pollution, water pollution, lead and gasoline, and so forth. But many Republicans were also concerned.

*JFR: Was this, to your knowledge, the largest demonstration in the history of the country?*

GN: It was reported as the largest demonstration.

*JFR: Let's discuss your personal and political history. How did you get involved in politics?*

GN: My father was a country doctor in a small town in the Northwest.

*JFR: When were you born, Senator?*

GN: Nineteen-sixteen. My father was a leader locally and leading supporter of old Bob LaFollett, young Bob LaFollett, and his brother Phil LaFollett. That was the progressive movement, and so I went to meetings with my father.

*JFR: How old were you when you started attending these meetings?*

GN: I can remember going with him to hear young Bob LaFollett, who succeeded his father when old Bob died in 1925. Young Bob succeeded him. About 1926, when I was ten years old, I remember traveling about nine miles with my father to hear young Bob LaFollett speak. My mother was very active in politics, and was the 11<sup>th</sup> Congressional District Chairman in Wisconsin. So I grew up with it and became interested.

*JFR: Where did your personal history on environmental issues originate?*

GN: It's sort of like asking somebody "When did you become interested in classical music?"

*JFR: Musical inclinations could have even started in utero.*

GN: My wife has a radio on in her sewing room upstairs, in the kitchen, and in the living room to the same classical music station. I don't think she could tell you when she became interested in classical music. I tell people I became interested in politics by osmosis.

*JFR: And when did that osmosis begin for you, Senator?*

GN: Well, when I was a kid, my hometown was Clear Lake, Wisconsin, with about 700 people. Now it has 1,000, but it was 700 and we had a lake at the end of

main street, on the east side of town, and two little lakes on the west side. Little Clear Lake and Big Clear Lake were both rather small. And, so I spent my time fishing, hiking, and skating. Most of our entertainment was out-of-doors. That was before radio and TV.

*JFR: You developed an appreciation for the natural world as a young child, having the privilege of growing up in an area of natural beauty.*

GN: Right.

*JFR: When did your first run for any political office?*

GN: When I got out of the Army in 1946 I ran for the assembly in my county, and was narrowly defeated. Then I ran in '48 and moved to Madison where I had graduated from law school. I ran and was elected there in 1948. I served ten years in the legislature from the capitol city, and then four years as governor, and then 18 years in the U.S. Senate.

*JFR: In what years did you serve as U.S. Senator from Wisconsin?*

GN: 1963 to 1981.

*JFR: So by the time you entered your first term as Senator in 1963, you were already quite sensitive to environmental issues, well ahead of Rachel Carson's book.*

GN: Yes, I was interested in the environment quite a bit before Rachel Carson's book came out in '62.

*JFR: Was the environment part of your first campaign platform when you ran for U.S. Senate in 1962?*

GN: Yes, by then I considered the environment the most important challenge to society.

*JFR: Did you also consider the environment the most important issue during the four years before that, when you served as governor of Wisconsin.*

GN: Yes, the most important bills that I pushed as governor were environmental legislation.

*JFR: When did you begin reading environmental literature?*

GN: It preceded that. I read a lot of environmental stuff before I was elected to the state senate in '48.

*JFR: Today, many would tend to think that Rachel Carson was on the cusp of a new movement. But you are taking this back to 1948. What was published at that time?*

GN: Johnson and her husband wrote books on Africa. On my way overseas, we had a library aboard ship. They had all of the Johnson books on Africa, animals, and native tribes. I read them all. So, I was interested by then in the environment.

