Earth, better or worse?
3 ways our environment is healthier after the creation of Earth Day, and 3 ways it's not
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Sunday is Earth Day, and Chicagoans are marking the occasion.

Local high school students will display a pop-up art exhibit at two city locations Sunday, weather permitting, through a program at the Field Museum focused on how Chicago families can help the Earth.

A yacht club is donating some of its proceeds from electric boat ride memberships on the Chicago River this month to the Earth Day Network. Clergy will deliver sermons on the importance of environmental sustainability.

After it began in 1970, Earth Day buzz eventually led to the founding of the Environmental Protection Agency and passage of the clean water, clean air and endangered species acts.

More than 40 years after the movement began, scientists say there are reasons to celebrate the health of Mother Nature, and also some reasons to worry.

Positives

Air quality

In the early 1970s, the newly-created Illinois Environmental Protection Agency began to enforce pollution restrictions on municipalities, private organizations and businesses. As lead and mercury levels lessened, so did pollution-related illnesses.

"It was really remarkable how quickly lead levels in the air declined," said Susan Kidwell, a geophysical science professor at the University of Chicago.

Green space

Experts say that green space in cities brings wildlife, clears pollution and has a positive effect on children's well-being.

"What we did is we added new types of spaces, because what we valued changed," said Kathleen Dickhut, deputy commissioner of the city's Department of Housing and Economic and Development.
Clean water

Soon after it was created, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency began to regulate what gets dumped into Lake Michigan and the Chicago River. The toxins, sewage and industrial waste that were regularly discarded in local rivers became better regulated, resulting in rivers that are not only cleaner but less likely to make residents sick.

Negatives

Invasive species

Quagga and zebra muscles, for instance, have been making their way to the Great Lakes. The finger-nail size sea critters filter out plankton that smaller fish eat, disrupting the normal ecosystem. The influx of these species also results in clearer waters, which means more sunlight can get through and creates more algae.

"If you were going to the border of Illinois (from) Michigan you would likely find a carpet of quagga muscles," said Todd Main, deputy director of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. "I guess that's one way of saying it's a big problem."

Carbon dioxide

Increased output of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, due to increased electrical production, creates changes in the Earth's temperature and weather patterns.

Climate Change

Climate change is a global environmental issue. Experts say regions such as Chicago will have to plan for how to deal with hotter summer, heavier rains and bigger snowstorms.

"People look at global climate change and they think of polar caps ... (but) there are local impacts too," said Aaron Durnbaugh, director of sustainability at Loyola University Chicago.