

**1969:** Inspired by the “teach-ins” held by [Vietnam War](#) protestors on U.S. college campuses, Senator Gaylord Nelson announces the idea for Earth Day, a large-scale, grassroots demonstration against the degradation of America’s natural resources.

**April 22, 1970:** Twenty million people participate in activities for the [first Earth Day](#) in the United States.

**1970:** Environmental advocacy group Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) was founded. Today, the group has over 1 million members, a staff of over 300 scientists, lawyers and other specialists and offices in [New York](#) City, Beijing, [Chicago](#), Los Angeles, [San Francisco](#) and [Washington](#), D.C.

**December 1970:** The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is established by President [Richard Nixon](#) in order to protect human health and safeguard the natural environment—air, water and land. Before the agency was founded, “the federal government was not structured to make a coordinated attack on the pollutants that harm human health and degrade the environment,” according to EPA.gov.

**1971:** Environmental activist organization Greenpeace is founded. Today, the group, which has campaigned against nuclear power, whaling and global warming, among other issues, has offices in 55 countries around the world.

**1972:** Congress passes the Clean Water Act, which limits pollutants in rivers, lakes and streams.

**1973:** Congress passes the [Endangered Species Act](#) to protect animals and their ecosystems.

**1980:** After 18 years in the U.S. Senate, during which time he advocated for numerous environmental causes, Gaylord Nelson loses his race for a fourth term in office. After leaving the Senate, Nelson

becomes a counselor for The Wilderness Society, an environmental group.

**1990:** The 20th anniversary Earth Day celebrations go global, with participants in over 140 countries.

**1995:** Gaylord Nelson receives the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest award given to a civilian, in honor of his environmental work. President [Bill Clinton](#) says of Nelson: “As the father of Earth Day, he is the grandfather of all that grew out of that event.”

**2000:** Hundreds of millions of people in 184 countries celebrate the 30th anniversary of Earth Day, with a focus on “clean energy.”

**July 3, 2005:** Earth Day founder Gaylord Nelson dies at age 89. His *New York Times* obituary notes that in addition to his Earth Day work, Nelson “was a principal sponsor of laws that preserved the 2,000-mile [Appalachian Trail](#), established fuel efficiency standards in automobiles, sought to control damage from strip mining and led to a ban on the insecticide DDT.”

**2007:** Capacity crowds attend Green Apple Festival Earth Day events in New York City, San Francisco and Chicago. More than 40,000 people show up for Earth Day festivities at Chicago’s Lincoln Park Zoo, setting a single-day attendance record. Earth Day Network members host 10,000 Earth Day events around the world.

**2010:** In honor of the 40th anniversary of Earth Day a climate rally and concert is held on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

**December 2015** - An international treaty on climate change is negotiated and adopted by 196 nations at the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris, France. The pact aims to reduce emissions of planet-warming greenhouse gases. The United States withdraws

from the agreement in 2020 under President [Donald Trump](#), and then rejoins in 2021 under President [Joe Biden](#).

**August 2018:** Swedish teenager and climate activist Greta Thunberg begins protesting in front of the Swedish Parliament with a sign: “School Strike for Climate.” Her protest to raise awareness for [global warming](#) catches the world by storm and by November 2018, over 17,000 students in 24 countries are participating in climate strikes.

**August 2019:** The United Nations Climate Summit takes place in New York City. It finds that “1.5°C is the socially, economically, politically and scientifically safe limit to global warming by the end of this century,” and sets a deadline for achieving net zero emissions by 2050.

**April 22, 2020:** 2020 saw the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many activities were moved online. A three-day livestream event organized by youth activists and EARTHDAY.org drew millions of viewers.