Media Contact: Office of the Secretary
For Immediate Release: April 19, 1971
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Secretary of the Interior Rogers C. B. Morton today launched his Earth Week activities with an address to Indian educators attending a workshop on environmental education sponsored by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the National Park Service.

Commissioner of Indian Affairs Louis R. Bruce and National Park Service Director George B. Hartzog also spoke at the opening session this morning in the Bureau of Indian Affairs Auditorium. Teachers of Indians from 14 states are participating in the Earth Week workshop which will continue Tuesday through Friday at Catoctin Mountain Park, Maryland.

The Secretary praised the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the National Park Service for encouraging environmental education and congratulated the "first environmentalists" -- the American Indians -- for their leadership in the effort.

"It is appropriate and gratifying that Indians are among the first to relate ecological concerns to their education objectives," he stated. "Their history, religion, and philosophy all reflect a oneness with nature. In this sense one might call Indians the 'first environmentalists'."

The teachers, he added, are "pioneers on a new frontier of learning."

About 53,000 descendants of the "first environmentalists" are currently involved in environment-related studies in their classrooms and outdoor study areas.

The environmental approach to teaching being developed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs relies upon study materials developed in cooperation with the Park Service NEED (National Environmental Education Development) program and the companion NESA (National Environmental Study Areas) program. The Catoctin Mountain Park provides such a study area, a setting for classes out-of-doors.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs schools are among the first in the country to make use of the park study areas with the conclusion of the school year, a series of environmental awards for noteworthy projects in Indian schools and communities will be presented in cooperation with Indian tribal school board officials.

Secretary Morton's remarks were focused on the cultural tradition of American Indians who, he said, "viewed all living things as possessing the right to life." He called on teachers of Indian children to help their pupils assume the role of "action people in our national effort to improve the environment." He also said:

"I can think of no approach to modern education that will have more lasting meaning for school children than one which relates an examination of their environment to other spheres of human knowledge.”

The Secretary was introduced by Miss Wilma Victor, a Choctaw Indian and former BIA educator, whom the Secretary recently appointed as his Special Assistant for Indian Affairs.

Education administrators and environmental socialists from the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the National Park Service are also participating in Earth Week workshop.