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Earthly worries arouse 60,000

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Balboa Park fair one of largest environmental events in U.S.

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UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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Environmentalists took to the streets yesterday in search of something they could take on the highway.

Sky-high gas prices created a hum about fuel-efficient cars during the 16th annual EarthFair at Balboa Park, one of the nation's largest Earth Day events.

Organizers estimated that as many as 60,000 people turned out to celebrate and participate in all things environmental, from vegetarianism and body art to fire ecology and the politics of habitat conservation.

"(This festival) is the big-tent event," EarthFair organizer Carolyn Chase said while munching lunch served on a compostable plate. "It's the one-stop shop for making a difference."

A collection of hybrid and electric vehicles displayed at a prominent intersection in the park made for a steady stream of potential customers.

"There are easily four times the people this year (compared with) two years ago," said Holly Candler of Pacific Honda in San Diego. "We haven't had much of a lull."



SCOTT LINNETT / Union-Tribune
At yesterday's EarthFair, Carlos Valdez pedaled a stationary bike hooked to a generator providing power for the big bulb, as Wei Chen gave her friend encouragement.

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No wonder. With California gas prices upward of \$2.60 a gallon for the basic unleaded variety, it seems everyone is interested in vehicles that not long ago were deemed alternative. Now, hybrids are viewed as a realistic way to express an environmental ethic while saving money each week at the pump.

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"I am just driving a car that doesn't make any sense as far as the environment goes," said Holly Sturtevant of San Diego.

She'd like to swap her Nissan Maxima for something as fuel-efficient as the Honda Insight, a gasoline-electric hybrid that gets about 57 miles per gallon of gas.

A few yards away, Mary Laiuppa of San Diego was showing off her new black Prius, Toyota's hybrid. She recently drove the vehicle in a 50-mile road rally – on just one gallon of gas.

"This is the direction we should be heading until something better comes along," she said.

Alpine resident Joe Sterling said he and his wife showed up at Balboa Park to explore innovations in electric car technology and solar power. By reducing their use of fossil fuels, they aim to help reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil and cut air pollution.

"I can make a difference in the world and in our country by being energy self-sufficient," Sterling said.

That kind of thinking is exactly what EarthFair boosters hope to cultivate.

"One day a year, we come out and protect the Earth," said John Falchi, emcee at one of the festival's entertainment stages. "It is just not enough. We have to go a little further."

An eclectic gathering of more than 250 groups promoted their ideas for doing just that at booths lining streets from one end of the park to the other. They belly-danced. They chanted. They gathered signatures. They read visitors' auras.

For many organizations, EarthFair is their best chance all year to recruit volunteers.

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"Where else can you have 50,000 to 60,000 people go by and be exposed to what you are trying to do?" said Rob Hutsel, executive director of the San Diego River Park Foundation.

A major EarthFair theme is making sometimes small changes in daily life that, taken together, can reduce the toll humans take on Earth. Solar power, bamboo flooring, water efficient kitchens and chemical-free agriculture were part of a collection of exhibits that organizers dubbed the e-Community.

Mary McLellan, a volunteer for the Tierra Miguel Foundation in Pauma Valley, handed out organically grown strawberries to e-Community visitors. All the while, she sought new members for the foundation's community-supported agriculture program, which delivers to subscribers fresh produce grown in San Diego County.

McLellan said organic farming and many other e-Community concepts are no longer on the cultural fringe.

"This is becoming the norm," she said. "It's not so granola-ish."

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