



Environmental History



Earth Day: Every
Day for Everybody



Below is a brief listing of some of the major environmental events that have occurred in history this month. Each is capable of being researched further by your students, and there are some questions below the timeline to help you get started.

1899 -- March 3 -- Rivers and Harbors Act (also called the Refuse Act) passed by Congress. The act is primarily aimed at preservation of navigable waters, but under Section 13 it becomes unlawful to throw garbage and refuse into navigable waters except with a Corps of Engineers permit. One exception is for liquid sewage from streets and sewers. Violators would be fined up to \$2,500 and imprisoned up to one year. The new law consolidated four previous laws and had far-reaching implications. Dumping of oil, acids or other chemicals into streams was now prohibited when it obstructed navigation, and in several cases the Supreme Court interpreted obstruction in a broad rather than narrow sense.

1903 -- March 14 -- President Theodore Roosevelt creates first National Bird Preserve, (the beginning of the Wildlife Refuge system), on Pelican Island, Florida. In all, by 1909 the Roosevelt administration creates 42 million acres of national forests, 53 national wildlife refuges and 18 areas of "special interest," including the Grand Canyon. The record will not be equaled until Bill Clinton's last year in office.

1928 -- March 12 -- St. Francis Dam gives way in Los Angeles, killing over 500. The dam was built as part of the controversial Owens Valley water project by William Mulholland, chief engineer of the city's water department. The breakup of the dam is today considered to be an example of what can happen if the principles of engineering geology are not well understood or overlooked. Improved safety measures were required in the aftermath of the disaster, including federal safety reviews based on uniform geological surveys.

1954, March 20 -- Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas leads a "blister brigade" of hikers down the old Chesapeake and Ohio canal from Cumberland, Md. to Washington D.C. Douglas publicized the hike to oppose a highway that he said would spoil the natural beauty of the canal. The area became a 12,000 acre [national park](#) in 1971.



1956, March 31 -- World's first commercial nuclear electric power plant is opened at Sellafield in the United Kingdom. The 180-megawatt Calder Hall plant opening was seen as the start of the "new atomic age" that would produce electricity "too cheap to meter." In fact, the plant was secretly intended to produce plutonium for Britain's nuclear weapons program. According to The Guardian newspaper, Calder Hall was the first of a series of magnox stations, so-called because the fuel cans were made of magnesium alloy. The second one, Chapelcross in Dumfries, was also built for military reasons. Altogether 11 stations, each slightly larger than the last, were eventually built, producing 10% of Britain's electricity.

1976 -- March 10 -- First *Empate* (standoff) over logging in Brazil's Amazon region. Led by rubber tapper Francisco Chico Mendez, tappers would form a human chain in the forest against the oncoming chain saws which displaced them. Mendez would be assassinated in 1988.

1976 -- March 19 -- Federal court says EPA has authority to regulate leaded gasoline. Even if there is no certainty that lead in gasoline is a danger, "awaiting certainty will often allow only for reactive not preventive regulation," says judge J. Skelly Wright. The lead phase-out begins, and by June 1979, nearly half of all US gasoline is unleaded.

1978 -- March 16 -- Amoco Cadiz wrecks off the coast of France and loses 68 million gallons / 1.3 million barrels (six times the amount of the Exxon Valdez spill) with over \$2 billion estimated damage. The oil slick covered 110 miles of coastline by March 29.

1989 -- March -- Basel Convention sets rules for international traffic in hazardous wastes. The convention is developed under the United Nations Environment Programme. See [Basel Action Network](#) web page. The US eventually signs the original 1989 convention but not the 1994 "Basel Ban" prohibiting toxic waste exports from industrial to developing nations.

1989 -- March 24. Exxon Valdez oil tanker crashes in Prince William Sound, Alaska, spilling 11 million gallons. Exxon Valdez was headed for California from the Trans-Alaska Pipeline Terminal at Valdez, Alaska. The vessel crashed on Bligh Reef, in Prince William Sound. Although not one of the largest oil spills in history, it is widely considered to have had the most dramatic environmental impact given the location of the spill. The state of Alaska maintains an [information page](#) about the incident.

1994 -- March 25 -- Basel Convention approved by most industrial nations. The convention calls for total and immediate ban on international shipments of hazardous waste from the industrial world to developing nations. US industry opposition stalled full implementation of the treaty.



Suggestions for discussion and further research:

1. What are some common goods made from rubber? Might restrictions on logging in rainforests like the standoff in Brazil, 1976, affect the prices of those goods?
2. Why was leaded gasoline outlawed? For what reason(s) is lead a health hazard?
3. Describe how laws protecting the environment – such as the Basel Convention, the Rivers and Harbors Act, and the regulation of leaded fuel – might affect businesses and the economy.
4. What was the largest oil spill in history? How much bigger was it than Exxon/Valdez?
5. Have your students do a research project on one of the topics outlined above. Topics could include, the aftermath of the Exxon/Valdez oil spill, the effect of the Basel Convention, a president's right to declare parks and how/whether it is limited, what laws are in place today to restrict the dumping of hazardous wastes into water systems.

*Information comes from the [Environmental History Timeline](#)

