

We're All In This Together

Ten years ago this month, we celebrated the first Earth Day. Since then we have grown increasingly aware that the actions of groups of people are related—no matter where on the Earth they live. We more fully appreciate that our Earth is finite, its resources limited. We realize the dangers of overtaxing its ecosystems.

Many biology teachers understood these things long before the first Earth Day, but the annual celebrations of Earth Day have focused the attention of many citizens on what is happening in our planet—how we are overcrowding and befouling it. Celebrating Earth Day has helped us realize that worldwide cooperative efforts are needed to care for our planet and live within our means. Earth Day reminds us that we're all in this together. Celebrating Earth Day is a symbolic act; by itself, it solves no problems. And, the problems keep changing.

In the early 1970s, our ecological efforts focused primarily on the problems posed by pollution—noxious fumes in the air, contamination in our water, accumulations of solid waste. We initiated, and have continued, clean-up and recycling efforts. We passed laws to protect our environment; we now even have an Environmental Protection Agency. Yet, many problems associated with pollution remain.

Running a close second to concerns about pollution were concerns about population. We created many organizations to work toward reducing the birth rate, especially in the less affluent countries. Birth control devices and information are widely available today, and abortions are legal in the United States. The birth rate has dropped in this and many other developed countries, but the world population continues to soar.

Associated with population is the problem of poverty; associated with pollution is the problem of affluence. Those who receive less than their share of the world's resources beget more than their share of the population. Malnourished mothers give birth to children who will starve or become mentally retarded from lack of protein. Those who receive more than their share of resources produce more than their share of pollution. The affluent use exorbitant amounts of energy driving big cars, heating and air conditioning elegant homes, and operating a myriad of electrical appliances. They never even see the pollution generated to supply their greedy appetite for energy.

We seem to forget that when some of us use more than our share of resources and energy, others will have to do without. Of course, we can argue that the problem is really one of distribution. Driving fewer miles or getting our protein from vegetables provides no guarantee that the needs of less affluent people will be met. Yet, what we have already used is certainly not available for distribution.

Some of the ecological problems of the 1970s are still with us. Gains in controlling pollution have been partially offset by the increase in the number of people producing pollutants and by the more affluent standard of living in many parts of the world.

Over the years since the first Earth Day we have been plagued with an increasingly severe energy crisis. To be sure, we have built nuclear reactors and the Alaskan pipeline; we have even done a little something with gasohol and solar energy. And our nuclear wastes are accumulating.

We are becoming cognizant of complex ethical dilemmas. Now that we have nuclear power, how can we use it responsibly? Now that we have some biomedical technologies for controlling life and death, how should we use them? And who should be making these decisions?

Each year as we celebrate Earth Day, we face a somewhat different set of problems. The problems of the 1970s might be summarized by the three P's—pollution, population, and poverty. In the 1980s, the P's will be replaced by the E's—ecology, which encompasses the unsolved problems of the P's, energy and ethics. Beneath all of these problems is a pervasive selfishness. Many of us want far more than our share of what the Earth can provide. Ten years after the first Earth Day, we still do not behave as if we realize that we're all in this together.

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