

America's Dirty Pictures: The Forgotten 'Documerica' Reminds Us How Far We've Come | 1



Discarded Pesticide Cans

In recent decades, environmental laws have not only been challenged in courts and Congress; they've also taken a verbal beating. They've been denounced as "job killers", "government overreach," "radical environmentalism," a "war on coal," and, lately, just "woke." It's become all too easy to focus on the costs of regulation and forget why we adopted them in the first place. Or worse, to take their benefits for granted. This is a consequence of politics, of course, but also of a kind of amnesia.

Many Americans today have no memory of the world that spurred modern environmental law. When *Time* magazine [declared](#) "Lake Erie is a dead lake" or [named](#) "The Endangered Earth" as its Planet of the Year, it was no joke. Air quality was so poor in Los Angeles that schools routinely cancelled recess. Piles of trash lined highways. Cleveland's Cuyahoga River famously caught fire in 1969 (the [12th time](#) it had burned in a century!).

Put simply, there were plenty of good reasons why the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970, energized the nation. In the largest single-day public demonstration in U.S. history, roughly 10% of the nation's population took to the streets to shout together: *Enough is enough!* Politicians listened. Over the decade that followed, all our foundational environmental laws were passed – the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act, and more.

America's Dirty Pictures: The Forgotten 'Documerica' Reminds Us How Far We've Come | 2

This is an important history to tell. But when I do so in class, putting up Powerpoints of charts and graphs and listing dates and disasters, decrying the blight and pollution of decades ago, I sometimes feel like a Simpsons character railing that *"You don't how bad things used to be!"*, somewhere between [Moe](#) and [Troy McClure](#). It doesn't really connect: students seem numb.

That's why I was excited to learn recently about the Documerica project, courtesy of a wonderful photojournalist [article](#) by [Gideon Leek](#). Conceived by Bill Ruckelshaus during his first stint as EPA Administrator, Documerica was inspired by the famous [photographs](#) of depression-era farmworkers commissioned in the 1930s by the Farm Security Administration. Ruckelshaus' newly-created EPA commissioned a nationwide photo record in order to, as Leek describes, "provide the EPA with a great deal of qualitative environmental data, create a 'visual baseline' against which to judge their efforts, and introduce the agency to the country through art."

America's Dirty Pictures: The Forgotten 'Documerica' Reminds
Us How Far We've Come | 3



Pile of wrecked autos at Klean Steel Co.

America's Dirty Pictures: The Forgotten 'Documerica' Reminds Us How Far We've Come | 4

Documerica was formally charged to “pictorially document the environmental movement in America during this decade.” In its five years of operation, it produced over 20,000 photographs, from rivers and farms to highways and city streets.

The photos, now housed at the National Archives, provide a vivid window into the state of the environment in the 1970s. For me, they are at once sobering and inspiring. They bring back memories from my childhood of how we took pollution and trash for granted. And a reminder of why I went into this field. For our students, it provides an important baseline of the conditions that led to the Modern Era of environmental law and shows how much has been achieved. They still need to see the charts and the graphs and I still need to offer up the lists of dates and disasters. But the pictures, the pictures are visceral.

I'd recommend you see for yourself, starting with Gideon Leek's [article](#) explaining the Documerica Project. For more detail, you can view the photos by [category](#) or [searchable](#).

Environmental laws and regulations have their costs, to be sure, but Documerica's photos show just how far we've come, and the loss we risk through forgetting.



Tires and trash litter the Baltimore Harbor