**WHEN THE EARTH MOVED**

*What happened to the environmental movement?*

by [Nicholas Lemann](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/nicholas_lemann/search?contributorName=nicholas%20lemann)



*Earth Day began as a minimally organized teach-in.*

On September 20, 1969, Gaylord Nelson, a Democratic senator from Wisconsin, gave a lightly publicized speech in Seattle in which he remarked, “I am convinced that the same concern the youth of this nation took in changing this nation’s priorities on the war in Vietnam and on civil rights can be shown for the problem of the environment. That is why I plan to see to it that a national teach-in is held.” Nelson had been pushing environmental issues for some years, initially worried that water pollution was hurting fishing, canoeing, and other forms of outdoor recreation in his state. In 1963, as a freshman senator, he persuaded President John F. Kennedy to stage a national “conservation tour” to talk about the issue. Kennedy visited eleven states in five days, just two months before his assassination, but the trip was a bust: anemic crowds, little attention, and not much obvious passion from Kennedy himself.

But Nelson’s idea of a national teach-in took off, to an extent that surprised even him. On April 22, 1970, only seven months after his speech in Seattle, the teach-in, dubbed Earth Day, generated more than twelve thousand events across the country, many of them in high schools and colleges, with more than thirty-five thousand speakers. “Today” devoted ten hours of airtime to it. Congress took the day off, and two-thirds of its members spoke at Earth Day events. In all, millions of people participated. This activity was largely uncoördinated. Earth Day had a tiny national staff—a handful of young activists—and there were no big environmental groups around to get behind it. The staff imposed minimal central direction over the local activity, and chose not to put on a main event, like a march on Washington.

Adam Rome’s genial new book, “The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-in Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation” (Hill & Wang), brings to life another era. We’re as distant from Earth Day as the Battle of Gettysburg was from James Monroe’s reëlection, and Rome evokes a United States that feels, politically, like a foreign country. There were a number of liberal Republicans. Most active members of environmental groups were hunters and fishermen. The Sierra Club was an actual club that required new members to be proposed by old ones. The Environmental Defense Fund was two years old. Things like bottle recycling and organic food were exotic.

Earth Day’s success was partly a matter of timing: it took place at the moment when years of slowly building environmental awareness were coming to a head, and when the energy of the sixties was ready to be directed somewhere besides the Vietnam War and the civil-rights movement. A coterie of celebrated environmental prophets—Rachel Carson, David Brower, Barry Commoner, Paul Ehrlich—had already established themselves, and Rome reminds us of the larger context: a suburbanizing, middle-class nation was increasingly aware of the outdoors and prepared to define liberalism in more than purely economic terms.

Earth Day had consequences: it led to the Clean Air Act of 1970, the Clean Water Act of 1972, and the Endangered Species Act of 1973, and to the creation, just eight months after the event, of the Environmental Protection Agency. Throughout the nineteen-seventies, mostly during the Republican Administrations of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, Congress passed one environmental bill after another, establishing national controls on air and water pollution. And most of the familiar big green groups are, in their current form, offspring of Earth Day. Dozens of colleges and universities instituted environmental-studies programs, and even many small newspapers created full-time environmental beats.

Then, forty years after Earth Day, in the summer of 2010, the environmental movement suffered a humiliating defeat as unexpected as the success of Earth Day had been. The Senate Majority Leader, Harry Reid, announced that he would not bring to a vote a bill meant to address the greatest environmental problem of our time—global warming. The movement had poured years of effort into the bill, which involved a complicated system for limiting carbon emissions. Now it was dead, and there has been no significant environmental legislation since. Indeed, one could argue that there has been no major environmental legislation since 1990, when President George H. W. Bush signed a bill aimed at reducing acid rain. Today’s environmental movement is vastly bigger, richer, and better connected than it was in 1970. It’s also vastly less successful. What went wrong?

