

## Half a Century Later...

Environmentalism was not even a word in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when curious gentlemen scholars and amateur naturalists began noting changes in the parts of the natural world they were studying. No doubt they exchanged information with one another but the majority of us paid no heed. We thought whatever WAS always had been and would ever be. Other spaces and places beyond our own borders did not impinge upon our area of responsibility until we read "Silent Spring." This book, published in 1962 and written by marine biologist Rachel Carson, delineated the threat of toxic chemicals to the natural world and its people. It is credited with the spark of interest in the environment that culminated in the first Earth Day, April 22, 1970. You might wonder what Carson would think of the policy that permits thousands of chemicals to flood the market without proof of their safety but only taken off the market if proven harmful?

That first Earth Day saw millions of people protesting our laxity in caring for our home planet. What followed were landmark laws protecting endangered species and our drinking water. Over the next decade economists, microbiologists, zoologists weighed in on pollution, resource loss, and wetlands destruction. One event that captured our attention in October 1973 was the decision of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to initiate an embargo but any sense that this was a warning of future scarcity vanished along with the long lines. Shortly after that time chemists reported that the ozone layer was being destroyed by CFCs (chlorofluorocarbons) and a huge hole had appeared over British Antarctica. That discovery resulted in efforts to curb the use of CFCs and the hole in the ozone layer began to shrink.

In 1979 the small partial meltdown at the nuclear power plant at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania made safety a front burner concern, delaying the research into the use of that source of power for future needs. The event in Chernobyl effectively eliminated any further nuclear plants here although 80% of France's power is derived from nuclear.

December 3, 1984 an estimated 10,000 people were killed by 40 tons of poison gas leaking from Union Carbide's pesticide plant at Bhopal, India. Had this happened in Pennsylvania, it may have resulted in serious concern about pesticides.

Environmentalist Chico Mendes was killed by cattle ranchers, December 22, 1986 for advocating the preservation of Brazil's forests as extractive reserves rather than clearing them. This crime brought a degree of attention to the destruction of the rain forest and the impact this has on climate.

The US's largest oil spill occurred March 24, 1989 when the Exxon Valdez dumped 76,000 tons of crude oil covering 5100 kilometers of Alaskan coastline and killing 250,000 birds. And so it went from crisis to crisis with thousands of people throughout the world attempting to protect and preserve the natural world through study

and education while others wished to continue business as usual as long as business prospered to the last tree, stream, drop of oil.

Good things have been accomplished but more remains to be done and can be done by all of us. When the climate change summit took place in Copenhagen there were thousands of demonstrators, mostly young people, demanding a reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> to 350 parts per million. The odd balls got the media attention but the authorities found the gathering 99.9% non-violent. Actually the 350 limit was endorsed by over 100 nations, not given a lot of attention as most of those nations were small or poor or island nations worried about being submerged by rising waters. By reducing the atmosphere's CO<sub>2</sub> to 350 ppm the temperature rise would be reduced to a point where climate change could be a manageable occurrence and not a crisis.

This is the point where every gardener adds his small efforts to those of his neighbors because there are tens of millions of gardeners. They will have an impact by changing their light bulbs, refusing to buy bottled water, pulling their shopping bags out of the car when they head to the store. It is so hard for us to believe these small efforts matter, but multiplied by millions they surely do. Perhaps this weekend, to honor the earth, you can lay a curving garden hose across a swathe of your green green grass and plan to incorporate that small segment into your shrub border, vegetable garden, or raspberry patch. It might become a family project while you argue the merits of asparagus vs. blueberries.