

GUEST VIEWPOINT: Earth Day calls for celebration, new dedication

BY BOB DOPPELT

For The Register-Guard

Published: **Friday, Apr 22, 2011 07:00AM**

It's Earth Day. The first celebration happened in 1970. Twenty million people demonstrated that day. Later that year, Congress established the Environmental Protection Agency to oversee air quality and other environmental issues.

Earth Day, and the environmental policies and agencies it helped establish, resulted from a recognition that the natural environment was being used by millions of individuals and organizations as a cost-free garbage dump. Everyone benefited from the air and water, but no entity was responsible for protecting it.

In other words, our nation's environmental regulatory structure sought to expand Americans' focus beyond "me" to the broader "we."

Since the first Earth Day, some aspects of the nation's environment have improved, and others have declined. The EPA says that 60 percent of the dangerous air pollutants that caused smog, acid rain and lead poisoning in 1970 have been eliminated. Over 90 percent of Americans now have access to clean drinking water. More than 2,000 bodies of water identified as impaired in 2002 now meet water quality standards.

Locally, air quality is mostly good. The Lane Regional Air Protection Agency reports that last year levels of particulate matter, ozone and carbon monoxide were well below federal standards. Oakridge was the only non-attainment area. Air toxics — pollutants from industry, automobiles and wood burning that may affect public health — remain a trouble spot. Five-year trends are above the state's health benchmarks.

Municipal drinking water around the region is good, mostly because it is treated. Water quality in general, however, is poor to very poor. The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality reports that rivers in the upper Willamette sub-basin — which include the upper Willamette, McKenzie, Middle Fork, and Coast Fork Willamette — are affected by overheating, bacteria, mercury or turbidity, or contribute to those problems in the lower mainstem Willamette.

Although conditions have generally stabilized or in some cases slightly improved, the Department of Fish and Wildlife says that many fish species, such as spring Chinook, chub, bull trout and others in the upper Willamette are in tenuous condition, as demonstrated by their listing under the Endangered Species Act.

Most of the environmental improvements we've made relate to human health. Much of the visible, stinky traditional pollutants that directly threaten us have been cleaned up, mostly through end-of-the-pipe pollution controls. Fish and wildlife agencies also commonly strive to maintain continued human uses of the resources they manage. The shift from "me" to "we" has primarily focused on conserving things we humans breathe, drink, eat, hunt or fish.

This approach doesn't do much to alter the underlying forces that create environmental problems in the first place. So our overall impact on the environment has continued to grow, impairing natural processes and organisms that cannot be directly linked to immediate human uses. That's where big declines have occurred.

Scientists have found that current rates of extinction among many species are now many times greater than the natural background rate. All over the world, natural habitats are in decline and genetic diversity is falling.

Global warming is triggering more destructive storms, floods, droughts, heat waves, forest fires and rising sea levels at home and around the world. Carbon emissions from power plants, factories, vehicles, buildings and other sources are also acidifying the oceans, destroying corals, plankton and marine fisheries. Essential ecological processes such as nutrient cycling are being disrupted.

Ensuring our personal well-being — focusing on "me" — is a natural instinct. But humans are also endowed with powerful "we" impulses that lead us to constrain our activities to benefit others. Changing times trigger different ways of thinking, so the emphasis we place on "me" compared to "we" tends to swing back and forth as conditions shift.

In 1970, the nation was in the midst of great social turmoil due to the Vietnam War, the emergence of the baby boomers, and the growing recognition of environmental problems. The public was open to greater emphasis on "we" — symbolized, in part, by the enactment of environmental policies.

Since that time, our population has mushroomed, as has our technological capacity. The nation adopted a "me" orientation and became riveted on constant economic growth. As a result, unmanaged environmental impacts have multiplied and become more complex, causing external conditions to once again change.

On this Earth Day, let's give thanks for the environmental improvements over the past 41 years. At the same time, let's reemphasize the "we," this time broadening the definition to include the climate and other ecological processes that make life on Earth possible for us and all other creatures.

Bob Doppelt directs the Resource Innovation Group and teaches about global climate change at the University of Oregon.