

Beyond Earth Day: From Climate Change to Immigration

How Environmentalism Affects Us All

By Diego Rivas

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Thank you Bill, and thank you all for having me here today. Most of you have probably seen me here off and on over the last year with my girlfriend Rachel, a surprise of sorts as I have never been a religious or even spiritual person, raised in a very reform Jewish slash agnostic home. And now here I am giving a church service nearly 15 years after I was very reluctantly bar mitzvahed in Atlanta.

I have been asked to give this service today as we head into what is now known as “Earth Week” (that’s right – an entire week!) so allow me to give you my background which may or may not give me enough credibility to be standing here before you.

My yet-brief career involves work in and around the political arena, from running state house campaigns in Georgia, to managing an issue questionnaire at Project Vote Smart in Philipsburg, to my current line of work as organizer and only staff person for Montanans for a Healthy Climate, a grassroots coalition campaign seeking federal action on the issue of climate change. I also currently serve as the president of the Wild Divide Chapter of the Montana Wilderness Association and volunteer when I can for other environmental organizations on a range of topics.

It is safe to say that my interaction with what we call “the environment” has always been a core of my being and my awe for its capabilities and the inspiration it brings to me on a daily basis is probably the only form of spirituality that I care to attest to. These values were instilled in me at an early age from my mother who is, as her email address states in Spanish, de la tierra, or - of the earth.

I grew up with many a hike in the north Georgia mountains. Truth be told, I often dreaded the thought of it, having to make the 2 hour drive up from Atlanta only to exert

energy by walking up and down a mountain when I could just as easily tire myself by kicking around a soccer ball with friends back at home. But once we got there, once we got our feet off concrete and into quote unquote “nature,” I always enjoyed the solitude and rare chance to see wildlife and most especially the views from the ridgeline unmatched by any vista of skyscrapers in the city. I guess that’s why you can say I moved to Montana in the first place – the beauty that surrounds us all the time, just right outside our backyards, was enough for me to call Montana home.

And so this coming Wednesday will mark the fifth earth day I will have celebrated in Montana, the fourth in Helena, and the 27th overall. For some of you it may be the 39th celebration, the official day of the birth of the modern environmental movement taking place on April 22nd, 1970. So let us take a step back in time, back to 1970, and think about what we were doing at that time, in this life or perhaps a previous one. To give you some context, I’ll read you this paragraph from the Earth Day Network website:

“Among other things, 1970 in the United States brought with it the Kent State Shootings, the advent of fiber optics, “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” Apollo 13, the Beatle’s last album, the death of Jimi Hendrix, the birth of Mariah Carey, and the meltdown of fuel rods in the Savannah River nuclear plant near Aiken, South Carolina – an incident not acknowledged for 18 years.”

Earth Day was founded, surprisingly enough, by a then-sitting U.S. Senator, Senator Gaylord Nelson representing the state of Wisconsin. It is nearly impossible to imagine a current U.S. Senator who would have the vision or courage to even think about conducting a similar experiment. Only the late Paul Wellstone, who represented neighboring Minnesota, comes to mind.

And it was *indeed* an experiment, a protest to, as Senator Nelson put it, “shake up the political establishment and force the issue onto the national agenda.” “It was a gamble,” he recalled later, “but it worked.”

And it did work. 20 million Americans took to the streets and parks and auditoriums to demonstrate their passion for a healthy, sustainable environment. Groups and organizations that had been plugging away at their single issue, be it coal or nuclear power, pesticides or the extinction of wildlife, came together for the common cause and shared common values.

Earth Day 1970 can be accurately credited with the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency, which prior had been only a loose patchwork of federal programs concerned with single environmental aspects. That same year, Congress passed one of our nation's most complex and ambitious statutes, the Clean Air Act, directing the EPA to set national air standards.

Congress used the momentum to also legislate the Clean Water and Endangered Species Acts in 1972 and '73 respectively; the three combined to this day the most cited pieces of legislation for environmental protection.

But something happened after that. Polluting entities, industries, governments took one in the gut in order to save their face. And environmental degradation kept right on rolling as if 1970 had never occurred. The 1980s brought with them environmental rollbacks in the name of progress, the great Ronald Reagan stating, "A tree's a tree. How many more do you need to look at?" or one of my personal favorites, "Trees cause more pollution than automobiles do." Ah yes, the Great Communicator.

SIDE NOTE – REAGAN BERKELEY PIT

Along comes the year 1990, and twenty years after the first Earth Day, a group of environmental leaders asked Denis Hayes, who was tapped by Senator Nelson to coordinate the first Earth Day, later to become director of the Solar Energy Research Institute, to spearhead an anniversary campaign. "This time, Earth Day went global, mobilizing 200 million people in 141 countries and lifting the status of environmental issues onto the world stage."

Once again this mobilization of people proved to be a success. 1990 saw the passage of amendments to the Clean Air Act and the regulation of sulfur dioxide, the primary cause of acid rain. I can vividly remember that day – my 3rd grade class creating a giant ball of vines used in the main downtown Atlanta festivities whereby people placed notes to Mother Earth. This was the first time that I can recall being on the local news.

