
# EARTH DAY

## CULTURAL RESOURCES

**Sunday, April 26, 2009**
Earth Day will be celebrated around the world in 2009 on Wednesday, April 22.

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### I. History Section

As a young child growing up in a predominantly African American neighborhood in Paterson, New Jersey in the 1970s, I had no idea what the word "environmentalism" meant. Oddly enough, being born and raised when the first pleas to end the manmade threats to our natural environment were made, the brothers and sisters where I lived never worried about greenhouse gases, soil erosion, or melting polar ice caps. That did not necessarily make these black folk hard-headed or hard-hearted about the state of the natural world, but hard-pressed to make the much needed connections between the mounting crisis in our environment and the immediate realities of women, men, and children living in the black community.

Sadly, throughout much of the 1970s, there was a pervasive sense that the places where black people called home were blighted and cursed areas unfit for life. Much of that came from the crushing impact of social injustice marked not only by issues of residential discrimination but also environmental racism. Looking back, the ways in which municipal governments and so-called civic authorities left numerous communities of color without dedicated attention and active protection of land occupied by black and Latino people was nothing less than awful. The need, however, was to make members of the black community aware of the need to raise a collective voice against the abuse and neglect of our communities.

Then came the stellar album by the late great superstar, Marvin Gaye, What's Going On. It began the process of awakening black people's awareness to the harm humans were enacting upon the Earth, which ought to be deemed as God's great gift to all humankind. For more than a generation, the first encounter numerous African Americans have had with the term "ecology" (the scientific study of the interaction between living organisms and their environments) came from listening to Gaye's song, "Mercy, Mercy Me." As a work of art, the album was a wonderful combination of both education and entertainment to the extent that the music could enlighten one's mind while it brightened the soul. In the

years that followed, without really taking a committed political stance concerning recycling or environmental cleanups, I became more sensitive and aware of how the quality of life was positively or negatively affected by the reality of our surroundings. The song served as a catalyst for helping me understand the importance of efforts, both large and small, intended to remedy the environmental damage done by humans.

Likewise, Earth Day ought to have a double significance for black people. On the one hand, proper adherence to the spirit of the day should prompt us to take a good, long look at the reality of the environment around us. Wherever we might live—in the country, in the city, or in the suburbs—we need to always be mindful of how human beings affect where we live. On the other hand, an occasion such as Earth Day challenges us to live and function in a way that minimizes our harmful impact on the natural environment immediately around us. As one of the mottos of the environmental movement states, it is important that we always "think globally, act locally."

For me, celebrating Earth Day is largely motivated by my desire to show the utmost gratitude to the God of all creation for giving us the blessing of the world and the fullness thereof. Earth Day provides churches the opportunity to make themselves aware of environmental issues as well as celebrate the glory of God's creation. What unites these two seemingly disconnected considerations is the ideal of restoration. We need to restore the notion of humankind as caretaker of creation (we are stewards of the earth), and restore our understanding of how fortunate we are that God was beneficent enough to give us such an amazing planet. For this gift, we owe God praise and good stewardship.

## II. Songs that Speak to the Moment

"Peace in the Valley" also known as "There'll be Peace in the Valley."
"Peace in the Valley" is a song by composer Thomas A. Dorsey. It was originally written in 1939 for the legendary singer Mahalia Jackson, widely hailed as the "Queen of Gospel Music." The song speaks of finding peace in Christ Jesus. However, the song's imagery also indicates an idyllic scene in which the natural world is lush and full of life ("There the flow'rs will be blooming, the grass will be green/And the skies will be clear and serene..."). So, the song's lyric evokes the notion that restoring the harmonious balance of humans living in tandem with nature will be indicative of the peaceful splendor of the spiritual realm (1 Cor. 15:46).

**There'll be Peace in the Valley**
I am tired and weary, but I must toil on
Till the Lord comes to call me away,
Where the morning is bright and the lamb is the light,
And the night is as fair as the day.

Chorus:
There'll be peace in the valley for me some day,
There'll be peace in the valley for me.
I pray no more sorrow and sadness or trouble will be,

There'll be peace in the valley for me.

There the flow'rs will be blooming,
The grass will be green,
And the skies will be clear and serene,
The sun ever shines, giving one endless beam
And no clouds there will ever be seen.

Chorus

There the bear will be gentle, the wolf will be tame,
And the lion will lay down by the lamb,
The host from the wild will be led by a child,
I'll be changed from the creature I am.

