

CLIMATE ACTION

EARTH DAY, 50 YEARS ON: Q&A WITH DENIS HAYES, COORDINATOR OF THE FIRST EARTH DAY

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In 1970, as a 25-year-old graduate student, Denis Hayes organized the first Earth Day. The resounding success of that event, which brought out 20 million Americans — 10 percent of the United States population at the time — helped spark the modern environmental movement.

The decade that followed saw some of America's most popular and powerful environmental legislation: updates to the Clean Air Act and the creation of the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act and the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency.

Fifty years later, we have different environmental challenges, some much larger, most notably global climate change. Despite the existential threat of climate change, today countries are [rolling back environmental protections, failing to live up to the Paris Agreement](#) and [dragging their feet](#) on climate action. Meanwhile, the environmental movement has gained momentum, thanks in no small part to an infusion of energy and outrage from the [youth climate movement](#).

Ahead of the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, we talked with Denis Hayes, now president of the Bullitt Foundation and board chair emeritus at Earth Day Network. He reflected on the legacy of the first Earth Day, the environmental challenges we face today and the opportunities we still have to secure a sustainable future.

The following conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Earth Day Network: As Earth Day goes digital in the face of the pandemic, we're delivering [24 hours of action online](#). From what I hear, you had an interesting whirlwind 24 hours of your own on the first Earth Day. Can you walk us through what April 22, 1970, looked like to you?

Denis Hayes: Well, I started out in my incredibly drenched basement one-room apartment off Dupont Circle and walked down to the Mall in Washington, D.C., to join in a sunrise ceremony with Native Americans welcoming the sun to bless the day.

I then flew up to New York, where I addressed a massive crowd on Fifth Avenue. Mayor Lindsay had blocked off more than 40 blocks of Fifth Avenue, and we filled it up with demonstrators. There were also crowds at Union Square and a big event at Central Park and Manhattan — we went all out. I have to note that it was the most exciting crowd experience of my life by far until then: The sea of people was literally extending out over the visual horizon.

After that, I went to Chicago, with demonstrations organized mostly by [progressive community activist] Saul Alinsky, so it was much feistier than the New York event. I flew back to Washington, D.C., late that afternoon. I did press roundups of the day on a couple of national television shows and met most of Earth Day's staff late at night for staff drinks and beer. We were settling down with exhaustion and feeling good about the way the day had gone.

EDN: The decade that followed the first Earth Day saw a cascade of environmental protection legislation, some of which are facing recent threats and rollbacks. What do we need to do to spark the next wave of protections for our environment?

DH: I'm not a mechanical determinist in politics, but there is something that has been as regular as a pendulum with the environment in America. The 1970s was a very pro-environment decade, when we were almost unstoppable for 10 years. That led into the 1980s and people whose names are synonymous with anti-environmental zealotry.

If there is a pendulum phenomenon, you might think that after the [current White House] administration, we will have a similar sort of backlash [to recent efforts to] undo 50 years of environmental progress. I think that will build up a fairly strong constituency, and if we pull our act together, we can mobilize to reverse anything and stop anything not yet completed.

The really big question is not so much how we're going to protect the victories of the past, since they are hugely popular and very cost effective; it's how we move into global issues, which we've been notoriously unsuccessful in figuring out ways to address. If it's a national issue, you just pass a law and turn it over to an agency to regulate it — we can enforce it and take people to court. On a global issue, none of that is true.

EDN: That brings me to my next question. We were facing different battles back in 1970, but what lessons can we learn from the first Earth Day that we can apply to our fight today against global climate change?

DH: That first Earth Day was so important in part because we brought together a huge basket of different issues: urban air pollution, freeways cutting through neighborhoods, leaded paint, DDT, the Santa Barbara oil spill, rivers catching on fire. And since people will put the most effort into something that's directly relevant to them, we were very much grassroots. We encouraged people who shared our values to get out and organize and do it within an Earth Day framework.

Similarly going forward, as you look at something like climate change, there are various different approaches to something akin to a Green New Deal. There are various different threats in different parts of the country. We have forest fires where I live, but we've never had a hurricane. And so, the things that will be relevant in one place will be very different in another. We need to have that latitude.

