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**Gaylord Nelson, Father of Earth Day:
Bridging the Gap from Conservation to Environmentalism**

**Senior Thesis
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Abstract

Senator Gaylord Nelson founded Earth Day, an important event in American environmental history. Nonetheless, there are significant gaps in the scholarly analysis of Nelson's overall contributions to the conservation and environmental movements. For the most part, scholars have focused on Earth Day itself, arguing that Nelson's brainchild was a watershed moment for Americans who worked for and cared about protecting the natural world. Consequently, their focus tends to be on Earth Day and subsequent contingent events in conservation history. While important, Earth Day would not have been as important as it was without the specific guidance and insight provided by Gaylord Nelson.

This paper considers the senatorial career of Gaylord Nelson from 1963 - 1970, placing his work in context by briefly examining the history of American conservationism and environmentalism from 1864. I argue that while Earth Day was, in fact, a critical event, its significance is best seen in the light of what happened that day but also by what preceded it.

It turns out that the real importance of Earth Day lies in its precursors as well as the events that followed, and that Gaylord Nelson was a singular figure in American history due to his unique abilities to build coalitions and bridge gaps between people and institutions of disparate beliefs and values.

Introduction

Is there anything more vital in the long view of history than the proper protection and conservation of our fresh water lakes, rivers, and streams, our wilderness, the soils and the forests, the air we breathe, the bugs and birds and animals and the habitat in which they live? I think not.

Gaylord Anton Nelson

In the late 1800s a European physicist named Svante Arrhenius first measured what is now known as the Greenhouse Effect.¹ By 1970, the Smithsonian Institution reported that particulate matter in the atmosphere had reduced the flow of sunlight to the Earth's surface by 16 percent since 1907.² Of course, at the time, the Smithsonian scientists did not understand the full scope or impact of what they were reporting, but even then they concluded that humankind's agency had a material effect on the natural environment and that the consequences were of serious concern.

On April 19, 1970, Senator Gaylord Nelson and Representative Paul McCloskey appeared on CBS's "Face the Nation." Nelson and McCloskey were the co-Chairs of Environmental Teach-In, Incorporated, and they were interviewed about the details of upcoming nationwide environmental demonstrations. The goal of the demonstrations, as described by Senator Nelson, was to educate Americans about environmental issues and to "...get the

¹ Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989), 9.

² Gaylord Nelson, interview by George Herman, James Ridgeway, and David Culhane, *Face the Nation*, April 19, 1970. Gaylord Nelson Papers 1954-2005, Box 1, Folio 6. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

environment on the political agenda.”³ The demonstrations, what Gaylord Nelson originally called an environmental teach-in, later collectively came to be known as Earth Day.

20 million Americans participated in Earth Day. Some people participated in ‘traditional’ teach-ins, learning about environmental issues from each other while others “...planted trees and picked up tons of trash.”⁴ In New York, public school officials organized educational programming and encouraged students to take the day off to participate.⁵ As well, “...Mayor John Lindsay closed Fifth Avenue to automobile traffic and 100,000 people attended an ecology fair in Central Park.” At the same time, Consolidated Edison supplied rakes to citizens who picked up trash and cleaned up public areas.⁶

There were also those who participated in the teach-in more aggressively. In San Francisco, “...‘Environmental Vigilantes’ poured effluent into a reflecting pool in front of Standard Oil Company of California to protest offshore drilling and

³ Gaylord Nelson, interview by George Herman, James Ridgeway, and David Culhane, *Face the Nation*, April 19, 1970. Gaylord Nelson Papers 1954-2005, Box 1, Folio 6. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

⁴ Bill Christofferson, *The Man from Clear Lake: Earth Day Founder Gaylord Nelson* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 3.

⁵ Harry Milgrom to District Superintendents and Principals of All Schools, February 16, 1970. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 6, Folio 28. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

⁶ Adam Rome, “‘Give Earth a Chance’: The Environmental Movement and the Sixties,” *The Journal of American History* 90, no. 2 (September 2003): 550. See also Bill Christofferson, 302-312.

oil spills...” while in Tacoma “...100 high school students rode horses down a superhighway to call attention to the pollution from automobiles.”⁷

Earth Day occurred at a time when there was significant friction in the United States. Americans routinely confronted questions about their core values. On one front, the civil rights movement was ongoing. On another, many Americans questioned the war in Vietnam. On a third, a nascent women’s movement was developing, aggressively questioning yet another set of injustices perpetrated upon the powerless by the powerful. Consequently, though some people embraced the idea wholeheartedly when the primary organizers of Environmental Teach-In, Incorporated announced a series of simultaneous nationwide environmental demonstrations, other people were skeptical of their intent. On one hand, people within the so-called ‘Establishment’ questioned the propriety of a protest movement designed to rally support to protect the natural world. Their skepticism arose from prior experience with the other social movements and their activities. They asked themselves how a movement to protect the environment would affect their lives and their businesses.

Other people said that the planned events were a contrivance on the part of the ‘Establishment’ itself to deflect citizen activists’ attention from what really mattered: establishing civil rights for all Americans, fighting poverty, and ending the war in Vietnam. In fact, during the *Face the Nation* interview, Representative McCloskey said, “Both Senator Nelson and I have been called... ‘fascist pigs’

⁷ David J. Webber, “Earth Day and Its Precursors: Continuity and Change in the Evolution of Midtwentieth-Century U.S Environmental Policy,” *Review of Policy Research* 25, no. 4 (2008): 318.

[and] 'captives of the establishment' [by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)] for initiating the [environmental] teach in."⁸ During the same interview, James Ridgeway asked Nelson and McCloskey if Earth Day was "...a mask to cover up the major problems of Vietnam and civil rights [in the United States]."⁹

Both men answered an emphatic no. Senator Nelson argued forcefully that environmentalism and the war in Vietnam were in fact contingent upon one another, noting that the United States had recently decided to stop using chemical defoliants in Vietnam and in the United States.¹⁰ Additionally, Senator Nelson specifically suggested that Vietnam was "...not worth the investment and that the money we are spending there ought to be spent here to clean up the environment of America..."¹¹

Gaylord Nelson, who first conceived of Earth Day, became a United States Senator in January of 1963. Prior to that, Nelson was a two-term

⁸ Representative Paul McCloskey, interview by George Herman, James Ridgeway, and David Culhane, *Face the Nation*, April 19, 1970. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 6. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin. See also Bill Christofferson, 310-11. See also Adam Rome, "'Give Earth a Chance': The Environmental Movement and the Sixties," *The Journal of American History* 90, no. 2 (September 2003): 544; and, Douglas Long. *Ecoterrorism* (New York: Facts on File Books, 2004), 16.

⁹ James Ridgeway, *Face the Nation*, April 19, 1970. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 6. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹⁰ Gaylord Nelson and Paul McCloskey, interview by George Herman, James Ridgeway, and David Culhane, *Face the Nation*, April 19, 1970. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 6. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹¹ Gaylord Nelson, interview by George Herman, James Ridgeway, and David Culhane, *Face the Nation*, April 19, 1970. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 6. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Governor of Wisconsin who had established himself nationally because of his sponsorship of ground-breaking legislation that protected Wisconsin's environment and natural resources in a way that had never been done before.

Senator Gaylord Nelson was a liberal Democrat. As such, he fought consistently for civil rights legislation and against the war in Vietnam. He also campaigned actively for consumer protection through his service on the Subcommittee on Small Business. As well, he took on pharmaceutical companies and lobbied for appropriate labeling of drugs with potentially dangerous side effects. Importantly, Gaylord Nelson was also a leader among a small group of legislators who were concerned about the fate of the environment and who worked together to pass groundbreaking environmental legislation in the 1960s.¹²

This paper considers the relative importance of Gaylord Nelson's conservationism and environmentalism from 1963 to 1970. I will evaluate the impact of the pieces of environmental legislation sponsored or co-sponsored by Gaylord Nelson in the 1960s and compare them to the impact of Earth Day 1970. What role did Gaylord Nelson play in the conservation movement? What role did he play in the environmental movement? Was Gaylord Nelson a conservationist, an environmentalist, or both?

I believe he played both roles. I will argue that at various times in his career Gaylord Nelson acted as a conservationist while at other times he acted as an environmentalist. I contend that while the creation of Earth Day added significant texture to Nelson's record as a conservationist and environmentalist,

¹² Christofferson, 41.

Senator Nelson's prescience and persistence about environmental issues while in office resulted in significant changes that directly protected land, water, and air. Thus I will conclude that through his political and educational efforts, Gaylord Nelson played a unique and profound role in balancing the ongoing historic tension between American conservationists and environmentalists.

In one way or another, Gaylord Nelson influenced how all Americans live their lives. On one hand, he helped pioneer activist environmental legislation and thereby changed the quality of every American's life. He also influenced his peers in the Senate and his colleagues in the House, establishing the idea that environmental conservation was morally imperative, practically necessary, and also politically viable. As well, by almost all standards Earth Day was wildly successful, educating millions of Americans about environmental awareness showing how individuals can and should do their part to protect themselves, the environment, and each other.

To prove my thesis, I will briefly examine the history of conservationism in the United States, starting at the turn of the Twentieth Century. Such a study proves immediately interesting and directly informs my inquiry because there has never been unanimity of thought or purpose among American conservationists. Some believed in conservationism characterized by utilitarian ethics, arguing for appropriate scientific management and consumption of natural resources. Others believed in conservationism characterized by preservationist ethics, contending that the natural world has intrinsic value and therefore deserves more explicit protection from human agency. Over time, the tensions between

'utilitarian' and 'preservationist' conservationists played out in social, economic, and political arenas. Over the course of his entire career, Gaylord Nelson argued from both perspectives; at times, he was a pragmatic politician, achieving what was prudent and what was possible. At other times, he was an environmental ideologue who advocated ardently for the natural world and its standing independent of human agency.

Conservationism, as distinguished from environmentalism, has its roots in the advent of modernity and the rise of 'scientific' forestry. Conservationists believed that natural resources were not limitless, and consequently must be protected in some way. However, conservationism was not easily simplified. According to Curt Meine, Americans "...are still struggling to find a comprehensive narrative of conservation's past."¹³ Nonetheless, the proto-conservation movement of the early twentieth century was initially characterized by an awareness of humankind's place within the natural world and the fact that people must produce commodities to live but that such commodities should not be overproduced. As a conservationist, one planned for the future. Furthermore, conservationists believed in the overall management and protection of natural resources, with social and political authority emanating from the 'top' down. If one was a 'utilitarian,' one focused on the maximum benefit for the most people. If one was a 'preservationist,' one believed in the intrinsic value of nature and thus argued for its protection.

¹³ Curt Meine. *Correction Lines: Essays on Land, Leopold, and Conservation* (Washington: Island Books, 2004), 3.

The rise of Progressivism and its emphasis on material efficiency affected internal debates among conservationists. According to Meine, Progressives had significant influence on the evolution of American conservationism due to their belief in social reform and active management of social, cultural, and material circumstances.¹⁴ By the 1930s, "...the principles of utilitarian resource conservation held sway," and the scientific basis of forestry gave rise to other conservation disciplines such as range management, wildlife management, and fisheries management which were increasingly characterized by discipline specific specialization and differentiation.¹⁵ So, though 'utilitarian' conservationists opposed "...rank exploitation," they still believed that conservation had as its basis ultimately anthropocentric ends.¹⁶

After World War II, scientific knowledge about the environment and ecological systems came to the fore, and the conservation movement took yet another turn. Before the war, human interactions with the natural world centered on how people acquired the necessities of life. Later, under the influence of Progressivism, people spent their money and time "...to acquire conveniences that lightened the tasks of normal living..."¹⁷ By the time that postwar Americans adjusted to normalcy, they were primarily interested in 'the good life,' characterized in large part by their consumption of commodities and their use of natural resources for recreation. According to Samuel P. Hays,

¹⁴ Curt Meine, 19.