Chorus

No headaches or heartaches or misunderstands,
No confusion or troubles won't be
No frowns to defile, just a big endless smile
There'll be peace and contentment for me.

Chorus

This unit opens with a video which plays the song, “Mercy, Mercy Me” by Marvin Gaye. This song, in many respects, has become the soul song of the environmental movement.

**Mercy, Mercy Me (the Ecology)**
Oh, mercy, mercy me
Oh, things ain't what they used to be
No, no

Where did all the blue sky go?
Poison is the wind that blows
From the north, and south, and east
Oh, mercy, mercy me
Oh, things ain't what they used to be
No, no

Oil wasted on the oceans
and upon our seas
Fish full of mercury

Oh, mercy, mercy me
Oh, things ain't what they used to be
No, no

Radiation underground and in the sky
Animals and birds who
live nearby are dying
Oh, mercy, mercy me
Oh, things ain't what they used to be

What about this overcrowded land
How much more abuse from
man can she stand?
My sweet Lord
My sweet Lord
My sweet Lord.

## III. Cultural Response this Moment on the Calendar

### Historical Lesson

In many ways, Earth Day marks the birth of a fully realized environmentalist movement. Responding to widespread environmental degradation, US Senator Gaylord Nelson from Wisconsin called for Earth Day to be an environmental teach-in to be held on April 22, 1970.[1] As an avowed environmental activist, Senator Nelson took a leading role in organizing the celebration. It was his avid hope that by creating this sizable event and demonstrating its popular support and, consequently, the political will for an environmental agenda, that, among other things, he would generate a viable plan to confront global climate change. In that first year, in excess of 20 million people participated in the events. Senator Nelson stated that Earth Day "worked" because of the spontaneous and sincere response of ordinary people at the grassroots level. Witnessing that sort of excitement surfacing nationwide, he directly credited the first Earth Day with persuading American politicians, including then president Richard Nixon, that environmental legislation had a substantial, lasting constituency and was not a passing fad or fashionable trend as many conservative naysayers had argued.

The first Earth Day had participants from two thousand colleges and universities, roughly ten thousand primary and secondary schools, and hundreds of communities across the United States. More importantly, it "brought 20 million Americans out into the spring sunshine for peaceful demonstrations in favor of environmental reform." Furthermore, many important laws were passed by Congress in the wake of the first Earth Day observance, including the Clean Air Act and the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency. Earth Day is now observed annually on April 22 by more than 500 million people in roughly 175 countries.

It is coordinated by the nonprofit Earth Day Network,[2] which claims that Earth Day is now "the largest secular holiday in the world, celebrated by more than a half billion people every year." Environmental groups have sought to make Earth Day a day of action that changes human behavior and provokes policy changes.

## Early and Current African American Environmentalists

Following the Civil War, the famous African American educator Booker T. Washington established the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in 1881. That created one of the preeminent institutions of its time for teaching African Americans agriculture and conservation. As a professor at Tuskegee Institute, George Washington Carver became regarded as one of the nation's greatest agricultural researchers. His innovations in agronomy and crop rotation are considered scientific breakthroughs in soil preservation and increasing farms productivity. Although he became famous for his scientific research that yielded no less than 325 new products from peanuts, as well as over 100 products derived from sweet potatoes, Carver's chief instruction to his students was to remember that nature is the greatest teacher and, thus, declared that the key to successful agriculture is to gain a fuller understanding of nature.

John W. Mitchell started out by serving farmers in three counties in the state of North Carolina. He accomplished this feat traveling mostly by bicycle or horseback throughout the state as part of the agricultural extension service just after World War I. Sometime later, Mitchell organized the Eastern Columbus Credit Union in order to help create a black farmers' cooperative where they could save money by buying their seed and supplies in bulk together as a group. Mitchell's expertise in advanced farming techniques eventually led to his appointment as director of African American extension services for the State of North Carolina; he subsequently became director for the entire southern region for the U.S. Department of Agriculture during the late 1940s. As a result of his contribution to the agricultural sciences in that state, Mitchell was inducted as a member of the North Carolina A & T University Agriculture Hall of Fame.

