

[return to article](#)

Wisconsin Film Festival: 'Earth Days' unfocused but a good lesson for today's activists

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"Earth Days" director Robert Stone answering questions Thursday evening in the Wisconsin Union Theater. - Katjusa Cisar

"Earth Days" bites into a lot.

Director Robert Stone admitted as much in the Question & Answer period after it screened Thursday evening in the Wisconsin Union Theater. The University of Wisconsin-Madison graduate has been making historical documentaries for 25 years, but "Earth Days" is a different kind of project. Its genesis goes back to his youth.

"It's been with me my whole life," he said. While his past projects have focused on "succinct little ideas, "Earth Days" is "going for the big idea. It's tackling the subject of kind of making a movie about everything."

"Everything" might be overstating it, but the documentary covers a wide swath of history. Stone interviewed nine Americans who were involved in creating the first "Earth Day" in 1970 and in defining the environmental movement as we know it today -- from former Republican congressman Pete McCloskey and Apollo Nine astronaut Rusty Schweickart to proud radical Stephanie Mills. The audience appreciated several references to Earth Day co-founder and former Wisconsin senator Gaylord Nelson, our state's champion for environmental awareness.

Stone splices footage of these interviews with an impressive variety and depth of historical footage, as well as gorgeous nature shots. The time-lapse photography of a day and night in the desert is especially arresting.

The film fits an awful lot of history into its 100 minutes, spanning the 1930s to the '80s, but mainly focused on the 1960s and '70s. Not surprisingly, it's too much. Despite Stone's careful, crisp editing, it often feels too dense, unfocused and scattered. Instead of focusing on a small bit of history that could convey "the big idea" economically, he tries to pack in too much.

That said, the film touches on themes that redeem it and make it well worth the occasional information overload.

Most interesting is its examination of the early environmental movement and the generational shifts in attitude that created it. For people born since about 1970, it's hard to imagine a world before the push of environmental awareness. (What child of the '50s would have started a "Nature Club" with the neighbor kids and talked earnestly at length about how to "save the Earth," as I did at age seven in the '80s?) Stone's film is strictly historical and doesn't address today's activism, but the generational comparisons are implicit and fascinating.

One of the biggest changes addressed in the film is our changing attitude towards science. Scientists in the 1950s talked about science as a way to control nature, but Rachel Carson flipped that attitude with her seminal book, "Silent Spring." Suddenly, nature was something humans had to honor and "come to terms with," as she put it.

"Earth Days" has many lessons for today's activists.

Early hippies and back-to-the-landers saw technology as the enemy (except in "hifis and drugs"), whereas today's youth know nothing but a high-tech reality, and embrace and harness it in environmental activism. Early environmental activists often alienated people with rhetoric and finger-shaking -- the film uses as an example the anger that the Sierra Club engendered in logging communities of the Northwest.

Stone admitted after the film, in a useful and enlightening talkback, that the "dirty little secret of the environmental movement" was its lack of diversity. Everyone interviewed in the film is white and middle class. Back in the '60s, many people compartmentalized their activism: African-Americans fought for civil rights, women fought for liberation, Native Americans fought for justice in their communities.

Besides, he added, "when you're hungry and poor, the environment is the last thing on your mind."

Stone intends the film's content partly as a "road map" for young people.

"They're standing on the shoulders of giants," he said. Today's activists shouldn't be starting from scratch but rather learning from the successes and failures of the activists of the '60s and '70s.

"Earth Days" is a good place to start.