Twenty years ago, Denis Hayes dropped out of Harvard Law School to stage the largest demonstration in history. It was called Earth Day, and its phenomenal success launched the modern environmental movement. Almost two decades and thousands of environmental crises later, Mr. Hayes was at work to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of Earth Day, April 22, 1970, with a massive international event in 1990 that will propel the environmental movement into a new decade of activism and on into the twenty-first century.

On the heels of Earth Day 1980, Mr. Hayes founded Environmental Action and became the chief lobbyist at the Clean Air Act of 1970. He later conducted research on energy and the environment at the Smithsonian Institution and served as director of the Illinois State Energy Office. In February 1989, Mr. Hayes took a leave of absence from the Illinois State Energy Office to spearhead the Earth Day 1990 Coalition.

For many of my generation, involvement with serious issues—adult issues—began with some form of unconventional politics: passive direct action and freedom rides in support of civil rights; the endless town meetings of Vietnam summer; wearing gas masks down Fifth Avenue on Earth Day; picking a state legislature in support of the Equal Rights Amendment; breaching the exclusion zone around Sea- bird or Diablo Canyon; blocking a train carrying fissionable material to the Rocky Flats bomb factory in Colorado.

We were impatient and idealistic. The first generation with Strontium-90 in its bones (from atmospheric nuclear testing), we trusted no one over thirty. Outraged over the state of the world we were inheriting, we vowed that we would pass on to our children a world that was peaceful, just, and ecologically sustainable.

That was twenty years ago. Today, the angry young women and men of Earth Day who poured sewage on corporate carpets and pounded polluting automobiles apart with sledgehammers are now middle-aged and still no closer to their utopian vision. If anything, perhaps, they are further away.

Twenty years after Earth Day, those of us who set out to change the world are poised on the threshold of utter failure. Measured on any scale, the world is in worse shape than it was twenty years ago.

Lessons Learned
Recognizing this, more than a year and a half ago, I wrote an article in which I proposed the need for a global Earth Day to coincide with the twentieth anniversary of the first Earth Day. Two months after the article appeared, a dozen national environmental leaders asked me to take a leave of absence from my legal practice to coordinate the Earth Day 1990 campaign.

At this time last year, Earth Day 1990 was nothing more than a concept. Now, it is an overburdened staff of thirty in Palo Alto, California; a national board of directors well over 120 in number (including John A. Hoot of The HSUS) with representatives from every sector of American society; a luminous international board of sponsors spanning every continent; and a field organization with hundreds of grass-roots coordinators spread across the country. In little more than a year, Earth Day 1990 has gone from the drawing board to a huge, global coalition determined to turn the tide in the battle to pull the planet back from the brink of ecological destruction.

The American conservation movement has a long, distinguished tradition, tracing back to such giants as Thoreau, Audubon, Muir, and Leopold. However, the American ecological movement is of much more recent origin. Individuals such as Rachel Carson and David Brower sounded the environmental alarm in the 1960s, and events such as the Santa Barbara oil spill of 1969 and the Storm King battle in New York gave rise to local waves of concerned activists, but a full-blown national movement emerged only in 1970.

Following the original Earth Day—April 22, 1970—the American conservation movement exploded in size and broadened its agenda to encompass emerging ecological issues such as industrial pollution, urban air- and water-quality problems, and solid waste disposal. Flushed with its new-found strength, the environmental movement won a string of spectacular successes on Capitol Hill, in the courts, and in the streets. Earth Day’s 25 million participants demonstrated to corporations, politicians, and our somnambulant neighbors that nobody is immune to the threats posed by environmental pollution and no one can avoid culpability. Twenty years later, some of the symptoms have changed, but the problem remains the same—us.

Sure, there are lots of villains to point fingers at: uncaring corporate monopolies; sketchy businessmen out to make a quick buck regardless of the damage left in their wake; and politicians too dependent upon polluters’ contributions to reelection campaigns and more than willing to turn a blind eye.

However, no one’s holding a gun to our heads as we merely drive ourselves into the greenhouse house, degrading ourselves with nuketast power stations exchanging one set of problems for another, including the quick proliferation of weapons-grade uranium into dozes of countries. Nothing short of a society-wide commitment is needed to turn our backs on the “disposable society” and toward the vision of a society that lives in harmony with the environment. The twentieth anniversary of Earth Day is an auspicious time to signal corpora- tions, politicians, and ourselves that such a profound shift is needed. The alternative is catastrophe.

