

The First Earth Day, 1970: Examining Documents to Teach About Civic Engagement

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Provide your students with handwritten letters from three young students to then U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin, written a few months prior to the first celebration of Earth Day on April 22, 1970. These primary source historical documents can be a part of upper elementary students' exploration of civic activism in the service of environmental change.¹ In this article, we outline a civics and history lesson in which fifth grade students explore how everyday Americans responded to the mounting environmental problems that faced our country in the 1960s.² Spurred to action out of frustration over the nation's environmental practices and policies, 20 million Americans participated in the first Earth Day in 1970, the largest demonstration in our nation's history.³ The civic actions presented in this story of environmental activism highlight the variety of ways citizens of all ages (including children) can effect change in our democracy. It is our hope that the analysis of primary sources will help students understand that "democratic principles are not self-evident but require the work of an engaged and informed citizenry."⁴

Building Background Knowledge with *When Rivers Burned*

When Rivers Burned: The Story of the First Earth Day, an award-winning trade book, is an excellent source for introducing the topic and building students' background knowledge about Earth Day. Begin by displaying the quote that opens the book: "Once, in America citizens were sickened by smog; pesticides wiped out wildlife in towns, fields, and forests; and the rivers were dirty enough to burn."

Have pairs of students speculate as to which time period the quote describes. Read aloud chapter 1, "Trouble in Paradise," to build students' background knowledge about five key environmental issues facing the United States in the 1950s and 1960s: the use of pesticides, air pollution, oil spills, population growth, and the pollution of industrial waterways. As you read, point out the primary source photographs in the chapter. Remind students that primary sources help us understand the past because they provide first-hand evidence of what happened at the time, and what people thought about it. Ask the following

discussion questions:

- How can we find out the ways that people actually responded to these issues at the time?
- What kind of evidence do we need?
- Where could we find that evidence?
- What sources should we consult?

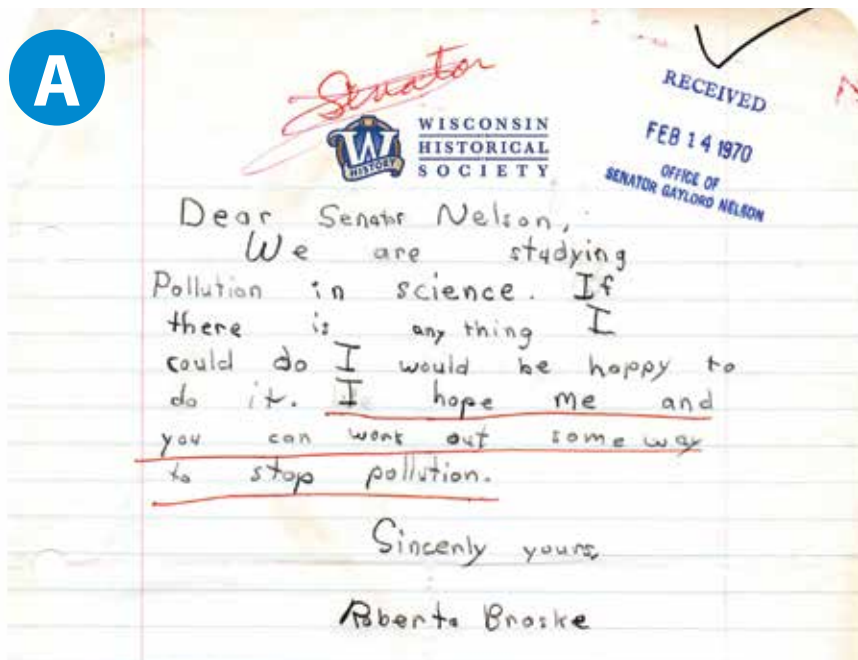
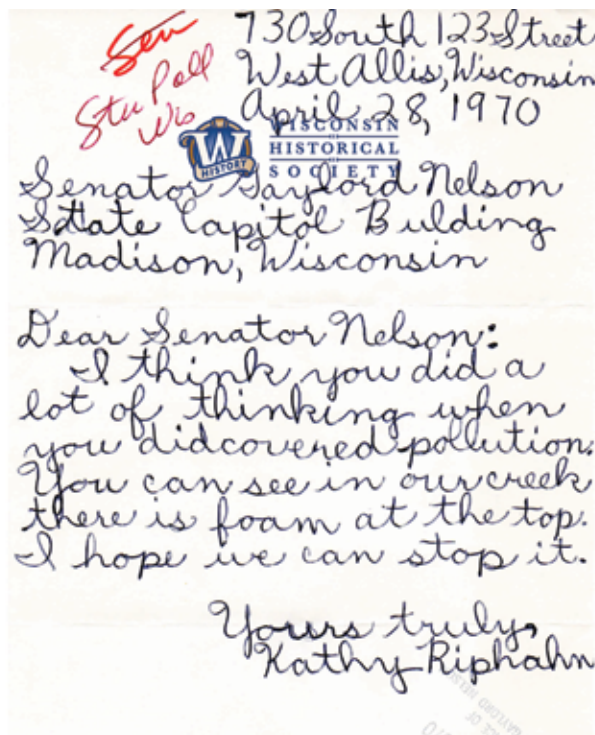
Investigating Sources

