Nelson, Gaylord U.s. Senator (D-Wisconsin) and Founder of Earth Day (1916-) Encyclopedia Article

Nelson, Gaylord U.s. Senator (D-Wisconsin) and Founder of Earth Day (1916-)

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Contents

Nelson, Gaylord U.s. Senator (D-Wisconsin) and Founder of Earth Day (1916-) Encyclopedia Article.....1

Contents.....2

Nelson, Gaylord U.s. Senator (D-Wisconsin) and Founder of Earth Day (1916–).....3

Nelson, Gaylord U.s. Senator (D-Wisconsin) and Founder of Earth Day (1916–)

One of the first and most effective environmentalists elected to the U.S. Senate, Gaylord Nelson is considered the father of Earth Day and sponsored many of the important environmental laws passed by Congress in the 1960s and 1970s.

As governor of Wisconsin (1958 to 1962), he convinced the legislature to purchase **conservation easements** on private property of high natural and scenic value.

Nelson brought his environmental concerns to Washington when he was elected Wisconsin's Democratic U.S. Senator in 1962. He organized a nationwide conservation tour for President Kennedy in 1963 and, in 1965, introduced the first legislation to ban DDT, a chemical used to kill insects that proved harmful to many other species. In 1969, inspired by the effective student anti-Vietnam War **teach-ins**, Nelson hired Harvard law student Denis Hayes to organize a series of environmental teach-ins on college campuses nationwide. These teach-ins helped inspire a growing awareness of pollution and environmental degradation. This awareness eventually led an estimated twenty million Americans to participate in thousands of events organized across the United States to mark the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970. The mobilized public awareness of environmental problems resulting from Earth Day gave Nelson and other environmentalist members of Congress the support they needed to pass the many environmental acts of the 1970s. Nelson is best known for his work on the Environmental Protection Act (1969), the Clean Air Act (1970), the Safe Drinking Water Act (1974), and the Clean Water Act (1977). Nelson received two awards from the United Nations: the Environmental Leadership Award in 1982 and the Only One Earth Award in 1992. In 1995, he was awarded the Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor.

Bibliography

Mowrey, Mark, and Redmond, Tim. (1993). Not in Our Backyard: The People and Events that Shaped America's Modern Environmental Movement. New York: Morrow.

Internet Resource

Earth Day Network. Available from http://www.earthday.net.