

Lesson Plan: A Brief History of Earth Day

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Featured resources

[KQED's The Lowdown: A Brief History of Earth Day](#)

Opening quick write prompt:

What does Earth Day mean to you? Why do you think Earth Day got started? When was the first Earth Day? What do you think happened as a result? (Make your best guess.)

A quick write allows students to write down their thoughts before discussing the opening question in order to increase participation and make the discussion more accessible to English Language Learners.



Ryan C. McGinley/Wikimedia

Objective

- Students will analyze the origins and history of Earth Day.
- Students will evaluate how political and public support for Earth Day has changed over time.

Essential Question and Lesson Context

What is the history of Earth Day? How has support and participation in Earth Day evolved over the years?

Earth Day grew out of the environmental movement in the late 1960s in response to a series of environmental disasters that took lives, marred natural beauty and threatened animal species. An estimated 20 million Americans participated in the first Earth Day -- April 22, 1970 -- which consisted of a series of local events designed to raise awareness of pressing environmental concerns. Though it borrowed from the student anti-war protests, the early environmental movement enjoyed widespread support. In fact, President Richard Nixon, a Republican, signed into law many of the environmental protections that Republicans today are trying to weaken. Today, the environmental movement is experiencing a strong resurgence amid fears of climate change, rising sea levels and carbon emissions. Yet the issue has grown far more partisan and divisive than it was when Earth Day first began.

Key vocabulary

Pre-teach key vocabulary before students do the activity, especially if you have English Language Learners. After going over the simple definition, consider providing a visual aid or having students draw one. More ideas for how to pre-teach vocabulary can be found [here](#).

Word	Simple definition
Catastrophic (adj.)	Involving a terrible disaster
Fetid (adj.)	Having a strong, unpleasant smell
Foothold (n.)	A position that makes it possible to begin an activity or effort
Incontrovertible (adj.)	Not to be questioned or doubted
Ominous (adj.)	An indication of trouble to come

Direct instruction and guided practice

- Discuss the quick-write prompt beginning with what students know or guess about the history of Earth Day, especially why they think it got started and what the early environmental movement may have achieved. Record their guesses on the board or an online document.
- Move the discussion to students' personal memories. They may remember elementary school Earth Day celebrations involving litter clean-ups or planting projects. Some may associate Earth Day with more recent times or exclusively with progressive politics.
- **Transition to independent practice:** Recap students' predictions about when and why Earth Day began and who said the quote at the top of the post.

Independent practice

- Individually or in small groups, students read [The Lowdown post](#). While they read, they make note of how their predictions match the facts of Earth Day's history. In particular, students should record:
 - When the first Earth Day took place
 - What prompted the first Earth Day
 - Who said the quote at the top of the post
 - What happened as a result of the first Earth Day

Assessment/Reflection

- As a class, students respond to the following questions in a discussion or in writing:
 - What did you discover about Earth Day that surprised you?
 - What was one difference mentioned in The Lowdown post between environmental disasters in the 1970s and looming environmental problems today?
 - Do you consider yourself an environmentalist? Why or why not?
 - How do you think we as Americans should best protect the environment? Explain your answer using evidence from The Lowdown post and other reliable sources.

Circle chats, small-group discussions and [think-pair-share](#) provide a safer space for students to practice speaking and listening, and also boost participation during whole-class discussions.

Extension/Homework

March for Science sidebar and civic participation: Students read [the sidebar](#) on the upcoming March for Science in Washington, D.C., and watch the video. Encourage students to present their views on the environment or science policy during the public comment section of a city council meeting, post on an online forum or write a letter to their representatives. For a list of how to contact local officials in your area, check out [KQED Learning's Local Election Toolkit](#).

Common Core standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1	Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7	Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W1	Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.