Students can work with three primary sources (pages 12 and 13; nelsearthday.net). **Handout A, B,** and **C** include three handwritten letters by elementary students to U.S. Senator Nelson. **Handout D** is a short biography of Gaylord Nelson (which is not a primary source, but is useful historical context). Students can examine the sources to help answer the central question: *How did American citizens respond to the environmental problems of the 1960s?* Remind students that a source might reveal several different methods of participation, or protest, or both. The teacher can create a basic graphic organizer for students to fill in. It would list each historical source and provide spaces for a student's written comments and analyses.

After students share their findings, begin a whole-class discussion about how people responded to environmental problems by asking:

- Which actions were most effective at bringing about change? Which were the least effective? Why do you think that? (i.e., What is your evidence for that opinion?)
- Can children have the same impact as adults in a democracy? Why or why not?
- Which actions require a group of people? Which actions are individual? Do you think actions by individuals are more or less effective than group actions?

Remind students to support their statements with evidence from the sources. These questions are meant to be debatable, so it is okay for students to disagree. At the close of the discussion, encourage students to think about their own ability to effect change.

A**B****Extension and Action!**

Now that students have developed knowledge about how citizens' actions created social and political change, there are rich opportunities for them to participate in civic practices on issues of their own choosing. Using your expert knowledge of the school community, help students identify a current environmental issue that is important to them. Issues may range from improving a local site that is polluted or national policies about oil drilling.⁵ Alternatively, the class could focus on ways to improve your local Earth Day events; such a discussion might address the differences between a "celebration" and a "teach-in," which is how the 1970 events were described. Guide students as they explore the issue and, referencing their prior discussion about effective actions, encourage them to think of ways that they might take action. Support students as they develop a reasonable and specific plan of action, which might include writing to businesses or elected officials, organizing a clean-up event, or educating others in the community about the history and importance of Earth Day. In doing this work, our hope is that students will begin to see their own civic capabilities and agency. 🌍

Notes

1. Wisconsin Historical Society, "Elementary Students Write to Nelson about Pollution, 14 February 1970," Nelson Collection, WHS, nelsearthday.net/collection.
2. The structure of this lesson borrows heavily from the Document-Based Lesson framework. See Avishag Reisman, "The 'Document-Based Lesson': Bringing Disciplinary Learning into the High School History Classroom with Adolescent Struggling Readers," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 44, no. 2 (2012): 233–264.
3. Linda Crotta Brennan, *When Rivers Burned: The Earth Day Story* (Amherst, NH: Apprentice Shop Books, 2013), 54.
4. Kristina R. Llewellyn, Sharon Anne Cook, and Alison Molina, "Civic Learning: Moving from the Apolitical to the Socially Just," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 42, no. 6 (May 2010): 804.
5. The National Resources Defense Council is a great resource for background reading about many national issues involving the environment: www.nrdc.org/issues.

