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Earth Day at 40: progress and pitfalls

Environmentalists see steps forward, backward on anniversary

By Meredith Cohn, The Baltimore Sun

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Brian Hughes was a typical suburban kid in the 1980s who didn't give much thought to where his food came from or what chemicals were used to produce it.

Now he's a farmer at Shaw Farm CSA in Columbia, supplying area families with organic fruits and vegetables. He also teaches others how to grow their own pesticide-free produce.

"People have begun to learn what's important," he said, reflecting on the changes in Americans' lives since the first Earth Day in 1970. "Their values have changed."

Since the birth of the modern environmental movement 40 years ago, many once-distant goals have been widely achieved. Americans today drive hybrid cars, recycle and use energy-sipping light bulbs. Their air and water have gained federal protections. Environmentalism has moved into the mainstream, many observers say, with consumers, governments, industry and the nation's largest retailer, Walmart, on board.

But on this Earth Day, as the environmental community cheers the advances and the public engagement, some also express disappointment that not everyone's habits have changed.

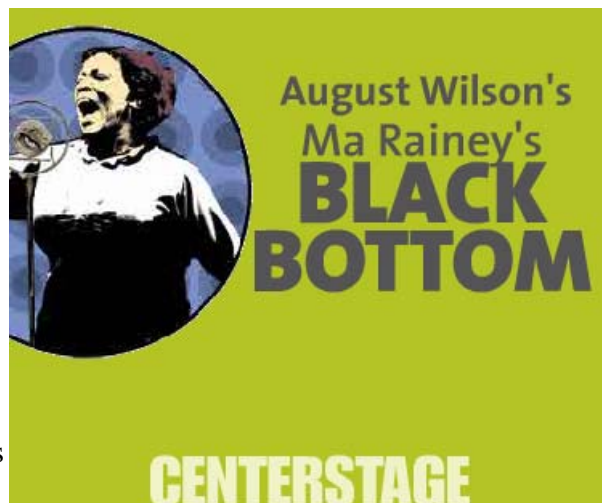
Species are disappearing at an unprecedented rate, and water and air aren't uniformly clean. Discarded petroleum-based plastic bags still get caught in trees, and toxins still end up in consumer products. Power plants still burn climate-warming fossil fuels.

Earth Day began in 1970, when then-Wisconsin Sen. Gaylord Nelson organized a nationwide protest to spotlight environmental degradation. Some 20 million people came out. Around the same time, Congress passed the Clear Air, Clean Water and Endangered Species acts, and agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency were formed.

Over time, profound changes have both contributed to a green culture and made the cleanup job bigger, said Kathleen Rogers, president of Earth Day Network, a nonprofit group that promotes environmentalism and organizes activities worldwide each year on April 22.

"Rivers rarely catch on fire anymore," she said. "We have a legacy that, on the surface, appears to have changed. But if you dig deeper, so much more needs to be done."

The U.S population nearly tripled in the last century to more than 300 million people, according to government numbers. About 80 percent live in urban and suburban areas, and they are using more resources and leaving a bigger footprint.



Meanwhile, Rogers said, the rise of computers has made access to information and communication easier, but as people spend more time online they become less in touch with the outdoors and community activism. More recently, the recession has left many people less interested in cleaner and greener products, which tend to cost more.

And just when the environmental community thought new leadership would again engage the masses, President Barack Obama announced plans to allow drilling for oil and natural gas off the Eastern seaboard.

"In the 1970s, the predominant pictures from the green community were of whales," Rogers said. "It's 2010, and we're still talking about saving the oceans. We take steps forward and major steps backward. It's not obvious how we're in a better place this Earth Day."

This year, some 1.5 billion people from 90 countries are expected to participate in Earth Day activities. Rogers said they will have to demand change from public officials and private businesses. That's true at the state and local level, too, said Gerald Winegrad, a former lawmaker and Chesapeake Bay advocate.

Winegrad attended the first Earth Day planning session with Nelson and said he didn't think much would come of it. While he's amazed and pleased that it's still an annual event, he said progress has come in fits and starts in Maryland.

"Smart Growth" was launched in the 1990s by then-Gov. Parris N. Glendening, but the population is still spreading out to previously undeveloped land, and runoff from suburban and urban areas is the fastest-growing kind of pollution in the Chesapeake Bay. The federal-state Chesapeake Bay Program, launched 25 years ago, is still struggling, according to the latest report: In 2009, the program reached just 45 percent of its goals.

"I'm not just disappointed, I'm bitterly disappointed," Winegrad said. "I don't see political will. The Clean Water Act is violated, and there are no sanctions."

He acknowledged that many people recycle, install rain barrels and carry reusable shopping bags, but "as long as plastic bags are free and convenient, people will use them." He said laws with teeth and "sticks," as opposed to carrots, seem to be the only measures that uniformly work:

Use of plastic bags dropped drastically in January in Washington when it imposed a 5-cent fee for them, while Baltimore rejected calls for a fee this year in favor of a proposal that promotes reusable bags. Interest in hybrids and small cars rose in 2008 when gas was \$4 a gallon. And after years of objections from the auto industry, the federal government recently said it would increase fuel economy standards to 35.5 miles per gallon in 2016 from about 25, and imposed the first limits on climate-warming gases.

