

Earth Day 2018: Taker or caretaker? The quest to save nature



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Sunday will mark 48 years since the first Earth Day in 1970. In that year, bipartisan cooperation led to the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency and passage of the Clean Air, Clean Water and Endangered Species Acts — all under a Republican president and Democratic Congress. Those landmark acts improved air and water quality and saved countless lives and wildlife species, like the bald eagle, from extinction. Some 20 million people — young and old, urban and rural, from both political parties — participated in massive coast-to-coast rallies demonstrating that Americans value their environment.

This Earth Day our planet is at a critical environmental turning point. Climate change, habitat loss, and chemical and pesticide poisoning are some of the examples of human impacts that continue to threaten life on Earth. The U.N. Environment Program estimates that about 150 species become extinct every day placing us in the largest extinction period since the dinosaurs disappeared 66 million years ago. It is likely that within the lifetime of children alive today, wildlife from favorite backyard species like hummingbirds and monarch butterflies to iconic animals like African elephants and polar bears will become extinct. This cannot be the legacy we leave our children.



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James Cameron, director of "Avatar," says his films are about our relationship with nature and the war between takers and caretakers. The concept of takers and caretakers goes to the core of our spiritual and biological connection to nature and defines the environmental crisis we face. As takers, Americans comprise 5 percent of world population but consume 25 percent of global resources.

In 2013, the U.S. EPA reported that Americans generated half of the solid waste on the planet, yet recycled only 34 percent. A single child born in the U.S. will have a greater effect on the environment than a dozen children born in a developing country. What would you do if the next time you were at dinner one person ate a quarter of all the food?

Each of us must take individual responsibility, live smart and consider the impact our choices have on the planet and its creatures. Lions and orangutans may be a half-world away, but the choices we make every day threaten their survival, and ultimately our own. We must demand that governments preserve the planet's biodiversity and that industry produces sustainably sourced goods with minimal environmental impact. Together we must replace the existing linear production model with a cyclical process that increases the recycling rate and reduces natural resource consumption to sustainable levels.

In her last publication, "Environmental Action is not a Choice, It's A Spiritual Obligation," the late Dr. Chandra Taylor Smith, environmental theologian and co-founder of Noah's Notes, wrote "It is even more apparent today that whatever we do to nature, we are doing to ourselves." The simple truth is we need nature to survive. Like that first Earth Day almost a half-century ago, Americans must come together as caretakers of the creation and save nature.

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