¹⁵ Curt Meine, 20.

¹⁶ Curt Meine, 48.

¹⁷ Samuel P. Hays. *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 4.

something beyond necessities and conveniences now lay within the reach of many; they can be called amenities. Associated with home and leisure, with recreation and the 'good life,' these came to involve considerable choice because spending was not dictated by necessity or convenience.¹⁸

Such a paradigm shift also involved a shift in power relationships. Whereas before the war conservationists worked from the top down, protecting natural resources by focusing on enacting efficiencies and production controls, after the war conservationists worked from a much broader base, pressing upon leaders even as they strongly advocated for a higher quality of life and a better standard of living. Furthermore, such conservationists did not differentiate among scientific disciplines and instead relied upon ecological methodology and its consequent management strategies. Such people came to be known as environmentalists.¹⁹

Such considerations put my interest in Gaylord Nelson into historical context. He was born in 1916, so he lived through the times when 'utilitarian' and 'preservationist' conservationists argued about what environmental strategies were best for America. He also grew up in a Progressive household and thus learned about the power of populism and political reform from an early age. As Governor of Wisconsin, Nelson enacted some of the most progressive conservation and recreation legislation in the United States, the Outdoor Recreation Action Program (ORAP). So, by the time he became a United States Senator, Gaylord Nelson had firmly established himself as a conservationist. His subsequent work established him as an environmentalist. As I delve into Gaylord

¹⁸ Samuel P. Hays, 4.

¹⁹ Samuel P. Hays, 13-39.

Nelson's work in the Senate, I will consider John F. Kennedy's Conservation Tour in 1963, which Nelson helped organize, and also his legislative battles on behalf of the natural world. He won some and he lost some. But, even in instances where his legislative efforts seemingly failed, Gaylord Nelson created national discourse about conservationism and environmentalism that built coalitions and strengthened both the conservation and environmental movements.

Conservationism and Environmentalism

Origins of American Conservationism

Conservation is a moral issue because it involves the rights and duties of our people – their rights to prosperity and happiness, and their duties to themselves, to their descendants, and to the whole future progress and welfare of this nation.²⁰

Gifford Pinchot

Hetch Hetchy Valley...is a grand landscape garden, one of Nature's rarest and most precious mountain temples. As in Yosemite, the sublime rocks of its walls seem to glow with life, whether leaning back in repose or standing erect in thoughtful attitudes...Sad to say, this most precious and sublime feature of the Yosemite National Park, one of the greatest of all our natural resources for the uplifting joy and peace and health of the people, is in danger of being dammed and made into a reservoir to help supply San Francisco with water and light."²¹

John Muir

Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and William Cullen Bryant had something in common. Each of them practiced and

²⁰ Curt Meine, 45.

²¹ John Muir. *The Yosemite* (1914: San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 191-192.

“...articulated an alternative view of the natural world...” that contravened existing paradigms of natural resource use and consumption in the early and mid-nineteenth century.²² Jefferson practiced contour plowing and soil conservation during the immediate post-colonial era. Emerson wrote his essay, *Nature*, in 1836 and was a leader among American naturalists. Thoreau, of course, went to Walden Pond and articulated a sensibility about the natural world that had profound impact on future conservationists and environmentalists. Bryant wrote extensively about the natural world, using nature as a metaphor for truth.²³ According to Meine, Jefferson, Emerson, Thoreau, and Bryant believed the natural world was “...a source not merely of material goods, but of intellectual enlightenment, aesthetic satisfaction, philosophical insight, and spiritual solace.”²⁴ Concurrently, explorers and naturalists such as Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, John James Audubon, and the Bartrams “...described and documented the astounding diversity of the [American] continent.”²⁵

In 1864, George Perkins Marsh published *Man and Nature*, and, along with other ‘proto-conservationists’ such as Frederick Law Olmsted, John Wesley Powell, and George Bird Grinnell, “...insisted that the attitudes and policies that had until then dominated the settlement and development of the American landscape required adjustment.”²⁶

²² Curt Meine, 16.

²³ Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/16341>.

²⁴ Curt Meine, 16.

²⁵ Curt Meine, 16.

²⁶ Curt Meine, 16-7.

Marsh's argument focused on intentionality.²⁷ He claimed that "...human agency is self conscious and its impact inavoidable;" it was therefore up to human beings to manage their relationship with nature better.²⁸ Unfortunately, there was no coherence to Marsh and other proto-conservationists' opposition to environmental degradation.²⁹ Their concerns, as such, amounted to little more than philosophical arguments about differing value systems. So, in spite of the prominent individuals who saw inherent complications in human beings' relationships with the natural world, the majority of Americans believed that land, water, and air were 'inexhaustible' and indestructible and thus environmental problems presented no problem to human society because they did not 'exist.'

By 1890, however, most observers noticed some environmental challenges, primarily involving deforestation and its concomitant problems. But, in spite of nascent conservation groups such as the Appalachian Mountain Club (1876) and the National Audubon Society (1886), there was

no coherent body of beliefs, philosophy, literature, history, science, economics, policy, and law through which the American people would understand and better guide their long-term relationship with the natural world, and scant evidence that such was regarded as an important societal or national goal.³⁰

Nonetheless, "...undercurrents of opposition..." to the United States' overall "...doctrine of conquest..." fostered the beginnings of the modern conservation

²⁷ David Lowenthal in George Perkins Marsh. *Man and Nature* (1864, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), xxxiv.

²⁸ David Lowenthal in George Perkins Marsh, xxxiv.

²⁹ Curt Meine, 17.

³⁰ Curt Meine, 17.

movement, exemplified by three men: Gifford Pinchot, John Muir, and Theodore Roosevelt.³¹

Pinchot was the founder of scientific forestry, and, according to Meine, he best characterizes 'utilitarian' conservation circa 1890. Pinchot believed in principles of scientific management, and he advocated a "...resource conservation ethic."³² According to Pinchot, forestry and logging that was not based upon principles of proper management and conservation was inherently wrong; as such it constituted "...epic wastefulness..." and "...rampant forest exploitation..."³³ Meine says that Pinchot believed that "...nature was not to be preserved, but actively manipulated by scientifically trained experts to improve and sustain yields."³⁴

Conversely, John Muir believed in the intrinsic value of the natural world. He worked to preserve the integrity of the environment, and "...could cite the benefits of forest cover in regulating water flows and protecting soils."³⁵ Muir had "...an abiding sense of the intrinsic beauty and worth of all things," and, contrary to Pinchot, said that human beings' hubris resulted in "...acts of desecration," resulting in "...plunder and waste."³⁶ Thus whereas Pinchot embodied a 'utilitarian' conservationist ethic, Muir represented a conservation ethic that was fundamentally 'preservationist.'

³¹ Curt Meine, 17.

³² Curt Meine, 18.

³³ Curt Meine, 19.

³⁴ Curt Meine, 19.

³⁵ Curt Meine, 17-8.

³⁶ Curt Meine, 18.

Theodore Roosevelt exerted influence upon both men. On one hand, Roosevelt was a utilitarian and thus he believed that natural resources should be scientifically managed and consumed accordingly. Though he abhorred waste and irresponsibility, he did not fundamentally question the ultimate primacy of human agency and scientific management as exemplified by Gifford Pinchot. On the other hand, Roosevelt also agreed with John Muir and acceded at times to the intrinsic value of the natural world.³⁷

The tension between 'utilitarian' conservationism and 'preservationist' conservationism around the turn of the Twentieth Century is best described by the Hetch Hetchy controversy. Pinchot, arguing for long-term need and appropriate management, wanted to dam the Tuolumne River which flowed through the Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park and create a reservoir for San Francisco. Preservationists, led by Muir, believed that Hetch Hetchy "...could not be preserved as parkland and used to store water."³⁸ According to Meine, the battle over Hetch Hetchy brought the tension between different conservationists into sharp relief, and forced people to ask the following questions: What is it to conserve a place [or a natural resource]? What is legitimate use of natural resources?³⁹

Conservationism and Progressivism

The crying need at this stage of the conservation movement is *specific definitions* of the environment needed by each

³⁷ Curt Meine, 19.

³⁸ Curt Meine, 20.

³⁹ Curt Meine, 20.

species...There is...a fundamental unity of purpose and method between bird lovers and sportsmen. Their common task of teaching the public how to modify economic activities for conservation purposes is of infinitely greater importance, and difficulty, than their current differences of opinion over details of legislative and administrative policy. Unless and until the common task is accomplished, the detailed manipulation of laws is in the long run irrelevant.⁴⁰

Aldo Leopold

In 1913, John Muir and other 'preservationists' lost their battle to protect Hetch Hetchy, and their loss embodied the overwhelming belief on the part of most Americans that proper conservationists focused on efficiency and scientific management of natural resources which was made manifest in the Progressive movement.

According to Meine, when Theodore Roosevelt and Robert LaFollette both took office in 1901, "...the Progressive tradition..." constituted a "...revolution..." of sorts, and thus solidified the hold that utilitarians had on the American conservation movement.⁴¹ So, though Roosevelt did at times align himself with Muir and other preservationists, more often than not he was motivated by practical concerns. Thus, his "revolution," as such, formally "...challenged the assumption that had dominated national development for generations: that the American land was a mere storehouse of inexhaustible resources, existing solely for the indulgence of the present generation of its most privileged species."⁴²

⁴⁰ Curt Meine, 98.

⁴¹ Curt Meine, 45.

⁴² Curt Meine, 46.

However, ultimately "...neither the utilitarian nor preservationist philosophy seemed to be up to the 'oldest task'."⁴³ In the years between Hetch Hetchy and World War II, utilitarian conservationism continued to be the dominant paradigm. Nonetheless, there were individuals who saw flaws in both approaches to conservation and during that time they worked hard to reveal the false dichotomy implied by utilitarianism versus preservationism.

Aldo Leopold was one such person. Unlike Gifford Pinchot, he did not ascribe to a strictly scientific method that focused on utility and efficiency; instead, he focused on synthetic approaches to science, specifically embracing the new science of ecology. So, whereas Pinchot applied different management disciplines to different types of environmental problems, Leopold used an integrative method that saw the natural world in terms of systems and interrelationships.⁴⁴

Correspondingly, though Leopold had a deep aesthetic appreciation for the natural world, he also acknowledged that "...aesthetics and utility are completely interwoven. To say we do a thing for either reason alone is prima facie evidence that we do not understand what we doing, or we are doing it wrong."⁴⁵ Thus, Leopold also rejected a strict preservationist ethic.

The result was a direct effort to appreciate the complexity of the natural world and human beings' relationship to it. On one hand, Leopold questioned the bases of both utilitarianism and preservationism; they struck him as extremely

⁴³ Curt Meine, 32.

⁴⁴ Curt Meine, 66.

