50 YEARS OF THE OEC

An Unexpected Guest
ROBERT REDFORD (pg. 2)

"When kids get the chance to play in nature, they grow up to become the protectors of our environmental future."

Aryeh Alex on our work with Metro Parks (pg. 3)

Climate Change: From Ohio to Costa Rica to Malawi (pg. 9)
This year marks the OEC’s 50th anniversary. Back in 1969 when our organization formed, Ohio faced some major crises, but our intrepid founders knew they had to fight for the health of our air, land, and water. This year, you’ll hear a lot from us about the issues we’ve faced, the wins we’ve had, and the growth we’ve seen as an organization.

This summer in Cleveland, in coordination with the 50th anniversary of the Cuyahoga River fire, we’ll celebrate how far we’ve come, but know that we’re also looking toward the next 50 years. Our fight continues, and we’re stronger than ever.

Today, the threat of climate change looms large. In the past few months, some major scientific studies made the environmental movement’s path forward clear — our society has just about a decade to change direction before our climate becomes too damaged to fix. If we miss this deadline, the consequences for our planet will be severe, and drastically alter our way of life. We can no longer afford to kick this can down the road.

The OEC has taken the charge to heart, and we’re fighting. We’re invested in diverse communities around the state. We’re learning about what it takes to bring about change in our city halls. We’re pushing folks across Ohio to join us as we advocate for a healthier future.

As I travel the state and speak with stakeholders and communities, I know that folks around Ohio are eager to join us. They’re willing to advocate for clean energy, water, and land. They’re willing to step up and provide testimony, speak to elected officials, and make changes at the local level. I’m so inspired by Ohioans’ commitment to making their state a better place. The OEC is proud to stand alongside them as we move forward to help fix our climate crisis.

Without your support of our movement, we would not have been going strong for 50 years. We would never have been at the Statehouse talking to decision makers, and we wouldn’t have advocated for Ohio’s environment in Washington, DC. If you didn’t have our backs, we wouldn’t have been able to secure protections for lands across Ohio, or meet with community leaders across Northern Ohio to discuss the future of Lake Erie.

Over the last 50 years, our mission has been powered by you. And I’m so excited to see what the OEC can do in the next 50 years, together.
When I first got out of the Air Force and came back to Ohio in the mid-1970s, I had been gone for four years, and the country was in turmoil. Our air was unbreathable, our land was ravished by the oil and gas industry, and the Cuyahoga River was so polluted that there wasn’t a fish alive in it. But, the OEC was here, and fighting. At the time, it was just a few founding members with a goal to stop some of the more serious issues facing our natural landscape.

Over the next decade, I watched as the OEC helped form the Ohio EPA and enforce the Clean Water and Clean Air Acts throughout the state. In 1987, when I became the Director of the Ohio EPA, I sought to work closely with the OEC on cleaning up our rivers.

One of my fondest memories was the 20 year commemoration of the Cuyahoga River fire in 1989, an event that shined a light on a lot of the regulations and protections that we worked so hard to implement.

Governor Dick Celeste and I were planning to do a boat trip on the river to celebrate how far we’d come. But, the day before we were scheduled to go out on the water, a special guest was added to the invite list: Robert Redford. Redford was in Columbus campaigning for Democratic Presidential candidate Michael Dukakis, but when he found out about the commemoration, he diverted his whole itinerary to travel up to Cleveland, giving us no advance notice. Redford cared a great deal about the environment, and he drove a ton of press and people to the event.

My hope is that 30 or 50 more years from now, future generations of environmental leaders look back and recognize that while the fight for clean air, water, and land may seem daunting, one day they’ll look at their progress and know it was well worth it.

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1981
Worked with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources to set up a recycling and litter program to redirect landfill waste.

1972
Stopped a proposal for a dam at Clear Creek in Hocking and Fairfield Counties.

From Board President, Rich Shank

While we were on the boat giving our speeches, I remember Redford pointing at a guy who was rowing on the water. He said, “this man is the perfect example of how much the river has improved!” We explained to him that the Ohio EPA and the OEC were instrumental in getting this river clean up and he was awestruck.

