

# The Significance of Earth Day's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in Mexico: Tiahoga Ruge

April 22, 2020, marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Earth Day. In this Q&A, we ask Tiahoga Ruge of Earth Day Network: Mexico to reflect upon the evolution of the Earth Day movement over the past half century and Mexico's environmental program.

## What is Earth Day, and why is it important?

For decades, environmentalists have raised concerns and alerted society to the irreversible effects of climate change and the loss of our planet's life-supporting systems, on which we all depend.

These concerns led to the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970, when millions of people campaigned across the US in the recognition that our industrial and consumer society was having a negative effect on the delicate balance of the biosphere. At that time, people were seriously worried about the industrial pollution and the degraded quality of air, water, and land. They came out on the streets to demand immediate government actions to solve these problems. This movement brought about the first public policies for the environment in the US and achieved the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency, the Clean Air Act, and the Clean Water Act. In other countries, Earth Day 1970 was the beginning of spirited local ecological movements and gradually created and strengthened national and international environmental institutions. This event marked the beginning of the environmental movement.

Now, 50 years later, these environmental impacts have worsened. The human population has grown from four billion to almost eight billion people, of which more than three billion are under 25 years of age. As the human population has doubled, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions have rapidly increased, temperatures have risen, and natural habitats have deteriorated. We now know that these problems cannot be easily solved, in part because our global economic system, which supports people trying hard to improve their quality of life, plays a major role in propagating this environmental threat. Solutions can only be found if we act as a united world in agreement with changing the root of



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the problem—us, and the way we live our lives.

We are reaching a tipping point faster than we thought, but we can still do something about this and change course toward a new path of “peace with nature” to ensure the continuity of life on this precious and unique planet Earth!

The annual Earth Day celebrations continue to provide a platform for people to voice their emerging environmental concerns. Since the first Earth Day in 1970, the event has reached around 200 countries and engages with more than one billion people each year. By bridging global and local conversations, it strives to send a clear and loud message to world leaders that human beings demand responsive and decisive actions about climate change and environmental degradation. Earth Day aims to close the divisions across various stakeholders to strengthen the collective power of global environmental activism and combat the cynicism of climate change deniers.

## How has the environmental movement evolved since 1970, and how has this encouraged action in Mexico?

The first Earth Day in 1970 was the beginning of the world environmental movement and sparked the initial public policies that have led to the global consciousness we have reached today.

Two years after the first Earth Day, in 1972, the United Nations Environment Program was created in Stockholm as a leading environmental authority, and international public policies started to develop, but it was another 20 years before the Río Summit in 1992 managed to bring together the leaders of the world to agree upon two main conventions: the Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biodiversity. The creation of Agenda 21, an action agenda for achieving global sustainable development, further helped to set the roadmap for world environmental action. This landmark event marked the real onset of international cooperation for the environment.

Mexico has been an active participant in the global environmental movement since the very beginning and built solid institutions after the Río Summit in 1992. Mexico created the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources (Semarnat), as well as the National Institute for Ecology and Climate Change (INECC), the National Commission of Biodiversity (CONABIO), and the National Commission for Forestry (CONAFOR).

Environmental education has been an important part of the educational system in Mexico, and the country implemented its national strategy during the UNESCO Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014).

Now in 2020, environmental education and climate education are mandatory topics in the educational system, and Mexico has spearheaded the World

Environmental Education Project, which was presented during the 2019 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP25) in Madrid and is to be ratified during COP26 in Glasgow in 2021. On April 22, Earth Day 2020, the Ministry of Education in Mexico intends to introduce a new concrete plan for Mexico's environmental education law. This brand-new law aims to make education of environmental and sustainable-development subjects obligatory in every school in Mexico. As a result, we expect to see a new generation of environmentally conscious youth that will lead future change.

Earth Day in Mexico has seen a significant advance in strengthening organizations and collaboration between civil society associations and governmental institutions. The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary has received strong support from more than 60 partners, including schools and educational institutions, state and local governments, cities, museums and botanical gardens, non-governmental organizations, and the media. Earth Day has afforded many groups the opportunity to learn, express concerns, and search ideas for an alternative way of life.

One of the most significant events has been the "Earth Day Schools" contest, supported by the Ministries of Education and Environment. More than 2,000 schools from all 32 states of Mexico have registered. We expect this to be the beginning of a much more active participation of schools and the educational system in environmental matters.

Also, the participation of the largest private and public universities in Mexico has triggered a new movement called "Youth for the Earth," and partnerships with "Earth Charter" and "Fridays for Future" have made this movement a wide collaboration for university students.

Today, we need to develop a new overarching system that will ensure long-term sustainable lifestyles!

### **What role do you see culture and art playing in environmental action?**

Culture and art offer a valuable opportunity to incorporate society broadly into the environmental movement. Creativity has played a key role in expressing the relationship between culture and the environment. Earth Day recognizes the vital

role that artists and the arts can play in connecting people to establish deep and powerful communication of environmental concerns and has collaborated with institutions, organizations, and museums worldwide to launch a global campaign called "Artists for Earth" to engage the public with critical environmental issues.

In Mexico, the environment has been a part of Mexico's culture since pre-Hispanic times. Mexico is a megadiverse country, and art and culture are based on the biodiversity of plants, animals, and ingredients for food. The ancient cultures of Mexico, such as the Mayas and the Aztecs, all included elements of nature in their expression of religion, architecture, and art.

Throughout history, during colonial times and times of independence, great landscape artists were able to paint the vast and beautiful countryside, including its plants and animals, which today helps us to understand the natural beauty of Mexico's heritage.

