

Sen. Gaylord Nelson

Seizing the conscience of a nation

by Guest Editor John F. Rohe

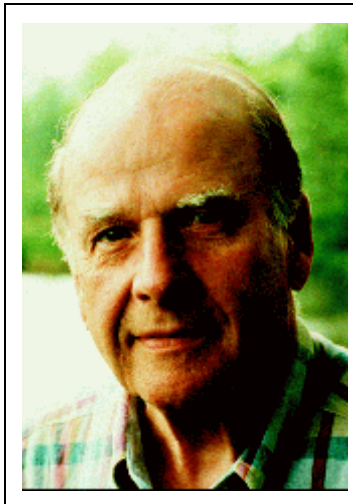
Absolutes are elusive in a universe of infinite variability. Environmentalists and conservationists would, however, seldom disagree with this absolute truth: Everyone in the movement today has been directly or indirectly influenced by Senator Gaylord Nelson.

It was seven years in the planning. After limping away from a slow start, Senator Nelson persisted against the odds. Through his energy and persistence, the date of April 22, 1970 seared an indelible mark on the conscience of a nation. He organized the first Earth Day. Twenty million demonstrators participated in this event. It was the largest demonstration in the history of our country. It will define Senator Nelson's legacy.

Those now inhabiting the tent of environmental concerns for the future can trace their intellectual heritage, in some way, to Earth Day 1970. They might have been drawn into the movement by its ethical imperatives. Perhaps they were swept into the fashionable nature of its grasp. If they were not yet in their impressionable years at the time, then they were influenced along the way by someone who was.

Senator Nelson rocked the conscience of a nation. He set a moral compass. Relationships between people and the land would never be the same. His enduring

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influence has deeply penetrated the heart of America, and the soul of anyone still striving to become a good ancestor.

Earth Day 1970 made politically feasible a stream of environmental legislation in the 1970's. Senator Nelson set the stage for a flurry of environmental activity. More importantly, he created public sentiment that made bipartisan support possible. The following is a highly abbreviated list of the environmental legislation that followed Earth Day 1970:

The 1972 Clean Water Act, 1973 Endangered Species Act, 1974 Safe Water Drinking Act, 1975 National Environmental Policy Act Amendments, 1976 Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, 1976 Toxic Substances Control Act, 1985 Superfund Amendments, and in 1988 a re-authorization of the Endangered Species Act. Additionally, there have been hundreds of individual public lands bills enacted since 1970.

Senator Nelson's legacy includes not only specific legislation, but also an environmental sensitivity pierced into our hearts.

While approaching the 10th decade of his life, Senator Nelson still challenges the conventional wisdom of the day. In his recent book, *Beyond Earth Day: Fulfilling the Promise*, published by the University of Wisconsin Press in 2002, the Senator continues to unveil vulnerabilities in the unexamined assumptions of our day. At page 144, he addresses immigration as follows: "Never has an issue with such major consequences for this country been so ignored."

Senator Nelson: *The Social Contract* honors your foresight, applauds your convictions, celebrates your successes, and reveres the blessings of the future held in your heart. •