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News

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Celebrate and protect America the Beautiful

This Earth Day, fewer show sense of urgency about the environment

BOB PERKOWITZ
Special to the Observer

It's April 22, 1970 -- the first Earth Day in America. There are 315,000 people in Charlotte, 203 million in the United States and 3.7 billion in the world. Twenty million Americans participate in Earth Day celebrations. In our major cities the air is brown and the rivers putrid. The American bald eagle is approaching extermination. America's environmental issues are evident, and our goals are obvious.

As the decade progresses, with broad public support, Congress will pass the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act and create the Environmental Protection Agency. As we have done time and time again, Americans will pull together, attack the problems and fix them.

Fast-forward to next week, April 22, 2005 -- the 35th anniversary of Earth Day. There are 614,000 people in Charlotte, 293 million in the U.S. and an incredible 6.4 billion on the planet. Though there are many more Americans, fewer than 1 million will participate in Earth Day festivities. Some still trumpet clean air and clean water, but few of us show any real concern anymore.

We have taken care of the old environmental problems. The new environmental issues seem insidious and confusing. Global warming? Collapse of oceanic fish stocks? Are those our fault? No matter how hard we try, can America solve them? Won't some other country just take the fish and pollute the atmosphere?

I suggest we are looking at this in the wrong way. We have some major environmental opportunities that are under our control. The goals of Earth Day 2005 should be energy independence, economic prosperity, healthy communities and preserving our national heritage. Consider the following.

- **Energy independence.** Most Americans have come to realize that energy is a national security issue. Only 3 percent of the world's oil reserves are in America; those supplies are decreasing while our consumption increases.

We now purchase 58 percent of our oil from foreign sources like Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Venezuela. In the process we fund dictatorships and terrorists that threaten our values, our property and ourselves. As China begins sucking on the oil pipelines, international tensions will only increase.

Oil dependence is America's largest national security and environmental problem. We will never be able to drill our way to national security. We can, however, achieve energy independence with biofuels production, increased energy efficiency and development of alternative energy sources, including wind, solar and hydrogen power. Any responsible American should champion energy independence.

- **Economic prosperity.** In 2004, America imported a record \$179 billion worth of oil. This accounted for 27 percent of our record-breaking \$665 billion trade deficit. Ironically these oil imports reduce the value of the dollar and lead to ever higher oil prices. The stock market goes down every time oil prices go up for a reason. Every time a tanker drops off a load of oil and heads back to the Middle East, it takes investment, jobs and

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economic growth with it.

A 21st-century energy policy that focuses on the future would create millions of American jobs, help correct the trade deficit and make American businesses more competitive in the dynamic world markets. Fostering American ingenuity with responsible market-based incentives like providing tax breaks for hybrids instead of Hummers should be an environmental goal in 2005.

• **Healthy communities.** Illnesses such as cancer and asthma are often found in clusters. In some American communities, one-third of the women develop breast cancer. In others, including Charlotte, schools are forced to call off athletic programs due to red alert ozone days. We are advised to not eat certain fish regularly because they are laced with toxic mercury. Rather than limiting our intake of fish or buying inhalers for our children, we should all be advocating for healthy communities.

• **Our natural heritage.** "America the Beautiful" was written 100 years ago by a New England teacher after her trip to Colorado. It is an anthem to the beauty and bounty of our country. The purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain give us our spirit, our identity and our wealth.

When we decide to put methane gas wells in Wyoming, oil wells in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge or use taxpayer dollars to put logging roads in our last remaining natural forests, we may or may not get some short-term economic benefit. We can, however, say with certainty that we lose a bit of America's soul.

There will be Earth Day festivities in Charlotte and across the Carolinas next week. Join the celebration. Nature is still beautiful and still taking care of us. Now is the time to start talking about energy independence, economic prosperity, healthy communities and our national heritage as our new environmental opportunities. As you do, you will realize that each of us, at heart, is still an environmentalist.

Bob

Perkowitz

Observer community columnist Bob Perkowitz of Charlotte is a businessman and environmentalist. Write him c/o The Observer, P. O. Box 30308, Charlotte, NC 28230-0308, or at rperks282@aol.com.

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