*JFR: Were there also other childhood influences?*

GN: I was also influenced by childhood experiences like the trap line that was used to catch rabbits. My mother refused to let me use leg-hold traps, so we had to use box traps. I was also influenced by wonders of the annual migration of mud turtles, snapping turtles, box turtles, from Little Clear Lake and Big Clear Lake across town to Mud Lake, where they would hibernate during the winter. It took them about three days to get from Little Clear Lake or Big Clear Lake to Mud Lake, and they had to cross Highway 35. Once in a while a car hit them. My friend Sherman Benson and I would pick them off the middle of the road and carry them across. For those who made it across safely and were headed for Mud Lake, we would sometimes pick them up and spin them around a half dozen times. Then, we would put them down facing back toward where they had come. In just a matter of seconds, they would stick their head out from under their shell and immediately turn around and head to Mud Lake, even though we placed them in tall grass and behind trees. They always headed directly for Mud Lake, which they couldn't see. I often wondered how they got there. I assume that was from the smell of the lake, like fish going back to the stream where they hatched. Sea turtles will return to wherever they hatched. They might travel a thousand miles around islands. I think they are smelling their way back. It just made me curious about how they would know.

*JFR: As a result, you became the founder of the largest demonstration in the history of the country. Senator, you have recently taken an interest in immigration reform. I'd like to discuss that with you. What prompted your interest in immigration reform?*

GN: Population is the greatest threat to the environment. When I was born in 1916, there were about 98 million people in the United States. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, I think we were at about 130 million. In the year 2000, we were at 281 million. Now at the current rate of increase, we'll go over 500 million sometime around mid-century. Then we will go to a billion in the second half of the next century or sooner. So when we

go to 500 million, that will double our population mid century. What does that mean? That means we will have to double the total infrastructure of the country. Twice everything you can think of. Twice as many grade schools, high schools, colleges, twice as many hospitals, twice as many miles of road. Just double everything you can think of. And then when we go to a billion, we will join India and China as the only billion-population countries in the world, by then we will have to multiply by four the current total infrastructure.

*JFR: Senator, with those daunting statistics, how do you explain that there are still a number of environmental groups that simply refuse to embrace immigration reform today?*

GN: Every group that I know of, every environmental group, is concerned. But if you're going to stabilize the population, you have to reduce the immigration rate. Now we have a fertility rate in this country of about 2.1. That would stabilize our population, because that 2.1 is the replacement rate. But anyone who advocates reducing immigration is attacked as a racist, and none of the press is leading the campaign to reduce the immigration rate. At the Cairo conference in 1996, 170 countries of the world endorsed the position that every country should stabilize its own population. The U.S. voted for that. The only way that we could stabilize our population is with a significant reduction in immigration rates, or a very significant reduction in the fertility rate. Nobody politically, neither party, nor the president, wants to tackle the question of immigration because people charge them with racism. Nobody wants to be charged with that.

*JFR: So that's even causing a number of the environmental groups to shy away from the issue.*

GN: Oh yes, that's the sole cause.

*JFR: So, Senator, how do we get back on track?*

GN: I think the way to tackle the question is for the president to give an annual message to the Congress and the country on the state of the environment. If the president doesn't think it's important enough to give a message on the state of the environment, then the public isn't going to think that it is important. The next thing that should happen is that the Congress should conduct a series of hearings extending over the next several years on sustainability. That's the challenge. What will it take to achieve a sustainable society? The president and the

Congress have to be responsible for educating the public on the consequences of doubling and quadrupling our population. There will be no habitat for song birds in 50 to 75 years and very little open space for humans to enjoy. The public ought to understand that. And there ought to be intelligent educational hearings on what are the consequences? What will be the consequences of doubling our population, and then going on to quadruple it, and then by the second half of the next century. If the Congress and the president don't mark that as an important issue, what's their responsibility? How do we expect the public to step out and say, "Mr. President, why don't you address this question?" So that's the only way it could be done in my view, politically without too high a risk to either political party. Who can object to education programs by the president on the state of our resources and by Congress conducting hearings on what is sustainable?

*JFR: Well, Senator, your words are prophetic. Your sensitivity to these issues has always been well ahead of the times. On behalf of the readership of The Social Contract, I want to thank you for your generous gift of time in sharing your insights and enthusiasm. It enables us to appreciate the vital history that you bring to this movement. I know that we are hearing from the person who made history, the founder of the turning point in our country, and thus the world, on issues of utmost importance. I sincerely want to thank you for taking this time and for your years of generous dedication.*

GN: Thank you. •