The millennium rolled around and Hayes and company used the internet to galvanize 5,000 environmental groups reaching out to hundreds of millions of people in a record 184 countries. The focus: global warming and a push for clean energy.

Yet, no major piece of legislation passed this time around and I can't help but laugh every time I read this statement from Earth Day Network: They say, "Earth Day 2000 sent the message loud and clear that citizens 'round the world wanted quick and decisive action on clean energy." I guess Congress didn't get the memo.

Which brings us to today - Earth Day 2009, 39 years and running. Next year – the big four oh. So what are the big topics of the day? Well, obviously climate change has not been solved, though there is hope that this year may be the year. An exciting piece of news hot of the presses – the EPA on Friday, the same EPA that was created in response to Earth Day 1970, determined that global warming pollution endangers the nation's human health and well-being. It only took forty years but we got there!

This decision marks the first step under the Federal Clean Air Act to begin establishing national emissions standards for large greenhouse gas emitters. This coming week, the Energy and Commerce Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives will begin debate on the American Clean Energy and Security Act which would set the limits for greenhouse gas pollution.

Endangered species, farm and food policy, oceans and rivers including over-fishing, forest and wilderness issues, and toxic chemicals top the list of other environmental

issues of the day. But I contend to you that earth day is not about single issues. It is about a way of life, a value premise, a moral stance on a plethora of issues, singularly and as a whole. It is not about winning one battle, passing one piece of legislation, or even two or three. It is about a larger movement building for now, for ten years from now, and for seven generations to come. It is not about planting a tree – you can do that on Friday for Arbor Day – it is about making your voice heard that yes, you, and many others like you, care about the earth, its environment and its people. And hopefully, by making your voice heard, you will inspire awareness and appreciation by others so that they too will consider their environmental impacts on a day-to-day basis.

I like this quote from an unnamed organizer of Earth Day 1970: “We’re going to be focusing an enormous amount of public interest on a whole, wide range of environmental events, hopefully in such a manner that it’s going to be drawing the interrelationships between them, and getting people to look at the whole thing as one consistent kind of picture....”

{PAUSE}

I mentioned before caring for the Earth’s environment and *its people* so I’ll spend a few moments talking about this relationship. Interestingly, as climate change is the focus of today, Earth Day 1970 occurred during a time of great concern about overpopulation and a call for zero-population growth. Of course, this idea remains a concern as our numbers become increasingly larger, but the topic is of such sensitivity that most are hesitant to talk about it with any real meaning. I myself would fall into this category.

Senator Nelson, *the founder of earth day*, not only viewed the stabilization of the nation’s population as a central aspect of environmentalism, but later took it even farther when he said, “The bigger the population gets, the more serious the problems become.... We have to address the population issue. The United Kingdom, with the U.S. supporting it, took the position in Cairo in 1994 that every country was responsible for stabilizing its own population.” And here’s where it gets interesting: “But in this country, it’s phony to say

‘I’m for the environment but not for limiting immigration.’” As the son of a Cuban immigrant and a firm believer in human free-will and the right to move oneself as one sees fit, I whole-heartedly disagree.

Yet Senator Nelson who passed away in 2005, was not and is not alone. A few years back I took advantage of an opportunity to bring to Montana a prominent Wisconsin politician for some Earth Day festivities. He was, after all, one of the organizers for Earth Day 1970 and a member of the Board of Directors for Sierra Club nationally. Everything was going well until day three.

On the drive home from Butte, America after a TV interview, I found myself in a heated discussion on this exact topic, one that nearly sent Sierra Club down the drain for good. The false premise is simple: the more people we have in our country, the more of our own resources we use, and the further we degrade our “own” environment. As such, we must limit the number of people we allow to cross our borders.

My apologies to anyone here who may hold similar views but I find these arguments, especially from people with such intelligence and vision as these two Wisconsin politicians, *extremely* short-sighted. First of all, what boundary does “our” environment have? Does the environment cease to exist at the Rio Grande? Do the world’s resources only get used if an individual is on a particular side of an imaginary line? Has not global climate change and the idea that greenhouse gases emitted from any one point negatively impacts the entire world not rid us of environmental nationalism?

We steadily debated these ideas, his concern for the environment of the United States versus my position that Earth means the whole world and not just one country, when he hit me with it: “I am not anti-immigrant,” he said, “just anti-immigration.”

This opened up a whole new can of vermiculting worms for me. Never before had I really linked immigration to the environment, and even less so individual immigrants. Before this moment, they were two completely separate issues, never to intertwine: immigrant

rights groups fight against right-wing nationalists and environmentalists fight against polluting industries.

But the moment he personalized his argument, when he brought it down to the individual immigrant rather than his suggestion for immigration as a whole, I began to see environmentalism in a whole new light: sure it's still about Mother Earth, protecting the only place we can possibly exist, but now more so than ever, in a way he was right – it's about individual people.

