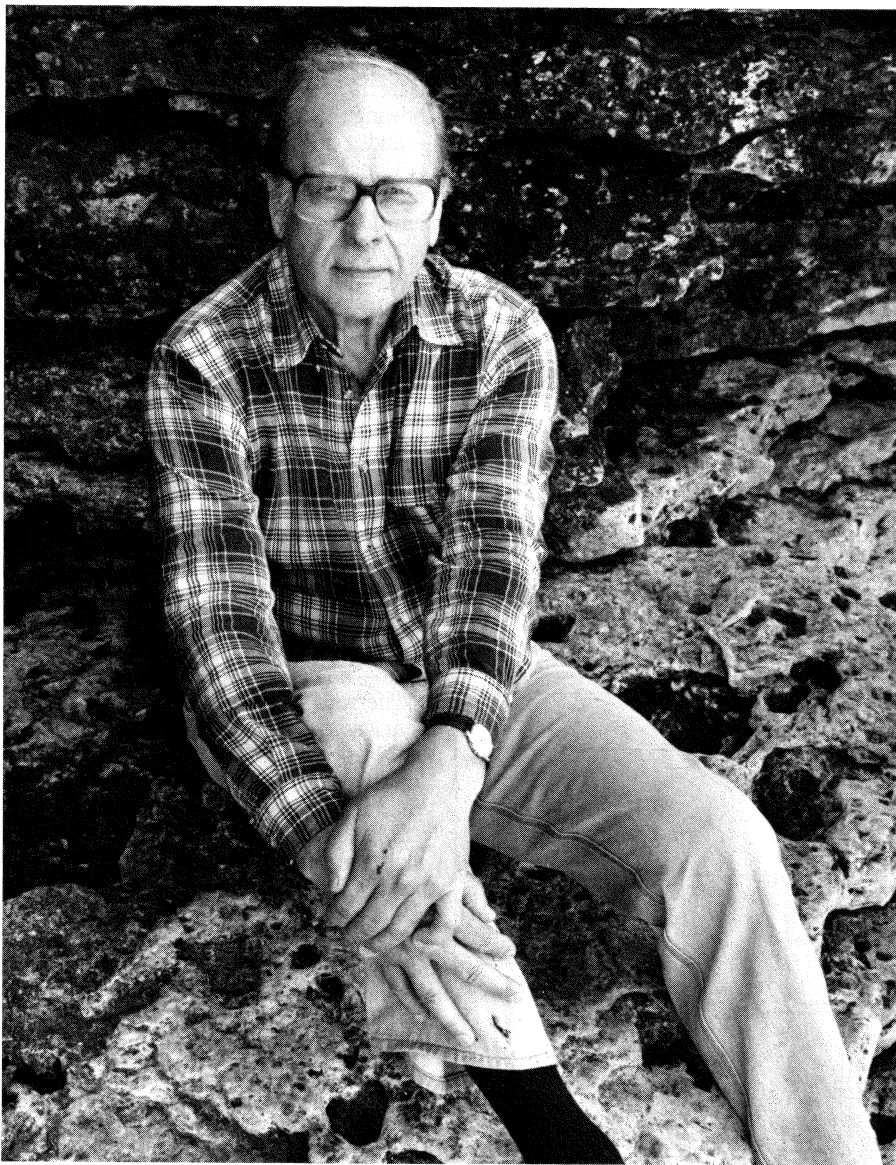


The Fragile Planet

Wisconsin's Gaylord Nelson explains why Earth Day should be every day



Guardian of the wilderness: former Senator Gaylord Nelson.

Despite the fact that he turned 70 in June, Gaylord Nelson — now a counselor (since 1981) with the Wilderness Society based in Washington, D.C. — is still that Wisconsin Huckleberry Finn who was born and raised in Clear Lake — “the son of a nurse and a country doctor” — who, like Thoreau, followed a distant drummer right down Main Street and out into the beautiful marsh beyond.

His boyhood was spent among the cattails, lily pads, birds, muskrats — and one turtle — and the waters of Big and Little Clear Lakes, the Willow River, Bull Brook and the Apple River.

Hardly anyone called it “the environment” then, but that’s what he fell in love with.

“They say you can take most boys out of the country,” says long-time associate Harold (Bud) Jordahl, a professor at the University of Wisconsin — Madison, “but in Gaylord’s case, he just took Clear Lake with him.”

He took it to San Jose State College in California where he earned a bachelor’s degree in 1939, to UW-Madison for his law degree in 1942 and to the U.S. Army during World War II, where he served for 46 months as a first lieutenant and met Carrie Lee, an Army nurse whom he married and with whom he has three children.

