



## Environment Makes News in 2004

By Rachel Kleinman, EarthScope Editor

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If you want to fix the environment, then fix the media. At least that's what environmental activists and media critics say. They fault the mainstream media for pushing environmental news onto the sidelines through lack of coverage, bias toward big industry and acceptance of industry-funded research and analysis as truth.

Battling the mainstream, the Marin Scope devotes space every other week to its environmental news column, EarthScope. For the past three years, EarthScope has been a welcomed oasis for citizens thirsty for environmental information. In 2004, EarthScope continued its mission to report accurate information and feasible solutions to the environmental problems we face.

Many environmental educators would say that the first step in changing today's environmental dilemmas is for everyone to understand that the health of people and the environment are interconnected, a theme that surfaced throughout the year in EarthScope. This theme is at the heart of one of the county's biggest environmental news stories of the year: whether or not to approve Measure B and ban the cultivation of genetically modified organisms in Marin. EarthScope addressed concerns that genetically modified crops may not only be unsafe for human consumption, but also could be detrimental to the balance of ecosystems on the other side of the farmer's fence. In another fall story, we reported that toxic fire-retardant chemicals used in common household products — from carpets to computers — as a safety precaution are, ironically, showing up in Bay Area wildlife and humans at alarming levels. And, earlier in the year, we alerted people to the high content of methyl mercury, a potent neurotoxin, in tuna, swordfish, shark, tilefish and king mackerel. Long-line nets used to catch these fish are also harmful to endangered sea turtles, which are trapped in the nets as well. Minimizing consumption of these fish not only prevents health problems, but also could motivate laws to protect the threatened turtles.

Just as our health is connected to that of the environment, so are our everyday actions, such as getting to work. The debate over the Transportation Sales Tax Expenditure Plan, commonly known as Measure A, drew a lot of public attention in 2004. The ballot initiative ultimately approved by voters will increase sales tax by a half a percent to pay for various countywide transportation improvement projects. Funding from this measure targets, in part, problems covered by EarthScope earlier in the year when Golden Gate Transit, which provides most of the bus service in the county, increased fares and decreased services, which equated to burdensome commuting schedules for those who rely on public transportation. On the other end of the transportation spectrum, we highlighted the efforts of those who regularly drive to work to leave their cars behind and try a more earth-friendly commute on Bike to Work Day. We even looked ahead to the future of transportation by investigating cars driven by pollution-free fuel-cell technology.

The Bike to Work Day story is one example of how EarthScope calls attention to positive steps taken by Marin residents, community leaders, businessmen, teachers and students to create a sustainable and ecologically just county. EarthScope mentioned over 60 of these groups working for a better environment, but also took a closer look at the following programs: the Bay Area Green Business Program, which has certified more than 50 Marin businesses as "green"; Sir Francis Drake High's award-winning environmental academy, SEA-DISC, through which students brought steelhead trout back to San Anselmo creek; environmental summer camps, including those at Wild Care and Slide Ranch; and re-use art efforts, such as an artist who converts plastic debris found along Pt. Reyes beaches into art materials, as well as a program facilitated by the Marin Conservation Corps that turns trash from local businesses into "creative re-use" supplies in elementary school classrooms.

Readers inspired to take action by these environmental success stories didn't have to go far for suggestions on how to get involved. The EarthScope column includes a calendar of upcoming environmental events. Throughout the year, EarthScope featured a flurry of these events, such as: a Green Festival in San Rafael's Canal neighborhood, the Marin Food Systems Project's Healthy Food for Growing Kids event, the annual Marin Environmental Film Festival, Coastal Clean-up Day, the Goldman Environmental Awards, the Bioneers conference and how to prepare an organic, locally grown Thanksgiving feast.

While EarthScope aims to inform the public, it also affects its reporters. Alex Webster, formerly a senior in the SEA-DISC academy at Drake High, said that her internship as an EarthScope reporter bridged the gap between school and her future. "Until I found my internship, I couldn't envision a career doing what I love — helping the environment," she said. "My internship has shown me that I can use the knowledge and passion I have gained in SEA-DISC in the real world."