

# An Environmental Vision 40 YEARS LATER



DEC Commissioner Henry L. Diamond pedals the streets of Manhattan during his historic 350-mile statewide bike ride in 1972 in support of the successful \$1.15 billion Environmental Quality Bond Act. To the left, riding several rows behind Mr. Diamond is current DEC Commissioner Pete Grannis (in white).



## DEC Commissioner Pete Grannis reflects on the foresight of the department's first Commissioner, Henry Diamond

On July 1, 1970, in the aftermath of the first Earth Day, DEC was formed. On the occasion of the creation of this new “super” department for the environment, the *Conservationist* sat down with new DEC Commissioner Henry Diamond to get his thoughts on the future of the department and the environmental challenges ahead. The following are excerpts from that 1970 interview with Commissioner Diamond, and from a recent interview with current DEC Commissioner Pete Grannis, who reflects on what has come to pass over the last 40 years.

**1970: In a recent *New York Times* interview, in response to a question about combating pollution, you said, “The front line is picking up garbage.” Could you elaborate?**

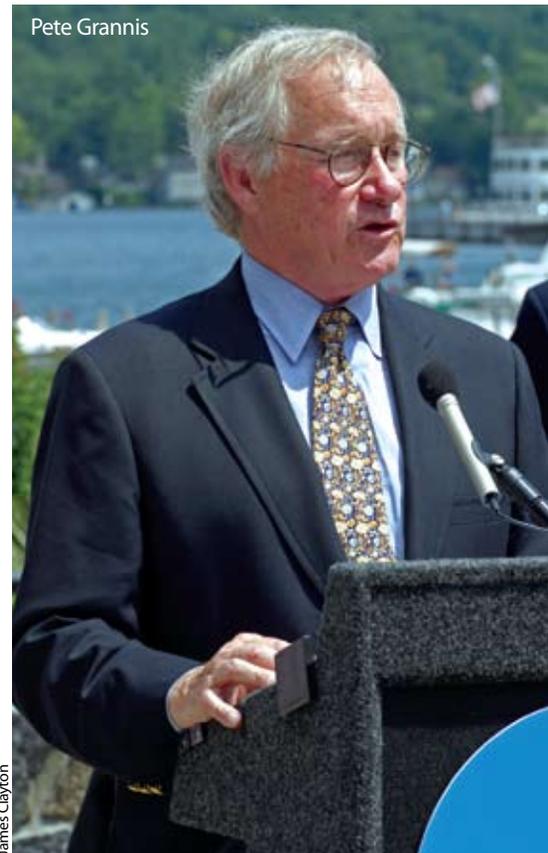
### **Henry Diamond:**

The point, I think, is very important, perhaps even the key element. There is a great deal of enthusiasm, zeal, public fervor and rhetoric about the environment right now. Our great challenge is to translate this enthusiasm into action. The things we talk about doing to combat pollution are really pretty grubby, difficult, unpleasant, unsexy, undramatic things—taking filth out of water, taking grime out of air, and picking up the garbage. They are, perhaps, not as dramatic as going to the moon, but it is more important for our survival.

**2010: Did we meet the challenge of translating the enthusiasm that existed after the first Earth Day into action?**

### **Pete Grannis:**

Yes. I think it clearly did happen. The first Earth Day in 1970 was viewed as a national one-day focus on the environment. Out of that day came the beginnings of the modern environmental movement. And some of the great environmental organizations were formed as a result of Earth Day activities. This agency was formed, the federal Environmental Protection Agency was formed, and agencies like DEC were created around the country. So clearly it was much more than a one-day flash in the pan. It was a very fundamental change—the beginning of a new era. You just have to look how far the country has come in the last 40 years, when we've had some of the strongest environmental laws on the books.



