

San Francisco Examiner Article 2022

there is also an original article from 1970, soon it will be posted

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https://www.sfexaminer.com/archives/did-earth-day-start-in-san-francisco-it-s-complicated/article_f4d91248-8d2b-5b55-8c76-ea6b26e54f0b.html

Did Earth Day start in San Francisco? It's complicated

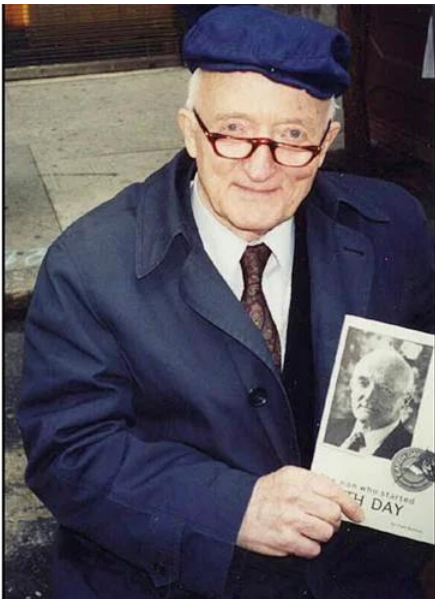
- By Jessica Wolfrom Apr 22, 2022 **Updated** Jul 6, 2022

John McConnell proposed an idea for Earth Day to a city supervisor while he was a preacher in San Francisco...

John McConnell designed the Earth Day flag after seeing images of the planet beamed back from the Apollo missions to...

Earth Day founder John McConnell in 2006. (Ann Charles)

Although former Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson is widely credited for launching the first-ever Earth Day in April of 1970, he was not the only person to designate a day to raise awareness about the planet. Before Nelson's event inspired tens of millions to host "teach-ins" across college campuses nationwide, a San Francisco minister and long-time peace activist was also floating the idea of planetary preservation in halls of power. **John McConnell, the son of an itinerant Iowan preacher, proposed the idea of Earth Day to former San Francisco Supervisor Peter Tamaras and, soon after, to Mayor Joseph Alioto and attendees of a United Nations conference at the St. Francis hotel in November 1969.**



Earth Day founder John McConnell in 2006. (Ann Charles)

John McConnell designed the Earth Day flag after seeing images of the planet beamed back from the Apollo missions to the moon.

(Kjerish/Wikimedia Commons)

The battle over Earth Day's origins was hotly contested from the outset. McConnell, for example, wanted his Earth Day to align with the vernal equinox in late March. By contrast, Nelson had his sights set on April. While March was still shaking off the last fits of winter, April guaranteed warmer weather conducive to clean-ups, rallies and other outdoor activities, said Thomas Dowd, former president of the Earth Society Foundation, an organization McConnell founded for his cause.

"The reason (McConnell) liked the vernal equinox is because, believe it or not, it's a day when light and darkness are equal on the Earth for a single moment," said Dowd.

What this difference of opinion meant for unassuming San Franciscans in the spring of 1970, however, is that Earth Day came twice within a matter of weeks, said Don Rittner, an environmentalist and mentee of McConnell.

That March, Alioto issued a citywide proclamation declaring the first Earth Day in San Francisco, soon followed by Nelson's event in April. "It looked like there were two different things," said Rittner. "John was talking about International Earth Day, where Gaylord Nelson was talking about a USA Earth Day."

To people in McConnell's camp, he was the obvious underdog; a man of little means and big dreams who lived off his wife's teaching salary. "He was a minister, and he didn't have the power that a senator has to make a phone call. So it was just really a matter that Nelson, he had a bigger bullhorn than John did."

Those who supported Nelson, however, saw a politician who had long devoted himself to the environmental cause when it was unpopular to do so and credit him for ushering in an "environmental decade" of radical legislative reform, including the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act.

Both narratives may be true. The late 1960s saw many seminal moments that woke up people to the degradation they were reaping on the planet. Smog blanketed major cities, the largest oil spill in the United States to date was seeping oil into the Santa Barbara Channel, and the Cuyahoga River had caught on fire.

"We were talking about climate change in 1970," said Rittner. "That was how many years ago?"

While we may never get a definitive answer about Earth Day's origins, the battle lines are still caustically clear 50 years later. Though most of the country now celebrates Earth Day on April 22, the United Nations still marks McConnell's March date by ringing the Japanese Peace Bell at the United Nations headquarters in New York during the vernal equinox.

The battle followed both men late in their lives. For McConnell, it was a wound that never quite healed. “John, to the day he died, always regretted the fact that he never got credit for starting Earth Day,” said Rittner. “He took that to his grave.”

For Nelson, it was a pebble of doubt that gnawed at his legacy. The dispute prompted him to issue detailed timelines of Earth Day’s origins and lengthy rebuttals to McConnell’s claims.

Today, as the impacts of climate change have become devastatingly clear across the globe, Earth Day has grown in size and popularity. But this has also stoked a growing fear that the day has become corporatized and hollowed out, devoid of its original intention.

“It really has been co-opted,” said Rittner. “It’s like Mothers Day. It’s like, you know it’s going to happen, and you have to have a card... so I can tell people, yes, I’m really interested in saving the environment. I’m not going to do anything, but here’s my card.” For others, though, Earth Day has long represented a day reserved for a privileged and mostly white subset of the environmental community. “Historically, in the Bay Area, there’s been a lot of greenwashing, a lot of mainstream white environmentalism that Earth Day has been pervasive in,” said Ashley Song, a youth and community organizer at Greenaction, an environmental justice nonprofit. Now, said Song, there’s a growing movement among Bay Area environmental and youth groups to recenter the day around communities on the frontlines of climate change. “The climate crisis does not exist in a vacuum,” she said. “The climate crisis is related to exploitation and injustice on so many levels and so many other systemic issues.” This weekend, San Francisco once again hosts multiple versions of Earth Day. A festival with live music and vegan chefs in the Mission will coincide with a youth protest at UN Plaza and neighborhood clean-ups citywide. Though this fragmented celebration may not be the Earth Day McConnell or Nelson envisioned, what’s important, said Dowd, is that people continue to fight. “John did the damage. He did the damage to the not caring about the earth. He damaged that forever. And now, whether it’s April 22 or March 21 — or a whole month in between – it doesn’t matter,” said Dowd. “But it is important that people of goodwill keep on fighting to the end for the environment and for the ecosystem around the world.”

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