Now it’s been 30 years since I was on that boat with Redford, and 50 years since the original blaze, and the Cuyahoga is recognized as one of the cleanest and best rivers in the state. In fact, Ohio now has 15 officially designated Scenic Rivers — in large part due to the work of the OEC.

Rich Shank (left) and Robert Redford (right) at the Cuyahoga River Fire anniversary in 1989. Photo provided by Rich Shank.
When kids get the chance to play in nature, they grow up to become the protectors of our environmental future. That’s why the OEC is working to make sure all children have access to parks and the freedom to explore them.

In November 2018, the OEC worked with our partners at the Friends of the Columbus and Franklin County Metro Parks, where I am honored to serve as President, to pass a levy to expand our parks and greenways here in Central Ohio.

Together, with the help of thousands of our members, and hundreds of thousands of voters, we passed the levy by a landslide margin and received the highest number of votes for a county park levy in Ohio history.

The need for green spaces like parks is only going to become more important. By the year 2050, Central Ohio is expected to see one million new people living here, and the area is already preparing. Every day, ground is broken for new housing projects, more businesses, and new industries — all while opportunities for public land are dwindling.

If we don’t protect green spaces now, they will become over-developed in the future and our environment and the health of the people that live here may suffer.

Our Metro Parks are cool places to hike, bike, or enjoy a picnic, but they also play a critical role in protecting our waterways. As you ride up and down the Greenway Trails that connect our parks and neighborhoods, you will see wetlands and prairies full of native plants. They soak up pollutants and protect our drinking water in the Scioto River along with the other rivers and creeks that criss-cross the region. And our bigger Metro Parks, like Battelle Darby Creek, act as “carbon sinks,” absorbing carbon pollution in the air, and returning it to the earth — offsetting our greenhouse gas emissions by a huge margin.

But our parks are more than just shields against climate change. Access to parks creates social equity offering an escape from the hustle of everyday life, especially for our children. It is our mission to make sure you don’t need to have a car to go somewhere beautiful, but instead have a natural wonder easily accessible right in your backyard.

I love that instead of playing on the street, kids can hop on a Greenway Trail and be transported to a naturally fantastical place. When I see the wonder in a young kid’s eye when they see a deer or a bison for the first time, I can’t help but notice that they suddenly become inspired and want to learn more. We want every child, especially those in areas that have been neglected by our society, to see these wonders. As communities of color and low-income neighborhoods struggle with the challenges of life, it is all the more imperative for our parks to be free and accessible for all to enjoy.

Investing in our public lands is investing in our future, and park levies like the one we helped pass, will ensure that kids grow up and build a sustainable, lasting future with equality, respect, and dignity for all.

Aryeh Alex teaches a young visitor about bison at Batelle Darby Creek Metro Park.

From the Vice President of Public Affairs, Aryeh Alex

1982
Halted the sale of over one-third of the Wayne National Forest (a proposal by Interior Secretary James Watt) and increased the size of the Wayne by over 50 percent.

1983
Worked with the State to secure a tax check-off, allowing Ohioans to donate part of their refund to wildlife habitat and scenic river programs.
From Green Giving Club Member, Laurenda Messer

In 2008, my husband Jon and I went on an OEC canoe trip down the Little Miami River. A group of passionate young people, who had worked hard to clean up this part of the river, taught us about the ecosystem and the importance of protecting our waterways. It was on that trip that Jon and I were bonded with the OEC, and we knew we wanted to do more.

We have been longtime donors to the OEC, but decided to start giving monthly about five years ago. Every year, we are reminded in some way about the incredible work the organization is doing to protect the environment.

Recently, I was moved by Carol Davey’s story where she talked about the “moxie” of people in the Southeast Ohio region who care about their natural resources, but might not necessarily call themselves environmentalists.

