

Earth Day New York 2010 Remarks

Water is life. Without water, life on earth would simply not exist; 'Earth' would be a dead planet. We need water to sustain us -- to produce our food, clothing and shelter, to drive our industries, create jobs, and to keep us alive.

Yet, today more than a billion people do not have access to potable water; by 2025 that number is expected to double or triple. Today, a child dies every 15 seconds from water-related diseases. That means that by the time I'm done speaking, 12 or more children will have died from dirty water.

When we think of the "water crisis," many of us still think of Africa or other far-off developing countries. But we have a growing water crisis right here in the U.S. where millions of Americans do not have access to safe drinking water because their supplies have been poisoned with chemicals or sewage.

We are very fortunate here in New York City and the Hudson Valley, where our drinking water is clean, delicious – and safe. But our good fortune was no accident. Twenty years ago a young Riverkeeper attorney named Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. figured out that it is far less expensive to protect drinking water at its source by preserving watersheds than to have to treat an already polluted supply.

But our drinking water – both here in New York and across the nation -- is under threat. The federal government's failure to reinvest in our infrastructure, including our wastewater treatment plants, means that an increasing amount of untreated sewage is contaminating our water. We are also just beginning to understand the possible effects of pharmaceuticals entering our water supplies – that is the hormones, steroids and drugs we seem to consume in enormous quantities. Most dangerous of all is the nearly 300 chemicals that could contaminate the NYC water supply and others across the state if industrial gas drilling, as currently proposed, is allowed to move forward. [I want to thank Mayor Bloomberg for his leadership on the gas drilling issue. At his direction, the city commissioned a definitive study demonstrating the risks of gas drilling, and has since supported a ban on gas drilling in the watershed.]

But perhaps the biggest threat to public water supplies nationwide is bottled water. Because when you choose "bottled" over "tap," we lose a critical constituent for protecting our municipal water supplies. Tap water here in NYC costs a fraction of what bottled water costs,

is every bit as healthy and safe, and doesn't pollute the environment. So please break the bottled water habit by using a reuseable water bottle and filling it up with some of the best tasting water in the world.

Forty years after the first Earth Day, there are still many reasons to be anxious about the state of the planet. Every day we read stories about some environmental calamity -- record temperatures, melting ice sheets, disappearing species, oil spills, polluted water, and the list goes on. The constant barrage of bad news about our environment can be overwhelming and profoundly distressing.

But the only way to combat that bad news is to be part of the growing movement of people across the globe who are doing something about it. And that's what Dennis Hayes and Senator Gaylord Nelson had in mind when they organized the first Earth Day forty years ago -- mobilizing people to join the effort to protect the only planet we have. [Those science fiction movies where humans live on an enormous space station may seem kind of cool, but the reality would be bleak. Kind of like selling your house in Paradise and moving to Hades.]

While we have made significant progress in those forty years, the environmental challenges are more ominous than ever before. If we are serious about rescuing the planet, we need to do more than recycle and change our light bulbs. We need to fundamentally change the way we live and do business. This does not mean a lowering of our living standards, as the cynics will tell you. This just means living smarter and better. And I cannot imagine a better lifestyle than one that includes clean air and water, abundant wildlife and open space, and healthy, prosperous communities.

[Riverkeeper is part of a global network of waterkeeper groups, each working to protect their local waterways and water resources. For more information about us, go to riverkeeper.org or waterkeeper.org.]

Groups like Riverkeeper and NRDC can't do this alone. We need all of you to celebrate Earth Day every day by rolling up your sleeves and being part of the change we seek.

Thank you and happy earth day!