Several cultural expressions will play an important role in celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Earth Day:

- Cinema: Cinemaplaneta is the most important environmental film festival in Mexico and is also a member of the Green Film Network. As a partner of the Earth Day Network, Cinemaplaneta will dedicate its festival to Earth Day and has also established a digital platform for environmental education.
- Music: Music plays an important role among young people, and several musicians have joined the Earth Day Network in Mexico through the Bahidórá Festival.
- Murals and paintings (Figure 1): "Artists for Earth" has inspired young urban street artists to bring alive dirty and gray walls with nature motifs while also participating in the greening of cities. Another Mexican project has brought young indigenous artists together to collaborate on the creation of a mural, and more projects are being developed to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Earth Day.

Art, music, and cinema allow us to learn about nature.

### **What role do you see Earth Day playing in helping to meet the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals?**

Earth Day plays an important role in creating public consciousness and promoting public policies on environmental issues. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), according to the United Nations, are the blueprint for achieving a better and more sustainable future for all. If we follow this blueprint, we can change the course of the world within the next 10 years.

In celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Earth Day in Mexico is working to advance the following SDGs:

- SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation. About 25% of the population in Mexico today does not have access to running water or sanitation. For Earth Day, we are closely working with the Mexican Water Council and promoting access to clean water and the restoration of watersheds.
- SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy. The Earth Day Network has participated in activities that promote the transition to renewable energy, but we still have a long way to go, and society needs clear incentives in order to switch to renewables.
- SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities. The Earth Day Network has been working with the mayor of Mexico City and with other state governments to promote the greening of cities and sustainable communities.
- SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production. The Earth Day Network has helped to create "Youth for the Earth," in which university students are coordinating to promote sustainable consumption within campuses and other college communities.
- SDG 13: Climate Action. Earth Day Network: Mexico is working closely with "Fridays for Future" and the "Climate Reality Project" and also has joined with various other climate-action groups.
- SDG 14: Life below Water. Earth Day Network: Mexico is working





**Figure 1. A Mural and a Painting Selected from the “Artists for Earth” Campaign by Earth Day Network: Mexico**

(A) “Mural Viveros de Coyoacán, Colectivo 7” by Mocre. This mural was designed by the street artist Mocre and was painted on February 23, 2020, in Mexico City, by Colectivo 7, a collective group of non-governmental organization. The theme of the mural is saving the Magdalena River in the southern part of Mexico City. The mural was painted on a wall of the Viveros de Coyoacán park, which is near the Magdalena River.

(B) “Dream Weaver Earth Healer,” painted by Lauren Salm (@laurensalm). The inspiration of this painting comes from the cosmology of the Maya and Native Americans, who believe in the indivisibility of nature and human beings. The painting also reminds us that everyone has a responsibility to find a balance between Mother Earth and ourselves. Lauren believes that we must integrate with nature to listen, respect, and protect it. Please visit <https://www.laurensalm.com/> to learn more about Lauren’s environmental artworks.

closely with several organizations to clean up beaches and remove plastic waste from coral reefs and the ocean. Because Mexico has a vast coastline and rich marine ecosystems, this is a very significant goal.

- SDG 15: Life on Land. The Earth Day Network has joined several organizations in the restoration of watersheds and the reforestation of wet-

lands and forests. Restoring ecosystems and biodiversity is crucial for our future.

Mexico has incorporated the SDGs into its public policies and in the National Development Plan, and for many local governments Earth Day has provided an opportunity to showcase the results of our action.

Earth Day offers the opportunity to come together, collaborate, and unite to drive environmental action and the platform to exhibit positive results!

### What have been Mexico's greatest environmental achievements over the past decade, and what does the future hold?

The past 10 years have seen positive action in a number of vital areas. Mexico is a country that has the ability and opportunity to cut CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Public policies have been established to support the transition toward renewable energy, which is abundantly available in Mexico via sun, wind, and geothermal sources. A broad new generation of young Mexicans has had the opportunity to attend university and has been prepared to make Mexico a modern and sustainable country. More women now have access to education, and their empowerment has helped to advance and strengthen society. Social programs have been put into practice, helping the less privileged members of society to advance, but there still is a long way to go to reduce poverty and inequality. Mexico has advanced in the implementation of public policies, laws, and solid environmental institutions that have managed to preserve almost 20% of the territory as natural protected areas. The SDGs have been a central part of environmental policy, and public guidelines on climate change are considered transversally. Finally, developments in scientific knowledge and communications have probably been the greatest advancement of all: never has humanity had so much knowledge and global consciousness as today.

The next decade will be a decisive time to take action and transition toward a sustainable future. Although Mexico has demonstrated significant progress in the past 10 years from an environmental aspect, there remains much to be done in the next decade. We need to transition toward a sustainable path of life, sustainable and renewable energy, and a new world order. Mexico is an oil-rich country, and the economy is largely based on the petroleum industry, which could be used for products more important than squandering oil for combustion. We need a balanced education system that leaves no one behind. The social program must

become inclusive and can provide fair service to all. The financial support for environmental programs such as the conservation of natural protected areas should be further strengthened, and here public policies and environmental

institutions could play crucial roles. Meanwhile, we must continue investing in environmental and sustainable education and research to enable us to better understand our Earth and establish a sustainable friendship with nature.

No matter whether it is 50 years ago or today, Earth Day is uniting the world and inspiring people around the globe to take action on environmental grand challenges and to pursue a sustainable future! Join us at <https://www.earthday.org>.

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