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Earth Day at 43: It began here

9 HOURS AGO • [MARK JAMES MILLER/COMMENTARY](#)

Earth Day will celebrate its 43rd birthday April 22. What began as the result of a protest against an oil spill in the waters off Santa Barbara in 1969 has evolved into a worldwide movement, dedicated to protecting and preserving the only Earth we have.

On April 22, more than a billion people around the world, from 192 countries, are expected to take part in Earth Day activities.

While the roots of the environmentalist movement run deep, the publication in 1962 of Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" is widely credited with opening up to public discussion the effect humans were having on the environment, particularly in the use of pesticides such as DDT.

But the real catalyst for modern environmentalism came on Jan. 28, 1969, when a [blowout](#) on Platform A, six miles offshore at Summerland, caused crude oil to start spilling into the Santa Barbara Channel. By the time the leaking stopped, between 80,000 and 100,000 barrels of oil had spewed into the water, making it the largest oil spill ever in California and the third largest in American history, after the Gulf spill of 2010 and the Exxon-Valdez in Prince William Sound, Alaska, in 1989.

The effects of the Santa Barbara Channel spill were felt from Pismo Beach all the way to Mexico. The first Earth Day, held a year later in 1970, was a direct result of that spill.

Earth Day was the brainchild of Wisconsin Sen. Gaylord Nelson, who envisioned it as a teach-in to raise public awareness of the risks to the environment that were coming from industrial pollution.

Nelson hoped for a "nationwide demonstration of concern for the environment so large that it would shake the political establishment out of its lethargy and, finally, force this issue permanently into the political arena." He certainly succeeded. In 1970, 20 million people from coast to coast participated. More than four decades later, Earth Day is still going strong and its focus has gotten larger.

"The concerns we have about Earth have changed," says Josh Schimel, who heads the Department of Environmental [Studies](#) at UCSB. "When Earth Day was founded, we didn't really mean the whole Earth. Now we recognize the entire planet is at risk."

After the Santa Barbara spill, the public demanded that protecting the environment become a responsibility of the federal government. As a result, the Environmental Protection Agency was founded in December 1970. In the years that followed, more environmental legislation was passed than at any other time before or since. The [Clean Air](#) Act, Clean Water Act and Endangered Species Act, among others, all came into being in the aftermath of the first Earth Day.

As Earth Day 2013 approaches, people will be asking themselves what they can do to help preserve Earth and its resources. Schimel of UCSB says, “By individual choices, we move the culture. By individual political action, we move our politicians to act.” He believes the biggest local environmental issue is development. “There isn’t a lot of livable space in our developed areas, and we’re increasingly trying to pack in more people.”

Earth Day has a long history and each year adds to its legacy. As public awareness increases of the need to protect Earth from pollution, preserve its resources and fight climate change, people are realizing that each of us can make a difference if we try, by recycling, using [environmentally friendly products](#), conserving energy and knowing that generations coming after us will inherit what we leave behind.

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