⁴⁵ Curt Meine, 115.

problematic oversimplifications of an extremely complex situation. On the other hand, Leopold did not question that human agency was a fundamental to ecological relationships. In other words, both utilitarians and preservationists acted as if human beings were somehow outside of the very systems they sought to manage or to protect. Conversely, Aldo Leopold believed that human beings operated within ecological systems, *a priori*. Ultimately, what distinguished human beings was their capacity for advanced moral reasoning within the realm of their interrelated ecological relationships. According to Meine,

Human use of the earth and its material components was a given. But human use, if undertaken without consideration of its moral dimensions, threatened to become corrosive...Mindful of the limits of scientific reasoning and unrestricted by the commands of academic philosophy, Leopold allowed his intuitive sense of the vital and indivisible earth to inform (though not dictate) his conservation stance.⁴⁶

Thus Leopold, unlike Pinchot and unlike Muir, was “...constitutionally forward looking...” in a unique way. He had articulated a land ethic, a philosophical framework that was to inform the work of Gaylord Nelson, directly and indirectly.

* * * * *

Gaylord Nelson’s parents “...were active Progressives, deep believers in the populist, reform politics of Robert M. “Fighting Bob” LaFollette...”⁴⁷ Nelson’s father, Doctor Anton Nelson, was “...a Progressive leader, often serving as the

⁴⁶ Curt Meine, 110.

⁴⁷ Bill Christofferson, 12.

Polk County Progressive Chairman.”⁴⁸ As well, Nelson’s mother, organized for the Progressives; she was

district Progressive Party chair, president of the school board, head of the Red Cross, president of the cemetery association, and leader and activist in a variety of civic and political causes, including family planning and women’s suffrage. She worked for candidates before women won the right to vote, saying, ‘I can’t vote but I can talk.’⁴⁹

Consequently, in addition to spending his youth roaming the fields and streams of Clear Lake, Wisconsin, Gaylord Nelson learned at an early age that a political life, properly applied, had potential to manifest positive change. The lesson stuck with him for his whole life.

In 1939, just before he started law school, Nelson joined the Young Progressives. When ‘Young Bob LaFollette’ campaigned for reelection to the Senate in 1940, Nelson campaigned for him.⁵⁰ According to Christofferson, by that time “...Nelson had become president of the campus Young Progressives and also held an office in the Young Democrats.”⁵¹ Nelson thus demonstrated his lifelong inclination toward serving two masters; as a Progressive, he had a vested interest in the welfare of Wisconsin which he never gave up. As a

⁴⁸ Bill Christofferson, 13.

⁴⁹ Bill Christofferson, 13.

⁵⁰ Bill Christofferson, 38. In 1934, the Progressives split from the Republicans to form their own political party. Before that, Wisconsin elections were traditionally contested by liberal Progressives within the party and those who were more conservative. Thus primary elections were more important than general elections. The Democratic Party, as such, was in a weak third place relative to the Progressives and the conservative Republicans. When Phil LaFollette lost his reelection campaign for Wisconsin Governor in 1938, labor leaders and other populists started to look to the Democrats “...as an alternative...” According to Christofferson, “...ten years would pass before a real Democratic revitalization began – with [Gaylord] Nelson playing a key role.”

⁵¹ Bill Christofferson, 38.

Democrat, he developed an active interest in national politics which also had a significant impact on his future.

***Silent Spring* and the Rise of Environmentalism**

The land ethic...enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land...A land ethic of course cannot prevent the alteration, management, and use of these 'resources,' but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state.

Aldo Leopold

There were four books written in the 1960s that had a direct and profound impact on the evolution of the conservation and environmental movements. In some way, all four argued that "...there is a connection between societal progress and environmental degradation."⁵² In 1962, Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* and Murray Bookchin published *Our Synthetic Environment*. Bookchin's book, which preceded Carson's, "...warned that the use of technology and technological innovations could have unanticipated effects and create new and unexpected environmental problems."⁵³ Later, in 1968, Paul Ehrlich published *The Population Bomb*, wherein he offered neo-Malthusian arguments about the rate of population growth and thus questioned the ability of the earth to feed its people, claiming that "...the only curtailment of population

⁵² Peninah Neimark and Peter Rhodes Mott, eds. *The Environmental Debate: A Documentary History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 180.

⁵³ Peninah Neimark and Peter Rhodes Mott, 180.

growth would be through ecological and social collapse.”⁵⁴ That same year, Edward Abbey published *Desert Solitaire*, a contemplative monograph that established the power and intrinsic value of nature in a way that no one had since John Muir.⁵⁵

Silent Spring ultimately transcended them all. Rachel Carson, like Ehrlich, was a neo-Malthusian who wrote specifically about the influence of pesticides on the environment. Carson’s argument was ecological, and though it had an extremely strong scientific basis, the clarity of her writing and made *Silent Spring* accessible to average people. She described the interdependent circumstances wherein pesticides affected all members of living communities.⁵⁶ Carson’s conclusions were scary. According to Carolyn Merchant,

pesticides had been used effectively to control mosquitoes, lice, and insect pests...but the side effects on human and ecosystem health were known mainly to scientists. Carson’s compelling book brought them to the attention of the public.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Carolyn Merchant, *The Columbia Guide to Environmental History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 178. See also Peninah Neimark and Peter Rhodes Mott, eds., *The Environmental Debate: A Documentary History* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press), 182.

⁵⁵ In 1975, Abbey published *The Monkeywrench Gang*. As the environmental movement evolved, the beautifully written and sometimes transcendent *Desert Solitaire* was taken by many as the philosophical basis for environmentalism whereas *The Monkeywrench Gang* was more of a how-to book. In fact, the tactics that *The Monkeywrench Gang* used to protect the environment from degradation were direct inspirations to those that founded EarthFirst! and other direct action organizations that used tactics such as tree spiking and putting Karo Syrup in the gas tanks of construction equipment. Personal communication from Mike Roselle, a founder of EarthFirst!.

⁵⁶ Maril Hazlett, *The Atlas of U.S. and Canadian Environmental History*, ed. Char Miller (New York: Routledge, 2003), 140.

⁵⁷ Carolyn Merchant, 178.

Robert Gottlieb agrees with Merchant, refining her argument by noting that Carson's book was at times controversial, saying

The publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962 and the ensuing controversy that made it an epochal event in the history of environmentalism can also be seen as helping launch a new era of environmental protest in which the idea of Nature under stress can also be seen as a question of the quality of life.⁵⁸

Neimark and Mott also contend that Carson was probably the one individual most responsible for calling public attention to pollution and environmental issues.⁵⁹ However, as shown above, there were other instances that differentiated public concern and brought conservation and environmental issues to the forefront. In fact, there had been active interest in the conservation of natural resources in America as far back as 1864.

Thus the selection of Carson's book as a moment of sea change seems a bit arbitrary. Instead, one can read the environmental history of the United States as an evolutionary progression that included but was not necessarily defined by notable events such as the publication of *Silent Spring*.⁶⁰

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According to Char Miller, one of the early debates that delineated the difference between conservationists and environmentalists was the conflict over the Colorado River Storage Act Project in 1956.⁶¹ The federal government

⁵⁸ Robert Gottlieb, "Reconstructing Environmentalism: Complex Movements, Diverse Roots," *Environmental History Review* 17, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 11.

⁵⁹ Peninah Neimark and Peter Rhodes Mott, 189.

⁶⁰ Peter Adams McCord, "Green Ideas, Green Vietnam: Environmentalism in the Sixties." PhD diss., University of California – Davis, 1996.

⁶¹ Char Miller, ed., *The Atlas of US and Canadian Environmental History* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 146.

planned to build nine dams in the Colorado River basin, including one in Dinosaur National Monument. The Wilderness Society and the Sierra Club, supported by the National Parks Association, opposed the dams, arguing in particular that the dam in the national monument "...would violate the National Park Service Act of 1916 which mandated that (such) parks are preserved unimpaired."⁶² Ultimately the Senate conceded, and the dams were not built. According to Miller, the fight about the dams politicized environmentalism in a new way. It was the first time that a coalition of conservation groups stood with one department of the government against another and won a fight to change existing plans that would have altered the environment.

Neimark and Mott agree, arguing that environmental activists based their objections to the so-called Echo Park dam project by making claims about the deleterious effects of human agency on the natural world.⁶³ Carolyn Merchant supports their claim. She says that national parks are places in America where the managing resources has always been secondary to acknowledging the intrinsic value of nature.⁶⁴

In 1958, the Eisenhower Administration established the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission (ORRRC). David Webber says that the Commission had three goals, "...to determine the outdoor recreation wants and needs of the American people," "...to determine the national recreation resources available to satisfy those needs," and "...to determine what policies

⁶² Char Miller, 146.

⁶³ Peninah Neimark and Peter Rhodes Mott, 180-1.

⁶⁴ Carolyn Merchant, 174.

and programs should be recommended to ensure that the needs...were adequately and efficiently met..."⁶⁵ The composition of the ORRRC was very interesting. Sitting members included "...representatives from mining, timber, grazing, business, conservation, and recreation groups..." in addition to federal bureaucrats.⁶⁶

Ultimately, the ORRRC influenced the creation of the Outdoor Recreation Advisory Council. According to Webber, it also contributed to the passage of three important pieces of environmental legislation: the Wilderness Act (1964), the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (1965), and the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act (1965).⁶⁷

In 1965, the Scenic Hudson Preservation Conference (SHPC) won a lawsuit against the Federal Power Commission, in which the court held that environmental factors must be given consideration in the planning of federal construction projects. This lawsuit, in particular, was very interesting at the time because it established standards which later seemed to be reflected in the NEPA legislation that passed in 1969.⁶⁸

According to Neimark and Mott, Consolidated Edison (ConEd) proposed a reservoir on Storm King Mountain which was approved by the Federal Power

⁶⁵ David J. Webber, "Earth Day and Its Precursors: Continuity and Change in the Evolution of Midtwentieth Century U.S. Environmental Policy," *Review of Policy Research* 25, no. 4 (2008): 322.

⁶⁶ David J. Webber, "Earth Day and Its Precursors: Continuity and Change in the Evolution of Midtwentieth Century U.S. Environmental Policy," *Review of Policy Research* 25, no. 4 (2008): 322.

⁶⁷ David J. Webber, "Earth Day and Its Precursors: Continuity and Change in the Evolution of Midtwentieth Century U.S. Environmental Policy," *Review of Policy Research* 25, no. 4 (2008): 324.

⁶⁸ Peninah Neimark and Peter Rhodes Mott, 4.

Commission. ConEd wanted to pump Hudson River water to the peak of the mountain, store it, and then release it when demand for electricity increased. The suit "...asked the court to reconsider approval...and examine alternatives...as well as other evidence that had been available...but ignored."⁶⁹

The SHPC lawsuit was a coalition effort, just like the Echo Park dam protest that preceded it. But whereas Echo Park involved national organizations and a part of the executive branch of the federal government, the SHPC was comprised of local governments and organizations. The notable difference was that instead of legislative intervention on behalf of the environment the circumstances were resolved in a lawsuit.

The SHPC was significant not only for its facts but also because it marked the beginning of modern environmental law. According to Neimark and Mott, the lawsuit was the first to put environmental concerns on equal standing with economic concerns. It also was the first to require the government to consider alternatives to building projects prior to granting licenses for potentially harmful projects, as well as requiring the government to develop evidence relevant to the public interest when environmental impacts for building projects was concerned. Finally, and, most importantly, SHPC established a precedent that granted environmental groups legal standing to sue on behalf of environmental plaintiffs even in instances where they had no economic standing.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Peninah Neimark and Peter Rhodes Mott, 4.