Some people are willing to take on more personal responsibility. Sisters Sara Rothleitner of Ellicott City and Lauren Arikan of Owings Mills took a class recently from Hughes, the organic farmer, to learn to grow their own organic food.

Arikan said that three years ago, when her daughter was born, she started reading product and food labels and eschewing those with environmental toxins. She bought local products to lower her family's carbon footprint and repurposed old clothes.

"I want my daughter to be an outdoor child, not someone who just watches TV and doesn't care," she said. "This is about our health and our environment, and our society."

Added Rothleitner, "There are long-term effects to what we do. We're sick and the planet is sick, and people are realizing that we're not functioning right. There should be plenty of resources on Earth for everyone."

The sisters took the four-part class at the Green Building Institute in Jessup, where the mission is teaching sustainability. Other classes center on home energy efficiency, energy audits and green tax credits. David Woolley-Wilson, executive director, said some people sign up because they want a healthier lifestyle or environment, and others want to save money.

The institute's home is itself an example of sustainability. Rain water is captured and reused, and construction materials are all reused or repurposed. Energy for lighting and air conditioning mostly comes from the sun through solar panels or tubes and the rest comes from the wind.

Called the Enviro Center, the building was designed and built by architect Stanley J. Sersen and is home to several green businesses and groups. Sersen subscribes to the idea that buildings shouldn't just be efficient with resources and LEED-certified — a designation from a third-party organization for sustainable water, energy and building practices and now mandated by Baltimore and about 200 other cities and states on public and private developments.

Those buildings just pollute less, Sersen said. They should aspire to no environmental impacts and even give back by filtering the neighbors' storm water and producing extra clean energy. An addition planned for the property aims to do just that and provide what may be the first tenant-assisted-agriculture garden. Renters will be able to help grow crops and take home a share.

"If no one else was polluting we could worry only about ourselves," he said. "But that's not the case, so we have to do more."

Democratic Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin of Maryland, agrees. He said there is reason to be proud of the past 40 years of environmental accomplishments, but now he is pressing for bills that would give federal regulators more authority over polluters, and would promote renewable power and reduce emissions.

Cardin said the legislation has opponents who believe the costs are too high, just as opponents of the original clean air and water laws did.

"Some people are less sensitive to the environment than they should be now," he said. "But we're going to make sure we get more things done, with carrots and sticks. Some groups need to understand there is a price to pay if you're a polluter. We owe it to the next generation."

But on the 40th anniversary of Earth Day, Mary Sloan Roby, executive director of the Herring Run Watershed Association, said everyone should take note of the progress that has been made. She said sometimes people don't see gradual improvement, and likened it to a home renovation. "People can't believe how bad it was until they look at the original picture."

Roby said Baltimore is no longer the gritty industrial town it was in 1970. And many residents now consider themselves environmentalists — though some believe they've earned the label by recycling alone. Convincing people that actions have intertwined and costly consequences, she said, will be the next challenge.

meredith.cohn@baltsun.com

Maryland environmental milestones

A selection of local accomplishments since 1970

2010:

The Charm City Circulator, the free downtown shuttle bus, launches an east-west route in January and reaches the 100,000 passenger mark this month. Two more routes are delayed but listed as "coming soon" by the city.

2009:

President Barack Obama calls the Chesapeake Bay a national treasure and issues an executive order asserting federal leadership in lagging restoration effort. Almost a year later, he calls for an end to a decades-old ban on drilling for oil and natural gas off the East Coast, potentially threatening the bay.

2009:

Baltimore City joins Howard and Montgomery counties and Annapolis and about 200 other cities and states in requiring developers to adhere to energy-efficiency and green-building standards. More than 20 buildings in Baltimore install green roofs, though the city has yet to release standards for the law.

2008:

The 15-mile Gwynns Falls Trail through Baltimore is completed after a decade-long, \$15 million effort. It

winds through 30 neighborhoods and 2,000 acres of green space. Bike lanes are also added on some city streets.

2008:

Baltimore City follows Howard, Anne Arundel and Carroll counties in switching to single-stream recycling, allowing residents to put all recyclables in one container. That helped the state divert more than 40 percent of waste from the landfill. Baltimore County launched its program this year.

2007:

The state legislature passes a law to curb runoff from development, which is polluting the Chesapeake Bay. The rules go into effect May 4, but were amended this month to grandfather projects already in the pipeline.

2004:

The state legislature passes the "flush tax," which imposes a \$2.50 fee on monthly sewer bills to pay for upgrades to sewage treatment plants. The improvements, already on about a dozen plants, aim to cut the pollution flowing into the Chesapeake Bay.

1997:

Then-Gov. Parris N. Glendening pushes a pioneering "Smart Growth" plan using incentives to push development to existing communities instead of former farms and forests. State funds for roads, sewers and public services are aimed at designated growth areas. Implementation has been spotty.

1983:

Federal-state Chesapeake Bay Program is launched to improve the conditions of the nation's largest estuary. Progress has been made, according to recent reports, on crabs and bay grasses, but farming continues to foul the bay and pollution from urban and suburban areas is growing.

1972:

The General Assembly establishes the Department of Natural Resources.

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