# **WAT’s Sustainable Episode 04 Transcript**

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WAT is up Waterloo? Welcome to *WAT’s Sustainable?*, the official podcasts of the University of Waterloo Sustainability Office. My name is Jenna and I am the host of this episode. Today in honour of Earth Day, our topic is: WAT is Earth Day? We will explore the history of Earth Day, its significance on a global scale, what communities around the world are doing to promote Earth Day, and what you can be doing in your personal life to promote sustainability and celebrate Earth Day from home this year.

As always, make sure to follow us on social media on Twitter and Instagram @UWsustainable to stay in the know on all the other sustainability topics we are sharing. And if you have any questions, feedback or podcast ideas or guests that you want to see on the show, feel free to email us at sustainability@uwaterloo.ca.

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This is also the last episode in our four-week pilot season in honour of the Earth Month Challenge that we have been running. As the podcast host, I just wanted to say a big thank you, first of all for listening to and sharing our content with other people in your network, and just being so open an engaging with us. It's been a great experience and I look forward to seeing what's coming next!

We will be taking a break at the end of the Winter 2021 term and resuming early in the spring term, but just know there will be some weeks where we will not have a podcast aired just as we plan for the next season.

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As usual, we will kick off episode with a global hurray, so I thought it would be very fitting to talk about Earth Day 2021 and what's going on to celebrate it. Now as you can imagine, it is going to be virtual this year in comparison to previous years (aside from 2020). For this year, earthday.org has decided to create a three-day virtual event since we can't be together in person, to use as momentum to change the business-as-usual model that we all follow in our daily lives. The theme this year for the event is “Restore our Earth.”

This event includes three days of action, including a youth climate summit led by Earth Uprising, which is a youth-led organisation, and it will include panels, speeches and messages from youth activists including Greta Thunberg, Alexandria Villaseñor and Licypriya Kangujam. On the second day of the event, there will be an educational summit to explore how education and educators play a critical role in combating climate change, and how to create transformative climate education. And then the third day will be full of other workshops, panels, etcetera, including discussions on emerging technologies to promote sustainability, restoration efforts and more. This is a free event that you can sign up virtually and we will provide the registration link in the show notes.

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Alright, let's get into the main content for the episode: WAT is Earth Day? To give you some background on the event and the whole campaign that is Earth Day, it’s a global initiative that started taking place 51 years ago, so 1970 was the first event the first Earth Day. The idea was proposed by U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson after learning about the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill, which is still considered one of the worst oil spills in history. It covered more than 30 miles or 48 kilometres of the ocean within a few days and killed thousands of sea birds and marine animals.

Earth Day 1970 was the first official Earth Day event, and it was only hosted in the USA. It was focused more on the impacts of humans on the environment reflective of this major oil spill, as well as the dangerous impacts of the industrial revolution and how a commercialized society was impacting our planet. It was also inspired by the success of student anti-war movements occurring at the time, and Nelson wanted to infuse the energy of these student anti-war protests with the emerging public consciousness about air and water pollution. Also keep in mind this was shortly after Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was released in the early 60s, so the general public was becoming more and more aware about environmental harm and realizing how important it was for individuals to take action to promote sustainability.

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So Gaylord Nelson decided, okay, we need somebody to coordinate this event. We need somebody who has the student perspective. They appointed Dennis Hayes who was a student at Harvard University, to coordinate the whole event. Dennis Hayes created a national day that would be considered a “teach-in” on the environment to educate the public on the importance of environmental protection and harmful human activities. They chose April 22nd to be the official Earth Day because it aligned well with the spring break and final exams for students so they could maximise student engagement in the event.

The First Earth Day gathered an estimated 20 million participants from around the country – that's about 10% of America's population at the time. This included more than 2,000 universities and colleges and over 10,000 primary and secondary schools. What this represented was a rare achievement of political alignment, getting support from Republicans and Democrats alike (because remember, this was in America), Alignment from rich and poor, urban dwellers and farmers, business and labour leaders. It also contributed to the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency, numerous environmental laws and more going forward.

