

Environmental Activism (1950's to the Present)

Starting in the 1950's there began to be an awareness that some aspects of the environment were developing significant problems. Air pollution from automobiles was increasing. Emissions from manufacturing operations were also increasing. Water quality was decreasing.

In June of 1962, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was published. Acclaimed as the catalyst of the modern environmental movement, *Silent Spring* condemns the overuse of pesticides. Between 1950-1962 the amount of DDT found in human tissue had tripled.



After the chemical industry denounces Carson's book as a "gross distortion of actual facts," President Kennedy charges his Science Advisory Committee to review the book's claims. The Committee reports that the conclusions in *Silent Spring* are generally correct, and by 1972 DDT will be banned in the U.S.

In 1969, an infamous fire on the Cuyahoga River in the middle of Cleveland, Ohio burst into flames when oil and chemicals from industries located along the river were floating on the surface of the river caught fire and caused flames over five stories high.



Firemen stand on a bridge over the Cuyahoga River to spray water on the tug Arizona.

In response to these growing environmental problems, national and state governments initiated and passed legislation to address air and water pollution. Overall, the issues were addressed on a bi-partisan political basis. Through federal and state legislation and funding, quite a bit of progress was made in cutting back on air and water pollutants.

Work to bring about positive change from the bottom up concerning the environment took a big leap forward on April 22, 1970 which was the first national Earth Day. Co-chaired by Congressman Pete McCloskey, the first Earth Day took the form of a nationwide protest against environmental ignorance. An estimated 20 million people participated across the country. It remains the largest demonstration ever in American history.

In the following decade, more national and state legislation and programs were adopted and implemented. People's consciousness was being raised regarding immediate and longer term environmental issues.

For the next 30 years, much progress was made in slowing down air and water pollution at the national and state level. Many contaminated, former industrial sites were cleaned up.

Unfortunately, environmental issues, particularly the idea of climate change has become a divisive issue in our country. The U. S. participated in worldwide efforts to reduce air and water pollution up until recently. Funding for environmental cleanups has diminished significantly. And the U.S. national government has reduced clean air and clean water standards, primarily at the request of large business interests.

Much bottom up work to improve the environment is required more than ever in our country and around the world.