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Earth Day At 55: It Belongs To The Central Coast

By Mark James Miller

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Earth Day belongs to the Central Coast. It began here. When Union Oil's Platform A blew out on January 28, 1969, and spewed 100,000 gallons of crude oil into the Santa Barbara Channel, humankind had an epiphany: We realized that this is the only Earth we have, and if we want to keep living here, we must take better care of it.

The first Earth Day celebrations took place a year later, and were bigger than anyone expected. In New York City crowds were so large Fifth Avenue had to be closed. The National Mall in Washington, D.C., was literally covered with environmental teach—ins. Over 2,000 colleges and universities hosted happenings about the environment. San Francisco raised the new Ecology Flag. Before the year ended, Congress had created the Environmental Protection Agency and passed the Clean Air Act. The Clean Water Act followed in 1972.

The Central Coast played a major role in that first Earth Day. There were protests at the site of the oil spill. Memorials were held for the thousands of birds that were killed. At UCSB students rallied for stronger environmental laws. "We are the trustees of the planet," a student said. "It belongs to the generations that come after us." Republican Congressman Pete McCloskey chimed in, "This is not a political issue. It's a survival issue."

That was two generations ago, and the struggle to save the environment is far from over. Here on the Central Coast this year's Earth Day saw Green Car Shows, an Eco Marketplace, plant—based Food Courts, and Sustainable Transportation. Not to be outdone, Allan Hancock College hosted its own Earth Day Event.

"It was a wonderful success," says primary organizer Erin Krier. The Earth Day Celebration was sponsored by the Eco-Revive Club and the Sustainability Committee.

“Earth is special,” says student Elmer Ramirez, who founded the Eco-Revive Club after being invited to an animal rescue last year. His eyes, he says, were opened to need to live in harmony with nature.

“This was our inaugural event as a new club,” says Erin Krier, the club’s faculty advisor. “The displays and activities from each booth were so engaging, informative, meaningful, I felt like it created a powerful sense of community.”

Campus and community organizations alike were represented at Hancock’s Earth Day: The Fashion and Design Club, the Hiking Club, the Pride Center, the Young Farmers and Ranchers, the Turtle and Tortoise Rescue Sanctuary, the Astronomy Club, and the Santa Maria Natural History Museum, among others. There was a tree planting ceremony in front of the administration building, and that evening featured a showing of *Common Ground* in the Fine Arts Complex, a film that examines the critical role soil health plays in the regeneration of the Earth.

The common theme at this event is that there are myriad ways to help the environment. At one booth flyers spoke of the benefits a vegan diet brings to the planet by conserving land, saving the water supply, and cutting down greenhouse gas emissions. Another explained the way “green jobs” are being created in areas such as renewable energy, mass transit, and water reclamation.

Beyond doubt, much more has to be done. While air quality in the U.S. and Europe is better than it was in 1970, and rivers like the Cuyahoga in Ohio (famous for catching fire in 1969) is no longer toxic, global carbon emissions have risen dramatically, plastic waste has exploded, and air pollution in developing countries like India is far worse than it was half a century ago. The fight to save the Earth will go on for many years to come. The committed people who turn out for Earth Day will be the ones to win it.

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