In a talk with Jon about the difference between words like “moxie,” “chutzpah,” and “gumption,” it struck me that Carol’s way of organizing is very much like the work I see here in the Cleveland area with another organization that’s dear to my heart, the Greater Cleveland Congregation.

This collective of 40 religious organizations, including mosques, synagogues, and churches, has been all about figuring out what truly moves people and working with them toward common solutions, just like Carol’s work in Southeast Ohio.

I am dazzled by her work, and by the power of local organizing. You can accomplish so much more when you get in the heart of the community. I hope we can continue to find meaningful ways to connect on the environment, whether it’s through a canoe trip, a public hearing, or a nice glass of iced tea on the porch. We just have to stay committed to that determination, that moxie, and change will continue to come.

Laurenda and Jon Messer are longtime OEC donors. Photo provided by Laurenda from a trip to the Grand Canyon.

A special thank you to our Green Giving Club sustaining members.
Your continued support makes a difference every day for air, land, and water.
Join the Club! Learn more at: bit.ly/Green-Giving-Club

1989
Helped establish a policy for public warning labels where pesticides and herbicides are applied.

1985
Worked withGov. Dick Celeste on the first Great Lakes Charter, an agreement between eight states and two Canadian Provinces to manage the Great Lakes Basin.
Growing up in the small town of Shelby, Ohio, community action and support became second nature to me. I dedicated myself to becoming an environmental advocate for clean water, air, energy, and public lands, inspired by my pride for the community that raised me and helped shape my values.

Having dealt first-hand with water contamination issues throughout my youth, the Ohio Environmental Council is an organization I actively support in their stance to protect access to safe, clean drinking water. In recent years they have developed numerous valuable proposals, working closely with state and federal government, to take action for the protection of Ohio residents and their access to clean water.

My hometown is now working on a $7.2 million wastewater treatment upgrade, thanks to OEC’s action to make sure the Ohio EPA’s regulations are upheld. This will bring safer, cleaner water to the community as well as much needed economic benefits.

I am now a resident of Columbus, pursuing Bachelors of Science degrees in Environmental Policy and City & Regional Planning to further my environmental advocacy work within state and local government.

I find pride in becoming one of the newest members of the OEC Emerging Leaders Council, working together to educate our communities and influence future generations to stand for protecting our environment and taking action on issues that hit close to home.
Established the Environmental Law Center, the first and only law center focused exclusively on environmental issues in the state.

2008  
Worked with the Public Utility Commission of Ohio on the Renewable Portfolio Standard to compel utilities to cut energy waste and invest in renewables.

From the OEC Law Center, Trent Dougherty

I was just a law student looking for ways to get involved in the nonprofit field when I started at the OEC as an intern in 2004. At the time, most of our legal cases were handled by outside counsel and there was a clear need for a legal department within the organization. I pitched my idea to then-Executive Director, Vickie Diesner, and one year later, she made me the organization’s first staff lawyer.

Over the past 14 years we’ve won some landmark cases, like the Lake Erie Shoreline Case, where we partnered with the National Wildlife Federation to defend the people’s right to access the shoreline and protect our precious Lake Erie. We’ve also taken on more community-focused cases. About six years ago, a small wetland in the middle of an urban area was threatened by a major corporation, which tried to file a permit to develop the land. Together with a group of concerned citizens called the Friends of the Sawmill Wetlands, we took the developer on to save this urban oasis. Battle after battle, we fought for the rights of the community and the environment. The case traveled all the way up to the Ohio Supreme Court, who ruled in our favor and protected the park from being turned into another strip mall or parking lot.

Our work with the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO) is where we’ve really made the biggest impact. The OEC has been involved in dozens of cases to implement and defend the Renewable Energy Standard and Energy Efficiency Standard, which have both played a huge role in limiting our use of fossil fuels and fighting climate change in Ohio. To me, that’s the core of our mission because climate change deeply impacts Ohioans’ access to clean air, land, and water.

