

# The Environmental Future

*How do we get there from here?*

by Gaylord Nelson

**T**hirty years ago on April 22, 1970, Earth Day burst onto the political scene. Twenty million people demonstrated their concern over what was happening to the natural world around them – polluted rivers, lakes, trout streams, ocean shores, the air we breathe and much more. The people cared, but the political establishment seemed oblivious to it all. The specific objective of Earth Day was to stir up a public demonstration big enough to shake up the establishment and force the environmental issue onto the national political agenda. Earth Day was a truly astonishing grassroots explosion. It achieved everything one could hope for. At long last, the environment was on the national political agenda, where it will remain as a constant reminder for this and future generations.

This brief commentary speaks to the fundamental challenge of our time – that challenge is to forge a

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*Gaylord Nelson, former Senator from Wisconsin and the founder of Earth Day, gave this speech at the Conservation Summit, Michigan State University, September 20, 2001.*

sustainable society. A sustainable society may be described in several ways: A society whose activities do not exceed the carrying capacity of its resource base; or a society that manages its environmental and resource systems so that their ability to support future generations is not diminished. Every nation on the planet faces the same challenge. And, no nation has yet succeeded in designing an environmentally and economically sustainable society.

Since the first Earth Day, we have tried a lot of things. We have learned and achieved a lot, but we still have a lot to do. It has been a kind of piecemeal approach to the environmental challenge. We tackled the most obvious and threatening problems – air pollution, water pollution, etc. Even after 30 years there is still much to do in these areas. We have learned that almost all environmental problems are either preventable – or at least manageable. With this new knowledge we now stand at the threshold of a “Golden Opportunity” to change the course of history. We can do it by turning away from the uneconomic practice of fueling our economy by consuming our natural capital. Forging an economically sustainable society is the practical and profitable alternative. We know all we need to know to launch a

long-term program that will lead us to sustainability.

After three decades of discussion, debate, legislation and education, there has evolved a new level of understanding and concern over what is happening around us. The public is prepared and, in the end, will support those measures necessary to forge a sustainable society if the President and Congress present a well-documented and convincing case. Failing to achieve sustainability is not an acceptable option. That would be a disaster for future generations.

## Political Leadership: The Only Direct Path to Sustainability

The Presidency and the Congress are the political institutions with the position and authority to take advantage of this opportunity before it is too late.

We have finally come to understand that the real wealth of a nation is its air, water, soil, forests, minerals, rivers, lakes, oceans, scenic beauty, wildlife habitats and biodiversity. Take this resource base away, and all that is left is a wasteland. That’s the whole economy. That is where all the economic activity and all the jobs come from. These biological systems contain the sustaining wealth of the world. All around the

planet these systems are under varying degrees of stress and degradation in almost all places, including the United States. As we continue to degrade them, we are consuming our capital. And, in the process, we erode living standards and compromise the quality of our habitat. We are veering down a dangerous path. We are not just toying with nature; we are compromising the capacity of natural systems to do what they need to do to preserve a livable world. We can - and must - forge a sustainable society, but it will take more vigorous leadership in the future. Fortunately, the ranks of the concerned and committed are rapidly expanding. The ultimate goal is to nurture a society imbued with a guiding environmental ethic. That ethic has been evolving, and ultimately, it will save us from many costly blunders. The British jurist, Lord Moulton, summarized the matter in one sentence - "The measure of a civilization is the degree of its compliance with the unenforceable." That is our goal.

In a dramatic and sobering joint statement (1992), the United States National Academy of Sciences and the Royal Society of London, two of the world's leading scientific bodies, addressed the state of the planet in the following words:

*If current predictions of population growth prove accurate and patterns of human activity on the planet remain unchanged, science and technology may not be able to prevent either irreversible degradation of the environment or continued*

*poverty for much of the world...*

*...Sustainable development can be achieved, but only if irreversible degradation of the environment can be halted in time...*

Late in the day, it has finally dawned on the political establishments around the world that environmental deterioration threatens both economic and environmental stability. This prompted the international community to organize two conferences on sustainability: 1992 in Rio and 1994 in Cairo. Next was the International Conference on Global Warming. These conferences were the first formal manifestations of serious international concern over the challenge of sustainability.

#### GLOBAL WARMING – THE TRANSITION FROM FOSSIL FUELS TO SOLAR ENERGY AND CONSERVATION

We can begin the process of forging a sustainable society now. We can begin the long and necessary transition from fossil fuels to solar energy; we can reduce air and water pollution to a level this is easily managed by nature; we can stop over drafting the supply of ground waters, depleting our fisheries, deforesting the land, poisoning the land with pesticides, eroding the soil, degrading the public lands, urbanizing farm lands, and destroying wetlands.

We can do this and much more. One thing is certain – we cannot afford to delay fixing problems here at home while we wait for the rest

of the world to act. We can help, but we cannot wait. As a nation we have it in our power to do most things necessary to achieve sustainability, but the longer we delay, the more we undermine the livable quality of the environment and the resource base that undergirds the economy.