In recent decades, it has been realized that poor urban communities of color were infinitely more vulnerable to being exposed to harmful toxins and pollutants. There has been considerable work done to expose the harsh truth that protection and preservation of the environment ought to be deemed a basic human right. There are numerous African American community leaders, activists, and scholars who saw the mounting struggle and were willing to take on the challenge of trying to heal their land and make their communities healthy and whole again. For instance, as the chief executive of DeKalb County near Atlanta, Vernon Jones championed the campaign in March 2000 to pass a referendum for a $125 million bond in order to acquire more land for public parks. Leading the pitched battle to preserve public lands in a majority black county in the state of Georgia ultimately led to a victorious referendum vote passed by a three-to-two margin. More importantly, Vernon Jones almost singlehandedly helped dispelled modern misconceptions that African Americans are not and could never be interested in environmental causes.

Another example is Zulene Mayfield. As chairperson of Chester Residents Concerned for Quality Living (CRCQL, pronounced "circle"), Mayfield led this grassroots community organization in its fight for environmental justice on the outskirts of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Since CRCQL's founding in 1992, she and the larger membership were

dedicated to dealing with the concerns caused by the skyrocketing number of waste treatment facilities and landfills being built in their local community of Chester, in addition to the resulting stench, noise, wretched air quality, tainted water, and horrendous ground pollution. This was declared by many Chester residents to be the underlying cause of countless health problems that plagued the Chester residents throughout much of the 1990s after the facilities were built. While leading this struggle to confront the local political establishment and corporate leaders who had multimillion-dollar investments at stake with these polluting enterprises, she and other CRCQL members had been targets of harassment and intimidation by the owners and operators of the Chester waste facilities. Through it all, Mayfield never considered herself an environmental activist *per se*, but did attest to the fact that her passion came from being a neighborhood resident who was fed up with the greed, pollution, corruption, injustice, and general apathy that left the community of Chester so devastated and blighted.

Finally, there is Robert D. Bullard who is the Ware Professor of Sociology and the Director of the Environmental Justice Resource Center (ERJC) at Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia. For nearly three decades, Dr. Bullard has been a pioneering scholar/activist and prolific author on the cutting-edge of social research that addresses the critical intersections of race, class, region, civil rights, and the environment. Aside from providing the definition and dynamics of environmental racism in practical terms that average citizens can readily understand, Bullard was instrumental to the founding of the environmental justice movement for communities of color that had been denied appropriate advocacy for far too long.

## IV. An Environmental Tragedy and Reminder

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina revealed the devastating impact of environmental racism in the starkest terms possible. After years of disregarding changing weather patterns and ecological shifts caused largely by human impact upon much of the Gulf Coast region of the United States, the world watched in horror and disbelief as the cumulative forces of government incompetence and neglect, gross mismanagement of emergency resources/disaster relief, and irresponsible stewardship of the regional ecosystem left the entire Gulf Coast region—especially the city of New Orleans—painfully devastated by the full brunt of nature's forces. To make matters worse, Hurricane Katrina and its terrible aftermath demonstrated in vivid terms the connections that exist among factors of race, poverty, residential segregation, health care, emergency response, and environmental risks that made the miserable consequences of the storm fall most heavily upon the residents of the Crescent City who were poor and black.

Although, nowadays, the majority of the cable television news crews and famous celebrities have mostly left New Orleans behind in search of something else to grab their attention, the Church must never forget the shock at seeing the flooded neighborhoods of New Orleans East, Lower Ninth, Chalmette, Algiers, Uptown, Mid-City, and the Garden District with the loss of life and property. We must never ignore that, even now, as hundreds, if not thousands, of displaced New Orleans residents press their way back home, they find themselves either homeless or living in tent cities and shantytowns.

As we look ahead to the future, the rebuilding and revitalization of New Orleans and the greater Gulf Coast region must be seen as a shining symbol of our ongoing struggles for environmental justice and human flourishing for African Americans. Recalling the horrific images of Hurricane Katrina, churches across the nation should take a more direct role in educating their members about environmental concerns in their own community and surrounding areas as well as empower them to confront local political and business interests that seek both to disadvantage and disenfranchise all of us.

By acknowledging that the environment encompasses our entire world—where we live, work, go to school, love, play, pray, and sleep—we must realize that the stewardship of the environment entails the preservation and protection of this planet as a prime example of our perpetual appreciation for God having given this gift to humanity. In that spirit, Earth Day provides us an opportunity each year to place issues of environmental justice foremost in our collective consciousness so that we become better stewards of this gift (Mother Earth) over which God has placed us as stewards.

## Notes

1. Nelson, Gaylord. "How the First Earth Day Came About." Envirolink: the Online Environmental Community. Online location: http://earthday.envirolink.org/history.html accessed 28 December 2008
2. Read more about Earth Day Network. Online location: http://www.earthday.net/ accessed 28 December 2008