We are beginning to do a much better job in incorporating people of color, of talking about the economic disparities in American society. And if we're going to restructure things, we need to do it in a fashion that will not produce dry-end gulfs between the ridiculously rich and the destitute. If there is a lesson, it's this: That first Earth Day was a very big tent with a broad set of values that underpinned it. The tent has become narrower in ensuing decades, and while remaining firm in our values and goals and objectives, we need to be more welcoming.

EDN: I wanted to talk a little bit about the recent rise of the youth climate movement and one of their tactics: striking from school. Did that school strike tactic fit with or against the ways you organized and mobilized young people and students in the 1970s?

DH: We had huge numbers of participants from K-12 schools on the first Earth Day, and it did have objectives, though they tended not to be politically polarized objectives. We wanted clean air, we wanted clean water, we wanted to have the ability to eat our food without being contaminated with pesticides. And so, we had significant support from the National Education Association and the National Science Teachers Association and in thousands or tens of thousands of schools across the country.

The students were out doing things on Earth Day, but they didn't have to strike, because the schools actually supported it. So, in that sense it was different from what we have today.

EDN: What do you see as the key legacy of the first Earth Day?

DH: The legacy of the first Earth Day was a fundamental restructuring of the American economy. The legislation of the 1970s was possibly the biggest change in how American industry operates in the nation's history. Folks who had no concern whatsoever for pollution, for toxics disposal, for resource extraction, suddenly had to operate within ways that were benefiting public health and benefiting the environment.

The only other thing of a similar scale that has taken place in American history was the New Deal, and it's up in the air which had the greatest, most enduring impact on the structure of American industry. But the New Deal was led by an enormously popular president coming out of the Great Depression with his party in control of both houses of Congress, whereas the environmental revolution was entirely grassroots. We had none of that on our side, but nonetheless, managed to achieve fairly sweeping ends.

I'd add to that a change in the way Americans perceive the world around them. In the 1960s, the most common perception of pollution was that it's the smell of progress, the smell of prosperity. And we were able to create a context in which people began to change their behavior, their values, what cars they bought, what food they ate, what clothes they wore, making decisions to only have one or two children for environmental reasons. It was sweeping in the ways that millions of Americans led their lives.

EDN: What does a successful Earth Day 2070 look like? And what legacy do you hope to build as Earth Day heads in the next 50 years?

DH: Well, 50 years ago we did not have computers. We did not have an internet. We did not have smartphones. We did not have lithium ion batteries. We did not have electric automobiles. We did not have smart grids. If you start describing physically what the world will look like, unless you happen to be Jules Verne, you're very likely to get it wrong.

But I do hope that what we have in 2070 is a world that is living within its limits. That is in ecological terms, not going well beyond its current capacity and suffering from overshoots from collapse is something that I fear is likely, but it shouldn't be if we're doing everything well. When we have things going well for the environment, Earth Days tend to be somewhat celebratory, and when you have things going wrong for the environment, then they tend to be protests against all of the things that are going wrong and that are harming people. I hope in 2070 we will be in a position to celebrate.

