

It's the Environment!
Essay on the Occasion of Earth Day 2012
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We have made progress in our collective efforts to save the Earth from ourselves, and still much remains to be done if we are to get the job done right. How far have we come? How many of our readers remember the horrible water and air pollution that plagued (and I do mean plague) our cities? It is true that the Cuyahoga River burned when oil spilled and floating on the surface caught fire.



Photo courtesy of the NOAA website.

It is also true that in years past, London smog had such high levels of pollutants that 50 people died, and the waters were not safe to drink. In 1989, syringes washed up on the beach, resulting in federal legislation that banned ocean dumping. And the list could go on. We have made progress. But we are not done yet.

One of my favorite authors, the late Kurt Vonnegut, was quoted in a court decision that affirmed a permit denial, thereby protecting a wetland:

“If flying-saucer creatures or angels or whatever were to come here in a hundred years, say, and find us gone like the dinosaurs, what might be a good message for humanity to leave for them, maybe carved in great big letters on a Grand Canyon wall? Here is this old poop's suggestion: WE PROBABLY COULD HAVE SAVED OURSELVES, BUT WERE TOO DAMNED LAZY TO TRY VERY HARD...”

We might well add this: AND TOO DAMN CHEAP.”

Are we saving ourselves? We'd better answer that question and quickly.

Another take on the environment comes out of the academic world where I keep one foot as an adjunct professor of environmental studies at VCU (Go Rams). A few months ago, I was one of three faculty who were torturing a graduate student in her final oral comprehensive exam that was the last hurdle between her and the degree. The topic turned to the public's perception and awareness of

environmental issues and problems, and we asked about the person at the grocery store. The questions turned around the public's understanding of the scientific side of environmental issues and the media's accuracy in reporting. During the exchange the point was made that media coverage of the environment is no longer rare- environmental issues are frequently "front page" and "above the fold." By that measure, the environmental movement is succeeding.

Other measures reveal the work ahead of us and future generations: hundreds of chemicals in our surface waters, groundwater, drinking water; endangered species; overfished populations of fish around the globe; air that is unsafe to breathe in too many cities; thousands of miles of rivers contaminated with all kinds of toxic chemicals; PCBs in our food supply; this list is seemingly endless.

On this Earth Day, I hope you will join me in making a change for the better in your own life style, and urge our leaders to lead us into a future that is sustainable in every sense of the word.