

## Mother Earth's Special Day

By Susan Camp

Next Sunday, April 22<sup>nd</sup>, is Earth Day. What began on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1970 in the United States as the first major manifestation of the budding environmental movement has grown into an international effort to combat global warming, increase the production and use of clean energy, and educate the world's citizens about sustainable living.

The Earth Day movement was founded by Gaylord Nelson, a United States senator from Wisconsin. An early environmentalist, Nelson envisioned the first Earth Day as a nationwide "teach-in" to educate Americans about the environmental dangers of the time, which included air and water pollution from factories, highways, and commercial shipping; toxic dump sites; and wildlife extinction.

Twenty million Americans across the nation participated in the first Earth Day rallies, garnering support from both major political parties. By the end of 1970, Congress had passed the Clean Water, Clean Air, and Endangered Species Acts, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) had been created.

Interest in Earth Day and environmental protection has waxed and waned since the early years of the movement when many major advances were accomplished. Complacency and cynicism have affected early enthusiasm for protection of the earth's natural resources. Some major shifts in consciousness in the 1970's resulted in changes that we now take for granted. Raw sewage spills rarely occur. Factories face oversight and huge fines for release of toxic waste materials into the air and water. We no longer use leaded gas in our cars and trucks. We recognize the hazards of indiscriminate fertilizer and pesticide use and try to prevent runoff into our nation's waterways.

The celebration of Earth Day has spread beyond the United States and is now a global initiative, with participants from 192 countries. Earth Day 2018 will focus on the massive goals of ending plastic pollution and combatting deforestation in order to reduce global greenhouse gas emission. I am disturbed and dismayed by the online photos of plastic "islands" in the oceans that endanger whales and other sea creatures. Deforestation in Malaysia and Indonesia occurs to create oil palm plantations for the global market in palm oil, which is used in the production of food, cosmetics, and other commodities.

Plastic exists in every area of our lives; we can't do away with it, but we can "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle", as instructed by the EPA. Reduce the number of plastic shopping bags decorating the beaches and roadside trees by purchasing reusable tote bags. Repurpose plastic items until they are no longer usable, then recycle them. Avoid using Styrofoam cups and containers and plastic drinking straws, which are among the top ten items found in ocean debris. (Think of all the pretty, fruity drinks with little umbrellas and plastic straws found on every beach of every resort all over the world). "Strawless in Seattle", a recent, month-long campaign by 150 restaurants in that city eliminated more than 2 million plastic straws from landfills and the Pacific Ocean.

We can combat deforestation by planting more trees, especially native ones that will provide food and habitat for native flora and fauna. Buy recycled paper products and recycle everything you can. Buy sustainably-sourced forest products. Avoid products manufactured with palm oil.

On Earth Day, show your grandchildren how to plant seeds to grow their own vegetables. Go online and find out about native trees to plant in the fall. Pick up plastic and trash from the ditch in front of your elderly neighbor's house. Take stock of your stash of plastic items and eliminate or recycle those you can live without.

Plastic pollution and deforestation are overwhelming issues, and sometimes we can't see how they directly relate to us, but any small act by a large number of people will make a difference. Awareness that a problem exists is the first step toward solving it.

As Jenevieve, my friend in Detroit, said today on Facebook about the Seattle campaign, "It's a small thing. Refuse the straw." Mother Earth will thank us.

April 19, 2018