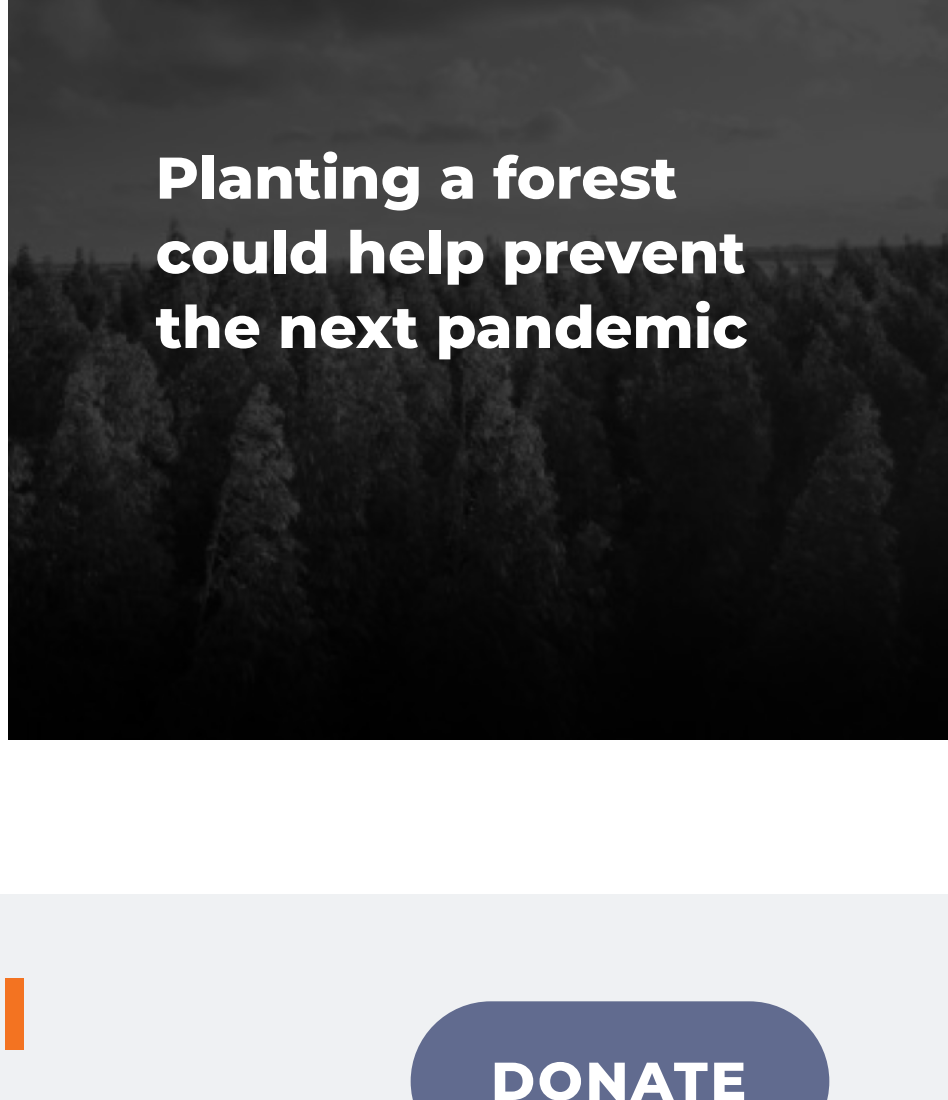
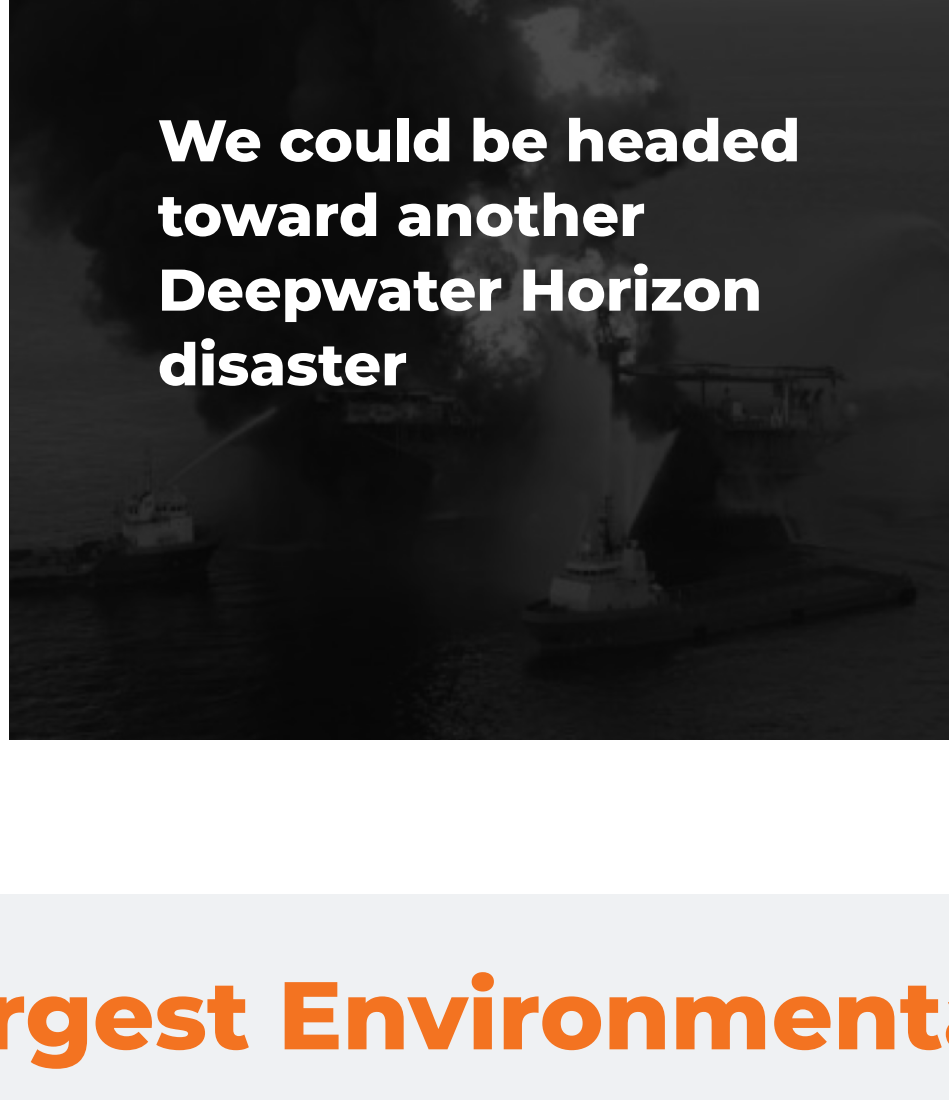
