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Let's work for a bright future for Earth

In 1970, when Earth Day began, we defined problems; today we must design solutions.

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By Brad Wyche

The first Earth Day in 1970 was a great success, waking up the United States to the horrendous abuses of our environment. It led to passage of our landmark federal environmental laws -- the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act and the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, all enacted within six years of that first Earth Day.

The focus of that first Earth Day was on the very visible signs of environmental degradation -- grossly polluted rivers, belching smokestacks and leaking drums of hazardous waste. In the last 37 years, we have done a good job in this country in addressing these problems.

But is now painfully obvious that these are just some battles we have won. Meanwhile, on Planet Earth, we have been losing the war.

We are losing the war because we have already destroyed half of the world's wetlands, half of its tropical and temperate forests, and 90 percent of its large predator fish. We are witnessing a massive extinction of plant and animal species -- 27,000 every year, 1,000 times the normal rate. Every second we lose another 750 metric tons of topsoil. Every hour another 5,000 acres of forests are wiped out.

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Meanwhile, the world's population is increasing at the rate of 10,000 people per hour, and every one of these people aspires to, and rightfully so, the same standard of living that we enjoy in the United States. But based on the way we currently use and exploit the world's natural resources, that goal is unattainable -- we would need two Earths.

We're losing the war because the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is higher than at any time in the last 650,000 years, having risen from 280 to 380 parts per million. There is now overwhelming consensus among scientists that this increase is the direct result of human activities and has already caused widespread environmental and economic harm.

On April 14, "Step It Up" rallies were held throughout the United States to call attention to the climate crisis and to demand that Congress take action.

But we need more than a step. Neal Armstrong took a giant leap for mankind on the moon. We need a giant leap now for Planet Earth.

Gus Speth, a South Carolina native and dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, has presented a compelling explanation of why the approach of the first Earth Day will not work well today:

In 1970, we were against. Today we must be for. Then we defined problems. Today we must design solutions.

In 1970, technology was viewed as evil. Today technology is what we need to get us out of this mess.

In 1970, it was national. Today it must be global.

In 1970, it was environmental protection. Today is sustainable development.

In 1970, we took a top-down approach. Now, we must encourage innovative, bottoms-up approaches -- "green jazz that is unscripted, improvisational and creative."

In 1970, we were too elitist. Today we must stress justice and equity.

In 1970, we created an environmental sector. Today we must make every economic sector an environmental sector.

In 1970, we demanded government leadership. We urgently need that leadership now, and the Step It Up rallies called for that.

But we cannot wait for government. We must take action in our own lives, our own homes, our own businesses and our own communities. We must think globally and act locally.

Wallace Stevens wrote, "After the final no, there comes a yes, and on that yes the future of the world depends." Today, on Earth Day 2007, let us all say yes, we will confront and resolve this crisis, and yes, we will secure a bright future for our planet.
