

**Keynote Speech for the 2008 Environmental Science Teacher Summit---August 19, 2008  
By George Meyer, Executive Director Wisconsin Wildlife Federation**

Good Morning. It truly is a great honor to have been asked to be the Keynote Speaker for the 2008 Environmental Science Teacher Summit. When asked to be the speaker, it took me just a few seconds to agree. The only great challenge I have in giving these remarks today is that by training I am a lawyer and it is very difficult to stay within the twenty minutes I have been allotted. But I will surely do my best.

I would like to start out by sharing two thank yous. The first is to the Wisconsin Environmental Science Teacher Network for inviting me. The second, more importantly, is to thank each and every one of you for your hard work and dedication in inspiring our youth about the issues and the science related to the environment. There is no more important calling affecting this state, this country and the world than yours.

I do not say that lightly. It is a fact and one that I have personally observed throughout the thirty-eight years that I have been deeply involved with conservation and environmental protection on a state, national and international level.

The challenges facing this planet from an environmental standpoint are monumental. Over the next 50 years we will need the best scientists, the most informed citizens, the most highly skilled diplomats and the most environmentally based, ethically informed policy makers that this country and the world have had in their history. These highly skilled individuals will only exist if you, individually and collectively, make it happen.

The issues of climate change, water shortages, land use and population control that this world will face over the next 50 to 100 years are truly stunning. It will take extraordinary leadership to convince the citizens of this planet to take the proper actions.

Is it achievable? That is a very legitimate question. One might worry that these remarks are setting too high a threshold and that these global problems are truly insoluble. Well, I am convinced that it is definitely possible. I truly believe that the power of environmental education is that strong.

The field of conservation education or environmental education has a long and rich history easily going back to the early stages of the 19th century resulting from this country's reaction to the many depleted resources resulting from our early settlement.

However, as you know, environmental education did not become an issue of common understanding in this country and internationally until Earth Day, April 22nd, 1970. The events surrounding that date and period were truly transforming and have had major impact on our citizens and a large number of policy makers on a national and international level. Prior to Earth Day 1970 and the environmental awareness and more importantly, the establishment of environmental education deep into the curriculum of our schools, the issues of environmental protection were deeply felt and acted on by only a minority of the citizens of this country. The actions and inactions of industry, municipalities and individuals in this country were quickly destroying the viability of our state and country.

This was well evidenced by the burning of the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland, the toxic, health destroying Love Canal in upstate New York and the brutally stultifying air quality in Los Angeles. While these were the worst examples, to a lesser degree, these environmental disasters occurred throughout the urban areas of our country and Wisconsin was no exception.

When I started working with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources a mere twelve days before Earth Day 1970, the Wisconsin and northern Fox Rivers were so contaminated that few game fish existed in them and those that were surely could not be eaten. The air in our major cities was highly polluted including the lead from our gasoline. There were thousands of leaking landfills and underground gas tanks contaminating our precious groundwater that is so critical for our drinking water supply.

Limited by my time constraints, I will not detail the outstanding improvements that have taken place in the last forty years in water, air and land quality in Wisconsin but trust me that they have been truly breathtaking.

How did that happen? It is obvious to point to the many tough environmental statutes and the hundreds of billions of dollars dedicated to environmental protection in this country since the 1970s. However those were the instruments of the cleanup, not the cause. The real cause is that restoration of our environment became a mainstream social value for the great majority of citizens in this state and country.

This did not happen by accident. It is a direct result of the strong commitment to environmental education in our schools and the transforming effect that has had on two generations of citizens including the leadership of our state, country and world. There surely are exceptions to this and you and I surely can name some. But the times have changed enough that even those that are not truly supportive of protecting the environment go to great length to hide their opposition by using fine sounding environmental platitudes.

Let me share a simple story from my past that I think illustrates the transformation. The Clean Water Act was adopted in this country in 1972 and the State of Wisconsin followed suit in 1973. The law required the cleanup of the discharges of pollutants by industry and municipalities into our rivers. As I indicated earlier, the northern Fox and the Wisconsin Rivers were highly contaminated and a major reason was the many paper mills that were discharging their effluent into the streams.

As a young lawyer, I was involved in preparing lawsuits against the worst transgressors. I can recall one particular case involving a paper mill on the Wisconsin River that I had assisted in referring to the Attorney General's Office for prosecution. As was normally the case, the opposing sides sat down together to see if a penalty could be negotiated for the many serious violations. I can recall to this day, the internal corporate lawyer of the company in the negotiations and his reaction to the state's penalty request. Besides seeking the addition of adequate pollution control technology at the plant, we were seeking a fine of \$10,000 for the many serious past violations. While money was worth more than then it is now, \$10,000 was not an earth shattering proposed fine especially to a large national corporation..

The mature and seasoned attorney for the company literally became totally unglued and went on a rampage for about twenty minutes on the severity of the fine and how the violations were truly meaningless, after all these were just environmental statutes. What made this reaction stunning was that the individual was a very low key, competent and well-respected individual, a true pillar of his community. What was really evident to those of us representing the state was that he and the others in the company had no grounding in the values and the purposes that had come to fruition in the adoption of the policies to protect our environment. There truly was a major cultural divide.

That chasm no longer exists today for the great majority of citizens in this country and many throughout the world. There are very few corporate leaders that do not have a very well understood knowledge of the need to protect the environment and many are far ahead of government policy makers and regulators in this endeavor. Our citizens and the employees of their companies demand it.

What made the difference? Very simply, it is a result of the inclusion of environmental education into our elementary, secondary and post-secondary schools. Protection of the environment has become a mainstay common value of the citizens of our country. The consistent and inspired environmental training of the country's youth for 40 years has led to this great accomplishment. It is due to the efforts of you and your predecessors that this has happened. Your efforts have led to a tremendous restoration of the environment in the industrialized world.

The genius of this transformation goes back to someone that I have had the privilege of working with over the years, the late Senator Gaylord Nelson. While people have many different reflections of the meaning and derivation of Earth Day, in my many discussions with the Senator, he constantly emphasized that Earth Day was all about environmental education. He was always pleased with the story of the paper mill corporate attorney and the observations about the acculturation of environmental values in our citizens since Earth Day.

If Senator Nelson were here today, he would emphasize that the Earth Day was a "teach-in" and was intentionally focused on the youth on our college campuses because they and their social values and optimism best reflected the necessary changes that were needed in this country and that the continuing training of our youth in scientific principles and environmental social values was our best and only chance of restoring the earth.

Let me share the words of Senator Nelson to the Washington Environmental Council in Seattle in a September 1969 speech: "I am convinced that the same concern the youth of this nation took in changing this nation's priorities on the war in Vietnam and on civil rights can be shown for the problems of the environment". He continued by stating that young people could take the leadership away from the "indifferent, venal men who are concerned with progress and profit for the sake of progress and profit alone and consider the environment the problem of the birdwatchers and butterfly chasers."

My time here today is rapidly ending but let me conclude by saying that the environmental challenges that we faced in the latter part of the 20th century, while dramatic and compelling, pale by comparison with the challenges that will face this planet in the first half of this century. However we have seen the way that we as a country and a world can solve these problems. It is doable because of the strength of teaching the scientific principles and social values of environmental education. It is a daunting challenge and one that may appear overwhelming, but will be accomplished by the straight-forward task of your teaching environmental education, one day at a time to our children.

Don't be deterred by the immensity of the challenge just be reassured by the success of your past outstanding work.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today and thank you especially for what you do.