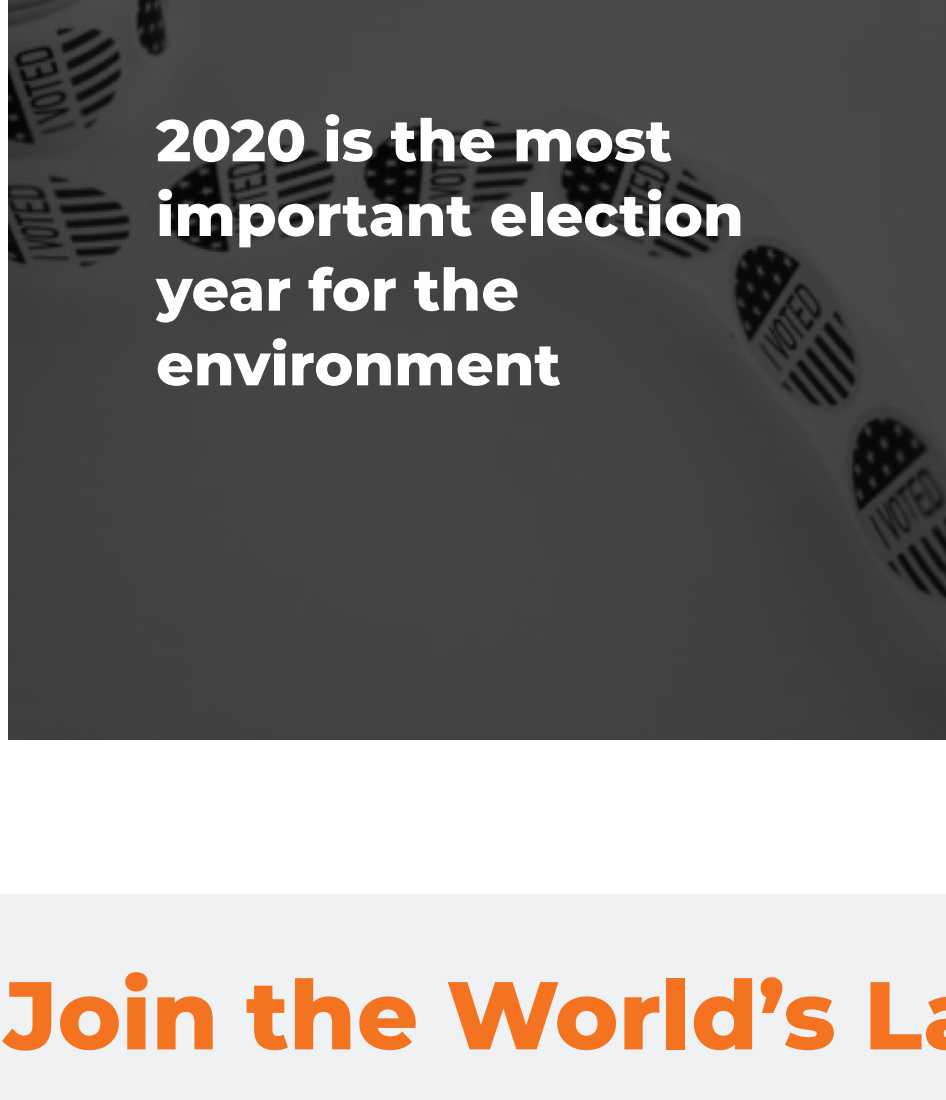
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