Returning to Madison, he practiced law, then paddled out into the political mainstream destined for one of the most distinguished public service careers in the state’s history.

That career eventually included 10 years as a Wisconsin state senator, four years as governor of Wisconsin and 18 years as United States senator, representing Wisconsin — and Clear Lake.

“He took that love of nature he had,” Jordahl says, “and a lot of it got turned into remarkable environmental legislation.”

In the U.S. Senate, Nelson introduced the first legislation in Congress to control strip mining, to ban the uses of DDT, 245T (Agent Orange) and phosphates in detergents, and to protect and complete the acquisition of the Appalachian Trail.

In what he regards as one of his greatest legislative achievements, Nelson — after eight years of trying — convinced the U.S. Congress to protect “in perpetuity” Lake Superior’s 22 Apostle Islands by passing the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore Act.

Many people know former Senator Nelson as the founder of Earth Day. And people still ask him, “Whatever happened to Earth Day? Whatever happened to the environmental movement? Is it dead?”

“I tell them that it’s still here. If anything, the interest, the concern and the under-

standing of Americans in environmental issues is several times greater than it was at the first Earth Day in 1970 [April 22].

"I remind them that in the 1984 campaign, President Reagan — who really doesn't care about the environmental issue at all — was told by his pollsters that their polls showed a great interest in the environment out there.

"Whereupon, President Reagan set aside some time and did a three-day 'con-

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servaion tour' to a wildlife refuge and to a park. He said how important they were and so forth. He did it because the polls were showing that the environment *was* an issue — and it still is.

"Every time you have a Love Canal, you've educated a lot of people. When selenium from the irrigation water kills all the birds in the California Kesterson Wildlife Refuge, that's another piece of education. People say, 'My God! That's our environment.'

"In the long pull, the most important factor affecting what standard of living we will have is the environment: the quality of the air, quality of the water, quality of the soil, the minerals, the forests, the wildlife habitat, the scenic beauty.

"With that in mind, the inescapable conclusion is that it is very unprofitable to be doing what we are doing with our resources — including those on our federal public lands.

"Those lands comprise some 640 million acres — in national parks, national forests, wildlife refuges, Bureau of Land Management lands — that's about 28 percent of the total land base of the whole country. It's also about 10 times the size of the state of Wisconsin.

"These magnificent lands not only have wildlife and scenic beauty for recreation, they also produce timber, minerals, gas and oil. Vast resources.

"Now I think that under appropriate conditions, the extraction of resources is perfectly sound and perfectly supportable, but the key words are *appropriate conditions*.

"There are some areas that shouldn't be touched at all. They're too valuable to ever cut the trees or what have you. Take the Tongass National Forest in southeast Alaska.

"The Tongass is a panhandle about 500

miles long — 16½ million acres — and along the coastal area, there's a rain forest. It is the last major 'old growth' rain forest in the world outside of the tropics.

"There are trees in the Tongass that are 800 and 1,000 years old. They are 280 feet high and absolutely spectacular. We are just beginning to study old growth forests, and there are precious few left.

"Well, under the timber policy in the Tongass National Forest, we are in the process of harvesting the trees off that forest — including old growth.

"What we ought to be doing in the Tongass is setting aside — in perpetuity — adequate timber stands to preserve that ecosystem of old growth because there will never be another one.

"What's happening in the Tongass is that not only is the old growth being cut, we taxpayers are subsidizing the sale of that forest. And all the timber, all the pulp from that forest is being shipped overseas to Pacific Rim countries — none of it to the United States — so it isn't being cut because of any demand in our market.

"We are losing \$50 million a year cutting timber in the Tongass. That's what it costs the American taxpayers. In Tongass, we're getting back seven cents for every dollar we spend there. That's irrational economics. It's irrational forestry.

"Another classic example of our irration-

ality is out in the Inter-mountain region down through Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Utah. It's an arid region, not much rain, mountains, fragile soil.

"Twenty years ago, the Forest Service cut trees on the South Fork of the Salmon River. It's a spectacular river, the Salmon, including its Middle Fork and the South Fork.

"The Forest Service sold timber off the watershed of that South Fork and *lost* mon-

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ey on the sale. They spent more for the roads to get the timber out than they got back for the timber.

"It's fragile batholith soil there, and along comes a big snowpack and a big rain and down the mountainsides come the earth slides. They silted in the spawning beds of

the South Fork which produced 50 percent of all the Chinook salmon in the whole Columbia River fishery. It just destroyed the fishery there.

"Well, that fishery was worth far, far, far more than the Forest Service could ever have gotten for the timber.