Obviously people are still concerned about some of the same things. Is the air healthy enough? Is the water clean enough? But back in those days many of our waterbodies were open sewers. There were industrial waste pits for businesses along the Hudson River, and other waterbodies in New York were used as dumping pits. Lake Erie was thought to be dead. Today it has one of the most important and exciting fisheries in the country. We've come a long way, but those issues are still out there. We have to make sure that our successes are maintained. We have a way to go, but I think that this progress wouldn't have been possible without the energy that came out of that first Earth Day.

I don't see another great day like we had 40 years ago, but the current concern about Climate Change has been driven by almost the same equation. Government officials didn't seem to get it, couldn't figure out what to do, or

didn't care. But the kids got it when they saw the polar bears on the ice floes and it rippled up to their parents. I think much of the concern about Climate Change has been driven by a citizen movement, and now government officials have finally come to the table and are struggling with solutions. It's a parallel with Earth Day, without the big national focus.

**1970: Historically, conservation activities have been centered in the suburban and rural areas, and yet many of our hardcore environmental pollution problems are in the cities. Will the new department redirect its attention to the urban ills?**

**Henry Diamond:**

I wouldn't call it so much a redirection as I would call it a formation or forging of a new environmental coalition. We've got a tradition of leadership among the fish and wildlife people, the wilderness enthusiasts and sportsmen. These people have always been interested and have always provided leadership.

Now we have a new type of interested citizen. Maybe she is a mother who lives in the Upper West Side of New York City. She doesn't care anything about hunting or fishing, and she doesn't really care about wilderness, but she wants decent air for her child to breathe. She wants to look at

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the Hudson River and see it cleaned up as a place for her child to play.

We are seeing a community of interest from the man who might be a trout fisherman or wilderness advocate, and this mother in upper Manhattan. Basically they are both seeking the same thing: healthy land, clean air and pure water. There is great power here and, quite frankly, political clout to support pollution abatement programs, to support fish and wildlife programs, and to support wilderness programs. I see this as a great opportunity to work together for the things we all want.

**2010: Did that prediction come to pass over the years? Do we still have broad, diverse coalitions pursuing common environmental goals?**

**Pete Grannis:**

Yes, I think so. When the department started 40 years ago, the conservation groups—the hunters and anglers, the people who did the bird watching, and who worried about things outside—were viewed as a much more rural constituency. Clearly, the broader constituency that Commissioner Diamond talked about was the force behind Earth

Day—families in New York City who wanted to go to a clean beach on a weekend; to go to the Hudson River and not have to hold their nose; to go outside and not be choked by car exhaust or have particulates raining down on them when they were having a picnic in a park. Those were constituents who were very much behind the early environmental movement that led to this department, and are still critically important today. While many of them don't view themselves as environmentalists, they certainly appreciate the quality of a clean environment. The point is, there's nothing urban, rural or suburban about clean water and clean air. They're universal. Whether you view yourself as an environmentalist or just somebody who wants to be able to go outside to appreciate nature or sit in the park, those are very common elements.

**1970: How can we pursue the two seemingly incompatible goals of industrial development and economic growth with pollution abatement?**

**Henry Diamond:**

Well, this is, of course, the classic dilemma. If you had no growth and no development you certainly would have far less in the



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Susan L. Shafer



James Clayton

way of pollution. You would also have far less in the way of wages and profits. I think what we are talking about is well thought-out, balanced development so that the new things we do, we do right.

We are going to be reasonable and realize that you have to have electric power, have to have jobs—but we were put here by the governor and the people of this state to be advocates for environmental quality. But achieving this balance is that thing called good governance and statesmanship.

### **2010: Have we achieved a balance between economic growth and environmental protection?**

#### **Pete Grannis:**

You just have to look where the country's come from in the last 40 years. Obviously, our economy has prospered, and I think we recognize even more than possibly back then, that a strong and progressive economy depends on strong environmental standards that everybody has to live by. It levels the playing field and sets the goal of an improved environment. Our country has done extraordinarily well with very rigid air, water,

and solid waste standards on the books. Again, it's a balance, of course, but I think there's nothing incompatible with strong environmental standards and a good, strong economy.

