
Education

Earth Day

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"You must be the change you wish to see in the world."- Mahatma Gandhi

Introduction

Education in its broadest sense is the act or experience that has a formative effect on the mind, character or physical ability of an individual. Education empowers people to be the change they aspire to be. Education can equip people with knowledge but the desire to make a difference and convert this knowledge into meaningful and consequential actions depends on how effective the channel of communication is.

There have been various initiatives to spread awareness about environmentalism and sustainability and to address issues of climate change and carbon emissions. The success of each of these initiatives can be gauged by how well it is received by the public, the commitment to ensure the continuity of the initiative and most importantly, the efficacy in achieving the objectives the initiative was constituted for. These initiatives can be carried out through a series of workshops, campaigns, clean up drives, competitions, day observances, fund raising etc. and target all age groups. The values drawn from these initiatives are best inculcated at a young age through schools as part of the academic curriculum to generate interest and nurture bright ideas.

Early Beginnings and Impacts of Earth Day

In the 1960s, there was an environmentalist awakening among the public and a surge in the awareness to address population concerns and for action to be taken to reduce pollution and to protect the environment across the US. There was evidence of environmental deterioration through a series of unfortunate events. These were in the form of polluted rivers catching fire, consequences of using DDT resulting in damage to the biosphere and spike in cancer cases, extinction of wildlife species and air pollution from smog and lead emissions causing asthma and other chronic diseases. These events made scientists and the public stand up and take notice of the events and mitigate them by altering their lifestyles and the technology used.

A number of factors were responsible for the environment revolution among the citizens. As the economy got more affluent, this yielded citizens with spare money and time combined with

an educated, resourceful and politically potent upper middle class who formed the backbone of the environmental movement. The scientific community had laboratory infrastructure and funding to study the effects of pollutants on the ecosystem and to establish their effects upon living organisms in the biosphere. Television provided the medium of transfer for the scientific findings through active journalism and the public concern towards these findings ensured that research continued leading to more discoveries. An amalgamation of all these factors made it inevitable for a mass movement to encourage changes for a healthier and safer environment.

Earth Day is one of those significant initiatives which have spread awareness in the United States regarding population concerns and environmental issues. It was founded by Senator Gaylord Nelson as an environmental teach-in on April 22, 1970, and involved the participation of 20 million people in the first Earth Day (EPA, 2009). Nelson raised funds for the first Earth Day, hired a director to begin organizing the event, and wrote letters to all 50 governors and the mayors of major cities asking them to issue Earth Day proclamations. He contacted all college newspapers explaining the event and wrote an article explaining the purposes of Earth Day for *Scholastics* magazine, which was circulated to most high schools and grade schools.

Earth Day unquestionably was the major focusing event of post World War II environmental policy making and has proven to be an effective political strategy to educate the American public about the human impact on the natural environment and the benefits of environmental protection. Earth Day's prominence; however, tends to detract from the importance of other environmental policy activities, events and decisions. Additionally, Earth Day's portrayal of environmental policy making, as crisis driven and grassroots led, influenced the public's expectation for solving policy problems (Webber, 2008). Earth Day was responsible for a number of apocalyptic predictions about the potential of human survival and the state of the environment in the years to come. Harvard biologist George Wald estimated that "civilization will end within 15 or 30 years unless immediate action is taken against problems facing mankind."

Positive Notes of Earth Day

The US environmental movement has borne a number of fruits, from an array of legislative accomplishments to a new, widely commemorated holiday - Earth Day. The first Earth Day reflected a major increase in public awareness and concern about environmental problems. It was followed in relatively quick succession by the passage of the Clean Air Act of 1970, the formation of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in December 1970, and the passage of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act of 1972, now known as the Clean Water Act. In these two acts, much more stringent pollution control objectives were established, and responsibility for establishing and enforcing pollution control requirements was shifted largely to the federal government (Freeman, 2002).

In the 1980s, when Earth Day focused on “Thinking globally, acting locally”, the people were encouraged to think of global issues and to act up on it in their local communities. The actions at local levels translated to environmental education and community oriented activities such as including fairs, rallies, community and church-based events and nature walks (Amy Fried, 1998). At present, there are initiatives to promote civic engagement, mobilize communities, implement Environmental Education Programs, bring clean water and sanitation to the world and engage college students to become environmental leaders. This is done while broadening the definition of the environment to include all issues that affect our health, our communities and our environment.

For many environmentalists Earth Day remains as a symbol of commitment, and this situation is seen in different ways. The current scenario for environmentalism is a result of the contribution and efforts of various initiatives such as Earth Day which took a stand in addressing problems faced by the environment. The approaches of modern-day environmentalism remain essential: Right now, they are the tools readily at hand with which to address many pressing problems, including global warming and climate disruption (Yale 360, 2009).

