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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Clear Lake Childhood</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Start of a Career in Politics</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ready to Run</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin to Washington, DC</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Day for the Environment</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More to Do</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On many calendars, April 22 is labeled “Earth Day.” Do you know what Earth Day is? Or how it came to be?

A Wisconsin politician named Gaylord Nelson had an idea to set aside one day to learn about human impacts on the environment. That day became known as Earth Day.

The environment was very important to Gaylord Nelson. To him, the environment included everyone and everything on Earth. Gaylord worked hard to protect the environment.

Photo credit: Fritz Albert. Wisconsin Historical Society. WHi-117862.

Gaylord Nelson (1916 - 2005)
Gaylord Nelson was born on June 4, 1916, in Clear Lake, Wisconsin. He had two older sisters, Janet and Margaret, and a younger brother named Stannard. He loved to play with his siblings and friends outside. They swam, skied, skated, and explored. Gaylord preferred the outdoors to studying, but still did well in school.

Gaylord’s father was a doctor and sometimes brought Gaylord with him to see patients. They were well known in the community.

A postcard from 1910 showing South Clear Lake. Gaylord’s childhood home was in Clear Lake, Wisconsin.
Gaylord’s family was very active in area politics. From the time he was a boy, Gaylord attended meetings and speeches with his parents. He learned about Wisconsin politicians like the La Follettes. What they said about making people’s lives better made Gaylord want to be like them.

Robert M. La Follette Sr. spoke from the back of a train while running for governor in 1900. La Follette and his sons were some of the politicians Gaylord Nelson looked up to.
Ready to Run

After high school Gaylord started college, then found a job shoveling stone for community projects like new roads and sewers. During that time, he decided to continue his studies. Gaylord went to college in California before returning to Wisconsin and going to law school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The whole time he kept thinking about becoming a politician.

Wisconsin Historical Society. WHi-5904.

Gaylord graduated from San Jose State College in 1939. Here he is at his college graduation with his mother.
When World War II started, Gaylord went into the United States Army. While serving in the Army, he met a nurse named Carrie Lee Dotson. They later got married and had three children: Gaylord Jr., Cynthia ("Tia"), and Jeffrey.

At the end of the war Gaylord came home to Wisconsin. He was eager to start his political career and decided to run for the Wisconsin State Senate. He wasn’t elected the first time he ran, but that didn’t stop him. When he ran again a few years later, his campaign was successful and he was elected.
Gaylord served ten years in the State Senate and four more years as governor of Wisconsin. During those years he made changes to help the government function better. He fought for equal rights for all people and to protect natural resources. He knew that all the places, people, and other living things were connected. It was important to care for all of them. It was also important to him that people have places to go to enjoy nature, so he took steps to make that happen. Good things were happening, but there was so much more to do.

To make an even bigger impact, Gaylord ran for a seat in the United States Senate. Once elected, he moved his family to Washington, DC. Gaylord brought his mission for the environment with him. But it wasn’t easy.
He persuaded the president to go on a national tour about conservation, but on the tour, people kept talking about other issues besides the environment. The tour didn’t have the impact Gaylord had hoped for. He proposed bills to ban harmful substances, but they were not supported by many in the Senate. Although frustrated, Gaylord didn’t give up. He needed to get through to people in a different way. But how? At the time he didn’t know what to do, but years later he would.

In 1969 he went to see the damage that had been done by a massive oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara, California. Slick oil coated plants and animals all along the shore. That upset Gaylord. On the plane home, he read a magazine article that sparked an idea.

The article was about college students were having teach-ins about the Vietnam War. Gaylord thought there should be teach-ins about the environment too. If more people learned about the environment, they would want to protect it. That would force the government to take action. He proposed this idea in the fall of 1969 and it began to grow.

Photo courtesy of Tia Nelson.

Gaylord went on a conservation tour with President John F. Kennedy in 1963. In this photo President Kennedy is on the left, and Gaylord Nelson is on the right.
A Day for the Environment

Gaylord wanted all the teach-ins to happen on the same day. That way everyone would wake up and take notice and have to do something. He picked April 22, 1970.

Sharing the idea was hard work. Gaylord took care not to tell people what to do. He let them make their own plans and decide what to teach and learn about. As the idea spread, the day got a name: Earth Day. On Earth Day, people across the country took part in grassroots events. Some lasted a day; others were for several days. Earth Day was more successful than Gaylord could have hoped.

Wisconsin Historical Society. WHi-57066.

Earth Day was the focus of *The Gaylord Nelson Newsletter* in May 1970.
More to Do

After the first Earth Day more people than before knew and cared about the environment. They demanded change and took action. Gaylord and his fellow lawmakers passed new anti-pollution laws to make sure there would be clean air and water for people. New groups formed and stepped up to care for the earth.

Students Taking Action: Then and Now

Even before the first Earth Day, students around the country had started to think about the environment and do things to protect it. That interest and activism continued to grow.

Recently students have held strikes and marches to demand major changes to save our planet. Have you learned about student eco-activists from the news?

Photo credit: Bruce Fritz/The Capital Times. Wisconsin Historical Society. WHi-48104.

Modified from Wikimedia Commons “San Francisco Youth Climate Strike - March 15, 2019 - 26.jpg” by Intothewoods7 / CC BY-SA (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0).

People gathered for the Earth Day march on April 21, 1970.

A sign from the San Francisco Youth Climate Strike on March 15, 2019
Gaylord left the Senate in 1980, but never stopped working. He became the counselor of The Wilderness Society. In that role he led efforts to protect lands, waters, animals, and so much more. Even though he passed away in 2005, we still feel Gaylord Nelson’s impact. We have to stand up for our earth and demand changes to protect it now and in the future. How will you help?

Wisconsin Historical Society. WHi-93130.

Gaylord Nelson sitting near the St. Croix River. This photo was taken in 1967.
activism (n): ........... work done to change an issue or cause

bill (n): ................. a proposed law; if legislators vote to pass a bill then it becomes a law

conservation (n): ........ to care for and protect nature

elect (v): ............... to choose for a job by voting

environment (n): .... the world of living and nonliving things

government (adj): ........ when citizens (or those who are not in leadership positions in a community or group) work together

natural resource (n): ... material found in nature that is useful to humans

politics (n): .............. ways that people living in groups make decisions, usually using laws and rules

senate (n): ............... a group of people elected to government who make rules or laws; states can have a senate and the United States has a senate

teach-in (n): ............. a gathering (often on a college campus) with talks or activities intended to raise awareness of an issue