#### HOW DO WE MAKE THE TRANSITION TO SUSTAINABILITY?

The President and the Congress have the key leadership roles, while the public has the key support role. The failure of any one of these elements spells failure of the enterprise. The challenge is to forge a society that is economically and environmentally sustainable. Since this is primarily a political challenge, we start with those two political institutions which share the key to the whole enterprise. Success or failure will turn on what kind of leadership comes from the President and the Congress. To be successful, their joint leadership must be vigorous and sustained over a period of several years.

#### The Presidency

To crank up the political machinery for a move down the path to sustainability, someone has to spark the engine. The President is in the best position to do that. He owns the bully pulpit; he is the chief educator of the nation, the superstar, the only one who can command top billing in the papers and on television and radio, whenever he wishes.

We have come a long way in the past thirty years. Opinion polls show upwards of eighty percent (80%) of the U.S. population is concerned about the state of the environment. It is now time for the key political leadership, the President and the Congress, to join in a non-partisan effort to design a plan of action for the future. It took three decades of effort to get where we are and it will take at least that long to get to where we want to go. An annual *State of the Environment* address to the Congress, coupled with regular

*“Public opinion polls show overwhelming concern for the environment...”*

Congressional hearings on sustainability, would inspire the kind of public dialogue that must precede major decisions on controversial matters.

THE FIRST ANNUAL  
PRESIDENTIAL MESSAGE ON THE  
STATE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

While there is a well-established tradition of an annual message to the Congress on the State of the Union, there is no tradition of a message on the State of the Environment. This, despite the fact that the actual “State of the Union” is totally dependent on the state of the environment and its resource base.

Presenting the Congress with an

annual State of the Environment message on sustainability would start a national dialogue on sustainability.

**The Congress**

EDUCATION AND LEGISLATION

The Congress is the other key player. Its primary and critical role will be a combination of education and legislation. Public opinion polls show overwhelming concern for the environment and support for whatever measures may be required to maintain a clean environment. However, what particular measures may be required is not broadly understood. Until it is, the public won’t support – and the Congress won’t pass – the necessary legislation. This means several years of hearings, debate and legislative enactments involving the broad spectrum of issues that must be addressed on the way to sustainability. In many ways, this may appear to be an onerous and intimidating challenge because it will extend over considerable time and involve much debate and controversy. However, the only rational choice is to begin the process without delay.

To make this undertaking succeed will require a cooperative non-partisan effort unlike any other in our peacetime history. The state of the environment, and its impact upon the economy and the quality of life, needs to be much better understood. This is the function of the hearings which should be held at least once or twice a month over the next several years.

Of necessity, sustainability hearings must range over all significant issues on the

environmental spectrum. That will include exploring: How we make a transition from our overwhelming reliance on fossil fuels to a significant reliance on solar energy; how we move to restore ocean fisheries; how we reduce air and water pollution to a level manageable by nature; how we preserve our magnificent heritage of public lands; how we shrink our excessive reliance on herbicides and pesticides; how we stop over-drafting ground water, reduce soil erosion; and how we preserve wetlands, forests and biodiversity.

CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS ON  
SUSTAINABILITY

Congressional hearings on sustainability could start almost any place. My choice would be public lands because almost everyone has some familiarity with National Parks, National Forests, wildlife refuges or BLM lands. These lands are a rare heritage of almost one million square miles totaling about 26 percent of the U.S. landmass. No other nation on Earth preserved such a vast mosaic of mountains, wetlands, lakes, rivers, seashores, islands, plains, forests, grasslands and deserts. Within these bounds, a sample of almost every major American landform is represented. These are the only large expanses of natural areas left in the lower forty-eight states. Here are lands that would be recognized by our forefathers, lands inhabited by wildlife that cannot survive elsewhere, a rare condition of quiet undisturbed by man-made noises, and immense vistas of scenic beauty that cannot be found any other place. If this is not a rare

asset deserving our most caring attention, then there is no such place.

## Public Lands

### NATIONAL PARKS – THE BEST IDEA WE EVER HAD

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the national park system was new in this country and unknown in any other, James Bryce, an Englishman, characterized it as “the best idea America ever had.” Yellowstone National Park was created in 1872, the world’s first national park. Since then, more than one hundred countries have established national parks.