Now we're going to flash forward 20 years: Earth Day 1990 was the first international Earth Day and it focused specifically on global warming and clean energy as these topics became evermore prominent in the media and in public concerns. As the first international Earth Day, 141 countries participated with an estimated 200 million participants. Ten years later, Earth Day 2000 had 184 countries participating, including 5,000 environmental groups. And now when we look at the present, there are over 190 countries engaged every year, more than 1 billion participants estimated to take part, and Earth Day focuses on a variety of issues related to climate change and broader injustices depending on where you're located. Individual organisations tend to focus on particular issues, or they focus on what is impacting their specific countries. We are seeing action from schools, community organisations, governments and more, all hosting their own individual Earth Day events.

For instance, locally the City of Waterloo has hosted regular clean-ups, they hosted the Eco Market back in 2019 which brought together plenty of sustainably focused local businesses, the David Suzuki Foundation has run a family hiking challenge, there's been other 20-minute makeovers hosted by the City of Kitchener, Waterloo and other cities and municipalities, there's been the Reconciliation Tree Planting within Waterloo Region and more. The University of Waterloo has done clean-ups, festivals, photo contests and more.

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And even this year when we have to do things virtually as I mentioned, earthday.org is hosting their free three day event, the Biden Administration in the United States is hosting a conversation about climate change amongst global leaders, and the University of Waterloo is hosting our Earth Month Challenge. Even Apple and other large corporations like them are doing Earth Day activities; Starbucks is running an Earth Month challenge where you can win prizes and Apple is doing an Earth Day activity challenge that you can participate in if you have one of their Apple watches.

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This represents people taking action and taking Earth Day seriously from across the planet, whether they're non-governmental organizations, major corporations, schools or individuals, it's clear that Earth Day has had profound impacts and is touching lives across the planet, far more than what it did in 1970.

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So WAT? What does Earth Day actually represent and what are some of the criticisms of Earth Day - because there are always two sides to a particular topic, especially when it comes to sustainability and the environment, and so there are some people who may not believe that Earth Day is very helpful. Despite Earth Day being the most widely celebrated non-religious “day” if you will, it represents people from all walks of life connecting on this particular day, highlighting the value of our planet and how important it is for us as individuals on it to take care of it for our future wellbeing, and the wellbeing of the planet itself. Earth Day is rooted in hope and desire to protect and conserve nature and the value it brings to humanity, and that in itself is really inspiring and a message that can connect us across these different walks of life. That said, there are a range of views on whether Earth Day or any single point focus event like Earth Hour etcetera are helpful or harmful. The idea of Earth Day has been claimed to be misleading because it makes people think that we *only* should care about the planet on this particular day, on April 22nd, when in reality we need to be caring about the planet every day. It's not just about celebrating and participating in activities for one day and then wiping our hands of any sustainability efforts. It's more about embedding a mindset and integrating this mindset into our everyday lives. Even if we aren't running giant clean-ups, conferences, or whatever big Earth Day events are happening, this mindset that we create on this day should still last, and it should be impacting us in our everyday lives.

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I did some reading and there was an article released by Ronn Torossian, who is the CEO for 5W Public Relations Agency. Some of the issues that he highlighted during his article is again that Earth Day is not just about one day, it’s not short-term action – it needs to have long term impacts; Earth Day has also become a marketing tactic in some senses because organisations are selling merchandise or making a profit out of it, even though consumption in itself is part of the problem that Earth Day seeks to address; and also that Earth Day supports a surface-level mentality, which is why I emphasize the idea of creating a mindset that needs to last. While Ron brings up some great points, again, it really depends on the mindset that we bring into Earth Day that will lead to either positive or negative impacts. If we're going into Earth Day understanding that we need to have lasting impact, that the mindset needs to last, that this isn't meant to be a marketing tactic, we can be coming out of Earth Day with much more holistic, sustainable actions and actions that last.

If anything, Earth Day can not so much be a day that we take action and then wipe our hands, but rather it can be a reminder to people that living sustainably is important. Or like New Years, it can be a time to reset the sustainability “clock” if you will, set sustainability goals if you need that sort of single day motivation like you do on New Years. Or to really assess your personal habits, reflect on them and figure out ways you can improve them. We can use Earth Day as that momentum, as that reminder and that encouragement to promote sustainability in our lives for the rest of the year.

