

Subject: Removing “rivets” and Earth Day  
April 11, 2023

I was at an inaugural Earth Day convocation 53 years ago this month, and it will be celebrated again this year on Saturday, April 22.

I had a little longer hair back in April 1970 and was probably sporting a set of bell-bottom blue jeans, which were the standard in those days. When I attended the convocation, I had both a concern for the environment and as well as myself, as I was also worried about a draft physical and that I was over my head on both accounts.

In spite of my concern for myself and my future, I still recall a statement I heard that day. The speaker recounted what he had read by Barry Commoner, who was an environmental scientist and writer of that period. He likened this issue of preserving the environment to an airplane in flight as if it were the planet's environment. He stated that passengers and pilots could remove a few rivets from the plane's wings and fuselage with no apparent impact on the plane's performance. But eventually, removing too many rivets would fatally doom the plane's flight. The point made was that we were removing natural rivets that held the ecosystem together without noticing the immediate impact.

Climate change was not mentioned at that first Earth Day convocation; that environmental problem would not be realized until some thirty years later. But we affluent Baby Boomers who took the pledge to save the planet that day in 1970 have some “explaining to do.” Our idealism back then did not translate into a societal commitment to preserving the environment once we took control. While some progress was made with the clean air and water legislation that followed in the early seventies, huge initiatives to address climate change—the overarching environmental issue remains to be confronted.

The looming question for humanity is how many more environmental rivets are we willing to remove in the name of progress?

Undeterred by a lack global progress, local volunteers for the annual Highlands Plateau Cleanup will make a small contribution toward preserving and “re-riveting” the environment this Saturday, April 15.

Everyone will gather at Founders Park for a catered breakfast at 8:30. Afterward, volunteers will get their equipment, instructions, and assignments, and then together, we will collect trash on all the corridors and throughout the neighborhoods. The Highlands Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Center sponsors the pickup and coordinates the breakfast, work, and picnic lunch afterward. Please call (828) 526-2112 to volunteer.

Fortunately, we are making systemic progress here as the trash on the corridors is not as bad this year as in the past because our voiced concerns for the environment are making an impact on the community, and we have had a number of volunteer groups and individuals coordinating pickups throughout the year. But this massive volunteer effort will help thoroughly clean the roadsides of the Plateau.

This trash sweep event is one “small rivet” we reposition—so to speak—each spring. Efforts by volunteers ensure that large amounts of plastics, metals, and other trash will not end up in our critical watershed areas.

As we approach this next Earth Day, the big challenges remain as to how to implement green energy initiatives, such as conversion to electric vehicles and the generation of carbon-free energy. We must address these challenges not just to save the earth but rather to save ourselves as a species.

This beautiful Highlands mountain plateau lies in the crosshairs of these decisions about the environment, conservation, and sustainability. How much do we develop? How much population density is acceptable? What level of opulent living can we embrace without removing more ecological rivets?

There’s a generation of young people out there in our educational institutions that are ready for environmental change and justice. I hope they do better than my generation did.

At the community coffee on Friday, April 21, the day before Earth Day, we will recognize Dr. Gary Wien, the retiring Executive Director of the Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust. The conversation will continue about how do we conserve this unique mountain environment and land.