

From VOA Learning English, welcome to THIS IS AMERICA. I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

And I'm Mario Ritter. April twenty-second is Earth Day. Former United States Senator Gaylord Nelson started the observance in nineteen seventy. The aim of this day is to urge local action and increase awareness about the state of the world's environment. The creation of Earth Day is widely considered the beginning of the modern environmental movement.

Gaylord Nelson was a Democrat from the state of Wisconsin. He had always been interested in environmental issues and worked hard to improve the environment in his state. The American public was also increasingly becoming aware of the huge environmental problems the country faced.

In 1969 two environmental problems caught the nation’s attention. The first was a huge oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara, California. More than eighty thousand barrels of crude oil from the spill severely damaged over sixty kilometers of coastline. The second was increased news reporting about a river so polluted that it caught on fire. This was the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland, Ohio.

Senator Nelson knew there was growing public concern about the country’s polluted air, rivers and land. He had been searching for a way to make the environment a subject of interest to all the country’s politicians and leaders. He had observed that students at colleges across the country had been organizing “teach-in” demonstrations to protest the war in Vietnam. He realized that this “teach-in” method would be a useful way for the public to express concern about the environment to federal and state officials.

In September of 1969 Senator Nelson announced his aim to create a national version of an environmental teach-in. The idea immediately received wide popular support from students, teachers, religious leaders and other community groups. It was so popular that his Senate office alone could not deal with the many responses.

So, Senator Nelson created an independent non-profit group called Environmental Teach-In to help organize what would become an environmental revolution.

Gaylord Nelson hired a student and activist named Denis Hayes to lead this special campaign. The aim was to get people young and old across the United States to act locally in solving environmental problems in their areas. Senator Nelson did not want the campaign to be about the changes and actions *he* wanted for the environment.

The movement was to be driven by the American public on a “grassroots” or local level. It was to be an event not just supported by students. Women, labor unions, religious groups, political groups, scientists and environmental organizations would also support the event.

The planning for a national protest on the environment soon began to receive national media attention. The Environmental Teach-In group began to educate people about how to take action locally and spread the news of the event. The group stated that the national day for the environment would be “more than a day of fruitless talking.” And, they created a new name for their national teach-in event: Earth Day.

The hard work of this grassroots effort resulted in the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970. An estimated 20 million people took part. In New York City, Fifth Avenue was closed to traffic as people marched through the streets. At demonstrations in Atlanta, Georgia, and Miami, Florida people gathered to demand a cleaner environment.

Gaylord Nelson later said that “Earth Day worked because of the immediate response at the grassroots level.” He said that the event organized itself.

Lawmakers in Washington seemed to have understood the public demand for a cleaner environment. In December of 1970, a new federal agency began its work.

The Environmental Protection Agency aimed to bring together federal research, supervision, and enforcement of environmental matters. By 1974 several other environmental laws had been signed. These include the Clean Water Act, the Pesticide Control Act, and the Endangered Species Act.

Earth Day has spread well beyond the United States. This year, organizers estimate that one billion people around the world will observe Earth Day. The event is one of the largest civic observances on the planet.

A nonprofit organization called Earth Day Network, based in Washington, DC, helps promote many Earth Day events.

Susan Bass is the senior vice-president of programs and operations at the Earth Day Network. She says Earth Day is still very much about activism and fighting for the environment on a local level.

The theme for 2013 is “The Face of Climate Change.” The Network’s 20,000 partner groups are helping spread the word. Franklin Russell is the director of Earth Day for the Earth Day Network.

“We had a couple photos come in from India recently, from students who were using recycled plastic bags to make pots for their plants. We had a bunch of people take to the streets in Bulgaria to protest deforestation and to demand that the government start taking action.”

Franklin Russell says his group is collecting thousands of pictures from social media for The Face of Climate Change campaign at earthday.org.

“The key is engaging as many people as possible... to take a photo of themselves, depicting either the impact of climate change or even some of the solutions that they are engaged in, share it with us and allow to build this really impressive digital mosaic that we can share with the world and influence change.”

That mosaic appears as a digital wall of photos. VOA reporter Rosanne Skirble calls it “mesmerizing.” She says you can stop on a photo, click to turn it over, and read more on the back. Then, you can join a live Twitter feed to comment on what you see.

One of the photos shows a young girl named Stephanie. She is on a glacier in New Zealand. She comments that warming temperatures have made it impossible to climb some icy peaks.

Another photo shows women in Kenya. They are learning to use new kinds of cook stoves. The stoves are more efficient, less polluting, and safer to operate.

A third photo shows Sarah Vant. Ms. Vant is an educator with a group in England called EcoActive.

“Well, the picture is a picture of me and my friend Polo here. Polo is my polar bear puppet.”

Polo helps Ms. Vant talk about solutions to environmental problems. They also talk about the dangers we face.

“If I talk about the polar bears, he might get a bit sad. Or if a child comes up with a brilliant idea for saving energy or reducing the emission waste that their family might be using, he might get really excited and maybe do a little dance.”

Another face on the mosaic belongs to a 75-year-old woman in a refugee camp on the border between Thailand and Burma. She is carrying a solar panel to put on the grass roof of her house.

“We are the face of climate change because we are proud to have the first solar-powered refugee camp in the world.”

That’s Iona Proebst. She is the executive director and founder of the Branch Foundation. The foundation helps people in South East Asia, includes Burmese refugees. Some of those refugees have been living in a camp without electricity.

Ms. Proebst says the solar panels have changed daily life at the camp. For instance, students' grades have improved. People are no longer getting hurt in fires. And refugees are saving money on lamps and candles. Those savings mean they can buy better food. Ms. Proebst says the solar panel project has given many refugees renewed hope.

“I think it sets an amazing example of a small amount of dedicated individuals wanting to create sustainable change. They are probably in terms what you might think of renewable energy a kind of unlikely suspect. Yet it has worked fantastically well in terms of the benefit.”

One goal of the Earth Day Network mosaic is to connect people around the world. One person commented on pictures of children planting trees. Ngong Edwin Nkainin says, “These children are climate change advocates. Imagine what one hundred children can do.”

Or, on Earth day, what one *billion* people can do.

I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

And I'm Mario Ritter. Join us against next week for THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Learning English.