### **1970: And finally, how can the average person or family contribute to saving the environment?**

#### **Henry Diamond:**

There is one set of programs concerning our environment that government must do. If you are building a multi-million dollar sewage treatment plant, or you are passing laws to require air pollution control devices on automobiles, or you are buying open space, or providing constitutional protection for the Adirondacks, then government has got to do the job. On the other hand, the average citizen has to join with his fellow citizens and government in many other programs.

We are beginning to see in a very interesting and important way, a new consumerism, a new individualism, and people are accepting personal responsibility for the environment. On the simplest level this means, "I will not litter, I will not throw things out, I will not buy

detergents that are non-degradable with a high phosphate content, or buy plastics and throw them away."

I would like to see the day when our automobiles are marketed not as sex symbols, but instead as symbols of environmental quality. If the public demands that manufacturers produce within environmental guidelines, then an improved environment will be created. And if the individuals do, it will happen. If they don't, it won't, and the rhetoric will fade away. Unfortunately, we may too.

### **2010: How can the average New Yorker help the environment today?**

#### **Pete Grannis:**

I think Henry Diamond was absolutely correct in his assessment of where things needed to go, and it's just as true today. Obviously an awful lot of the environmental movement depends on personal choices and actions. Buying a car that gets better gas mileage and uses cleaner fuel, taking reusable bags to the supermarket instead of using plastic bags, recycling bottles and cans, changing out light bulbs for more efficient ones—all of these little things add up. On top of

those is the personal concern that individuals can convey to the state legislature and to their federal officials about the things they want improved, what they want government to work on to come up with better solutions. A lot is driven by lifestyle decisions in peoples' homes and in their work places.

All across New York State, there are communities that have taken our "Climate Smart Communities" pledge. They're making decisions at the local level, recognizing that while it's not going to make a huge difference in the world's climate, every little bit helps. These are communities and individuals that care, and I think they've been the drivers, as they were 40 years ago, in looking at environmental issues in a new way and with a new concern.

**In 1970, you were hired by Commissioner Diamond on his new executive team. Does looking back on his interview spur memories of your early years at DEC?**

**Pete Grannis:**

Yes, it does. Back in 1970, I was a tax lawyer at a small New York City law firm. Along with a few friends, I helped organize the first Earth Day in New York City. Being part of that amazing experience, seeing all that energy and excitement, I decided that I'd much rather be working on environmental issues than looking after peoples' taxes. Through a friend, I managed to get an appointment with Henry Diamond. He offered me a job as the agency's compliance counsel where my role would be overseeing all DEC's enforcement activities.

It was overwhelming. I was the new kid on the block with a lot of energy and focus, coming from a small law firm to a huge state agency. It was an exciting time, working with people from different backgrounds, with different perspectives, and who treated problems differently.



I greatly admired Henry Diamond back then, and I still do. What he thought and said 40 years ago seems to be surprisingly similar to what we're saying and thinking today.

**As DEC turns 40, is the department's mission as essential as it was in 1970?**

**Pete Grannis:**

Our work today is probably more important than it's ever been. We play a pivotal role, not only in maintaining the quality of the environment, but also in providing the progressive policies that lead to a strong economy. So much of our economy is linked to the work done at DEC—combating Climate Change, ensuring clean water and healthy air, restoring polluted land, reducing waste, protecting our magnificent natural areas—the list goes on and on. What we do at DEC is really at the heart of what the state is all about.

I don't think the men and women of the department get nearly enough credit for the extraordinary job they do. DEC touches every New Yorker's life and that's a message that needs to be sent over and over again. Something good

happens for the environment every day, and it's really because of the people who work at DEC.

**Henry Diamond** is currently a principal of Beveridge & Diamond Law Firm in Washington, D.C., the largest and one of the oldest firms in the United States concentrating in all aspects of environmental law and litigation.

**Pete Grannis** is Commissioner of DEC.