"The river had silted in four feet deep, and it took 20 years for the river to slowly come back as a spawning stream. So what happens? This year, the Forest Service made *another deal* for the timber on the South Fork of the Salmon — and it's another deal on which they are going to lose money!

"The Forest Service says, 'We got to do that. We have dependent industries out here that need the timber.'

"Well, I don't know why the taxpayers should be subsidizing the destruction of a forest and the destruction of a salmon fishery and the destruction of scenic beauty in order to keep some industry going. We'd be better off just *giving* the industry the money and not letting them cut a single tree for it. We lost — the Forest Service lost — \$600 million last year selling timber.

"That's been a Forest Service policy for a long time — timbering in many national forests without any regard for what it costs the taxpayers. Then the Reagan administration came in and escalated the irrationality of that policy.

"Mr. John Crowell came in as assistant secretary of agriculture for the environment. Mr. Crowell had been a lawyer for Louisiana Pacific, and Louisiana Pacific was the biggest timber buyer from our national forests. Mr. Crowell announced that we ought to *double* the cut on the national forests, including the San Juan Forest in Colorado.

"This administration almost destroyed the Environmental Protection Agency,

"A dirty environment is economically very expensive. It costs a lot less to protect the integrity of the environment than to clean it up."

which is responsible for the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act and the Hazardous Substance Act. This administration slashed EPA's budget so the agency was literally incapable of doing *anything*. And then the administration put people in charge of the agency who were opposed to the laws that the agency was supposed to enforce.

"Then they sent James Watt to head the Department of the Interior, and Mr. Watt was opposed to the conservation policies of all previous secretaries of the interior. Mr. Watt said, 'We ought not to be setting aside any wilderness areas; we ought to be bringing in more drilling rigs; we ought to have more exploitation of all the resources.'

"This isn't a partisan matter. If you look at the votes in the Congress on the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Hazardous Substance Act, the Addition to the National Parks Act — all the votes for those were bipartisan.

"A majority of both parties voted for all that legislation, so this is an anomaly in the history of environmental policy — to have an administration come in that doesn't give a damn for all the laws that were passed to protect the resources of the country.

"A dirty environment is economically very expensive. It costs a lot less to protect the integrity of the environment than it does to clean it up — and that's where a lot of people who oppose environmental laws have got the thing turned upside down.

"Sure, there's a short-term gain you can show for an individual industry or city to dirty up its water, but in the long pull, it just costs a whole lot more.

"Minneapolis puts dirty water into the Mississippi River and then La Crosse has to launder it and then return it — dirty — to the river. And so it goes for 2,000 miles down the Mississippi — a couple of hun-

dred municipalities and several hundred industries taking out water, cleaning it up to use it and then returning it dirty. That's a hell of a lot more expensive than keeping it clean in the first place.

"The problem goes beyond just the polluters and the exploiters. The problem is also the institutions of our nation. The powerful political institutions, cultural institutions, social institutions that set the standards and provide the guidelines for what we do and how we live. These institutions have agendas of their own that are more important than the environment.

"After all, the corporate agenda is this year's balance sheet — not what the environment will look like 20 years from now, even though it may become very much less profitable to operate 20 years from now in a dirty environment.

"The corporation is concerned about today's balance sheet. The politician is concerned about next year's election. The politician has to be. The franchise is short. So the politician addresses the next election, not the generation of people who will follow.

"The academic institutions are interested in turning out a student who can get a job tomorrow. Academia has a longer-range responsibility, and we can hope that they will do better.

"The churches are interested in the current condition of their flocks and 'the hereafter.'

"With all these institutions, the environment is of secondary concern. The environment ought to be at the top of all their agendas. It ought to be at the top for all of us, but it isn't.

"I would like to note here that as far as understanding the environment and resources and population problems go, Wisconsin has, historically, been a seedbed for new ideas and progressive approaches to problems.

"We have had very distinguished people — lots of them — in the environmental resource field. People like Sigurd Olson and Aldo Leopold and John Muir and many, many others. We have had good leadership here over the years, but I still think we're a long way from achieving an understanding of — and making our environmental decisions on — Aldo Leopold's concept of 'The Land Ethic.' I suppose it will be many years before we get there. I also think Wisconsin will be the first entity to get there.

"I think we have to develop an ethical concept about the land, its resources, its creatures — and about the human beings who interplay with all the other resources and all the other creatures.

"We simply have to learn to manage our resources in such a way that we don't destroy the capacity of the planet to sustain life. That means sustaining more than the life of the human being. Because as other creatures go into extinction, we have to realize that we are standing in the same line — and one day, it will be our turn." ■