

The Man From Clear Lake: Earth Day Founder Gaylord Nelson

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On April 22, 1970, twenty million Americans turned out to celebrate and pay respect to the environment. Earth Day grew from the vision of Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson, who devoted more than forty years as the “conservation governor” of Wisconsin, three terms in the United States Senate, and two decades as chairman of the Wilderness Society to promoting environment causes that have improved Americans’ quality of life.

The author, a former Milwaukee and Wisconsin government official, presents an engaging and informative biography of the small-town boy from Clear Lake, Wisconsin who became one of the Senate’s most popular and respected members.

Nelson was a good but indifferent student; he received his most important education following his graduation from San Diego State University and the University of Wisconsin Law School. During World War II he was an officer in charge of an all-black company, which taught him about segregation’s injustice. As a state legislator, he proposed a bill to integrate the Wisconsin National Guard, and co-sponsored the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act.

Elected Wisconsin governor in 1958, at the age of forty-two, Nelson earned the reputation of “conservation governor” because his programs expanded state parks, created new forests, developed wildlife habitats, and made the state’s recreation facilities more accessible. His record helped him get elected to the Senate in 1962, in which he served for three terms. He lost a bid for a fourth term in 1980 in the election that swept Ronald Reagan and many conservatives into office.

Even during the fractious Vietnam War, which Nelson grew to oppose, the environment remained his top priority. In 1969 he called for a national teach-in, which became the first Earth Day. He was able to harness grassroots public support for a clean environment, much like the leaders of the civil rights and antiwar movements did for their causes. Earth Day was the inspiration for many of the environment-friendly bills passed during the 1970s and early 1980s.

In 1995 Nelson received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor, for his unwavering advocacy of the environment as a Senator and as the chairman of the Wilderness Society, a position he held for two decades. Now eighty-seven years old, Nelson is as vibrantly concerned about the earth and its human and animal inhabitants as he was on that first Earth Day, thirty-four years ago.

The author, at times, lapses into overly detailed descriptions of legislation, but he is to be commended for showing Nelson’s human side along with his political one. His writing is clear and he has skillfully illuminated Nelson’s enduring contributions during his distinguished tenure in the political arena.

KARL HELICHER (March / April 2004)

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