We were one of the first environmental groups to become heavily engaged in PUCO cases, and go up against big industrial companies who had been promoting their agendas for years.

Because we fight for you, we jumped headfirst into something where a lot of entrenched interests didn’t think we belonged.

Even though it was new and it was tough, we stood up. Now more than a decade later, we’ve grown exponentially from just one staff attorney to a team of dedicated, smart, strategic people who care about these issues and impact the lives of Ohioans every day.

My goal for the law center is to be strong enough to take on the giant cases, while remaining nimble enough to take on the small community-focused ones. This is because the court is truly the last backstop to environmental degradation, and a strong environmental law center fills huge needs in the state.

Our law center sets us apart from other environmental groups, and proves that we can be a catalyst for positive change from backyards all the way to the Ohio Supreme Court. I plan on continuing to instill those values into our young law students so that when they go off to do bigger things, they leave with an appreciation for how the legal system can inspire change — and are prepared to take the lead on these issues for the next generation.
I wouldn’t necessarily have called myself an environmentalist before I started working at the OEC. But, growing up in Columbus, I spent a lot of time outside, learning from Ohio’s natural beauty — it wasn’t until recently that I realized that I wanted to protect it.

I am first generation and my family is from Malawi where lush, untouched landscapes are everywhere. Because of this, the people tend to have a much more intimate relationship with the natural world.

Two years ago, I visited my Uncle Billy, who lives in the middle of Liwonde National Park in Malawi. I was blown away by the breathtaking scenery and the rich, thriving ecosystems in the park, an environmentalist’s dream. My uncle is a walking encyclopedia and brilliant jack-of-all-trades who has figured out how to supply power and water to his hotel using solar, even though there’s no electric grid. For him, solar is the only option, but also the best option because it’s low-impact, reliable, and sustainable — the same reasons that many in the U.S. use solar power, even though the context may be different. For the people in Malawi, environmentalism means protecting their heritage while building a better life.

I experienced the same thing living in Costa Rica during my time in the Peace Corps. Sustainable practices and progressive environmental policies are everywhere. Since 2016, over 98 percent of Costa Rica’s energy output was from renewable sources. Recycling and composting is a way of life, a necessity — not something you can opt out of or choose not to do. Treating the natural world with respect is integral because everyone’s lives are directly connected to it. For Costa Ricans, environmental sustainability is a vital and foundational part of their culture, even though they might not necessarily use those words.

The people who live in places like Costa Rica and Malawi are often the most heavily impacted by climate change and by our choices here in Ohio, especially when it comes to our action (or lack of action) on climate change. It may seem like the situations or contexts are very different — but often, if we look deeper, we can find common values like sustainability. There is a lot we can learn from developing nations and how they treat environmental protection, as a necessity rather than a luxury.

So, while we all think of environmentalism in a different way, we all share environmental values, whether you’re from Malawi or Costa Rica, or the suburbs of Columbus, Ohio. There are always opportunities for us to come together and learn from one another on the issues that affect us all, to understand that clean air, water, and land are essential to our way of life — no matter where you are from or what words you use to describe yourself.
There will always be a need for diverse voices to unify around their support of environmental quality and the conservation of natural resources in Ohio — that is why the Ohio Environmental Council was formed in 1969, why it has endured for 50 years, and why it is so effective today.

When I first arrived at the OEC in 1977 as the second executive director, I was freshly graduated from Denison University. At the time, I was the only staff person and our budget was nothing more than pocket change. But working for the betterment of the environment was my passion, my dream.

Our first major victory during my time at the OEC was the creation of the voluntary income tax refund check-off on state tax forms. With this box — which you can still find on your tax forms today — people could donate part or all of their refund to wildlife and scenic rivers programs.

We launched the first Environmental Gala (now the Green Gala) and we held regular meetings with the governor and agency directors. We established funding with some of our greatest grantors at The George Gund Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, and The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation — all of whom continue to support the OEC to this day.