⁷⁰ Peninah Neimark and Peter Rhodes Mott, 4.

Gaylord Nelson's Environmental Politics

To achieve conservation, attitude change was essential, but no sufficient; success required solid science, political will, effective technique, and much education.⁷¹

Curt Meine

It takes all kinds of motives to make a world. If all of us were capable of beholding the burning bush, there would none left to grow bushes to burn. Doers and dreamers are the reciprocal parts of the body politic: each gives meaning and significance to the other. So also in conservation. Just now, conservation is short of doers.⁷²

Aldo Leopold

Gaylord Nelson, Governor of Wisconsin

Gaylord Nelson was a 'doer' who graduated from San Jose State College in 1939, and earned a law degree from the University of Wisconsin in 1942.⁷³ He entered the Army immediately after earning his degree and eventually he attended Officer's Candidate School. After earning his promotion, he served in the Pacific Theatre on Okinawa in the quartermaster's corps.⁷⁴ After the war, Nelson went home to Wisconsin and started practicing law. Carrie Lee Dotson, a nurse he dated in Okinawa, joined him in Madison in 1946 and "...fit easily into

⁷¹ Curt Meine, 97.

⁷² Aldo Leopold, in Curt Meine, 97.

⁷³ John Heritage to Richard Saltonstall, December 1, 1969. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 3. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

⁷⁴ Bill Christofferson, 40. For information on Nelson's civil rights and anti-war activism, see also Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folios 3 and 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Nelson's social set." On November 15, 1947, Gaylord and Carrie Lee Nelson got married at Pres House on the campus of the University of Wisconsin.⁷⁵

In 1948, Gaylord Nelson ran for the Wisconsin State Senate. He won. As a State Senator, he served on the Senate Conservation Committee. His lifelong interest in protecting the environment had finally manifested itself directly.

According to Nelson,

By the time I was elected Governor in 1958...it [the environment] had become a primary issue with me. I had concluded that the deterioration of the environment in which we live is the most serious threat to the human species.⁷⁶

Consequently, in his second term, Nelson established himself as Wisconsin's "Conservation Governor" for all time by creating the Outdoor Recreation Action Program (ORAP), which consisted of land purchases, "conservation easements," creation of lakes and recreation areas, and other conservation projects. Nelson paid for his plan by imposing a one cent tax on Wisconsin smokers.⁷⁷ The money was to be spent all over the state of Wisconsin, and thus Nelson rapidly gained support for his proposals. Of course, there were some political machinations along the way, specifically when the Republicans tried to block the Governor's bill and subsequently pass one of their own, but in the end Gaylord Nelson had built enough of a coalition to pass the law as written. The rhetoric

⁷⁵ Bill Christofferson, 54. See also Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folios 3 and 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

⁷⁶ Gaylord Nelson, interview by Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996, transcript. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

⁷⁷ Bill Christofferson, 138.

Nelson used in support of the bill was extremely powerful, and suggested that the Governor believed that the natural world had intrinsic value over and above its power as an economic resource. Christofferson says that Nelson "...called it 'a now or never situation,' with the state losing its natural resources 'not by the inch and the ounce, but by the square mile and the ton.'⁷⁸

The bill captured national attention, and, even though most saw the obvious pork barrel aspect of its passage, they also saw it as a moment of fundamental change, led by the vision of Gaylord Nelson. After the bill passed Secretary of the Interior Udall praised the bill as "...the boldest conservation step ever taken on a state level in the history of the United States."⁷⁹

The creation of ORAP was Gaylord Nelson's second overt act of environmental politics. The first occurred in 1954, when Nelson voiced opposition to the Tidelands Oil Bill during his campaign for the United States House of Representatives. The bill, as written, transferred federal ownership of offshore oil deposits to Texas, Florida, Louisiana, and California. Theoretically the deal would be worth billions of dollars to those states. Nelson objected on two grounds; first, he contended that his opponent, Representative Glenn Davis, had voted in support of the bill because he had received a \$500 campaign donation from Texas oil and thus had voted for the bill out of political motivations and not in the best interests of Wisconsin. Second, Nelson said that if American offshore oil deposits provided income then all the states should share in the royalties, not just the states mentioned in the bill. Consider Christofferson:

⁷⁸ Bill Christofferson, 143.

⁷⁹ Bill Christofferson, 146.

The unlikely issue of offshore oil reserves became the centerpiece of Nelson's campaign. Nelson repeatedly hammered at Davis' vote for the Tidelands Oil bill...Nelson said royalties from the oil should have been divided among all of the states, which would have meant hundreds of millions of dollars for Wisconsin.⁸⁰

At first glance, the political controversy over Tidelands Oil does not seem to support the notion that Gaylord Nelson was a conservationist or an environmentalist. After all, he did not object to offshore oil drilling on the grounds that the consumption of natural resources should be managed appropriately. Nor did he protest that offshore drilling was a threat to the marine environment. His objections were purely political; on one side, he used the issue as fodder for his debate with Davis. On the other, he strongly advocated for Wisconsin; if there was a monetary benefit to be gained from offshore drilling, then Wisconsin must benefit.

Nonetheless, Nelson's objections are very important to this inquiry. By protesting Tidelands Oil on political grounds, Nelson showed that at that time he was interested in practical results for the people of Wisconsin; implicitly he also acknowledged that the proper consumption of natural resources was appropriate thus demonstrating a basic conservationist ethic. Furthermore, Nelson's objections to Tidelands Oil also show his capacity for personal change. In 1954, Nelson objected to offshore oil drilling on political grounds. By 1969, his objections to offshore drilling would be based on aesthetic and moral grounds. Then he argued an ardent environmental ethic. Thus Gaylord Nelson's interest

⁸⁰ Bill Christofferson, 73.

in Tidelands Oil shows how his interest in environmental politics evolved. For Gaylord Nelson, Tidelands Oil was a starting point.

Nelson's work on ORAP shows another step in the evolution of his environmental beliefs. Whereas Tidelands Oil was strictly a practical and political issue, utilitarian in nature, ORAP served the needs of Wisconsinites in a unique way. The bill was not merely practical and political because ORAP recognized the importance of nature and the value of recreation. In other words, natural resources did not exist merely to be consumed. Instead of cutting down trees once to serve the needs of a particular industry, the trees could be enjoyed time and again. In other words, ORAP demonstrated that natural resources could serve the needs of different individuals in different ways, as long as people took measures to protect them.

So, by the time he ran for the United States Senate in 1962, Gaylord Nelson had prepared himself to speak knowledgeably about conservation and environmentalism. As a junior state Senator, he worked for the Senate Conservation Commission. As a candidate for the United States House of Representatives, he saw the power and the presence of conservation and environmental issues in the political arena. As Governor, he passed groundbreaking conservation legislation that affected the wellbeing of all of the citizens of Wisconsin in a profound way. Gaylord Nelson was tackling issues of conservation and environmentalism, a focus that resonated throughout the rest of his life.

Gaylord Nelson, United States Senator

Whether or not [machine civilization] survives depends upon whether or not man is able to recognize the problems that have been created, anticipate the problems that will confront him in the future, and devise solutions that can be embraced by society as a whole. The problems that can be recognized at present are enormous, and great intelligence, vision, and courage are required for their solution.⁸¹

Harrison Brown

The ideological status of ecology is that of a resistance movement. Its Rachel Carsons and Aldo Leopolds are subversive...They challenge the public or private right to pollute the environment, to systematically destroy predatory animals, to spread chemical pesticides indiscriminately, to meddle chemically with food and water...they oppose the uninhibited growth of human populations...and most other purely engineering solutions to problems of and intrusions into the organic world.⁸²

Paul Shepard

On March 25, 1963, Gaylord Nelson addressed the United States Senate for the first time. Nelson spoke as a co-sponsor of an amendment to Senate Bill 649, the Clean Water Act of 1963. The amendment, also sponsored by Senator Maurine Brown Neuberger of Oregon and Senator Thomas McIntyre of New Hampshire, sought to ban the use of alkyl benzene sulfates (ABS) from use in household detergents. In part, Nelson's speech was specific about the details of the new law; ABS, a crude oil distillate, was dangerous when used in detergents

⁸¹ Harrison Brown. *The Challenge of Man's Future* (New York: Viking Press, 1954), xi.

⁸² Paul Shepard. *The Subversive Science*, Paul Shepard and Daniel McKinley, eds. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 9.

because it was not biodegradable. The resultant effluent resisted water treatment and was consequently a potent pollutant.⁸³

Nelson's co-sponsorship of the amendment, though critically important, was not the most important thing that happened that day. What was more important in the long run was the tone of his rhetoric. He left no doubts in the eyes of his peers that his primary concerns revolved around protecting the United States' environment and natural resources. According to Gaylord Nelson,

The control of detergent pollution is just one part of what I consider the most urgent domestic crisis facing our nation today – the preservation of our priceless natural resources and the defense of the environment in which we live against the most powerful assault in the history of our nation...Unless this nation girds for battle immediately, its people are not going to have clean water to drink, clean air to breathe, decent soil in which to grow their food, and a green outdoors in which to live...⁸⁴

One can see the obvious tension between a conservation ethic and an environmental ethic in Senator Nelson's statement. On one hand, though he did say that 'our' natural resources are priceless, he explicitly chose to refer to the natural world as resources, thus indicating implicitly that there was an active consumption matrix at work. On the other hand, Nelson was also explicit about the fact that Americans and the environment faced significant threats. Furthermore, the military tone of his rhetoric lent a sense of urgency to conservationism and environmentalism and sent a strong message to his colleagues in the Senate about his intent.

⁸³ Cong. Rec., 88th Cong., 1st sess., 1963: 18695-18696.

⁸⁴ Cong. Rec., 88th Cong., 1st sess., 1963: 18695-18696.

Nelson repeatedly invoked scientific evidence to make his case for Senator Neuberger's bill to the Senate. He thus aligned himself with what Rachel Carson had done when she published *Silent Spring* by relying on the power of science in a new way.

Gaylord Nelson started his fight to stop detergent pollution immediately upon entering the Senate in 1963. According to the evidence, he continued to fight to ban detergent pollution for fourteen years. Ultimately, though, Nelson failed to sponsor successful legislation banning the presence of sulfates and phosphates in detergents.⁸⁵ Why, then, include his work on detergent pollution in an analysis of his work as a conservationist and environmentalist?

There are four reasons: (1) the battle over detergent pollution is a very useful exemplar, proving that successful environmental legislation can take a long time to pass, (2) the battle over detergent pollution shows Nelson's fierce determination to protect the natural world, (3) though federal legislation banning detergent pollution did not pass, local and state legislators did pass bans on detergent pollution which were very successful, and (4) the battle over detergent pollution is an excellent exemplar of the extant tension between conservation ethics and environmental ethics in the 1960s and 1970s.⁸⁶

According to Christofferson,

In the mid-1990s, after many states had passed phosphate detergent bans, the industry voluntarily quit manufacturing household laundry detergents with phosphates. While Nelson's efforts did not produce federal legislation, they increased public awareness, spurred other states and local governments to follow

⁸⁵ Bill Christofferson, 217.