In Rome’s view, the original Earth Day remains a model of effective political organizing. He believes that Gaylord Nelson’s idea of a “teach-in” was more than just sixties jargon. It defined Earth Day as educational, school-based, widely distributed, locally controlled, and mass-participatory. He draws a contrast with Earth Day 1990, a far better planned, better funded, more elaborately orchestrated anniversary event, which turned out more than a million people in Central Park and two hundred thousand on the Mall in Washington but had far fewer lasting effects. That was because Earth Day 1990 was, Rome says, “more top-down and more directive” than Earth Day 1970, and more attuned to advertising and marketing than to organizing. Earth Day 1990 kept its message simple, because its organizers “sought to ‘enlist’ people in a well-defined movement, not to enable them to work out their own vision of how they might make a difference.”

I was involved in commissioning two reports, published online earlier this year by an organization called the Scholars Strategy Network, on why the big effort to pass carbon-limiting legislation failed in 2010. Both reports confirm the basic picture that Rome describes. Even as the environmental movement has become an established presence in Washington, it has become less able to win legislative victories. It has concentrated on the inside game, at the expense of efforts at broad-based organizing.

The story of the Environmental Defense Fund is illustrative. Rome presents the infant E.D.F. as a raggedy group of amateur activists on Long Island, whose motto was “Sue the bastards!” It helped to get DDT banned in New York and elsewhere, and successfully pushed for water-safety standards nationwide. By the mid-eighties, though, it had become moribund, and a new president, Fred Krupp, then thirty years old, advocated an accommodationist direction for the movement, focussed on deal-making with big business and with Republicans. In the summer of 2006, Krupp and a few allies began assembling a coalition that met regularly at the offices of a professional mediation firm in Washington. He persuaded a number of major corporations with heavy carbon footprints, like Duke Energy, BP, and General Electric, to join. The coalition became an official organization called the U.S. Climate Action Partnership, funded primarily by a handful of major philanthropists and foundations. Shortly before President Obama’s Inauguration, USCAP released the fruit of its labors: a draft of the ill-fated carbon-emissions bill.

Back in the Earth Day era, the federal government would deal with such emissions simply by ordering limits on them. Since then, market solutions to big social problems have triumphed. For years, “cap-and-trade,” a system of tradable permits for carbon emissions, had been the solution preferred by many of the established environmental groups, because that seemed to be the best way to bring business on board. (For the same reason, Democrats came to favor a market mechanism—private health exchanges—to achieve their long-cherished dream of universal health care.) But in previous years even cap-and-trade bills had repeatedly been defeated by Republican opponents. Petra Bartosiewicz and Marissa Miley, the authors of one of the reports on the failure of the legislation, observe that, as a result, the major environmental groups felt that they had to strike enough deals with big business in advance to guarantee at least some Republican support.

In the summer of 2009, Democrats in the House of Representatives, joined by a handful of Republicans, passed a bill based on the USCAP framework. It was fourteen hundred pages long. Almost immediately, corporate members dropped out of the coalition; as the grand alliance unravelled, the bill languished in the Senate. After Harry Reid, then in a tight reëlection campaign against a Tea Party candidate, dropped it, Rahm Emanuel, the White House chief of staff, blasted the environmentalists’ political ineptitude at a private meeting. (Bartosiewicz and Miley obtained a tape recording.) The big environmental groups had promised the White House that they could deliver a few key Republican votes in the Senate. Instead, Emanuel said, “They didn’t have shit. And folks, they were dicking around for two years. And I had those meetings in my office so it was not that I wasn’t listening to them. This is a real big game, and you’ve got to wear your big-boy pants.”

The environmental movement had certainly believed that it was playing the big game. Bartosiewicz and Miley estimate that the groups behind the climate-action partnership spent hundreds of millions of dollars in the effort to pass their bill. The organizers of Earth Day never would have been able to get a substantial group of corporate chief executives to sit down with them and negotiate, even if they had wanted to. Today’s big environmental groups recruit through direct mail and the media, filling their rosters with millions of people who are happy to click “Like” on clean air. What the groups lack, however, is the Earth Day organizers’ ability to generate thousands of events that people actually attend—the kind of activity that creates pressure on legislators.

