

LAST LOOK



Earth Day Turns 55

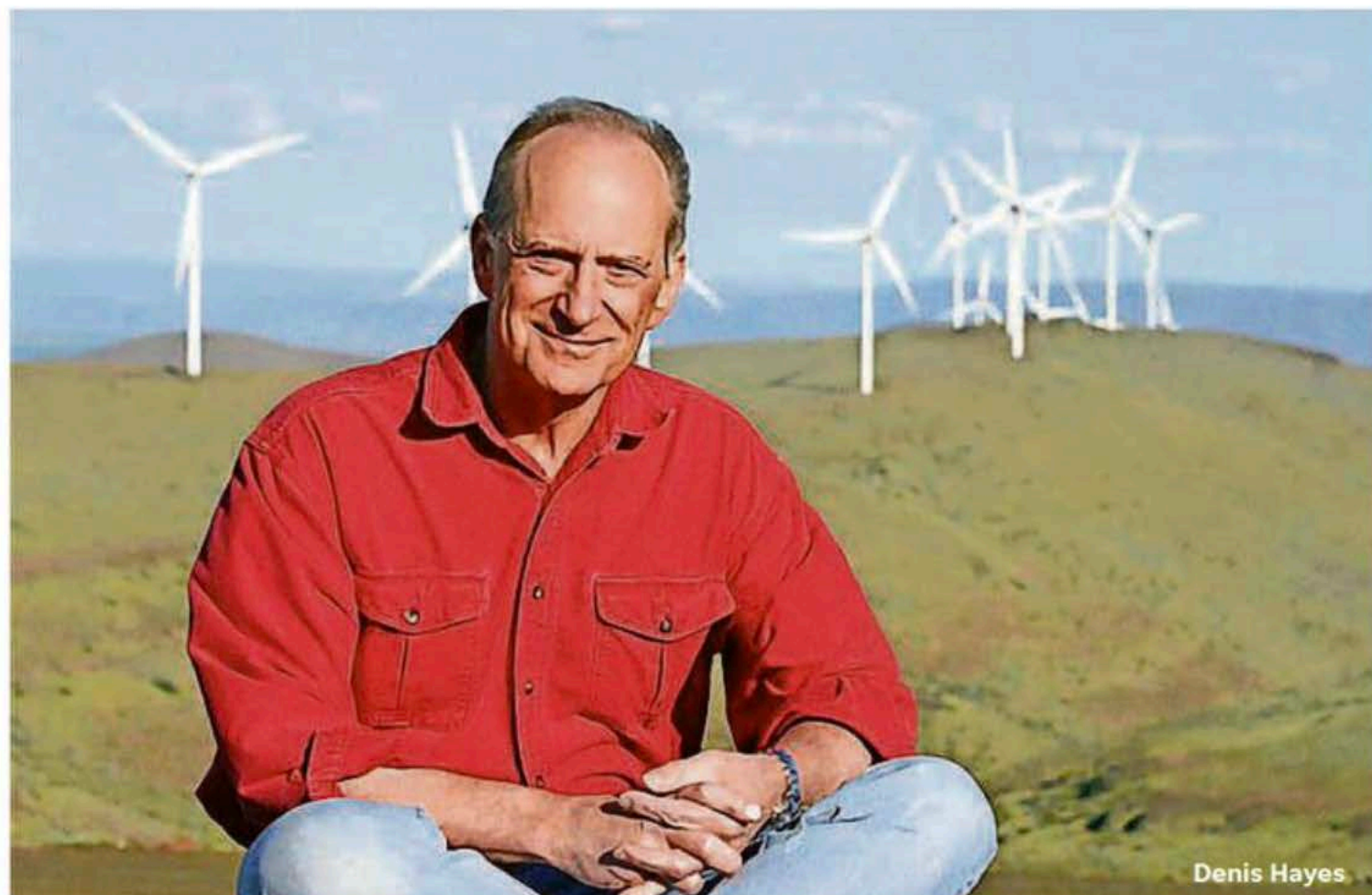
Catching up with Denis Hayes, the man behind the movement

By Adam Stone

In 1970, Denis Hayes was the driving force behind the first Earth Day. He left graduate school at Harvard University to work for Sen. Gaylord Nelson, D-Wis., as the principal national organizer of the nascent event.

