

Earth Day 2017: Making Peace with the Planet Won't Be Easy

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Theme: [Environment](#)

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[Greg Guma](#) 21 April 2017

It had arrived again, the day that newspapers, TV and magazines had been hyping. April 22, Earth Day, or, as it was known in 1990, "The Dawn of the Environmental Decade." But despite the sunny skies and big promises to "clean up the planet," I was uneasy.

Should I have been more content? Maybe. After all, the news that we faced a crisis of global, potentially catastrophic proportions was finally reaching the masses. I had been urging people to take individual and collective action since the first Earth Day twenty years before. Yet most of the "save the planet" messages, and even an emerging eco-consciousness, felt unsettling rather than reassuring.

On the previous Friday, for instance, CBS's **Dan Rather** had reported that we were making headway in reducing smog over many US cities. Really? In most urban areas residents faced smog levels up to 150 days a year. Rather's report and others seemed misleading. The idea that environmental protection laws passed after the original Earth Day had produced real gains provided a false sense of security.

Newspapers congratulated themselves for using recycled paper. But there was no sign of reducing the amount of mindless pap promoting a "consumer society" that perpetuates waste and pollution. And of course, major corporations touted their newfound commitment to environmental protection while conveniently omitting their toxic crimes.

Time Warner sponsored The Earth Day Special and promised to do its part. But what about Time magazine? asked my son. He knew that its 30 million glossy copies were produced on non-recyclable paper every week.



Too cynical? It was Earth Day, after all. Time to forgive and recycle, right? But I just couldn't buy into the "we can do it" mood. Something simply wouldn't leave my mind. Reality. Things were getting worse, not better. The hype no longer convinced me that "we will do it," at least until we understood what was really wrong.

Celebrating Earth Day was educational and fun. But I wasn't impressed, and either was the planet.

Maybe the problem was too much information. For several months I had been part of a local environmental task force. We'd looked into what Burlington, Vermont could do to create more "ecological security." That phrase, used to name a conference I'd organized to bring together the peace and environmental movements, was an attempt to refocus locally at the end of the Cold War. Our insecurity, it suggested, stemmed from diverse threats to the natural world. The Task Force was expected to create a factual record and come up with bold yet feasible remedies.

We managed to develop a respectable list of first steps, among them proposals for a local ban on the use or sale of all products producing CFCs, the creation of citywide bike lanes, buying development rights to the delicate Intervale area, establishing a collection and storage facility for hazardous wastes, and a community panel to oversee biotechnology operations at the university. Like lists of "simple things you can do" being distributed at the time, such changes were clearly necessary. Still, on reviewing their work, some Task Force members felt defeated.

Had we succeeded only in developing another laundry list, while failing to identify the underlying problems? Wouldn't other actions by the government and private interests negate the improvements we suggested? No funds for recycling had been included in the new Public Works budget. And despite a stated commitment to explore alternative transportation, the city administration still proposed new roads and the expansion of others. Some even thought it advisable to build a road over the edge of a recently closed landfill. Without limits on development and changes in energy production, even not-so-simple things would have a negligible effect.

Despite the best intentions, the Ecological Security Task Force had fallen into a trap described by **Barry Commoner** in his book, *Making Peace with the Planet*. Environmental degradation was built into the design of the modern means of production, he argued, and therefore traditional "control" approaches to environmental protection are bound to be inadequate. Trapping or even destroying pollutants merely postpones or shifts the problem. The only way to eliminate a pollutant is to stop producing it. Once produced, it's too late.



Ecological Security Logo

What this suggests is the need for a radical set of changes in lifestyle and production practices. Not to minimize the “every person can make a difference” viewpoint, big institutions do have the biggest impacts. At the local level, government, the university, the hospital complex and the commercial sector would all have to take major steps to reduce waste, stop using or producing non-recyclable or toxic materials, and re-use as often as possible. Voluntary action alone wouldn’t cut it.

You’d have to be living in an oil drum not to see the problem. Air pollution, the Greenhouse Effect, ozone depletion, hazardous waste, acid rain, vanishing wildlife, garbage islands, and more. Plus the dangerous drift of society. Natural products replaced by synthetic petrochemical creations; natural agricultural fertilizers by chemical alternatives; trains, trolleys and buses by private, inefficient and polluting cars; reusable goods by throwaways. Shops, vehicles, factories and farms had become seedbeds of pollution.

And this was before we understood the phrase “climate change” or began to experience “extreme weather.”

Although its charge stopped at the city line, the Ecological Security Task Force recognized that the problems did not. They could only be addressed through regional and broader cooperation. Looking only at the bottom line, corporations had produced much of the mess. But the public was being asked to handle the clean up. In general, environmental laws passed since the first Earth Day had not dealt effectively with what industry produced.

When General Electric proudly proclaimed that it would review the environmental impacts of its products and spend \$200 million on protection, it was important to keep in mind its rarely mentioned 47 contaminated toxic waste sites, past radiation experiments, toxic releases and status as one of the world’s major nuclear contractors.

The challenges are enormous. But what can make a difference is an active, even angry citizenry. And this was another reason for my Earth Day blues. Despite all the study and talk, I could not see the groundswell of popular outrage that was needed for a successful movement. Sure, recycling was catching on and the state was “environmentally conscious.”

But being conscious isn't enough. There must be real demands, ones that force all levels of government to use their purchasing and regulatory powers to eliminate polluting technologies and products, and also rapidly develop alternatives. In particular, the planet and its inhabitants cannot afford the squandering of resources, both material and human, that more than \$1 trillion a year in world military spending represents.

We also need alliances that force businesses and governments to prevent pollution at the source. And it won't get easier as we go along. Steps like halting the production of toxic chemicals or the use of nuclear energy won't be embraced with nearly the enthusiasm of a general "save the planet" campaign. Every time people press for an ecological goal, the response is bound to be a competing economic need. After postponing action for so long, the clean up won't be cheap.

So yes, I am skeptical. It's easy to tell ourselves that "minor" sacrifices will be enough, or that corporations will factor in the environmental impacts as they assess the balance sheets. But these artificial entities are designed to make money, not to protect anything. Under the current capitalist system, they are machines that use the air, water and land without calculating the long-term costs. Meanwhile, most people in the developed world have not truly acknowledged that their lifestyle is built on environmental waste and degradation. As **Paul Erlich** put it, there aren't too many people, just too many rich people.

Will we wake up in time? Are we finally getting serious? These days I wouldn't bet on it. But I look forward to being wrong.

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