Once you get past the cheering that President Obama aroused by mentioning climate change in his Inaugural Address (as he scarcely did during his reëlection campaign), it becomes clear that his approach to climate change, in his second term, is to move still further in the same direction. That means entrusting the mission to regulators, and abandoning efforts to mobilize the public and its representatives. “I will direct my Cabinet to come up with executive actions we can take” to limit carbon emissions, he announced in his recent State of the Union address. Here was a President who had won reëlection so decisively that there was talk about whether the Republican Party was doomed, and he was starting his second Administration by implicitly acknowledging that Congress would never pass any bill that would address the most serious and obvious environmental problem of our time.

The failure of environmental legislation isn’t just a matter of faulty strategy. Part of Earth Day’s success, Rome makes clear, was that it promised short-term, tangible, personal benefits in a way that climate-change legislation cannot. Back in 1970, suburban mothers (who, along with college students, made up the core of the new environmental movement) wanted to protect their children from contaminated air, water, and food; hunters and fishermen wanted their habitats back. The danger of global warming, at least until recently, has been less local and less obvious. Since the original Earth Day, conservatives have grown increasingly hostile to environmentalism. After the rise of the Tea Party in the hinterland and an anti-environmental lobbying apparatus in Washington—and many years of Rush Limbaugh and his imitators mocking “environmentalist wackos”—even the few Republicans in Congress who had been concerned about climate change, like John McCain, were frightened away. Still, Obama’s strategy is a short-term one. Republican members of Congress are lying in wait, poised to try to undo environmental regulations that they find excessive. For people who are serious about trying to restrict carbon emissions and slow the onset of climate change, the question is how to restore the environmental movement to the public realm.

Perhaps part of the problem is some fundamental mistake in the way we understand our environmental responsibilities. Aaron Sachs, a historian at Cornell, suggests as much in a long, ambitious new book called “Arcadian America: The Death and Life of an Environmental Tradition” (Yale). He rejects the ideal of protecting nature from human civilization. Instead, he thinks, we should revive an earlier, more integrated American tradition: “Our forebears were obsessed with the possibilities of Arcadia—that ancient society of solid rural values, of pastoralists who wandered free over a broad countryside of mountain meadows and forest glens, yet who also, somehow, established the kinds of stable civil institutions that ennobled Aristotle’s Athens.” To understand this tradition and then to bring it back to life, he believes, “could be precisely what’s needed in the age of global warming.”

“Arcadian America” is part of a series that Yale University Press has launched, called New Directions in Narrative History, which promises to publish books that “offer significant scholarly contributions while also embracing stylistic innovations as well as the classic techniques of storytelling.” In Sachs’s case, a historical essay has been interwoven with a personal memoir, mainly concerned with his rather unremarkable interactions with nature and with death. I could have done without the memoir. The historical sections of the book are executed at a higher level.

In Sachs’s account, the Arcadian ideal prevailed in the first half of the nineteenth century. It envisaged humans and nature as intertwined: landscapes artfully shaped for people’s needs, people adapting their lives to natural contours, especially to the inevitability of death. Mount Auburn Cemetery, outside Boston, which opened in 1831, and its imitators (like Green-Wood Cemetery, in Brooklyn) are for him the exemplars of Arcadian America, with their rolling, parklike design and constant use by the living as well as by their belowground permanent residents.

Arcadia was a casualty of the Civil War—not just because the war was so profoundly unpastoral but also because, afterward, the country set itself, with renewed vigor, on a path of industrialism, deforestation, and Western expansion that was the opposite of the gentle equipoise with the land which defined the Arcadian ideal. Civil War cemeteries didn’t have meandering layouts. They were grids, and so were cities and the large-scale farms that pioneers established west of the Mississippi River. In opposition to those excesses, the idea arose of wilderness preservation, which led to the establishment of the National Park Service. Sachs mistrusts that approach, because it’s based on the idea of humans and nature occupying separate realms.

