

Looking Forward

Earth Day goes from Central Coast to global



By Mark James Miller, April 7, 2017

In January 1969, a blowout took place on Union Oil's Platform A, six miles off the Summerland coast, spewing between 80,000 and 100,000 barrels of crude oil into the Santa Barbara Channel.

As horrified residents watched their beaches turn black and the news media showed the world the thousands of dead and dying birds and other marine life caused by the spill, a new consciousness about humankind's relationship with Earth came into being. A new movement, environmentalism, was born, and along with it Earth Day, right here on the Central Coast.

Environmentalism expresses itself most eloquently every year on Earth Day. Celebrated first on April 22, 1970, by a relatively-modest 20 million people, 47 years later it will be observed by over a billion people in 196 countries, making it the largest civic observance in the world.

In its wake came the Environmental Protection Agency, Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act, as well as the movement for green energy and recycling. While the oil spilled in 1969 has long since been cleaned up, the impact of the Platform A blowout is still being felt all over the world.

"We at the Community Environmental Council are big believers in the impact of Earth Day," said Kathi King, director of the Santa Barbara Earth Day Festival. She sees Earth Day "as a way to connect with the community at large about where we are with environmental protection."

King's feelings are echoed by Professor Debra Stakes, who teaches oceanography at Cuesta College.

"All citizens have a responsibility ... to understand the basics of what is happening," said Stakes. "The health of Earth has been jeopardized by those who want to sell more fossil fuels rather than develop sources of renewable energy."

Marc McGinnes, an emeritus member of the UCSB Environmental Studies Program and an organizer of the first Earth Day observance in 1970, agrees with Stakes. He notes that climate change deniers are often acting "to promote the agendas of political/economic interests who benefit from a continuation of reliance on fossil fuels and technologies dependent on them."

Since a climate change denier is now in the White House, "Earth Day will have increased importance," McGinnes continues. With the Trump administration "pursuing the most anti-environmental agenda since the Reagan presidency," environmentalists need to call on citizens to act "as if every day were Earth Day."

King also expresses concerns about what a Trump presidency may mean for the environment.

"This year we are focusing on activism in response to social concerns about impacts to environmental successes from the new administration," she said.

Stakes agrees, pointing out "there are political and industrial leaders that intentionally deny climate change to increase their personal fortunes."

It is important to note, said Stakes, that "climate change deniers are in the minority in this country and the world." Ninety-seven percent of the world's climate scientists believe that not only is climate change real, it is caused by human activity. Stakes notes that while Earth has seen higher temperatures in the past, "these ancient changes happened over millions of years, not hundreds."

"Earth Day continues to evolve," says King, "as more people grow concerned about climate change and want to know how to best address it."

From Santa Barbara to the rest of the world, Earth Day has made its influence felt for nearly 50 years. No doubt that influence will continue and grow well into the new millennium. Earth Day lives on — and it started right here.

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