Earth Day Critique

To provide positive environmental experiences to children, the academic curriculum includes environmental education modules, and environmental educators who work in the private sector provide highly sought after extra-curricular activities to school districts. Yet by most objective measures, this money has been wasted, because out of the classroom, people have failed to make the link between their individual actions and the environmental condition.

Earth Day demonstrates the US environmental movement's limitations and problems. Certain corporate and business groups proclaim their commitment to the cause by using Earth Day as an opportunity to define themselves as supportive of the environment. There was a concern that the political edge had decreased and the commercialism of Earth Day had increased. People believed that 'the focus needs to be expanded to issues besides recycling'. The US certainly recycles a lot more than it did in 1970, but we still don't know whether recycling really works in a practical and sustainable way. In the 1980s, global warming, protection of the Antarctic and NAFTA were topics of international discussion but the emphasis was on local activities across the states. Even though the Earth Day exemplified the people's dedication to the environment, critics believed that the movement was insufficiently political and local activities had encouraged individual action over political efforts.

Effectiveness of Earth Day

The environmental movement in the United States must now face up to a deeply troubling paradox: Our environmental organizations have grown in strength and sophistication, but the environment has continued to go downhill, to the point that the prospect of a ruined planet is now very real. As the earth is faced by numerous problems, an appraisal of the Earth Day is necessary, if not called for.

Environmental concern among the public has not been converted into an effective agent of political success (Webber, 2008) and large-scale policy change. Political engagement is required for environmental change, from the local level of taking responsibility for ourselves, up to the

higher levels of government organizing and international trade. From the battles over higher fuel efficiency for cars and trucks to the attempts to reduce carbon emissions through international treaties, environmental groups repeatedly have tried and failed to win national legislation that would reduce the threat of global warming. As a result, people in the environmental movement today find themselves politically less powerful than we were one and a half decades ago (Nordhaus, Shellenberger, 2005).

Three and a half decades ago, when the nation's key environmental laws were approved, politicians were responding to the mood of the country. In a recent survey, the Pew Research Center asked Americans about their priorities for Congress and the new President. "Dealing with global warming" ranked at the bottom of a list of twenty choices, far below "strengthening the nation's economy" and "reducing health-care costs," and even below dealing with unspecified "global trade issues" (New Yorker, 2009).

Improvements

Conflict over resources in the industrial age has much more serious effects on the environment than we have ever been able to leverage in human history. Earth Day needs to resurrect and ignite the spark that was alive in its first event. It needs people to take definitive actions which can have a bigger impact on the environment. Given its success and credibility, the Earth Day committee should coordinate with local and national organizations for actual transformation which calls for political reform that is inevitable. Though we can surely take responsibility for personal actions -- for example, how often to drive our cars, sort our garbage, buy local organic, and ride a bike to work; we should not ignore the environmental costs exercised by our governments acting in our name.

Effect of Earth Day Worldwide

As 1990 approached, a group of environmental leaders asked Denis Hayes, coordinator for the first Earth Day, to organize another big campaign. This time, Earth Day went global, mobilizing 200 million people in 141 countries and lifting the status of environmental issues on to the

world stage. Earth Day 1990 gave a huge boost to recycling efforts worldwide and helped pave the way for the 1992 United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. As the millennium approached, Hayes agreed to spearhead another campaign, this time focused on global warming and a push for clean energy. Earth Day 2000 combined the big-picture feistiness of the first Earth Day with the international grassroots activism of Earth Day 1990. For 2000, Earth Day had the Internet to help link activists around the world. By the time April 22 rolled around, 5,000 environmental groups around the world were on board, reaching out to hundreds of millions of people in a record 184 countries (EarthDay, 2009).

Conclusion

The movement helped the people gain a new understanding of environmental issues to ensure a good quality of life for the present as well as for the future. It instilled a sense of responsibility towards the air, water and land and made us accountable towards our actions. Ironically, we do not know how much worse the current environmental situation would have been without investment in environmental education. The current disconnect between environmental education and personal responsibility is not reassuring and should cause one to stop and reevaluate both the process by which we teach environmental education and the subjects taught. It also calls for political awakening among citizens and their leaders to take concrete steps towards sustainable living. Doing Earth Day good deeds will not result in sustainability of the planet, Bright Green wants people to understand. Failure is entirely possible by not acting boldly and quickly enough. We are in this together globally, and we all need to work hand-in-hand to change things if we are to save this planet before it is too late (Bukisa, 2009).

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