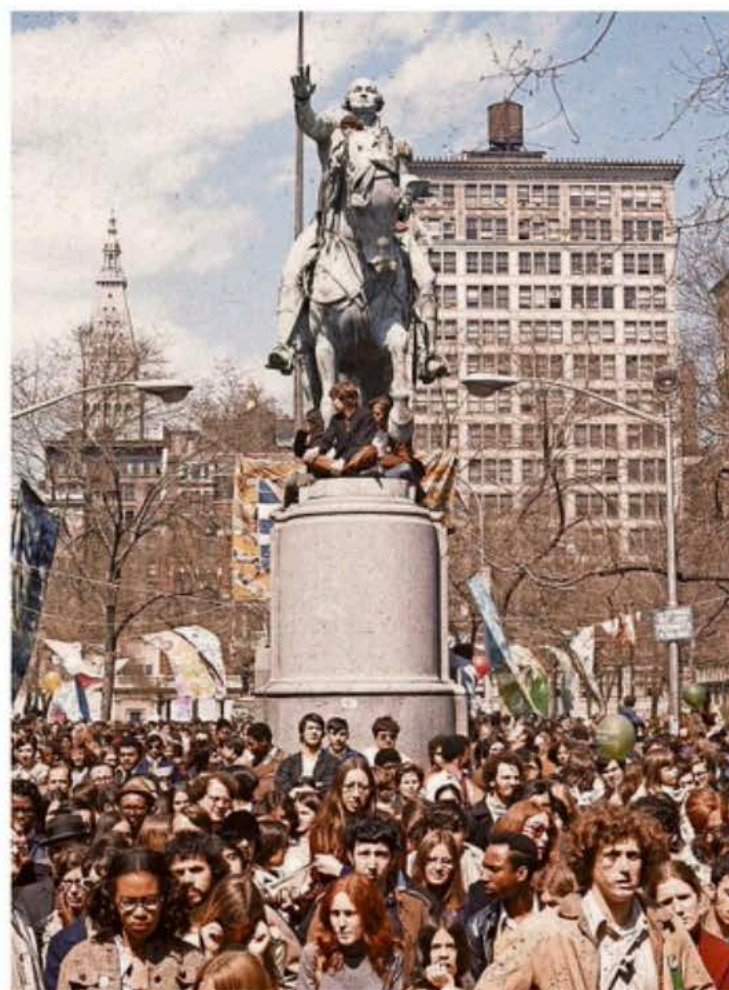
He went on to take Earth Day international, organizing events in 141 nations in 1990 and adding China in 2000. Now board chair emeritus of Earthday.org and CEO of the Bullitt Foundation, Hayes reminisces about the birth of the movement, its growth and plans for 2025 and beyond.

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Denis Hayes

ROBERT STONE



Crowds gather in Union Square Park during the first Earth Day celebration in 1970. GETTY IMAGES



A girl wears a gas mask to highlight pollution during Earth Day celebrations in 1970. GETTY IMAGES

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Children sweep a New York City park during the first Earth Day celebration on April 22, 1970. HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

What were you hoping to achieve when you put together the first Earth Day?

The big issues of my youth included atmospheric nuclear testing, civil rights and Vietnam. (The environmental science book) *Silent Spring* described new mortal threats to birds. Air and water pollution became too flagrant and lethal to ignore. The Santa Barbara oil spill showed that pollution affected rich and poor alike.

I hoped that Earth Day could combine all these issues, and many others, to launch a powerful new

movement based on the science of ecology. And, looking back, it actually did!

What stands out most in your memory from that first Earth Day?

Mayor John Lindsay of New York — a Republican environmentalist, back when that wasn't an oxymoron — closing Fifth Avenue to automobiles. An estimated 1 million people packed 40 city blocks.

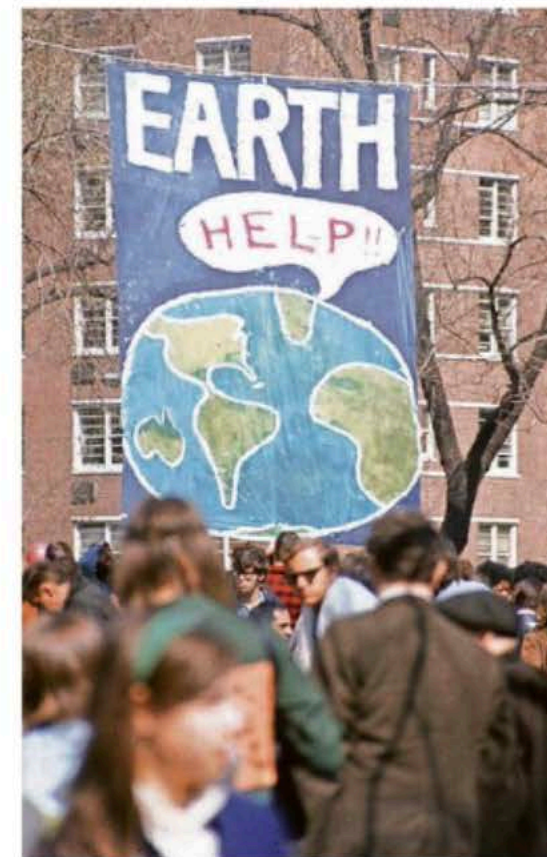
It dwarfed the anti-war rallies and civil rights marches. Yet it was just one of a dozen Earth Day

events in New York City. More than 10,000 events across the country attracted an estimated 20 million people.

How has the movement changed?

In the immediate aftermath of the first Earth Day, the environmental movement flexed its muscle, passing the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act, Toxic Substances Control Act and myriad other laws.

A half-century later, however, an anti-environmental backlash has gained traction. Sophisticated, well-



A crowd gathers on the first Earth Day conservation awareness celebration in New York. HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

funded groups now seek to roll back much of the progress we've made. Environmental values still command the support of most Americans, but easy victories are behind us. Which is why Earthday.org refreshes people's environmental values. It sets a theme each year for people to rally around.

What are your hopes and dreams for the future of Earth Day?

Earth Day will always offer opportunities for people to come together to reaffirm their values and educate new generations. I expect there will be an important role for Earth Day until the Golden Rule becomes a universal global standard of behavior.

For local birthday events and celebrations around this year's theme "Our Power, Our Planet," visit Earthday.org.