College students are protesting again - sounding off about race, immigration, gender, sexual harassment and gun violence. Their cacophony triggers my memories of youthful protest during my college years (1969-1973) when the main issues were an illegal war, nuclear proliferation, a corrupt presidency and environmental degradation.

The voices of both generations will merge next week when UConn hosts a weeklong metanoia - "the journey of changing one's mind" - on the environment prior to the 48th Earth Day celebration on April 22.

My self-appointed job for the week is to find out what happened at UConn during the first Earth Day in 1970 and tell today's students. With the assistance of Nick Hurley at the university's archives, I discovered something so "groovy" that I felt compelled to share it.

In short, UConn students helped drag the rest of the world forward on the environment. The Hartford Times headline, "Establishment Joins Students for Earth Day Festivities," captures the essence. A handwritten note from one UConn faculty member writing to his director captures the befuddlement on the part of the older generation: "Sorry this was delayed. I'm just as confused about the present situation as everyone. Back to grading papers."

Indeed, UConn's first Earth Day is completely absent from the university's officially sanctioned history, "Red Brick in the Land of Steady Habits," by the late historian Bruce Stave. The official minutes of the university's board of trustees and the student yearbook, the "Nutmeg," fail to mention it. The thinness of two folders on Earth Day from then President Homer Babbidge Jr. indicate that this event was a minor footnote to administrative business as usual.

Student activists in Storrs thought otherwise. They organized a three-day schedule of events, splashing their news across three consecutive issues of their Connecticut Daily Campus. The front page story for April 22, 1970, wasn't a story at all, but a grim, full-page photograph of someone standing in front of an enormous garbage dump. Another photo showed a toxic effluent pipe pouring into a stream, captioned, "Our Ravaged Environment." Altogether, student coverage spanned five full pages of articles, photos and event listings.

Led by the UConn Ecology Action Group, and endorsed by the University Senate, students of my era were vigorously responding to Wisconsin Sen. Gaylord Nelson's bipartisan call for a "national teach-in on the environment" to be held between spring break and final exams on campuses across the country.

Highlighting UConn's celebration was a 24-hour "be-in," or all-night "marathon" held in the ROTC airplane hangar, formerly opposite the Jorgensen Center for the Performing Arts. It featured music from seven bands, speeches given by experts, a film festival, a light show and gales of environmental hyperventilation. Feeding the hungry was an "eco-stew," a one-pot boil composed of donated unsaleable food combined with whatever people brought, including hamburger and chickens.

Local student coordinators were Jeffrey Fitzgerald and Janet Jahoda. Their headliner was Ryan Drum, a botanist from UCLA and self-declared "Ph.D. Hippy." He helped organize a "multimedia fantasia on ecology," an "Eco-explosion" ironically supported by "10,000 watts of power" for a "massive jam session" of whatever electric guitars or other instruments people brought. This prophet of doom criticized the status quo, claiming that "no one will want to go to college five years from
now." Oh, how wrong he was. Less hyperbolic presentations were given by a poet, potter, artist, architect, oceanographer, chemist, doctor, ecologist, zoologist and molecular biologist. Also present were national, state and local government officials.

The take home message is that UConn's students and their national cohort convinced the generation of their parents to support a sea-change of environmental legislation within the next five years. The uber-issue of our times, however, climate change, went unmentioned.

These students, at UConn and elsewhere, went on to become today's national environmental leaders. Today, our state's flagship institution is leading the way toward greater environmental sanity via its curriculum, organizations, expertise, administration and infrastructure.

This year's weeklong metanoia is a tribute to past student activism.