

Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

Earth Day by Pete Grannis

It's hard to believe that it's been 40 years since the first Earth Day.

My involvement with that historic gathering began in the late fall of 1969. A number of groups in New York City were discussing how to respond to Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson's call for a national grassroots demonstration for environmental action. Some friends and I met in my living room to talk about how we could make a difference. We decided that the most constructive thing we could do would be to coordinate all the groups who were interested in taking part in this demonstration. Our efforts picked up speed in the beginning of 1970, culminating in the massive New York City Earth Day demonstration in April.

April 22nd, 1970 was a gorgeous day. We had convinced Mayor Lindsay to shut down 5th Avenue from midtown to 14th Street, and to close off 14th Street and Union Square Park. It was a festive atmosphere, but people were also angry about how much had gone wrong over so long; how our water was polluted, our land ruined, the air filthy, and how our government leaders didn't seem to be focused on what was happening, or much concern about how to change it.

It was the same across the nation. Millions marched for action and change—demanding an accountable government that would get involved to fix the massive problems we faced. The message sent that day in New York and cities and towns throughout America was a wake-up call to our national, state, and local governments. They understood

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that things needed to change to fix the environment.

That first Earth Day gave rise to a modern environmental movement that looked at the whole environment—air, water, solid waste, land use, land abuse, land preservation, and a host of other issues. Soon after that first Earth Day, the federal government passed the Clean Water Act, which has been an instrumental law for cleaning up our nation's waters, and the Clean Air Act, the most effective weapon in our national arsenal to fight air pollution.

That first Earth Day also led me to change careers. Back in 1970, I was a tax attorney at a small city firm and there was conflict for me because Earth Day and tax day were only about a week apart. After experiencing Earth Day, I decided that I'd much rather work to improve the environment than look after peoples' taxes. Through a mutual friend, I met Henry Diamond, who was to become the first DEC Commissioner, and he offered me a job on the leadership team of this newly created environmental agency.

Since that time, progress has been phenomenal. Forty years ago, the Hudson was filled with sewage, industrial and human waste. Today, it's swimmable in almost every part of the river. The air is phenomenally cleaner; it's healthier to breathe. We've cleaned up pollution in neighborhoods and put formerly polluted sites back to good use.

As much as we've accomplished, the work continues. Just as Earth Day 1970

was a tipping point, today we face a similar moment in environmental history. This time, the issue is global climate change. Just as it was forty years ago, the fight against global warming has been spurred by a grassroots, citizen-led response to a massive environmental threat—one that demands concerted, sustained action to address. In New York State and across the globe, we've finally begun to respond. I'm proud to be back at DEC to help lead New York's efforts.

Back in April 1970, I couldn't have imagined the enormous strides we would make in the coming decades. In New York State, our continued environmental progress is the direct result of the dedicated men and women at DEC, whose daily work pays tribute to the millions of concerned citizens of all ages and backgrounds who marched, demonstrated and demanded change forty years ago.

Pete Grannis is commissioner of DEC.



Earth Day, April 1970. Fifth Avenue, Manhattan.

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