⁸⁶ Bill Christofferson, 217-18.

Wisconsin's lead and act on their own, and kept the pressure on manufacturers to clean up their act and find alternatives to phosphates.⁸⁷

* * * * *

For the most part, however, Senator Gaylord Nelson was very successful working to protect the environment. In the first place, Nelson had a perfect conservation voting record throughout his entire senatorial career, and thus he helped enact significant environmental legislation such as the Wilderness Act (1964), the Land and Water Conservation Act (1965), and the National Environmental Policy Act (1969).⁸⁸ In the second place, he personally sponsored successful legislation, particularly in the area of wilderness protection. Third, his colleagues in the Senate looked to him for leadership on conservation and environmental issues, and through his relationships he built coalitions and bridged gaps between very disparate communities.

For example, on January 2, 1969, Senator Nelson wrote a letter to Senator John Stennis, discussing information on conservation Stennis had requested. Nelson's letter was notable because it discusses the impact of Paul Erlich's book, *The Population Bomb*. Nelson, who inserted a response to *The Population Bomb* in the Congressional Record, acknowledged the problem of overpopulation but claimed that Erlich overstated his prediction that the world's population problem would reach a critical apex within ten years in order to shock

⁸⁷ Bill Christofferson, 218.

⁸⁸ Nelson, Gaylord Anton, Papers, 1954-2005, Box 1, Folio 3. Wisconsin State Historical Society, Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin. On February 17, 1969, Nelson received the National Wildlife Federation's "Distinguished Service to Conservation Award," the NWF's highest honor in the field of conservation legislation.

his audience. Nelson said, "My own feeling is that Dr. Erlich decided to shock people by using the time period of one decade...I have discussed it with a number of ecologists and marine ecologists who agree with everything Erlich says except the ten year period."⁸⁹ Nelson also recommended two books to Stennis, *The Challenge of Man's Future* by Harrison Brown and *The Subversive Science*, edited by Paul Shepard and Daniel McKinley.

* * * * *

According to Gaylord Nelson's papers, in 1930 "...the 71st Congress directed the Secretary of the Interior to investigate the potential for an Apostle Islands National Park."⁹⁰ Forty years later, as Governor of Wisconsin, Nelson renewed interest in the Apostle Islands when he "...asked for a detailed study of the feasibility of the national lakeshore."⁹¹ In 1965, Senator Nelson introduced an Apostle Islands bill to Congress.

Over the course of the next years, Congress considered Nelson's legislation several times. It passed the Senate in 1967, but the House Interior Committee "...was unable to take up the bill for action before adjournment." The bill passed the Senate again in 1969, and on September 10, 1970 it "...was

⁸⁹ Gaylord Nelson to John Stennis, January 2, 1969. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 3, Folio 8. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

⁹⁰ Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 8. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

⁹¹ Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 8. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

passed by the House.” President Nixon signed the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore Act on September 26, 1970.⁹²

What makes the Apostle Islands bill interesting is the confluence of work necessary to make it law, as well as its impact on other events. In this case, Gaylord Nelson again showed significant determination, working for nine years to make his dream a reality. Second, Nelson worked with representatives from the different bands of local Indians and eventually gained their support. Finally, it was Gaylord Nelson’s interest in the Apostle Islands that catalyzed his effort to organize John F. Kennedy’s Conservation Tour in September of 1963. When Nelson approached Kennedy with his idea, he integrated conservation ethics and environmental ethics in his proposal, and thus Nelson’s work to establish an Apostle Islands National Lakeshore proves to be a critical exemplar of his efforts to bridge gaps and build coalitions between conservationists and environmentalists.

John F. Kennedy Conservation Tour of 1963

On September 24, 1963, John F. Kennedy embarked on a nationwide tour intended to promote resource conservation and environmental awareness. He visited seventeen cities in four days. The tour, as planned, was the brainchild of Gaylord Nelson.

⁹² Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 8. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

John Heritage, who served as Nelson's Legislative Director during the 91st Congress (1969-1970), told Richard Saltonstall of Time Magazine that Nelson first discussed the importance of environmentalism with Robert Kennedy during John Kennedy's Presidential campaign of 1960. Heritage prepared the letter to Saltonstall in anticipation of his planned interview of Gaylord Nelson. According to Heritage, "Nelson told Robert then that he thought the protection of the environment was a very significant national issue that a Presidential candidate should embrace."⁹³

Heritage wrote the letter in December of 1969, subsequent to Nelson's brainstorm about the Environmental Teach-In the previous August. By December, public interest in the event was piquing. Apparently Saltonstall intended to sum up Nelson's environmental bona fides in his article, because in addition to the information about Nelson's conversation with Robert Kennedy the letter contains a virtual laundry list of Nelson's other environmental accomplishments up to that point.⁹⁴

The timing of the letter proves interesting, because it conflicts somewhat with other evidence in Gaylord Nelson's papers, and forces the historian to ask exactly how Kennedy's conservation trip was precipitated. On one hand, Nelson told Dr. Heather Newbold that as he wound down his tenure as Wisconsin Governor and anticipated working as a Senator

⁹³ John Heritage to Richard Saltonstall, December 1, 1969. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 3. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

⁹⁴ John Heritage to Richard Saltonstall, December 1, 1969. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 3. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

...the idea occurred to me that if I could persuade President Kennedy to do a nationwide conservation tour, the whole country would focus on the issue and it would force the environment onto the national political agenda.⁹⁵

Nelson continues and describes an appointment he made with Robert Kennedy, to which he brought "...a substantial collection of newspaper headlines about...wide public interest in the environment," and persuaded the Attorney General that "...it was a good idea to do a nationwide tour."⁹⁶

Senator Nelson's interview with Edwin Bayley of the Kennedy Library Oral History Project contradicts the Newbold interview somewhat. According to Nelson, he first discussed conservation with John Kennedy during the Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner in Milwaukee in the spring of 1962.⁹⁷ During the course of their day together, the President and Governor Nelson discussed the issues that confronted the United States at the time. Nelson recalled that Kennedy said that with exception of Medicare, "...all the issues had become so complicated the public had great trouble understanding them..."⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Gaylord Nelson, interview by Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996, transcript. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

⁹⁶ Gaylord Nelson, interview by Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996, transcript. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

⁹⁷ Gaylord Nelson, interview by Edwin R. Bayley of the Kennedy Library Oral History Project, July 1, 1964. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 6, Folio 40. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

⁹⁸ Gaylord Nelson, interview by Edwin R. Bayley of the Kennedy Library Oral History Project, July 1, 1964. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 6, Folio 40. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Nelson responded that he could think of one other issue whose complexity did not confound the American public: the environment. According to Nelson,

I said I thought that there was one significant, important, appealing issue that was simple and that the people did understand and I said that that was the field of conservation of our natural resources...concern with conservation cuts across all walks of life and...every person has some concern about conservation.⁹⁹

Nelson did have a meeting with Robert Kennedy sometime in 1963 wherein they discussed environmentalism. However, unlike the meeting described in the Newbold interview, Nelson said in this version that he did not make the appointment with Kennedy specifically to discuss environmental issues. Instead, Nelson "...went to see him on another matter..." and conservation came up. Nelson "...told him how important it was on its merits and how important it was politically..." and Kennedy admitted that the issue had not been given enough attention.¹⁰⁰

After Senator Gaylord Nelson took his oath of office in January of 1963, he met with Lee White (and another unnamed individual) who represented the White House. He discussed the notion of promoting "...a major policy statement and a national tour to see the problem areas and to discuss the conservation of our

⁹⁹ Gaylord Nelson, interview by Edwin R. Bayley of the Kennedy Library Oral History Project, July 1, 1964. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 6, Folio 40. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹⁰⁰ Gaylord Nelson, interview by Edwin R. Bayley of the Kennedy Library Oral History Project, July 1, 1964. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 6, Folio 40. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

natural resources.”¹⁰¹ According to Nelson’s account, by this point Stuart Udall, Secretary of the Interior, and Senator Clinton Anderson also supported the idea of a conservation tour.

On May 16, 1963, Senator Nelson received a letter from a member of President Kennedy’s staff, Arthur Schlesinger, indicating that the President wanted Nelson’s input regarding “...the field of conservation.”¹⁰² Nelson replied on May 24, and promised the President a memo outlining his ideas for a conservation tour.¹⁰³

Nelson’s five page memo, dated August 29, 1963, is a tour-de-force of environmental activism and political savvy. Nelson combined ardent environmentalism with practical political advice. He explained the details of environmental problems, and outlined how he would handle the planning of a conservation tour. As an addendum, he also included quotations from environmental philosophers and scientists, “...some of which may be fitting for your speeches.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Gaylord Nelson, interview by Edwin R. Bayley of the Kennedy Library Oral History Project, July 1, 1964. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 6, Folio 40. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹⁰² Arthur Schlesinger to Gaylord Nelson, May 16, 1963. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 2, Folio 35. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹⁰³ Gaylord Nelson to John F. Kennedy, May 24, 1963. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 2, Folio 35. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹⁰⁴ Gaylord Nelson to John F. Kennedy, August 29, 1963. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 2, Folio 35. Nelson’s suggested quotations included passages by Loren Eiseley, Henry David Thoreau, Wallace Stegner, and Aldo Leopold, to name a few. Interestingly, Nelson also included a quotation from J.

Nelson's reasoning was sound and aggressive. It is clear from the content and the tone of the letter that he urgently wanted President Kennedy to take a conservation tour. Nelson pointed out that no President had taken such a tour, and that to maximize the effects of his trip Kennedy would have to speak very specifically about environmental problems to shake people out of their apathy and lethargy, urging Kennedy to "...tell the whole story." Nelson hypothesized that the nations' political leaders had failed to protect the environment, and consequently had ignored "...outdoor assets..." which have inherent value. Nelson also invoked Rachel Carson, saying that her work is "...a perfect example of the kind of impact that can be made with specifics."¹⁰⁵

Thus one can see the thrusts of Nelson's argument to Kennedy. First, the environment has intrinsic value and must be protected. Second, natural resources, or, in Nelson's words, "...assets..." have monetary value that have to be managed. Third, by protecting nature and managing its assets, the President could earn political capital.

Once he established sufficient justification for a conservation tour, Nelson got very specific about the subjects Kennedy should tackle. They included overpopulation, pollution of air and water, wilderness, reclamation, and recreational issues. In his discussion of recreational issues, Nelson identified

Horace McFarland of remarks he made before the White House Conference on Conservation and Natural Resources which took place in 1908 and probably placed his suggestions to Kennedy in historical context.

