

## EARTH DAY

# Author provides readers upbeat outlook on environment's future

(AP)After 25 years of Earth Day warnings from environmentalists about pending ecological doom, author Gregg Easterbrook has a refreshingly different message for those who care about the planet: Cheer up.

On April 22, it's expected that millions of Americans will celebrate Earth Day's silver anniversary by planting trees, cleaning up beaches and attending rallies. It's also expected that thousands of commentators will use the day to reflect on a quarter-century of green activism and the challenges ahead.

Easterbrook has emerged as a prominent voice in the latter endeavor. A contributing editor to *Newsweek*, he has written a book called *A Moment On The Earth: The Coming Age of Environmental Optimism*.

The 745-page book, extensively researched and doggedly upbeat, reviews more than three decades of environmental doom-saying, from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 to current alarms about global warming.

In nearly all cases, Easterbrook writes, things have turned out much better than predicted by what he calls the "environmental orthodoxy."

Easterbrook makes some sweeping predictions of his own — that pollution in the Western world will end "almost painlessly" within our lifetimes, that most environmental catastrophes, such as runaway global warming, are almost certain to be avoided.

For support, he cites many environmental success stories:

—Air. U.S. smog has declined by about a third since 1970, even though 85 percent more vehicles are now on the road. Airborne levels of lead have declined 98 percent; annual emissions of carbon monoxide are down 24 percent; and sulfur dioxide, the chief cause of acid rain, is down 30 percent.

—Water. In 1972, only a third of all U.S. bodies of water were safe for fishing and swimming. Today, almost two-thirds are safe.

—Recycling. From humble beginnings, recycling has become big business. Nationwide, more than 22 percent of all municipal solid waste is recovered for recycling or composting.

Easterbrook's book, scheduled for release April 20 by Viking, already has received considerable attention. Excerpts have appeared in major newspapers, and Easterbrook summarized his main points in a 3,000-word piece for *The New Yorker* magazine.

Easterbrook said he wrote the book because good news is suppressed by both sides of the environmental debate. Liberal environmentalists don't like good news because it hurts their agenda of creating the appearance of a crisis in need of immediate action, he said. Conservative opponents, meanwhile, don't want to admit that environmental laws actually work.

But they do work, Easterbrook has concluded. "Not only is the Western world getting better, it's taking place spectacularly fast by natural standards," he said in a telephone interview from his home in Arlington, Va.

"I think the public will support future environmental initiatives much more readily if they're convinced that the programs are working and conditions are good. If you constantly scare people to death, if you constantly tell them things are falling apart — and things never fall apart — then you lose credibility."

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*Gregg Easterbrook,  
author*

happens almost automatically. He calls it "organic self-adaptation — society reacting just as nature would to self-correct a resource imbalance."

But those closer to the struggle say the self-correction rarely comes easily. Indeed, they note that the alarmist rhetoric Easterbrook criticizes is what helped achieve most of the environmental progress he praises.

Earth Day in 1970 rallied public support against entrenched industrial powers, said Denis Hayes, an organizer of that original celebration and now director of a Seattle-based environmental foundation.

"We were almost unstoppable for a few years," Denis Hayes said. "That didn't last. For the last 20 years, it has been a struggle every inch of the way to get good bills passed."

He is decidedly less cheerful than Easterbrook. "In 25 years, we've made some terrific strides in cleaning up the air and water and removing toxics," Hayes said. "But there are serious issues out there that need attention."

U.S. environmentalists who say they might have welcomed Easterbrook's celebratory tone last year are now bracing for battles with Republican congressmen who want to weaken environmental laws.

And struggles in American politics are small potatoes compared to global environmental challenges.

While Easterbrook points out that the United States now treats virtually 100 percent of its sewage, others look to the Third World, where only 2 percent is treated.

Hayes worries about the loss of biological diversity through habitat destruction, and says progress toward heading off global warming by reducing carbon dioxide emissions has been "a huge disappointment."

For more discouraging news, consider world population, which drives many environmental problems.

Since 1970, global population has grown from 3.7 billion to 5.7 billion, and it continues to increase by about 90 million people a year. By the time you finish reading this article, there will be about 1,700 more mouths to feed on the planet than when you began.

Developed nations have cut their growth rates, but they're still growing nonetheless.

"The rates can go down and people think we don't have to worry anymore. But the base numbers are still huge," said Susan Weber, executive director of Zero Population Growth.

"In terms of environmental impact, we're still No. 1 — and everyone wants to be like us," she said.

Easterbrook says optimism should not become complacency, and he worries that anti-environmentalists will pluck passages from his book out of context to argue against environmental protections.

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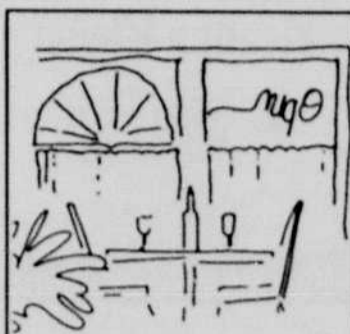
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