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WISCONSIN
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

Feb. 3, 1970

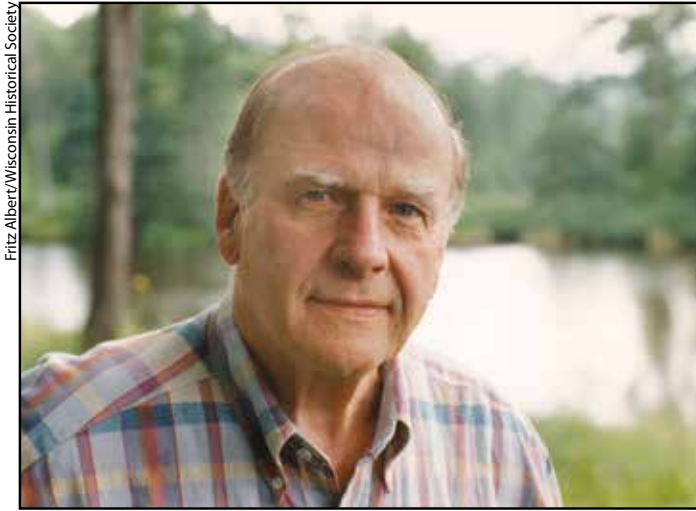
Dear Mr. Nelson,
Considering all your other problems. I think this should be a familiar one, pollution. Every city in Wisconsin is polluted. Instead of paying money to stop the war. I feel you should pay money to stop pollution in Wisconsin. Jets, mills and cars polluted our state of Wisconsin. You can also tell this to President Nixon.

I think by the year 1975 every person will be dead. More jets, mills and cars will be built. It will make Wisconsin more polluted and the whole world will be polluted. Right now people are dying of pollution. So would you please ~~to~~ take this into consideration.

Sincerely Yours,
Tom Kubald

Handout D

Founder of Earth Day Senator Gaylord Nelson



Gaylord Nelson, 1995

Gaylord Nelson was born in 1916. His lifelong goal of putting the environment onto the nation's political agenda began when he was a young boy in his hometown of Clear Lake. Surrounded by the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest, the largest state forest in Wisconsin, he grew up among 223,283 acres of pristine lakes and landscapes. There, he developed a strong relationship with the forests around him and his passion for nature that would fuel his political career. That political career began when the World War II veteran was elected to the Wisconsin State Senate in 1948.

In 1958, he was elected Governor of Wisconsin and, during his term, he initiated the Outdoor Recreation Acquisition Program (ORAP) in Wisconsin. The program, which funded the purchase of a million acres of recreation and wildlife areas through a tax on cigarettes, was only the first of Nelson's many notable conservation achievements.

In 1962, Nelson was elected to the U.S. Senate, where he would achieve his most famous accomplishment. Public and political attention was shifting towards various ecological problems and Senator Nelson channeled this emerging environmental consciousness into the first Earth Day. These nation-wide demonstrations and organized protests against the deterioration of the environment brought together groups concerned with a variety of environmental issues from the loss of wilderness to oil spills, air pollution and pesticides. Ever since, Earth Day has contributed to the modern environmental movement and is proof that the environment can bring diverse groups together for a common cause.

Senator Nelson passed away in 2005 at the age of 89, but his legacy continues. In his 1970 Earth Day speech, he stated, "The battle to restore a proper relationship between man and his environment, between man and other living creatures, will require a long, sustained, political, rural, ethical and financial commitment far beyond any effort we ever made before in any enterprise in the history of man." This is a huge undertaking, but Senator Gaylord Nelson has shown that one individual's momentum can continue to fuel society's environmental consciousness for years to come.

SOURCE: Erin Sandlin, *American Forests* (Spring/Summer 2015), www.americanforests.org/magazine/article/senator-gaylord-nelson-father-of-earth-day/