The Concept
The concept of Earth Day was American in its origin. However, the problems that Earth Day addressed were—and are—global in nature. Where Earth Day 1970 was the catalyst for the creation of the modern American environmental movement, Earth Day 1990 is designed to catalyze the creation of a truly global environmental movement and to make the 1990s a decade of striking environmental achievements. Unfortunately, it took the discovery of holes in the ozone layer, widespread fires in the Amazon, and convincing proof of the threats posed by global climate change to make the environment an issue worthy of international press in...
The time is well nigh to set aside narrow self-interest to focus on the global environmental issues that threaten... the human race.

The Constituency

To meet the formidable challenge of building a constituency for sustainable development, Earth Day 1990 is seeking the assistance, participation, and commitment of leaders from all sectors of society. Earth Day 1990's national board of directors is drawn from government, education, labor unions, civil rights groups, corporations, academia, and the arts and includes the CEO of every major national environmental organization in the United States.

At the grass-roots level, Earth Day 1990 has built a national network of local and regional organizations that has given birth to regional offices opening across the country. Local grass-roots and student organizations now exist in hundreds of cities, including all of the nation's largest metropolitan areas. Individuals involved in local Earth Day 1990 coalitions are a study in diversity, with participation ranging from members of neighborhood-improvement associations to city council members, from environmentalists to civil rights activists, from students to senior citizens. Many have never been involved with an environmental campaign before.

Supplementing our field organizing activities, Earth Day 1990 has developed public-education programs that reach people in their homes, workplaces, and recreation centers. These programs are designed to change how people shop and affect how they vote and raise their children. Some are applicable primarily to a U.S. audience, while others have been adapted for use in other countries.

Education

To reach the next generation of leaders with lessons that we have yet to learn, Earth Day 1990 has developed formal educational materials including a lesson plan and survey for students in grades K-12 and a campus environmental audit for colleges and universities. At the K-12 level, students will work with their parents to complete a survey that they can use to measure the environmental soundness of their homes. The campus audit will help students, faculty, and administrators to gauge accurately the impact their college has on the community's environment through the generation of solid, medical, radioactive, and hazardous waste as well as its air and water pollution, procurement policies, and dangers in the workplace.

Investment

Drawing on the examples of the antiapartheid and other social-justice movements, the environmental movement has launched an ambitious campaign to apply environmental concerns to decisions in the corporate boardroom. I cochair the Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies (CERES), which includes environmental organizations and financial institutions. Last fall, CERES unveiled a new tenpoint corporate code of ethics, which addresses the damaging impacts of products and production processes on consumers, employees, communities, and the global environment.

Already, the Principles have been endorsed by state, city, and religious pension funds totaling over $150 billion in assets. In conjunction with other coalition members, Earth Day 1990 is working with corporations, state treasurers, portfolio managers, universities, and cities to urge the wide adoption of the Valdez Principles as an effective gauge for corporate performance and a guideline for socially responsible investing.

Global Cities

Responding to a surge of municipal environmental activism, Earth Day 1990 has developed the Global Cities Project, which offers city and county authorities practical assistance in expanding or creating programs that fulfill the maxim, "Think globally. Act locally."

Under the Global Cities Project, Earth Day 1990 will assist cities and counties to develop or expand existing programs in areas such as ride-sharing, recycling, energy and water conservation, hazardous-waste reduction, and tree planting. Cities participating in the project also will receive an "Earth Day Project Planning Guide" and will be eligible to attend project-planning seminars held throughout the country. The response has been enthusiastic, with participants ranging from Newark, New Jersey, to San Diego, California, to Atlanta, Georgia.

International Earth Day

On the international level, Earth Day 1990 has a growing international board of sponsors, which spans every continent and includes two heads of state and the leaders of ten international organizations, including two United Nations agencies. More than 120 countries have Earth Day coalitions representing thousands of nongovernmental organizations, universities, and government agencies. Diversity is predominant; planned activities range from an "Indigenous Peoples Consultation on Bio-Diversity" in the Philippines to a "Green Train" bearing Earth Day 1990's logo on its side as it travels through twenty-one major Italian cities testing pollution levels with its on-board laboratory.

The Global Challenge

International Earth Day is a concept whose time has come. Global environmental issues exemplify the interdependence of communities around the world. If we truly want to develop solutions to global warming, ozone depletion, ocean pollution, and the rest of the global ecological horrors that we've created, world leaders need to take the pragmatic step of setting aside parochial priorities and focusing on threats to the global commons. Earth Day 1990's global campaign will provide the politicians of the world compelling evidence that there indeed exists an informed and angry constituency that considers the health of the planet an issue second to none.

If You Want to Get Involved

If you want to join the Earth Day 1990 process, contact our main office in Palo Alto, California. Regardless of where you live, our field staff can put you in touch with a local grassroots coordinator. For further information, contact: Earth Day 1990, PO Box AA, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94309; (415) 321-1990.