¹⁰⁵ Gaylord Nelson to John F. Kennedy, August 29, 1963. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 2, Folio 35. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

fishing, hunting, skiing, hiking, and camping as contingent benefits of environmental protection, again showing his pragmatism; it appears from the letter that every time he tended to stray too far afield, he would come back to the ultimate value of the conservation tour to the President. In essence, Nelson was selling something and he knew it. Nelson told Kennedy, "I am suggesting that your series of speeches constitute a total presentation of the whole problem in both its broadest and most specific aspects."¹⁰⁶

It is unclear from the available evidence when President Kennedy decided to go on the conservation tour, though there is a letter to Senator Nelson from Lawrence O'Brien, dated September 3, acknowledging receipt of Nelson's memo.¹⁰⁷ As well, in an interview for the Kennedy Library, Nelson said that he "...had occasion to see the President about another matter and Mr. Ted Sorenson said that they had received the letter, appreciated it, and thought it was very good."¹⁰⁸

President John F. Kennedy toured the United States from September 24 to September 28 in 1963, visiting seventeen cities and towns in four days. The ostensible purpose of the trip was to promote environmental awareness and

¹⁰⁶ Gaylord Nelson to John F. Kennedy, August 29, 1963. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 2, Folio 35. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹⁰⁷ Lawrence O'Brien to Gaylord Nelson, September 3, 1963. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 2, Folio 35. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹⁰⁸ Gaylord Nelson, interview by Edwin R. Bayley of the Kennedy Library Oral History Project, July 1, 1964. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 6, Folio 40. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Senator Nelson is also quoted in this interview, saying that his memo to the President was subsequent to the President's decision to go on tour. In this case, the evidence is inconclusive.

resource conservation. The President invited Gaylord Nelson, Secretary of the Interior Stuart Udall, and Senators Hubert Humphrey, Gene McCarthy and Joe Clark to accompany him on the trip. According to Nelson, Udall and all of the Senators had profound interest in environmental protection.¹⁰⁹ According to Nelson, their agenda included

major speeches on water, on all aspects of conservation, explaining that every magazine in the country concerned about these issues, whether it's boating or fresh water or fishing or hunting, would run extensive pieces about the President's interest and it would arouse great and needed public concern about this matter.¹¹⁰

Unfortunately, Gaylord Nelson's plans for the trip did not come to fruition.

In his interview with Heather Newbold, he said,

As we took off, I remember thinking 'this is it, we've succeeded. Now the environment will be forced onto the national agenda of political priorities and we will finally start seriously addressing the issue. I was wrong.'¹¹¹

* * * * *

Gaylord Nelson was wrong for three reasons. First, on September 24 the Senate passed the Nuclear Test ban treaty which immediately diverted the press' attention from the conservation tour to the arms control treaty. In fact, according

¹⁰⁹ Gaylord Nelson, interview by Edwin R. Bayley of the Kennedy Library Oral History Project, July 1, 1964. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 6, Folio 40. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹¹⁰ Gaylord Nelson, interview by Edwin R. Bayley of the Kennedy Library Oral History Project, July 1, 1964. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 6, Folio 40. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹¹¹ Gaylord Nelson, interview with Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

to Nelson, "...the President held up the takeoff so we could vote on the treaty."¹¹²

Second, though Nelson had indicated to Robert Kennedy in 1962 that he thought the American people could unify to protect their resources and the environment, it did not appear to be true. Environmental issues were complicated and buy-in on the part of the citizenry was not as easy to come by as Nelson thought it would be. Finally, though Nelson and his Senatorial colleagues were united together to present a strong message of conservation during the tour, President Kennedy and his staff were not. Nelson said that "...this conservation trip was not treated by the President's advisors as a conservation trip at all, but rather...as an excuse to get out into the political hustings [sic]."¹¹³ In 1996,

Nelson told Heather Newbold,

Though I had assumed the President's tour would focus national attention on the environment, the reporters and editors had no understanding of the issue, thus no interest in it. It should also be said that the President's speeches did not dramatically outline the profound implications of continued environmental deterioration. Even if he had, I am inclined to doubt that could have competed with the excitement over the test ban and its foreign policy implications.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Gaylord Nelson, interview with Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹¹³ Gaylord Nelson, interview by Edwin R. Bayley of the Kennedy Library Oral History Project, July 1, 1964. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 6, Folio 40. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹¹⁴ Gaylord Nelson, interview with Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin. See also <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources>. It is unsurprising that the press' attention was easily diverted from President Kennedy's conservation tour by the ratification of the Limited Test Ban Treaty. Less than a year before, the United States and the Soviet Union came to the

The speech that President Kennedy gave in Salt Lake City at the Mormon Tabernacle provides further evidence of the marginal success of the conservation tour. For although the President did initially mention the purpose of the tour, conservation, he rapidly changed direction, and the bulk of the address concerned the United States' foreign policy. The bulk of his speech attempted to justify the United States' political, economic, and military activities abroad. Consequently, Kennedy spoke about foreign aid, the United States' role within the United Nations, and stopping the spread of communism. He also spoke of the recent ratification of the Limited Test Ban Treaty by the Senate and thus considered the "...irreversible influence" of science and technology.¹¹⁵

One important subtext of the President's speech informs this inquiry directly. As noted above, the cultural, political, and social tensions that existed between those who argued for conservation of natural resources and those who ascribed more intrinsic value to the natural world and the human environment were profound. In his speech, President Kennedy reflected American society's ambivalence. He talked specifically about the importance of water, especially in the west. On one hand, he showed himself a romantic environmentalist,

brink of nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis. What is important to this study, however, is the fact that though Gaylord Nelson voted for the test ban, he did not mention the importance of the test ban to the health of the natural world in either the Bayley interview (1964) or the Newbold interview (1996). This is interesting in particular given that the Treaty stipulated that the signatories pledged to end the contamination of the environment by radioactive substances. According to the evidence, Gaylord Nelson did not connect the scourge of nuclear weapons to environmental degradation during the 1963-1970 time period.

¹¹⁵ John F. Kennedy, address at the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, Utah. September 26, 1963. <http://www.ifklibrary.org/ifkl> (Accessed February 17, 2009).

especially when he evoked images of pioneers and their westward expansion. On the other, he showed himself a conservationist, if only in the sense of aligning himself with the notion that political power in some basic way relied upon control of natural resources, arguing that "...the control of water is the secret of the development of the west, and...no drop of water west of the 100th parallel should flow to the ocean without being used."¹¹⁶

* * * * *

In the Newbold interview, Nelson said that the marginal success of President Kennedy's conservation tour actually motivated him to ask how to "...get this issue onto the national political agenda," claiming, ultimately, that the conservation tour was "...the germ of the idea that eventually evolved into Earth Day."¹¹⁷

Earth Day

The exact origins of Earth Day are somewhat hazy. Just as in the case of President Kennedy's conservation tour of 1963, there are conflicting accounts in Gaylord Nelson's papers. However, in the Newbold interview and later in his book *Beyond Earth Day*, Nelson said that by the summer of 1969, conditions in the United States were ripe for environmental change. According to Nelson,

¹¹⁶ John F. Kennedy, address at the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, Utah. September 26, 1963. <http://www.ifklibrary.org/ifkl> (Accessed February 17, 2009).

¹¹⁷ Gaylord Nelson, interview with Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin. See also Bill Christofferson, 302.

It was a time when people could see, smell, and taste pollution...Lake Erie was proclaimed dead, and backyard birds were dying from a chemical known as DDT. Public interest was further piqued by two environmental catastrophes that captured headlines from coast to coast earlier that year. The first was a large oil tanker spill offshore Santa Barbara that left the public with images of sea birds coated with oil. Then in June of 1969, the Cuyahoga River...caught fire and shot flames high into the air in Cleveland.¹¹⁸

Nelson also told Newbold that he was specifically inspired during a speaking tour in the American west during the summer of 1969, and that the idea for Earth Day occurred to him as he read a *Ramparts* magazine article "...on anti-Vietnam teach-ins which were happening on campuses all over the country."¹¹⁹ According to Nelson, "As I read the article, it suddenly occurred to me, 'why not have a massive nationwide grassroots teach-in on the environment?'"¹²⁰ Nelson continued by saying that he thought it obvious that "...the general public was far ahead of the press and the political establishment in its concern for what was happening to the environment."¹²¹ Ultimately, Gaylord Nelson believed that a

¹¹⁸ Gaylord Nelson, with Susan Campbell and Paul Wozniak, *Beyond Earth Day* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 6.

¹¹⁹ Gaylord Nelson, interview with Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin. See also Bill Christofferson, 302. See also Bill Christofferson, 302.

¹²⁰ Gaylord Nelson, interview with Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin. See also Bill Christofferson, 302.

¹²¹ Gaylord Nelson, interview with Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin. See also Bill Christofferson, 302.

huge demonstration would "...shake up the establishment and put the environment on the national political agenda."¹²²

After returning to Washington, Nelson put his plans into motion. The first thing he did is start raising money. His first call was to Walter Reuther, President of the United Auto Workers. According to Nelson, Reuther "...was an old friend, a wonderful person, and a great supporter of the environment..." who ended up agreeing to donate \$2000.¹²³ Other donors soon followed.

In addition to Reuther's donation, Nelson also accepted money from George Meany, president of the AFL-CIO, who only showed interest after being told that Walter Reuther had already donated.¹²⁴ Evidently the two men's political and personal rivalry extended into any arena where one could top the other. In this instance, their competitive natures ended up helping to organize Earth Day. As well, Nelson himself also donated all of his Earth Day related speaking fees, totaling \$18,000.

The leaders of Earth Day, however, were not indiscriminate. They did not accept all of the donations they received. According to Senator Nelson's records, they did reject some checks, notably those from Standard Oil,

¹²² Gaylord Nelson, interview with Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹²³ Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 6, Folio 28. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹²⁴ Gaylord Nelson, interview with Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. See also Environmental Teach-In Contributions. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 6, Folio 28. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Monsanto, Proctor and Gamble, and Colt Industries.¹²⁵ On the whole, it is unclear why Nelson *et al* chose to accept money from some organizations that presented ongoing threats to the natural world but rejected donations from others.

Importantly, the list of donors to Environmental Teach-In, Incorporated informs this inquiry directly, because Gaylord Nelson solicited funds from sources that spanned the political and cultural spectrum; thus, he asked for and accepted funds from conservation groups, unions, big businesses, and concerned individuals, and, in so doing, he supported and encouraged conservationists and environmentalists alike.¹²⁶

* * * * *

Gaylord Nelson announced Earth Day on September 21, 1969 in Seattle, Washington, and "...the announcement was carried nationwide by both the Associated Press and United Press."¹²⁷ Nelson told Heather Newbold that by the time he returned to Washington

the phone was ringing off the hook – inquiries were coming in from all parts of the country – they wanted to know, what is the date? What are your plans? The interest and activity was expanding so

¹²⁵ Gaylord Nelson, interview with Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹²⁶ Gaylord Nelson, interview with Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹²⁷ Gaylord Nelson, interview with Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

rapidly, we couldn't keep up with it in my office. I was being called off the Senate floor to answer inquiries from the press and telephone calls from college students all across the country.¹²⁸

Eventually the pressure on Nelson and his staff became too intense, and he decided to open an independent Earth Day office.¹²⁹

One thing that was always true was that Gaylord Nelson wanted Earth Day to be primarily educational in nature. In Nelson's mind's eye, a successful Earth Day would raise consciousness and inform the general populace about environmental issues. On the other hand, a successful Earth Day would focus attention on the politics of conservationism and environmentalism and force those in government to begin to reckon with the implications of ongoing environmental degradation.¹³⁰

Thus, Senator Nelson and those that ran Environmental Teach-In focused their immediate attention on organizing in schools and universities, and to support their effort they chose a date in mid-April that did not conflict with any major events on university calendars. Subsequently, Nelson "...prepared letters to all fifty governors and over two hundred mayors around the country asking

¹²⁸ Gaylord Nelson, interview with Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹²⁹ Gaylord Nelson, interview with Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹³⁰ Gaylord Nelson, interview with Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

them to issue Earth Day Proclamations.”¹³¹ In all, forty-four governors ended up supporting Earth Day. As well, “Innumerable mayors did too because they were at the local level and saw the issue far better than the Congress and the President.”¹³² Also, as Earth Day’s momentum grew, members of both houses of Congress received requests from their home states to speak on Earth Day. Ultimately, “So many requests flooded in during March and April that the leadership adjourned the Congress for Earth Day.”¹³³

* * * * *

Earth Day was a success. According to Gaylord Nelson,

Earth Day did exactly what I had hoped for. It was truly an astonishing grassroots explosion. The people cared, and Earth Day became the first opportunity they ever had to join in a national demonstration to send a message to the politicians to wake up and do something. Suddenly, the environment became a national political priority by public demand.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Gaylord Nelson, interview with Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹³² Gaylord Nelson, interview with Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹³³ Gaylord Nelson, interview with Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹³⁴ Gaylord Nelson, interview with Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

In all, twenty million Americans participated in Earth Day.¹³⁵ In the Preface to *Beyond Earth Day*, Robert F. Kennedy wrote that Earth Day was the largest demonstration in American history, and though one might quibble with his reasoning somewhat, the fact remains that whether Earth Day was one demonstration or thousands it catalyzed subsequent environmental change in an unprecedented way.¹³⁶

However, though Earth Day did have myriad measurable effects in the United State and ultimately in the world, the purpose of this inquiry is not to discuss what happened after April 22, 1970. Instead, one asks how Gaylord Nelson's behavior as a Senator from 1963 to 1970 helped bring about the international phenomenon that became Earth Day. Was Nelson a conservationist, or was he an environmentalist? How did his work – his action or his inaction – contribute to a national discourse about environmental issues?

