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The Rise And Fall Of Earth Day, A Day No One Notices Anymore

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Ah, April 22, when environmentalists celebrate Earth Day, and communists celebrate Lenin's birthday, and no one really bothers to notice either any more.

What happened? The decline and fall of communism was a mathematical certainty, but what explains the profound disinterest that Americans have in the environmental movement? Just ask Gallup—where you will find environmental concerns pretty much at the bottom of what activates people's neurons, and, within that diminishing category, the iconic specter of dreaded global warming ranks near the bottom of environmental concerns.

In the 1970s, Earth Day brought out millions of the eager, prompted dozens of quaint college "teach-ins," and usually bagged the number one story on the three legacy TV networks. This year, bet that several of the major outlets won't even notice, the exception being the tattered spinoffs of NBC, i.e. CNBC and MSNBC, which paint their peacocks green for a week.

The decline of Earth Day is in part an unintended consequence of its success. The older among us remember the stinging ozone-laden smog of southern California and the opaque air of Pittsburgh. These, along with countless other environmental horrors, were pretty much everywhere, and everyone agreed we had tremendous problems. The EPA was started not by lefty democrats but by Richard Nixon. People were literally sick and very tired of the obvious pollution of so many of the nation's urban airsheds.

This was back in the day when Californians were proud to say that they led the nation to its ultimate future (such an attitude today, unfortunately, predicts national bankruptcy and one-party rule). The Los Angeles Basin is one of the worst locations on earth to place a city thanks to the combination of stable air from the Pacific maritime layer, and trapped air, thanks to the surrounding steep mountains. But somehow California cleaned it up. Similar regulations governing automobile emissions spread across the country. City air became breathable.

State and federal bureaucracies charged with maintaining environmental quality grew like mushrooms in the compost of lousy air. Like unions, once their work was done, did they decline into irrelevancy? Hardly.

Which is why Earth Day isn't so popular any more. As problems were solved, rather than go quietly into the night, the environmental bureaucracy doubled and tripled down. Those who made our air breathable became the pest and pestilence, enforcing all kinds of well-intentioned law in the most stringent and asinine ways imaginable. Thus the Delta Smelt is destroying agriculture in California's Central Valley, in its heyday perhaps the most remarkable agricultural achievement in our planet's history. A modestly sized semi-desert, when irrigated with water impounded in the Sierra Nevada it became the nation's vegetable garden. Today we divert that water to keep the little fish alive.

This coming summer may reveal the profound bankruptcy of this policy. The California irrigation system is actually built to withstand multiple years of consecutive drought, which is the current situation out there. But that's if the water is not poured out in favor of an irrelevant fish, instead of being used to feed the nation. This summer will probably mark its first systemwide failure.

Where it was once both useful and noble, the environmental machine has now become a tool of common oppression, legally empowered to do things that no Congress would dream of, like—thanks to a recent decision by the DC Court of Appeals—making sure that no new coal-fired electricity will ever be generated.

Or, like mandating that cars—largely cleaned up during the noble era—achieve fuel economies that will make them uproariously expensive, while at the same time doing absolutely nothing about the purported problem (global warming) that this is supposed to stop. Meeting this goal will require huge amounts of copper, but the EPA is bent upon pre-empting even an application to exploit North America's largest known deposit, the Pebble Project, some 150 miles west of Anchorage, in land zoned for mining.

The bureaucracy is incapable of doing anything but regulating, even though EPA's own computer models show that if our emissions of dreaded carbon dioxide were cut to zero, today, that we wouldn't be able to measure the effect on global temperatures in the year 2100.

These and so many other insults by the environmental bureaucracy are the reasons that Earth Day is barely celebrated. Having done their job, our greener friends should have packed up and gone home. Instead, they demand more and more that accomplishes less and less.

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