

April 12, 1991

Mr. John Lancaster
Washington Post
1150 15th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20071

Dear John:

John Teare tells me that you doubt whether Earth Day 1991 is sufficiently newsworthy to justify a story. From a reporter's standpoint I can see how one might want to conclude that there is no adequate news hook for a story. I think, however, that there is a compelling case to be made for the proposition that the 20th anniversary celebration of Earth Day, so widely covered by the media, was not nearly so important an event as the unreported story of evolving environmentalism which is spreading through every facet of society. Each year the press ought to update the country with a wrapup story on the state of environmentalism in all its aspects. If a new political party were established and its influence were expanding into our school system, the churches, the private sector, and the political sector that story would be big news. An annual update on the status and progress of the new party would be considered a required subject for coverage. Yet here is a phenomenon with greater social, cultural, economic and political implications than any other that I can identify and it remains superficially covered at best.

After establishing Earth Day 1970 I organized Earth Week 1971, '72 & '73. My objective was an annual educational observance in our grade schools, high schools and colleges. These events were quite successful with a substantial number of schools participating. In fact I spoke at Earth Day events every year for 19 years following Earth Day.

The event is now well enough established at the grass roots so that there will be several thousand grade schools, high schools, colleges, communities, churches and corporations participating in Earth Day activities this year with the number increasing every year.

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Much of what has happened hasn't been reported anywhere, so far as I know. For example the student organization SEAC (Student Environmental Action Coalition) was established in 1989 to be part of the Earth Day 1990 Celebration. In less than two years SEAC Chapters have been established on 1,400 college campuses. Last October I attended the first SEAC Convention at the University of Illinois. There were 7,000 delegates from all 50 states and 18 foreign countries. That's almost three times as large as either the Democratic or Republican national convention. The fact that there is enough interest in this issue among college students to organize 1400 chapters in less than two years shows that something important is happening.

Environmental education in our schools is now becoming an important issue. I am speaking at a statewide environmental education event in Minnesota on April 26. Such conferences are beginning to proliferate around the country. Last year Wisconsin became the first state in the nation to mandate environmental education in the state school system K through 12. Other states are following Wisconsin's lead.

Many corporations are putting on environmental seminars for their employees. Four weeks ago I spoke at a two day seminar sponsored by Johnson Wax in Racine for their employees and their national suppliers. There has been a sea change in attitude by corporations on this issue. Twenty years ago not a single corporation or business leader contacted me about Earth Day or the environment. They are now deeply involved and I hear from them regularly explaining their involvement or asking advice. Enclosed is an Earth Day magazine written by Earth Day USA and sponsored by Proctor & Gamble and Hardee's. Hardee's will distribute one million copies. All of this is important because involvement of the corporate sector is essential if real progress is to be made.

Except for an article in Environmental Action, I haven't noticed a single news story about the increasing involvement of churches in the environmental cause. This year I have spoken on the environment at church services in Minnesota, Pennsylvania and Delaware. The whole service including prayers and sermon was devoted to the environment. This is the first year since Earth Day 1970 that I have been invited to give an environmental speech at a church, though I have given a number of speeches on Civil Rights which has been a long time religious cause. A bit more than a year ago a national organization called North American Coalition on Religion and Ecology was founded with headquarters here in Washington. Its impact is extending to churches from coast to coast - in good part because ministers and their congregation reflect the growing national concern.

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I don't wish to overly burden you with examples of the changes that are happening - I simply wish to point out that the press is not really covering the big picture. What is happening at the grass roots level in schools, churches, corporations, communities, etc. in all 50 states is more important than the dramatic 20th Anniversary celebration of Earth Day last year because it demonstrates the a growing grass roots commitment and concern over the issue which will permanently influence the direction of society.

This only touches lightly on what is going on, mostly unreported.

In any event if you have some interest in exploring my view further I would be happy to visit with you at your convenience - preferably over a Milwaukee beer.

I have enclosed a recent Earth Day speech, article from Environmental Action, a brief explanation of the Wisconsin Environmental Education Act and the Earth Day magazine.

Sincerely,

Gaylord Nelson