As suggested above, Gaylord Nelson was a conservationist and an environmentalist. As a Senator, he fought for legislation that supported

¹³⁵ Gaylord Nelson, interview with Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹³⁶ Robert F. Kennedy in Gaylord Nelson, with Susan Campbell and Paul Wozniak, xi. See also Gaylord Nelson, interview with Dr. Heather Newbold, October 23, 1996. Gaylord Nelson Papers, 1954-2005. Box 1, Folio 4. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin. According to Nelson, "During the decade following Earth Day, twenty-eight major environmental laws were passed." Though such considerations are outside of the scope of this inquiry, *per se*, it is important to note the events that followed the original Earth Day also served to build and strengthen ongoing relationships between conservationists and environmentalists, relationships that Gaylord Nelson helped to maintain throughout his career as a United States Senator.

conservationists' ideals just as he fought for legislation that supported environmentalists' ideals. A politician, he was anything if not pragmatic, and so he was a master of accomplishing the possible. So, while on one hand he worked to pass the National Wildlife Incentive Program which gave American farmers incentives to "...agree to retire cropland, manage it for wildlife protection, and open it to the public for hunting and recreation," he also worked for wilderness protection in the form of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.¹³⁷ Thus Nelson, through his actions as a Senator, acted both as a 'utilitarian' conservationist and as a 'preservationist' conservationist. The Wildlife Incentive Program was about management and proper efficient utility whereas the Scenic Rivers Act was recognizing and protecting the intrinsic worth of the natural world.

Of course, there are other pieces of legislation that demonstrate my argument equally well. In addition to the Wildlife Incentive Program Senator Nelson proposed Operation Mainstream – Green Thumb, which amended the Economic Opportunity Act of 1965 and provided funds that not only focused on ending poverty by putting people to work but also made "...a major attack on the conservation work backlog..."¹³⁸ Correspondingly, in addition to the Scenic

¹³⁷ Gaylord Nelson Papers 1954-2005, Box 225. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹³⁸ Gaylord Nelson Papers 1954-2005, Box 225. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Rivers Act there Nelson sponsored the National Hiking Trails Act as well as the legislation that made the Apostle Islands national lakeshore.¹³⁹

At the same time, Gaylord Nelson worked for many years to pass laws banning the use of phosphorus and other eutrophic agents in detergents. He was also the first member of Congress that proposed a national ban on DDT. Thus, in addition acting as a conservationist of both stripes, he also acted as an environmentalist.

While planning Earth Day, Nelson also played both roles. As a fundraiser and manager, he worked with anybody who expressed an interest, building coalitions and doing whatever was necessary to get the job done. He appeared on *Face the Nation*, and, as a United States Senator, he legitimated Earth Day in a way that few others could have done. At the same time, Nelson also dealt with students whose environmental agendas were much more radical than his own; Nelson, as noted above, primarily wanted Earth Day to educate the populace about conservation and successfully politicize environmental issues. But, those that he worked with believed in more aggressive measures. While Nelson and others talked over their plans and negotiated, sometimes taking years to pass significant environmental legislation, there were environmental protesters associated with Earth Day who buried cars and dumped effluent in Standard Oil's

¹³⁹ Gaylord Nelson Papers 1954-2005, Box 225. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

reflecting pool in San Francisco.¹⁴⁰ It took all kinds of people to build Earth Day, and Senator Gaylord Nelson dealt with and led them all, bridging gaps between very disparate communities.

Nelson accomplished this unique feat through his use of appropriate rhetoric. He spoke to his colleagues in the Senate in one manner, leading the way, suggesting ways of acting, and sharing information, but never cajoling or shaming. He also spoke the language of conservation, and those who were interested in wise use and efficiency listened. Finally, he spoke the language of preservation, freely acknowledging the beauty, standing, and power of the natural world. Finally, Gaylord Nelson spoke directly to environmentalists, and it was the language of environmentalism that was Nelson's ultimate legacy to those who participated in Earth Day.

Gaylord Nelson's Earth Day Tour

Leopold's understanding of the significance of evolutionary biology and ecology, his integration of science and ethics, his sensitivity to the cultural context of conservation, and his personal example as a pragmatic manager and healer of the land, changed the direction of the conservation movement.¹⁴¹

Curt Meine

¹⁴⁰ Gaylord Nelson Papers 1954-2005, Box 225. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹⁴¹ Curt Meine, 5.

[Gaylord Nelson]...personifies the Leopoldian 'Ecological Conscience' reminding citizens of their duty to manage wisely all things held in a public trust.¹⁴²

D.J. Behling
President, Wisconsin Academy of
Sciences, Arts, and Letters
April 29, 1967

Concurrent with the organizing that was taking place in the offices of Environmental Teach-In, Inc., Gaylord Nelson and his staff planned the Senator's personal contributions to Earth Day.

Gaylord Nelson received dozens (if not hundreds) of requests to speak to Earth Day audiences. In response, he crossed the United States on a seventeen stop speaking tour in the two weeks leading up to Earth Day, which culminated in a particularly intense five day spree of speaking engagements, starting with his appearance on *Face the Nation* on Sunday, April 19, 1970.¹⁴³

Nelson appeared on Face the Nation with Representative Robert McCloskey, a Republican from California. As noted above, one of Nelson's strengths was building consensus among colleagues, which he did especially well in the days and months leading up to Earth Day. Nelson had selected McCloskey as his co-Chair of Environmental Teach-In for two reasons; first, selecting a Republican included the 'opposition' party in the planning of Earth Day in a significant way and guaranteed that the event "...would be

¹⁴² D.J. Behling. Gaylord Nelson Papers 1954-2005, Box 1, Folio 5. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹⁴³ Bill Christofferson, 307.

nonpartisan.”¹⁴⁴ Second, Nelson worked well in the Senate, but he needed a balancing force in the House; McCloskey provided that balance.

Face the Nation proved challenging. The reporters, George Herman, James Ridgeway, and David Culhane, asked very tough questions that challenged Earth Day from both the political left and the political right.

Herman started by noting that “...some of the young radicals are already calling [Earth Day] nothing but a con game set up by the establishment to conceal...abuses of the environment,” asking if Earth Day will really accomplish anything.¹⁴⁵

Nelson did not equivocate. He told Herman that Earth Day was “...a necessary part of the educational effort that must go on to gain an understanding nationwide of the disastrous situation that is occurring in the degradation of the environment,” saying that such understanding was a critical precursor to “...intelligent action.”¹⁴⁶ Of course, Herman did not let his focus lapse; he wanted to know if Nelson and McCloskey expected “...some actual disruptions,” to which McCloskey answered that he felt violence was a possibility.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Bill Christofferson, 302.

¹⁴⁵ George Herman, *Face the Nation*, April 19, 1970. Gaylord Nelson Papers 1954-2005, Box 1, Folio 6. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹⁴⁶ Gaylord Nelson to George Herman, *Face the Nation*, April 19, 1970. Gaylord Nelson Papers 1954-2005, Box 1, Folio 6. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹⁴⁷ Paul McCloskey to George Herman, *Face the Nation*, April 19, 1970. Gaylord Nelson Papers 1954-2005, Box 1, Folio 6. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Nelson differed with McCloskey; he said that he had already given ten Earth Day speeches, and that "...they have all been very valuable experiences in understanding this issue."¹⁴⁸

Later, James Ridgeway asked Nelson and McCloskey about the oil spills which had recently occurred on the Outer Continental Shelf: "...if Congress and the administration are really so serious about this pollution business, why isn't the drilling on the Outer Continental Shelf stopped?"¹⁴⁹ Here, again, Nelson stuck to the foci that consumed him throughout the entire process of organizing Earth Day. He emphasized two things: public education about conservationism and environmentalism and the consequent political will necessary to create social change. Nelson also noted that he had recently proposed legislation to stop offshore drilling, claiming that

we will not drill for oil in the seabed any place any more until we need the oil and until we have the technology to extract it without a threat of an environmental disaster such as occurred in Santa Barbara and in the Gulf [of Mexico] and elsewhere around the world.¹⁵⁰

Of course, the above reveals a lot about Gaylord Nelson and aligns with my argument: Gaylord Nelson was a conservationist and an environmentalist and the way he conducted himself had everything to do with who he was

¹⁴⁸ Gaylord Nelson to George Herman, *Face the Nation*, April 19, 1970. Gaylord Nelson Papers 1954-2005, Box 1, Folio 6. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹⁴⁹ James Ridgeway, *Face the Nation*, April 19, 1970. Gaylord Nelson Papers 1954-2005, Box 1, Folio 6. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹⁵⁰ Gaylord Nelson to James Ridgeway, *Face the Nation*, April 19, 1970. Gaylord Nelson Papers 1954-2005, Box 1, Folio 6. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

speaking to and what he was trying to persuade them to accomplish. On one hand, Nelson was motivated by his belief in the intrinsic value of the natural world. He wanted to stop offshore drilling because it caused environmental disasters. On the other hand, he did not absolutely reject offshore drilling, and thereby he showed himself as functioning as both a 'utilitarian' conservationist and an environmentalist. Senator Gaylord Nelson bridged gaps where others could not, and thereby he built important consensuses which in the long run helped protect the natural world.

