

Earth Day: Wisconsin Roots and the Protection of Natural Resources

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BY TONY WILKIN GIBART

This month, we celebrate the 56th anniversary of Earth Day. Each year, Earth Day, April 22, serves as a galvanizing moment to recommit to protecting our collective home. At Midwest Environmental Advocates, Wisconsin's only nonprofit environmental law center, Earth Day is an opportunity to recognize the generations of Wisconsinites who have helped secure and defend the legal rights we all share to clean water, healthy land, and breathable air.

Those rights are not abstract. Every day at MEA, we work alongside Wisconsinites who are harnessing the power of law to bring about a more just and healthy future for their communities and for all of us. Their efforts are a reminder that environmental progress is realized not only in statutes and court opinions but also through the persistence of ordinary people who insist that the law live up to its promise.

Why should Wisconsinites – especially those of us in the legal field – feel a sense of pride on Earth Day? Because Earth Day itself has deep roots in the Badger State. Its primary founder was Wisconsin lawyer and U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson, who in 1970 proposed a nationwide teach-in to focus public attention on the growing crisis of environmental degradation.

The response was extraordinary. Roughly 20 million people took part in Earth Day events across the country. For the first time, the scale of public concern about environmental degradation became visible. Earth Day helped signal the public's desire for the law to catch up to the realities facing our land, water, and air.

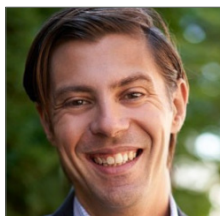
Prior to 1970, the U.S. lacked comprehensive legal frameworks for protecting the environment. Since that first Earth Day, Congress created the Environmental Protection Agency,



the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, and numerous other environmental statutes. Together, these laws established the foundation of modern environmental protection in the United States. Earth Day stands as a powerful example of how civic engagement can drive the evolution of the legal system.

We see Wisconsin's legacy of protecting the environment through democratic participation carried forward in countless ways. It shows up when residents pack public hearings on Clean Water Act permits. It drives communities to insist on transparency and careful review before major data centers and energy projects are allowed to advance. It is strengthened by young people urging courts and policymakers to reckon with the realities of climate change. And it is deepened by the leadership of Native Nations whose own environmental laws and traditions continue to guide stewardship of the lands and waters we now call Wisconsin.

Wisconsin lawyers also have an important role in carrying forward our state's environmental legacy. As we mark another Earth Day, we encourage lawyers to consider how their skills, voices, and expertise can help safeguard the natural resources that make Wisconsin such an extraordinary place to call home. **WL**



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