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Pollution in Memphis - and Politics

(Editorial Climate!) →

Earth Day Didn't 'Just Happen'

By GLADWIN HILL

LOS ANGELES — Tuesday will bring observances of the 10th anniversary of the first Earth Day, and with them, I hope, a requiem for the notion that the environmental revolution is a fad.

A question some are sure to ask skeptically in the less-frenetic atmosphere of 1980 is, "Whatever happened to all the environmental enthusiasm we saw in 1970?" — the inference being that somehow the bottom has dropped out. The answer to that question is simple and impressive: Environmental concern has become institutionalized; it is now an integral part of the national fabric.

LAWS AND REGULATIONS on environmental matters would fill several five-foot shelves. Few sizable projects at the federal, state and even local levels now are launched without environmental-impact assessments. The Environmental Protection Agency is among the largest federal regulatory entities, with 10,000 employees. The Council on Environmental Quality has become a governmental fixture, advising the White House and Congress on policies. On Capitol Hill, the "environmental lobby" is considered one of the most influential.

In partisan politics, environmental issues figure all the way from presidential campaigns down to city council elections, and repeatedly have tipped close congressional and gubernatorial contests. Every sizable corporation now has to have an environmental division and to devote a lot of time and thought to impacts and policies. Environmental organizations are growing in membership and scope. National opinion surveys have consistently shown sustained public desire for environmental improvement, even at appreciable cost.

The delusion that environmental concern was an evanescent aberration rested on three myths that still becloud understanding of just what is going on.

Myth No. 1: Environmental quality is an absolute, like pregnancy — you either have or not. This is a convenient misconception for opponents of environmental reforms because it sets the stage for false alternatives: "Environment or Economic Development," "Environment or Jobs," where no mutual exclusivity exists. Environmental quality essentially is a relative matter — a question of choices and tradeoffs. Nobody questions that homes, factories and highways have to be built, trees chopped down, ores mined. The issue, in each case, is simply: What environmental sacrifices, if any, are involved, and are they worth the result — or is there another way the result could be achieved?

Myth No. 2: "Environmentalism" is an elitist enthusiasm of a small minority of "bird-watchers" and members of arcane groups like the Sierra Club. While conservation organizations have given great impetus to environmental progress, most of them have existed

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for generations as voices crying in the wilderness. It was not until events such as the 1969 Santa Barbara oil-well blowout generated a tidal wave of public concern about conditions that the environmental revolution burgeoned.

Myth No. 3: Environmental reform is a monolithic, unified, integrated "movement" engaged in an Armageddon-like conflict with other values from which it will emerge triumphant or crushed. A casual glance will show that the quest for environmental quality is an immensely ramified, far-flung, fragmented array of efforts on thousands of fronts, ranging from protecting endangered species and corralling oil spills to controlling carcinogenic chemicals and reducing excessive birth rates.

BECAUSE "ENVIRONMENT" is not some absolute state of grace but an infinite series of choices on how we alter our natural heritage, the quest for environmental quality is not a cause that can ever be counted as "won," so that everybody can sit back and forget about it. But it is a cause that cannot be lost, given reasonably wise choices. One way or another the effort will continue. The record of 10 years shows plainly that the crystalization of public concern evinced in Earth Day 1970 was a bell that cannot be unrung.

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