Environmental Justice – it exists as its own field. But isn't that term just a little bit redundant? Is not being conscious about the environment executing justice to those around you, now and in the future? Is not working in the environmental field in general seeking justice for the masses who are negatively impacted by the evils of those who really just don't care?

I'll give you another example. When I first started my current job organizing people to respond to climate change issues, one of the big things I pushed, and still push, is each individual's contribution to the problem. And there are easy fixes to many of them. Surely all of you by now know that replacing your incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescents saves energy. CFL's create light, old-school incandescent create heat which creates light. Simple equation.

Yet I'll never forget the mass hysteria over CFLs as they were first making their way into the average home – **THERE'S MERCURY IN THERE!!**

And sure, it's a valid concern, nobody wants mercury in their own home. But yet very few said anything about the tons of mercury pollution spewing from coal plants impacting the poor, mostly black neighborhoods in the south. That's not *my* environment they said.

And so I'll link that back to politician X's disdain for immigration, and what we call NYBISM: do whatever you want, as long as it's *not in my backyard*.

Needless to say, this idea goes against the spirit of Earth Day. That's why I like the mission statement of Earth Day Network, the main organization behind the spread of Earth Day across the globe and promotion of environmental citizenship and year round progressive action worldwide. It states, "Earth Day Network was founded on the premise that all people, regardless of race, gender, income, or geography, have a moral right to a healthy, sustainable environment."

Another side note here, it is important for us all to remember that Montana's constitution reads very similar and states that "All persons are born free and have certain inalienable rights" which includes the "right to a clean and healthful environment."

In each of these statements we see the words "persons" or "people." We cannot conceivably think about the Earth without people, and how could we, for to many humans have existed since the beginning of time 6,000 years ago. To others, people signify the maximum nature has to offer, the perfection of the animal into an intelligent creature unmatched by any before or any to come. Still to others, people are just a part of a natural cycle, humans acting as the dinosaurs of today, likely to create their own destruction to make way for a newer, more advanced being.

Regardless of your view on where people fit in the natural realm, it is important that we not forget that we are not separate from this realm but rather an integral part *of it*. We cannot say, "I'm going to the mountains so I can get into nature." This is a truism of sorts for no matter where you go, you will always be *in nature*.

For this reason, it is fundamental that people are keenly aware that not only do they exist *in nature* but that they themselves *are* nature, they are the environment. In doing so we expand the definition of environment to mean more than just the trees in the forest or the

waters of our rivers. We expand it to include more than air and water pollution, to include all issues that affect our communities, once again, individually and as a whole.

Last year I had the pleasure of participating in a conference of sorts put on by The Policy Institute, based here in Helena. The mission of this Leadership Seminar Series is to bring together progressive-minded thinkers from various issue backgrounds to discuss how to move our over-arching agenda as a whole rather than piece-mealing individual issue campaigns that could perhaps conflict with one another.

On the first day of this multi-day affair, I asked the entire group a question that had been bothering me at the time – “should the environmental movement be a part of the larger progressive movement or should it remain separate in order to achieve smaller victories wherever and whenever it can?”

Clearly, taking into account what I have already said, I reached my conclusion that the environmental movement should indeed not be an exclusive movement, working on its own behind the scenes, without regard to the important work of others, but rather should focus its energy on building momentum wherever it can in order create a sustainable support group from all walks of life.

For example, if you believe that our public schools should serve better, healthier lunches to our kids, than you are an environmentalist. Just think of all the environmental benefits of improved lunches: healthier kids more likely to walk or bike to school meaning less fossil fuel combustion; food more likely to be all natural, void of genetically modified crops from a monocultural field sprayed with pesticides; less transportation needs in getting that food to the schools – the list is endless.

If you believe that health care is a right, than you are an environmentalist. If you like to fish, you are an environmentalist. If you like to hunt, you are an environmentalist. If you work for a living, then, yes, you are a environmentalist for what is a job without a safe and clean environment to work in?

So now that we have established you not just as a person who cares for the environment, but rather a full-fledged, raging, crazy environmentalist, it time to get to work. I can't help it, but the organizer in me just has to end with an ask from the audience.

Which brings me back to why I am here in the first place. Earth Day – the most celebrated secular holiday in the world, the only event celebrated simultaneously around the globe by people of all backgrounds, faiths and nationalities. More than a half a billion environmental activists making their voices heard. As we have seen, it could be said that every person on earth is an environmentalist in one way or another – they just need to be made aware of it.

And it's our job to make that happen. Earth day is a day of teaching – it was in fact originally organized not just as a protest and a nationwide grassroots demonstration but also as an environmental teach-in demonstrating popular support for an environmental agenda. It was, and continues to be, a success not because it focuses solely on issues relating to the environment but rather its focus on the people who support those actions. It is not a day of action necessarily. I am not asking you to go out and make a difference on your own by not driving your car for a day. On April 22nd, I am asking you to make your voice heard by everybody around you that you care about your environment. Write a column or letter to the editor to the Independent Record, participate in a demonstration, hold your own earth day dinner as I did last year, and invite those who may need a little enviro pushing, ask them to bring something either local or organic, or even better both! Do whatever you can.

Thank you.