Eventually, the *Face the Nation* interview turned to economic issues. Herman wanted to know the long-term implications of progressive environmental change. He set up his question by suggesting that until that point, the United States had "...capitalism based on constant growth," asking if Americans were really prepared "...to end what we have had..."¹⁵¹ Herman, by the way in which he framed his question, expected Nelson to say that environmentalism would require Americans to change their lifestyles and sacrifice in new ways. Nelson was brutally honest:

The country can't survive with constant growth. We have demonstrated our lack of will or capacity or both to stem the tide of deterioration of the environment with 200 million people. When we get to 300 million people, it will be a disaster...So I think we have to revise our attitudes and our philosophy and modify the works of our institutions in order to preserve the environment that is livable. It

¹⁵¹ George Herman, *Face the Nation*, April 19, 1970. Gaylord Nelson Papers 1954-2005, Box 1, Folio 6. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

involves a huge investment in resources and a vast change in attitude.¹⁵²

Nelson also made his response conditional. Though he was very direct, he told Herman that he did not believe that voters anywhere were prepared to take appropriate measures to protect the environment because they did not fully understand the gravity of environmental problems.

Hence the need for Earth Day. Nelson told the panel on *Face the Nation*, time and again, that whatever Americans chose to do about the state of the natural world needed to be based on education, political will, and intelligent and rational action.

* * * * *

The next days proved much the same for Senator Gaylord Nelson. At every turn, he spoke vehemently on behalf of changing the way that human beings acted on and acted in the natural world. On Monday the 20th, Nelson gave a speech on environmental education in Bethesda, Maryland. After the speech, he left Washington and proceeded to Atlantic City to deliver a speech to the United Auto Workers (UAW). Interestingly, even after taking their money to help fund Earth Day, Nelson had the political courage to tell the UAW "...that the automobile is becoming a symbol of environmental crisis. 'The heart of the problem is the internal combustion engine, which has powered America into

¹⁵² Gaylord Nelson to George Herman, *Face the Nation*, April 19, 1970. Gaylord Nelson Papers 1954-2005, Box 1, Folio 6. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

unparalleled affluence, but now may drive it to unprecedented environmental disaster’.”¹⁵³

Though it initially appears to be counterintuitive, Nelson’s speech to the UAW supports my argument that he was both a conservationist and an environmentalist. I base my contention on the notion that while he was confronting a serious environmental problem, he also praised the auto workers for their commitment to protecting the natural world. Furthermore, Nelson argued for technological change instead of just suggesting that combustion engines be eliminated. Thus he was making a strong point in defense of the natural world and he was building bridges to the people who could help make that happen

* * * * *

On Tuesday the 21st, Nelson made speeches to a joint session of the Massachusetts General Court, a citizens’ group in Milwaukee, and delivered the keynote address for the University of Wisconsin’s Earth Day celebration. The next day, Earth Day, Nelson spoke to crowds at the University of Indiana, the University of Colorado – Denver, and the University of California – Berkeley. Finally, on the 23rd, Nelson went to Los Angeles and spoke to a large crowd at the University of Southern California. He then flew back across country so he could appear on the *Today Show* on Friday the 24th.

Two things about Senator Nelson’s trip are notable. First, Nelson’s itinerary indicates specifically that he and his staff knew that he was taking on a significant burden on behalf of a successful Earth Day. The heading for

¹⁵³ Bill Christofferson, 308.

Wednesday, April 22 asks: “SLEEP! What’s that?”¹⁵⁴ Second, Nelson’s itinerary and notes show that he was not giving the same speech over and over. Instead, he spoke to the needs and interests of each crowd, thus again indicating his flexibility and his determination to talk about protecting the earth in whatever way would help to accomplish his overall objectives.

Conclusion

Aldo Leopold endeavored to be a healing presence, stanching the flow from the psychic wound in American conservation, even in the American mind. He did so by pursuing shared goals wherever they existed, by using history to show the connections between people and land, by reaching beyond conservation proper for insight and reinforcement. In so doing, he maintained that society’s choice is not in fact between utility and preservation, but between short-term exploitation and long-term well being. It may be that the wholeness he sought came to exist more in his own soul than in the exterior landscape, but through his efforts he also helped nudge that landscape – what he once termed ‘that great biota we call America’ – toward a richer and more vigorous existence.¹⁵⁵

Curt Meine

Senator Gaylord Nelson had a lot in common with Aldo Leopold. Like Leopold, Nelson was a pragmatist and an ideologue who reached “beyond conservation proper,” healing wounds and building bridges. As such, Nelson worked with conservationists of different stripes as easily as he worked with ardent environmentalists. Also like Leopold, Nelson was not torn between notions of utility and preservation; instead, he was conservationist at some times

¹⁵⁴ Earth Day Tour Intinerary, Gaylord Nelson Papers 1954-2005, Box 27, Folio 3. Wisconsin State Historical Society, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

¹⁵⁵ Curt Meine, 116.

and an environmentalist at others; he was “a healing presence” who had the “long-term wellbeing” of Americans and America at heart. As a conservationist, Nelson made practical arguments to protect the natural world in the United States Senate, leading his peers by supplying information, proposing legislation, and setting standards of conduct for others to follow. As an environmentalist, he was a visionary who conceived of one of the most revered environmental institutions in American (and world) history: Earth Day. In other words, Gaylord Nelson protected the environment when he could and how he could. He worked with anybody who was willing to help move his environmental agenda forward. He excluded no one. Like Leopold, Nelson “...helped nudge...[the American] landscape...toward a richer and more vigorous existence.”¹⁵⁶

* * * * *

If people destroy something replaceable, made by mankind, they're called vandals; if people destroy something irreplaceable, made by God, they're called developers¹⁵⁷

Gaylord Nelson, quoting Joseph Wood Kruch, to the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire Forum Special

Twenty years after the first Earth Day, on April 10, 1990, Gaylord Nelson gave a speech at the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire Forum Special. In his speech, Nelson highlighted the triumphs of his career as a conservationist and environmentalist, noting in particular the legislation he sponsored that called for

¹⁵⁶ Curt Meine, 116.

¹⁵⁷ Gaylord A. Nelson, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire Forum Special, April 20, 1990. Special Collections, University Archives, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire.

establishing fuel efficiency standards for automobiles, controlling strip mining, banning phosphates in detergents, and stopping the production of DDT and Agent Orange.¹⁵⁸

Nelson also talked about the origins of Earth Day, recalling President Kennedy's national conservation tour in September of 1963 and the night in 1969 when the idea of an environmental "teach-in" first came to him. Nelson told the audience in Eau Claire that the purpose of Earth Day was twofold; he wanted to organize a demonstration so big that politicians would have to pay attention to their constituents and thereby create a significant national dialogue among politicians about environmental issues. He also wanted to educate people about the problems facing the natural world.¹⁵⁹

According to Nelson, he was trying to confound two hundred years of heedless economic development across the American landscape, challenging a development ethic that encouraged maximum exploitation of natural resources without regard to environmental consequences.¹⁶⁰ He said that the "...politically bankrupt slash and burn policy...is economically, environmentally, and morally indefensible," telling his audience that if "...you really think about it, there is

¹⁵⁸ Gaylord A. Nelson, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire Forum Special, April 20, 1990. Special Collections, University Archives, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire.

¹⁵⁹ Gaylord A. Nelson, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire Forum Special, April 20, 1990. Special Collections, University Archives, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire.

¹⁶⁰ Gaylord A. Nelson, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire Forum Special, April 20, 1990. Special Collections, University Archives, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire.

actually just one issue that stands alone above all others...no other issue is more relevant to the condition of human life.”¹⁶¹

Nelson also told his audience that natural resources “...are the wealth of the nation,” arguing that instead of destroying its capital assets the United States should have an environmentally sustainable economy.¹⁶² It was his belief that contrary to what most people in the business community thought and fought for, environmental protection did not threaten economic growth. Instead, environmental protection supported economic growth. Nelson said that “...the real and present danger to the viability of our economy is that every corporation in history that consumed its assets and counted them on the profit side of the ledger went bankrupt.”¹⁶³ He warned that in 1990 companies in the United States were still doing the same thing.¹⁶⁴

Thus we see that even twenty years after the first Earth Day, Gaylord Nelson was still acting as a conservationist and acting as an environmentalist. On one hand, he focused on practical issues and efficiencies, making arguments about Americans’ quality of life and their prospects for the future which were grounded in his Progressive roots. On the other, he also focused on the intrinsic

¹⁶¹ Gaylord A. Nelson, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire Forum Special, April 20, 1990. Special Collections, University Archives, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire.

¹⁶² Gaylord A. Nelson, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire Forum Special, April 20, 1990. Special Collections, University Archives, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire.

¹⁶³ Gaylord A. Nelson, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire Forum Special, April 20, 1990. Special Collections, University Archives, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire.

¹⁶⁴ Gaylord A. Nelson, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire Forum Special, April 20, 1990. Special Collections, University Archives, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire.

value of the natural world, claiming that the "...threat to our environment is more serious than the threat posed by nuclear war, missile gaps, Star Wars, crime, debt, trade deficits, world hunger, economy, or any other number of issues..."¹⁶⁵ To Nelson, nature had independent standing and resources were there to be prudently and efficiently managed and consumed.

One of Senator Nelson's main points during his speech in Eau Claire was that in order to protect the environment, Americans needed aggressive moral leadership. Such leaders needed to replace "...[America's] anemic conservation ethic," and "...imbue the coming generation with a strong conservation ethic that will guide their conduct in its relations with nature..."¹⁶⁶

Of course, Nelson had, in fact, imbued the generation seated before him with a new environmental ethic on the first Earth Day. He was such a leader. By the time he spoke to the audience at the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire he needed to recruit more leaders to the causes of conservationism and environmentalism. After twenty years, Gaylord Nelson was still building bridges.

* * * * *

Senator Gaylord Nelson left many legacies, and the limited scope of this inquiry prevents deeper analysis of his overall contributions to the conservation and environmental movements. However, the work that Nelson did during his first seven years as a United States Senator was significant. Early on, he

¹⁶⁵ Gaylord A. Nelson, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire Forum Special, April 20, 1990. Special Collections, University Archives, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire.

¹⁶⁶ Gaylord A. Nelson, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire Forum Special, April 20, 1990. Special Collections, University Archives, McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire.

established himself as a leader among his peers. He proposed several extremely significant pieces of environmental legislation. In turn, he supported environmental legislation proposed by other senators and congressmen. Unfortunately, the United States Congress, comprised of politicians motivated by myriad concerns, was very slow to act. Thus, even when Congress supported strong environmental legislation, the time lag involved meant that in the meantime environmental damage continued.

Gaylord Nelson understood that ultimately politicians would only act fast enough to satisfy the people that elected them. Consequently, Earth Day was very important. Twenty-million people created a lot of political pressure, and also built an important movement that still has power in its own right.

Unfortunately, there is still much work to be done. Thus one asks if Nelson really made any progress at all. If he did, then why do things seem worse now than they did in the 1960s? Are environmental conditions worse in fact, or has our ability to describe our circumstances merely improved?

I think that Gaylord Nelson did make progress, and substantively protected the natural world. I also think that environmental problems are worse, as are our abilities to describe the relationships that constitute our environment. What, then, is Gaylord Nelson's lasting legacy?

As with Aldo Leopold, Nelson's ultimate legacy is connected to his willingness to see beyond limiting paradigms of human thought and behavior. Just as Nelson saw the problematic circumstances of human existence so too he saw a way to live within our means. So, whereas Pinchot and Muir lived in a

world characterized by a dichotomy that fundamentally separated them based upon their worldviews, Leopold, and Nelson after him, saw the solutions to humankind's problems in its relationships and interdependencies. In the end, that was Gaylord Nelson's greatest strength. He saw potentials as well as problems. He believed.

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