

# The Seattle Times

Monday, April 26, 2010 - Page updated at 07:09 AM

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## Earth Day reflections: How green is my planet?

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

The first Earth Day, in 1970, would hardly be recognizable today.

It featured "teach-ins," mostly about pollution and threats to wildlife. People talked about "ecology," not going "green." No one had heard of global warming. Corporations weren't jumping on the bandwagon.

Forty years later, what have we wrought? Earth Day 2010, observed this past Thursday and with events throughout April, affords us an opportunity to consider the history and future of the modern environmental movement.

**Q:** Didn't the green movement actually start before Earth Day did?

**A:** Yes, it was sparked by the publication of "Silent Spring" by Rachel Carson in 1962, according to the excellent new documentary film "Earth Days" and other historical sources. Carson's book vividly described the persistent damaging effects of certain pesticides.

The initial Earth Day in 1970 provided a forum that allowed educators, politicians and the media to acknowledge the public's growing interest in environmental protection.

**Q:** Following that first Earth Day, which green developments most affected consumers?

**A:** The first changes were far-reaching. In the early 1970s, the federal government enacted stricter laws to protect air and water, began phasing out lead in gasoline and created the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

After that flurry of activity on the federal level, much of the impetus for green changes gradually shifted to local and state governments, businesses and individuals.

**Q:** What have been the most significant environmental developments in recent years?

**A:** On the local level, highlights include:

â€ Food focus: A healthy public appetite for local and organic food has fed the development of many innovative urban and rural agriculture programs. Western Washington now has more than 100 farmers markets (see [www.pugetsoundfresh.org](http://www.pugetsoundfresh.org) for listings).

â€ Neighborhood power: Providing education, activism or a mix of both, community-based green projects and organizations have sprouted like mushrooms. "Sustainable Communities All Over Puget Sound," or SCALLOPS ([www.scallopswa.org](http://www.scallopswa.org)), serves as an umbrella network for more than 60 groups.

â€ Recycling fervor: Seattle-area communities have among the highest recycling rates and most advanced recycling programs in the nation, including the collection of residential food scraps.

â€ Mobility revolution: With light rail finally operating, a system of charging stations for electric cars being built, and more people biking, walking or busing to work, our region has created a strong foundation for alternative transportation.

**Q:** How about a couple of national or global examples?

**A:** On the positive side, the increased access to environmental information through the Internet has been an enormous boon to the public.

Green products also have multiplied and offer many benefits, but the prevailing notion that we can help the environment mainly by buying products is increasingly being questioned. In her new book "Green Gone Wrong," journalist Heather Rogers assails this "green capitalism" as a convenient but bankrupt solution to global warming and other environmental problems.

**Q:** How has Earth Day itself evolved?

**A:** It's become much more corporate and less grass-roots. Some companies promoting Earth Day have truly changed the way they do business for the greener, but many still make relatively minor green adjustments in one product or package and then issue a news release about it in April.

**Q:** So what should we expect on the green horizon in the next 40 years?

**A:** Reducing our environmental impact will become simpler in some ways and more complicated in others. Opportunities will grow for back-to-basics green practices such as swapping and sharing stuff, living in smaller spaces or raising our own food.

But consumers also will face many complex choices as they try to balance environmental, social, economic and technological issues. One approach that promises to make these choices easier is product stewardship, where manufacturers are asked to take full responsibility for the impacts of their products.

No matter what the future brings, we likely still will celebrate Earth Day. If it helps us stop and think about this planet we all share, it's done its job.

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