



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.

1902, Nov. 14 -- While on a hunting trip, President Theodore Roosevelt declines to shoot a young bear that had been tied to a tree to give him an easy shot. The incident was depicted in a cartoon two days later in the Washington Post ("Drawing the line in Mississippi") and when an enterprising New York shopkeeper created a "Teddy" bear, the idea caught on.

1950, Nov. 24 -- Poza Rica killer smog incident leaves 22 dead and hundreds hospitalized in Mexico. The killer smog was caused by gas fumes from an oil refinery

1969 -- Nov. 26 -- Five hundred attend the UNESCO conference "Man and his Environment: A View Towards Survival" in San Francisco. Stanford University professor Paul Ehrlich said he thought that it would be impossible to increase the food supply for the six to seven billion people expected by the 21st century. The idea that the food supply can be increased by harvesting the oceans "is a gigantic hoax," Erlich said. Stirling Bunnell warned that neither form of nuclear power -- fission or fusion -- would be a safe substitute for fossil energy. Carl Gerstacker, chair of Dow Chemical Co., said what worried him was the unwillingness of politicians to set effective pollution measures. Nixon representative Lee DuBridge, on the other hand, said that the "taxpayer and consumer, not the industry, must pay for environmental improvements." The conference was in preparation for the Stockholm Conference on the Environment of 1972. "A good many people in San Francisco expressed the hope that the United States will have a more responsible contribution to the coming meeting than a lecture on 19th century capitalist philosophy," Wolf von Eckert said in a Washington Post article Nov. 17 (p.B1).

1980 - November 20 -- Jefferson Island salt mine in New Iberia, Louisiana collapses after a Texaco oil-drilling rig on nearby Lake Peigneur accidentally penetrates an abandoned salt-mining cavern. The lake empties pulling houses, barges, tugboats and oil rigs down into a half mile crater but no injuries or deaths are reported.



1986 --November 1 -- Chemical spill in Basel, Switzerland creates a massive fish kill in the Rhine River through Germany, France, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. The spill occurs when a fire breaks out in a chemical warehouse owned by Sandoz S.A. Fire fighters hose down the blaze and, in the process, wash tons of toxic chemicals into the Rhine. Swiss authorities did not issue timely notices that could have led to containment downstream. Contamination cut off drinking and irrigation water for millions of people and killed half a million fish. Despite international legal agreements, Switzerland was not required to pay for the damage. Sandoz was held liable. The London Times reported on Nov. 21, 2000 that there is evidence that the East German "Stazi" secret police sabotaged the Sandoz plant possibly in order to take attention away from activities in East Germany.

1995 -- Nov. 10. Nigerian government executes journalist and environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other environmentalists. They had been active in fighting pollution from big oil in the Ogoni homeland. International protests of big oil activities continues. Sara-Wiwo's last words: "Lord, take my soul, but the struggle continues."

2004 - Nov. 5 -- Russia ratifies Kyoto treaty, putting it into effect worldwide even without US approval

2004 - Nov. 8 -- Rapid climate change is occurring in the Arctic, according to 300 scientists who worked for four years on the international Arctic Council. The scientists concluded that sea ice in the Arctic covered 10% less surface area than it had 30 years earlier, and was only about half as thick as it had been then. Rapid melting of sea ice threatens many species and the traditional way of life of indigenous Arctic populations, but it might open a waterway through the Arctic sea and ease access to the world's untapped oil and gas reserves

Questions for further discussion and research

1. Do some research on nuclear power. Is it, as Stirling Bunnell argued in 1969, an unsafe substitute for fossil fuel, or, in your opinion, have the dangers of nuclear power been overblown?
2. What power controlled East Germany in 1986. When did it relinquish that control and why?
3. What are the details of the Kyoto Treaty. Why hasn't the US signed it? What other countries have either not signed it or are exempt from it?
4. Do this month's math exercise and compare the conclusions you get from the data with that of the scientists working in the Arctic.
5. Teddy Roosevelt was one of the first environmentalists. What major environmental actions did he take during his presidency?