The national park system was formally established by the 1916 Organic Act and now encompasses some 80 million acres. The Organic Act specified that the parks be managed with the purpose of conserving –

*...the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.*

What a wonderful thing it would be if the park system were managed in compliance with the spirit and letter of the law. Sadly, it is not. Over many years, a succession of Presidents and Congresses have defaulted in their responsibilities and permitted all kinds of incompatible activities to proliferate, much to the detriment of the system. Obviously, those activities that adversely affect

wildlife, pollute the air, destroy the peace and quiet of the parks, and otherwise degrade the enjoyment of these special places, violate the mandate to leave these parks “unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”

### THE BEST IDEA WE EVER HAD IS RAPIDLY FALLING APART

The whole national park system is in varying degrees of serious decline. Park visitations have ballooned from 30 million in 1950 to almost 300 million today, resulting in traffic jams and noise pollution. Automobile traffic should be drastically reduced or eliminated in most parks. Snowmobiles are causing air pollution and noise pollution in Yellowstone National Park. At Yosemite, several thousand visitors stay in cabins and tents, creating a virtual city that has been described as “looking like downtown Los Angeles at midnight.” In Grand Canyon National Park, 100,000 commercial tourism flights a year fly down the canyon, disturbing wildlife and the peace and quiet of that special place. In 1985, then-Governor Bruce Babbitt of Arizona testified that the noise in the canyon is “equivalent to being in downtown Phoenix at rush hour...and that’s not what a national park is for.” Contrast this with what Zane Gray wrote on the Grand Canyon in 1906: “One feature of this ever-changing spectacle never changes: its eternal silence.”

This is just a quick peek at what is happening to the crown jewels of our public land system. At the current rate of degradation, the National Parks as we know them

will be gone within thirty years. They will be modified theme parks or Disneylands. The same thing is happening to our National Forests and the Bureau of Land Management lands – only much worse because they don’t have the legal level of protection that the National Parks do. These lands are being degraded by all kinds of four-wheel drive vehicles, motorcycles, snowmobiles, jet skis, and more.

Doesn’t all this degradation at least justify extensive hearings to inform the Congress and the public what is happening to twenty-six percent (26%) of the United States’ land base? It is my view that the use of off-road vehicles on public lands should be phased out and that cattle grazing should be re-evaluated and reduced or phased out wherever it is compromising the resource base. This is controversial stuff and begs for public discussion.

### HEARINGS ON POPULATION

What will America be like when the population doubles from about 280 million to over 520 million within the next 75 to 80 years or sooner? If we permit that to happen, it will have a dramatic and pervasive impact on almost all aspects of our living condition. It will mean, for example, that we will have to double the total infrastructure of the United States within the next seven or eight decades – that means we will be dealing with twice as many cars, traffic jams, parking lots, paved roads, planes and air fields, schools, colleges, prisons, apartment houses; a tremendous loss of agricultural land, open spaces, wildlife habitat, areas of scenic beauty; loss of all

kinds of freedoms – freedom to move about with ease, to find places free of noise, crowding and people pressure of all kinds.

Then think of what our country will be like when the population doubles again to over a billion sometime in the next century. If you think that won't happen, think

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*“Shouldn't  
there at least be  
a national dialogue  
on the issue...?”*

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again. Why won't it happen?

If you think the President and the political parties of the next century won't be in the same competition for pro-immigration votes that they are today, tell us why. Is it because they will be more concerned about the future of our nation than the politicians are today?

Shouldn't there at least be a national dialogue on the issue of continued population growth and what it means for the future? Isn't this a question of “The Public's Right to Know?”

The President and the Congress are making decisions that will radically transform the nature of life in the United States. Shouldn't we at least have a national dialogue on what this means to our future? Extended public hearing would serve that purpose admirably.

The Rockefeller Report to the President and the Congress in 1972 concluded that there would be no benefit to the country from further population growth and

recommended that we move to stabilize our population. Since that report, the United States' population has ballooned by another 70 million.

If stabilization is to be achieved, it will require a substantial reduction in the immigration rate, and that is attacked as racist by some pro-immigration groups. This has silenced almost everyone, including many distinguished newspapers and other journals of opinion. Joseph McCarthy, from my state of Wisconsin, used exactly the same tactics – it is now called McCarthyism.

Since population density affects all aspects of our lives in quite significant ways, it should not be driven out of the market place of public discussion by McCarthyism or any other demagogic contrivance.

Surely, this is an issue that ought to be explored in public hearings.

## Conclusion

THIS GENERATION OF POLITICAL LEADERS HAS A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY TO LAUNCH A PROGRAM THAT WILL REVERBERATE DOWN THROUGH HISTORY

There have been two international conferences on sustainability during the past eight years. Finally, the international political community has come to recognize the threat of environmental deterioration. This is an important step. However, we cannot afford to delay addressing our own environmental problems while we wait for the international community. Now that we know that forging a sustainable society is the key to our future well-being, and

that of succeeding generations, where and how do we start? This is simple enough: It must all start with the President and the Congress because the legal authority is in their hands alone.

Most of us have many chances to do the right thing during our lives, but very few among us are afforded the opportunity to be a key player in launching a program that will reverberate down through history as an act of vision and statesmanship. The President and this Congress have that chance.

Next year will be that Golden Opportunity for the President and the Congress to heed Bismarck's elegant observation when he said: “The best a statesman can do is listen to the rustle of God's mantle through history and to try to catch the hem of it for a few steps.” •