Sachs’s ruminative, associative style makes for interesting takes on dozens of writers, artists, and landscape architects, but it isn’t well suited to forcing a main argument out into the open. It’s refreshing to encounter a version of American history before the environmental movement that isn’t just a procession of despoilers of nature, but Sachs has a fundamentally nonpolitical mind. When he recounts how Gilded Age writers whom he regards as potentially Arcadian, like Ignatius Donnelly, turned instead to socialism and other economic remedies, he is palpably disappointed. Here’s where he winds up:

My hope, for all future generations, is that they will have (in addition to sunshine, fresh air, clean water, and fertile soil) a somewhat slower pace of life, with plenty of time to pause, in quiet places . . . haunted places—everyday, accessible places, open to the public—places that are not too radically transformed over time—places susceptible of cultivation, where people can express their caring, and nature can respond—places with tough, gnarled roots and tangled stalks, with digging mammals and noisy birds—places of common remembrance and hopeful guidance—places of unexpected encounters—places that breed solidarity across difference—places where children can walk in the footsteps of those who have gone before—places that are perpetually up for adoption—places that have been humanized but not conquered or commodified—places that foster a kind of connectedness both mournful and celebratory.

Theda Skocpol, a political-science professor at Harvard and the author of the second report on the failure of the cap-and-trade bill in 2010, represents an academic sensibility that’s the complete opposite of Aaron Sachs’s. A proud daughter of blue-collar Macomb County, Michigan, Skocpol is hardheaded, plainspoken, specific, practical-minded, and opinionated. For years, she has been studying the successes and failures of political movements, and her clear preference is for local organizing. Her master example is the pension system for Civil War veterans, which, thanks to the effective efforts of the veterans themselves, became so extensive and generous (at its peak, it accounted for more than forty per cent of the federal budget) that in the eighteen-eighties one of the largest government office buildings in Washington, now the National Building Museum, was built to administer it.

Skocpol dismisses the notion that climate-change legislation failed because Obama and Harry Reid were not sufficiently committed to it. They were initially no more committed to health-care reform, she asserts; a large pro-reform campaign that invested heavily in a fifty-state organizing effort, called Health Care for America Now, helped propel the legislation. By contrast, the forces behind the climate-change bill directed their money chiefly to the inside game in Washington, and secondarily to “messaging,” rather than to organizing. (They ginned up an organization called Clean Energy Works, which was supposed to build public opinion in support of its bill. Bartosiewicz and Miley report that, after extensive polling, it came up with the slogan “More Jobs. Less Pollution. Greater Security”—not even mentioning global warming.) Skocpol scorns the tactic of trying to mobilize broad support exclusively through the media: “ ‘The public’ is seen as a kind of background chorus that, hopefully, will sing on key,” as the insiders try to manipulate people with focus-grouped phrases. Instead, she argues, “reformers will have to build organizational networks across the country, and they will need to orchestrate sustained political efforts that stretch far beyond friendly Congressional offices, comfy board rooms, and posh retreats.”

That doesn’t mean that environmentalists should simply hand the movement over to the grassroots, demonstration-staging left. Reformers “cannot simply turn away from national politics,” Skocpol writes. She has argued for years that liberal victories are more likely to be secured by “federated structures”: groups that form state organizations and local chapters, which meet regularly to develop their larger political goals. The groups’ national headquarters allow the local chapters to function according to their “local variety.”

Democratizing the environmental movement may have policy implications, too. Skocpol advocates an alternative to cap-and-trade called cap-and-dividend, because it would put the fees levied on carbon emissions into the hands of individual voters, not companies. Cap-and-trade involves deals made among corporations. With cap-and-dividend, consumers who bought goods made by low-carbon manufacturers would get payments. This approach could give millions of Americans a direct stake in the system.

In the decades since Earth Day, Americans have become attuned to forms of social justice of which we used to be oblivious—the latest example is gay marriage, and the enlargement of the circle of concern that it stands for. Yet the cultural and economic distance between the top of American society and the broad middle has grown enormously. Political distances have grown, too. Gaylord Nelson’s state is now a battleground, represented in the U.S. Senate by a Republican who is associated with the Tea Party and a Democrat who is the body’s only gay member.

Meanwhile, liberals have come to take as a core creed the urgent need to reckon with global warming, and limit carbon emissions. To turn concern into action requires politics. The science of carbon emissions is there. The politics is not. On its anniversary, Earth Day is worth not just celebrating but also studying—as a story with political lessons. ♦