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Now WAT? We've discussed what Earth Day is, some of the past events that are going on, we've discussed some of the criticisms of Earth Day and how we can address those criticisms – now let's talk about how you can actually participate in Earth Day. Some of the normal activities that usually happen during Earth Day are 20-minute makeovers on campus, student societies running events like movie screenings, broader community clean-ups, festival, other things like that. Because of COVID of course these in person events are greatly restricted, if not completely paused altogether. But there are still plenty of organisations and individuals taking action.

For instance, last year during Covid when the pandemic was first beginning, Rare Charitable Research Reserve hosted a virtual Earth Day yoga, there was a face mask making workshop hosted by The Museum in Kitchener, there was the backyard bird count hosted by the Waterloo Region District School Board, and Sustainable Waterloo Region did a week-long social media campaign highlighting all of the sustainability efforts occurring in the community. At the University of Waterloo, we are hosting our Earth Month Challenge where if you've been following us along on social media or even in the podcast, you'll know that we've had weekly themes and specific actions you can take related to those themes to help you live a more sustainable lifestyle at home, and that there are prizes to be won for those who participate in our challenge. So even if you are living at home, no matter where you are – if you are in Waterloo, if you are in the GTA, if you are in other provinces or even other countries, you can participate in Earth Day with us simply by taking action and following along in our Earth Man Challenge. Or you can see what is going on in your community or what other virtual events are available to you that you can sign up for.

I think it's really important to recognise that Earth Day has been very adaptable, just as any event has been in going online, and this really reflects the idea that Earth Day is a mindset rather than just an event, a surface-level event to take part in and then wipe your hands of whatever you learned or did on that particular day. But it's a mindset of sustainability that we need to be implementing in our lives and it doesn't matter if we're doing events in person or for doing things virtually, or if we are just taking that day to reflect on our actions and set sustainability goals for ourselves. Earth Day is something everybody can participate in, no matter what resources you have available to you, how much time you have or are willing to give to living sustainably. It's something everybody can participate in, no matter their limitations. And it's important that everybody is participating in it to contribute to collective action to create a sustainable world.

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In summary, Earth Day is an example of how we can come together and *need* to come together to take global action on global issues. We need to care about the planet every day, but Earth Day just serves as a reminder. It can serve as motivation to set goals, and it just again demonstrates that we can come together despite our diverse living situations and diverse experiences in life. There are many things you can do this Earth Day and every day at home to promote sustainability. Something as simple as getting outside. You can volunteer or join a student club. You can focus on saving energy and reducing carbon emissions at home every day, such as by turning off the lights or appliances would not in use. You can plant pollinator friendly plants when you're planning out your garden for the summer. You can donate – you can donate money items or time to a local charity or organisation, and you can talk about sustainability and climate change with friends and family. We often overlook the power of simply talking about something and how conversations can create change and promote sustainability and how it can create positive outcomes.

Simply by talking about sustainability and Earth Day with your friends and family, you increase the likelihood of them wanting to participate and wanting to engage, and so that increases the number of people that are taking action just like you to promote a sustainable world. Through the actions of everybody, we can create sustainability. We will leave more resources in the show notes for you to learn about sustainability, how you can take action on Earth Day and every day, and any other resources that we think might be useful for you.

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As a reminder, don't forget to sign up for our Earth Month Challenge if you haven't already yet. We are in the last week when this episode is airing, so take this opportunity now to sign up before it's too late. And once again, make sure to follow us on Twitter and Instagram @UWsustainable if you are interested in learning more about sustainability, how you can take action in your own life, seeing some sustainability spotlights from campus and around the community and more.

And if you have any questions for us about the podcast, if you have any guests or topic ideas that you want to see, please email us at sustainability@uwaterloo.ca and we would be happy to address your concerns or brainstorm some ideas with you.

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That is all for this episode and for the pilot season of *WAT’s Sustainable?* I hope you enjoy it as much as I've enjoyed recording this podcast, it's been so much fun and I am excited to see where it goes moving forward.

That's WAT’s up, Waterloo. This is Jenna signing off of the podcast and we will see you in the next season!