Looking back, the policy and organizational achievements were tremendous. But, these achievements come and go. What really endures are the people behind these efforts, including the legions of volunteers who fold newsletters, make phone calls, and give money. There are a lot of unsung heroes behind the OEC and many of you were not only colleagues, but also became permanent friends of the organization.

I was honored to serve as a board member following my tenure and have been delighted to see the organization grow into the powerhouse that it is today.

The environmental movement is just as important as it was in the 70s, 80s, and 90s and we face some of our toughest challenges yet. But, if there's anything that 50 years of this organization can teach us, it's that we will find a way.

From OEC Alumnus, Stephen Sedam
Executive Director 1977-1990, Board Member 2013-2019

2013
Worked with the Ohio Department of Forestry to protect 8,000 acres of the Shawnee Forest backcountry from logging.

2014
Rallied community opposition to stop a proposed open-lake dumping project in Lake Erie, keeping toxic sediment out of the lake.

LEGACY CLUB
We extend an extra measure of gratitude to our members who have included a bequest or gift to the OEC in their estate plan.

Anonymous (2)
Marketa Anderson
Kathy Barber*
Richard Behymer*
Linda Butler & Steven Nissen
Beth Crane & Richard McKee
Ryan Donzelli
Ruth Ellen Butler & Gerald Butler*
Babette Gorman
Peter & Joanne Griesinger
Vince Hand & Ann Hagerman
Pat Hammel
Andrea Jones
Rosemary Joyce
Maryann & Roger Kafer
Jeremy King & Susan Studer King
Paul & Jane King
Calvin & Ilene Kunin
Alan & Susan Lapp
John Marshall & Angela Plummer
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Anne Powell Riley
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Donald & Jeanie Sampson
Lynn Schreiber*
Stephen Sedam & Virginia Weiss
Rick & Jan Segal
Jack Sharer
Michele Simmons & Josh Asbury
Jeanne Smith*
Joe Sommer
Wendy Stewart
Heather Taylor-Miesle & Don Miesle
Chris Thorman
Ellen Weston
Gene & Sandy Wright

*Deceased

To learn more about the Legacy Club, contact us at (614) 487-7506 or LegacyClub@theOEC.org
I gained a lot of unexpected knowledge about environmental issues during my internship for the OEC — and it’s lead me on some amazing adventures.

Following my internship, I studied permaculture at Kibbutz Lotan in the Arava region of Israel. Permaculture is a way of thinking and agriculture that utilizes natural patterns to protect and restore the planet while also serving the needs of people.

For four weeks, I lived with 15 international students in homes made of mud that were heated by passive solar energy. We cooked all of our meals using biogas from our food scraps and composted everything.

Together we studied topics such as gardening, permaculture design techniques, sustainable leadership, and mud building. I saw connections to what I learned at the OEC everywhere. During one class on wastewater treatment, the teacher posed a question, “what is something you don’t want in your drinking water?” Before anyone else could even open their mouths, I blurted out, “polyfluoroalkyl substances!”

Every single person looked at me in shock. No one had ever heard of PFAS, let alone had the ability to pronounce the term. And, to top it off, most of the people in the room didn’t speak English as a first language. I proceeded to give a 5-minute explanation about PFAS from what I learned as an intern and even shared a few articles. It was invigorating to watch my classmates add PFAS to their environmental priorities and to see cross-cultural connections being made around environmental issues.

Now, I am looking forward to further building upon the skills and knowledge that I gained at the OEC as I begin a Masters in Public Administration with a concentration in Environmental Policy in the fall.
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We work very hard to ensure all donors are listed correctly; however, we do make mistakes. Please e-mail OEC@theOEC.org with any questions or corrections.
We want to hear from you!
Help us celebrate OEC's 50th Anniversary by sharing your OEC story with us! Our donors, action takers, volunteers, and alumni are the foundation of this organization. Without you, we wouldn't be able to protect Ohio's air, land, and water. By sharing your story with us, you are helping us document OEC's history and greatest achievements.

Go to: www.theoec.org/50-years