

# Earth Day 2018: An overdue daily call to action or just another one-day celebration?

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Contributed Photo



According to Earthday.org, the first Earth Day was held on April 22, 1970 in response to the environmental disaster caused by the massive 1969 oil spill in Santa Barbara, California. That day marked the birth of the modern environmental movement where people of all walks of life and political leanings said “enough is enough!” with widespread environmental abuses like rampant air and water pollution, free-for-all consumption, and mountains of waste that threatened the sustainability of our existence.

Since then, April 22 has been the official Earth Day celebration, but has the original awareness campaign and urgent call-to-action become diminished over time? Based on the current growing environmental challenges, like the unnatural rate at which the planet is warming and the five ocean gyres of mostly plastic trash (one the size of Mexico now according to National Geographic – not fake news!), I’d say so.

Like any significant holiday or national observation, there’s usually is an outpouring of like-minded support for that day. As a volunteer-centric grassroots environmental organization, Keep Loudoun Beautiful (KLB) receives many such requests by concerned individuals and groups looking to roll their sleeves up for the planet around Earth Day, which is much appreciated as we always need more volunteers.

Our fragile environment, however, needs responsible caretaking not only on Earth Day, but every day in order for it to survive and for us to survive, yet the majority that celebrate Earth Day may do something Earth-friendly for that day and then return to their typical non-Earth-friendly lifestyles for the other 364 days out of the year. Well folks, that’s not environmentally sustainable as we are clearly on a slippery slope due to widespread environmental apathy in addition to a big dose of burying our heads in the sand, sadly including our national leadership, by refusing to accept that we made this mess, and things will only get worse for you, your children, your grandchildren, and all future generations unless immediate decisive corrective action is taken.

Sure, governments at all levels here and around the world need to take this global threat seriously as we are running out of time, but you need to be proactive and do something about this, as well. You must take action, not only in the voting booth, but with your lifestyle as an Earth-friendly lifestyle, which includes your daily habits, will make

a significant difference to our unsustainable trajectory.

At KLB, we have seen a lot of disgusting litter since 1972 and have learned much about human behavior, and the tons of litter that KLB collects all around Loudoun each year is an environmental canary in a coal mine, just like the disappearing glaciers. This canary isn’t doing so well and we need to pay attention to the alarm bells before it’s too late as the litter we collect paints a very clear picture of what we consume, and it’s not pretty.

The #1 litter we collect is empty bottled water, mostly from wind-blown curbside open-top recycling totes, but certainly some from deliberate littering. So beyond the litter, “What’s so wrong with bottled water?” you might wonder. Well, a lot. The production and distribution of bottled water wastes energy, wastes non-renewable natural resources, wastes water, and generates air and water pollution. Here are two fun facts for you: Bottled water consumes roughly 17.6 million barrels of oil each year in the U.S. and to make just one bottled water, it takes three bottles of water. Isn’t that nuts? On the disposal side of this unbalanced equation, only around 23% of bottled water is recycled, meaning that the rest is either in landfills growing our trash mountains, or it becomes litter, which is worse as we only recover a small fraction of what’s on the way downstream to the closest ocean gyre.

So in a country where we have the cleanest municipal water and wonderful treatment options for well water, you really have to ask yourself if it’s really worth all this environmental damage for something you consume for a few minutes and then toss, most likely into the nearest trash bin, when you have so many affordable reusable bottle and cup choices to pick from. Remember: When the bottled water industry wins, we ALL lose.

Beyond the bottled water litter, we collect the usual Gatorade and soda bottles, beer/soda cans, glass bottles, disposable coffee cups, drink pouches, tires, a bazillion balls (tennis, baseball, soccer, golf, etc.), cigarette butts and empty packs, Styrofoam cups and packing material, dog waste bags (mostly empty, thankfully), and disposable plastic bags floating or buried in the bank of a waterway or snagged in vegetation. Of course, we find many more kinds of “interesting” litter, but suffice it to say that it’s a real mess out there with most of the litter being use-and-toss consumer products, which is a tell-tale sign

of the all-too-common wasteful lifestyles that ultimately hurts all of us.

And while we’re talking about excessive waste, did you know that we generate an incredible amount of municipal solid waste (stuff we consume) to the mind-boggling tune of 4.4 pounds per person per day as reported by the EPA for 2013? Even more alarming is that this number is getting worse each year, not better. But this wasteful epidemic isn’t so hard to fathom given generations of passing along bad habits along with the barrage of clever advertisements with the lure of convenience and “quick-and-easy”, which fuels our insatiable use-and-toss lifestyles even more.

So if this all resonates with you, and it should, you might ask “Where do I start to take control of my environmental destiny?” Well, thanks for asking! A great place to start being kind to your planet is with some serious self-evaluation followed by living by the time-tested, yet simple principles of Reducing, Reusing, and Recycling, which are most effective when executed in that particular order. In other words, always recycle something that can be recycled instead of tossing it into the landfill, but it’s better to avoid recycling by Reusing, and still better to avoid Reusing by Reducing what you consume. See how that works? It’s not rocket science, and it’s really common sense when you think about it, but it can be tough to switch from a wasteful use-and-toss lifestyle to an Earth-friendly one due to human nature in addition to the abovementioned challenges.

But once you understand the massive negative impact of disposable products, it should be a no-brainer to make the switch, and it’s really easier than ever with all the great practical and affordable products available these days. Simply kicking the wasteful bottled water habit in favor of something reusable is a great first step.

Bringing your own reusable shopping bags not only to the grocery store, but to everywhere you shop will also pay environmental dividends. If you must have a java fix at your favorite coffee shop, don’t forget to save your planet by bringing your own insulated mug. And simply putting a lid on your curbside recycling will eliminate most careless littering. It’s that easy to make a difference, but that’s the tip of the iceberg of the positive impact you can and need to make, so to help with this critical journey, we’ve added a Green Tips page on our Website ([www.keeploudounbeautiful.org](http://www.keeploudounbeautiful.org)) with some initial content that we’ll add much more to as time permits, starting with yard maintenance as things are really starting to green-up out there, as well as some other practical green tips that we’ve shared over the years.

In the meantime, be sure to check-out the green tips published in our newsletters as every green act matters and get involved by volunteering with KLB and other environmental organizations to accelerate a positive change.

You know, based on the current state of our environment and how we continue to find new ways to abuse it, I think calling Earth Day a celebration is a stretch as there is really nothing to celebrate, at least not yet. Sorry to be a Debbie Downer, but the party’s over, folks, and if you don’t take this crisis seriously, Earth Day will soon turn into a day of remembrance of yet another human folly.

It’s your choice, so what’s it going to be? Hopefully, you will answer the Earth Day call to action every day if you haven’t already joined this humanity-saving movement.

Your family and future generations are counting on it! ♦



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