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### Same Earth, new challenges

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Joanna Detz, of Providence, picks up trash along the water at India Point Park during a cleanup organized by the Friends of India Point on Saturday in Providence.

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The Providence Journal / Gretchen Ertl

When the first Earth Day was celebrated on April 22, 1970, Navy Secretary John H. Chafee flew home from Washington and spoke to some 800 students packed into the University of Rhode Island Memorial Union.

Chafee, always the environmental advocate, said he was optimistic about the chances of achieving what he described as a delicate balance between man's materialism and his desire for a healthy environment and personal liberty.

Then the students did something surprising. They gave Chafee a one-minute ovation, prompting URI President Werner A. Baum to observe, "It must be a long time since anyone in the military got applause like that from students."

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The comment reflected the tumult of the time. Americans were furious about the Vietnam War. College students staged protests and teach-ins about the war across the country. [are you about recycling?](#)

The late Gaylord Nelson, the U.S. senator who organized the first Earth Day, wrote that he worked for years to try to get the political limelight to focus on environmental issues. He tried to make President Kennedy focus on the environment, but his efforts weren't successful.

Finally, Nelson said he borrowed from war protesters and proposed in the fall of 1969 a national, grassroots demonstration on behalf of the environment the following spring. It took off beyond his wildest expectations. It grew into what is now considered the largest mass rally in history — 20 million people at 2,000 colleges and in several thousand communities. It was so big, Nelson said, "It organized itself."

Rhode Island's Earth Day activities were organized by a group called Ecology Rhode Island. One day wasn't enough. They planned an Environment Week in Rhode Island.

The leading concerns were pollution of the air, water and land, and they were expressed through protests and speeches.

Students at Rhode Island College planted two dozen small white pines near the student union parking lot. About 50 youngsters demonstrated at Warwick City Hall against the pollution of Gorton Pond. In Providence, college students wore gas masks to call attention to air pollution.

Speakers were concerned about homeowners burning leaves in yards and towns burning garbage. Barry Commoner, the biologist and activist, spoke at Rhode Island College. Governor Frank Licht called for the wise use of resources.

At Providence College, there was a debate about whether the Scituate Reservoir should be opened to recreational activities. It still is not.

The General Assembly was considering dueling bottle bills: one would prohibit the use of nonreturnable containers, the other would mandate them. It still hasn't passed any bottle bill, but it's looking at one again this year.

Some voiced support for an ocean zoning bill before the General Assembly. That eventually led to the creation of the Coastal Resources Management Council, a regulatory achievement that put Rhode Island ahead of much of the country.

Rhode Island has accomplished a lot since then:

- Several months after that first Earth Day, Rhode Islanders established a group called Save the Bay that has grown into one of the largest and most active environmental advocacy groups in New England.
- Two years after the first Earth Day, Rhode Island established its first two land trusts, the Sakonnet Preservation Association and the Block Island Conservancy. Now there are 40 land trusts working in all but five of the state's communities.
- The state has purchased 34,200 acres of forests and farmland valued at \$276 million.

- So far about 100,000 acres or 10 percent of Rhode Island's land has been protected one way or another. On Block Island, protected land totals 42 percent.

- The state has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on sewage treatment plants and other efforts to clean its waterways.

- Air pollution has dropped 50 percent even as the country's gross domestic product has nearly tripled, according to Robert W. Varney, head of the Environmental Protection Agency in New England.

BUT THE WORLD still faces myriad environmental problems, ranging from water shortages and loss of biodiversity to climate change.

Last year, faced with budget cuts, the state Department of Environmental Management stopped staffing the state's Earth Day Committee. The committee dissolved in October. Many groups and individuals continue to organize Earth Day activities, nevertheless.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced last week that global land surface temperatures last month were the warmest on record — 3.3 degrees Fahrenheit above the 20th century average. Temperatures in Asia were 8 degrees above average.

Just two weeks ago, Margaret Leinen, former dean of URI's Graduate School of Oceanography, gave a somber talk at URI. She now works with a company trying to provide solutions to climate change.

Recent research by the United Nations shows that levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere now are higher than anytime in the last 500,000 years, she said. At the same time, proposals to lower emissions and sequester carbon that's already in the atmosphere don't come close to bringing carbon back to levels that won't trigger climate change.

She said scientists did a good job sounding the alarm about climate change, now they should help find the solutions. "It's not going to be as easy as our legislators would lead us to believe," she said. "We have a planet-sized challenge ahead of us."

THE ENVIRONMENTAL movement has widened and become more organized; more likely now to work with and within industry ranks to make change happen.

Adam Werbach, famed environmentalist and youngest ever president of the Sierra Club, now works for Wal-Mart. His job: cut the super-retailers carbon footprint and make the company more money in the process.

Earth Day in Rhode Island has become an opportunity for cleanups, festivals and educational opportunities rather than protests against the government.

Today, Roger Williams University plans to sign the American College & University Presidents Climate Commitment, which commits the school to eventually eliminate its greenhouse gas emissions.

There are more cleanups, an educational presentation at the State House and activities on campuses around the state.

Some developments could be good and bad. So many corporations announced new "green" products this year that Advertising Age ran a story headlined: "Is Earth Day the New Christmas?"

John Chafee was a pioneer when it came to the environment, his son, former U.S. Sen. Lincoln D. Chafee, recalled from his office at Brown University yesterday. As governor, he was promoting land conservation to a hostile state legislature and setting aside public space such as Colt State Park.

Chafee played a key roll in sponsoring many of the nation's landmark environmental bills in the 1970s and 1980s. But when Congress swung to the Republicans in 1994, he spent his final years trying to prevent members of his own party from gutting the environmental programs he worked to create.

What would John Chafee say in an Earth Day speech today?

“I think he'd be happy that the world is getting more focused on these issues in a cohesive way, that countries are working together,” said Lincoln Chafee. “At the same time, he'd be distressed that his own country — under the current administration — is not cooperating at all on climate change.

“I think my father would think that ultimately common sense will prevail, and the only common sense is to look at the long term,” Chafee said. “I know he'd be optimistic and enthusiastic.”

With reports from Natalie Garcia

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