

The End of Earth Day

Let's admit it: Earth Day is bunk.

This is not to say it has always been; the first Earth Day, in 1970, mobilized millions of Americans and prompted the creation of crucial legislation like the Clean Air Act.

In the fifty years since that first fateful demonstration, however, the annual ritual has achieved little further political change.¹ Though Earth Day retains incredibly strong name recognition, and a laudable aim, its *raison d'être* has disintegrated into a broad stratum of issues and strategies, and its adoption by the political and business establishment now signifies something more sinister: the self-congratulating “green capitalism” that exchanges superficial action for barely-mitigated economic growth.²

In this sense, Earth Day unfortunately now resembles the “senseless, dreamy, garbled” delusionality embodied by the UN's much-maligned 2015 Sustainable Development Goals.³ Criticized for their excessive vagueness, encyclopedic breadth, and purely voluntary benchmarks, the SDGs advocate unrealistic environmental and socioeconomic improvements by the year 2030. Examples within SDG 11, which focuses on cities, includes providing “universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible green and public spaces,” and enhancing “inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management.”⁴

Though these aims are certainly noble, they represent the atomized emphases of the SDGs — even a single goal ranges from the creation of public parks to the reorganization of citywide planning. The SDGs are also plagued by open-ended language that makes enforcement impossible, and belies the bureaucratic and administrative complexity of their demands.⁵

¹ Earth Day, “History.”

² Earth Day, “Our Work.”

³ Easterly, “Senseless, Dreamy, Garbled.”

⁴ United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, “Sustainable Development Goal 11.”

⁵ Aust and Du Plessis, “Good Urban Governance,” 221.

In spite of these serious shortcomings, however, critic William Easterly concedes that the SDGs' optimistic rhetoric could yet prove galvanizing for activists and governments, by positively advocating "a cause worth fighting for."⁶ Similarly, even if Earth Day activism remains ineffectual, can't its hopeful language pull our minds out of the ecological gutter, if nothing else?

On the contrary, I argue that the modern Earth Day reflects the same ideology that make the SDGs a point of pause: namely, insidious anthropocentrism and neoliberalism that maintain the illusion of change while keeping us tethered to irretrievably harmful systems.

SDGs harbor several inherent paradigms that make them more palatable to the general public, but also ineffectual in addressing environmental and climactic concerns. The oxymoron "sustainable development" itself speaks to these concerns, for infinite development is *necessarily* unsustainable.⁷ Moreover, "development" is itself a Western concept imposed on Third World countries as a form of economic hegemony; indigenous ecological ideologies tend to focus not on development so much as quality of life and harmony with nature.⁸

Indeed, sustainable development remains wedded to the precepts of the neoliberal economic order by repeatedly emphasizing economy *over* environment and equity, thus further enforcing the growth fetishism of the capitalistic economy within the armor of an ostensibly critical framework.⁹ The optimism of the SDGs also suggests an anthropocentrism simultaneously over- and understated: while advocating for the very unnatural notion of eternal development, they also insufficiently address the vast chaos we have already wreaked on the global environment.¹⁰

Earth Day, too, unwittingly reflects these threats: hegemony, neoliberalism, anthropocentrism. For example, its "Green Cities and Local Governments" action page, while advocating for important goals, also calls for "revitalizing waterfronts" and addresses development only

⁶ Easterly, "Senseless, Dreamy, Garbled."

⁷ Adelman, "Sustainable Development Goals," 15-16.

⁸ Kothari et al., "Sustainable Development is Failing."

⁹ Adelman, "Sustainable Development Goals," 20.

¹⁰ Ibid 33.

regarding increased efficiency standards.¹¹ But the question of infinite development itself goes unasked and unanswered; instead, Earth Day's recommendations comply with the neoliberal paradigm of economic growth.

Moreover, its signature 2020 event — Earth Challenge 2020 — is a broad citizen-science initiative, in which participants will record environmental data through a special app, “providing valuable environmental insight and a platform for policy change.” The scientific approach advocated in this global policy seems attuned to a Western populace in its elevation of cell phone usage and “insights,” while its partners are all Western organizations. The Challenge's language is also neoliberal in mission to “[develop] new EC2020 technologies.”¹² There is no discussion of using information to challenge existing frameworks — only to create more technology, more value, more of the same civilization.

Finally, certain Earth Day aims are also phrased in anthropogenic terms: its Canopy Project, aiming to plant millions of new trees, argues that “Planting a forest could help prevent the next pandemic.”¹³ Though Earth Day purports to help the planet, it often does so for human benefit.

Despite these critiques, Earth Day still provides valuable mobilizing infrastructure, and retains strong name recognition. Harnessing these advantages, I propose a new holiday in its stead: “Earthy Day.” This holiday — about being of, by, and for the earth — can prove a Western counterpart to indigenous ecological movements, by advocating “radical well-being,” biocentrism, and a critique of our eternal-growth economy. “Earthy Day” can elevate interspecies relations and nonhuman actors, fighting the notion that the natural world exists for our benefit.

Rather than seeking half-measures to preserve the illusion of infinite progress, we must follow the groups that are already lighting the way – Buen Vivir, Swaraj, Degrowth — and turn a hegemonic anachronism into grounds for real change.

¹¹ Earth Day, “Green Cities.”

¹² Earth Day, “Earth Challenge 2020.”

¹³ Earth Day, “Planting a forest.”

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