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LIVING

## Environmentalism conflicts with economy

### Earth Day needs to be more than cleaning up litter

This coming Sunday is Earth Day, and as much as I believe in its message of living sustainably and volunteering one's time for community environmental events, I always feel a certain sadness.



Drew Monkman

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

As a teacher, I first became involved in organizing Earth Day activities in the late 1980s. Every year, our school brought in speakers, organized Earth Day barbecues and picked up litter on the schoolyard and in surrounding parks. It was an Earth Day initiative that led to our schoolwide recycling program (the first in the city), "litterless lunch" program and schoolyard natural habitat area. Earth Day was truly an inspiration for a greener lifestyle and healthier planet where all species could thrive. Many of us tried to embrace that dream. Although we saw individual responsibility and action as being essential, at least in terms of drawing attention to the issues, there was also the assumption that government and private industry would soon step up to the plate and take an environmental leadership role - a very naïve thought, in retrospect. I remember thinking that fast food restaurants would soon be forced to abandon disposable packaging and that countries would see the logic of working together for the common good of protecting the oceans, rainforests and climate.

As the years went by, though, Earth Day - and the environmental movement in general - seemed to lose much of its meaning and urgency. Many environmentalists realized that, for most people, change is difficult. The key message therefore became: "We can easily make a positive difference to the environment simply by making tiny changes in our daily choices and in how we shop. Just buy products that are marginally greener. No fundamental change in how you live is necessary." This warm and fuzzy, feel-good

approach became the norm. At a larger level, we were led to believe that simply tweaking our models of economic growth in order to somehow make growth "sustainable" would be the solution. In other words, economies could continue to expand indefinitely and that the environment would not suffer unduly.

Well, it didn't work. By nearly every important indicator of environmental health, things are much worse now than they were even 10 years ago. Unfortunately, the idea that we can proceed with business-as-usual is not being respected by the laws of biology, physics and chemistry. The health of the environment continues to decline and has no respect for what society is comfortable with or politically willing to do.

I always struggle to write columns such as this. Environmentalists have to walk a fine line between optimism and pessimism. Clearly, we all have to live in this world and strive to be as happy as possible. Most of us have children and grandchildren. We don't want to scare them or make them feel that the future is overly bleak. Therefore, we do our best to accentuate the positive. Peterborough, for example, has been an environmental leader in many ways. One only has to look at successful programs such as Ecology Park, Peterborough Green-Up, curbside recycling and green waste pickup and composting. At the provincial and national level, we now have compulsory environmental assessments, laws against air and water pollution, more fuel-efficient vehicles and, by and large, more environmentally responsible behaviour on the part of industry. We have even seen the return of the bald eagle.

But as much as I want to be optimistic, science is telling us a different narrative - namely, that these good news stories are being played out against a background of steady environmental decline. Climate change is occurring much faster than anyone ever thought; coral reefs are dying as the oceans turn increasingly acidic; fungal pathogens are decimating bats, amphibians and trees, and the list goes on. And, while all of this is happening we have a federal gov-



DREW MONKMAN Special to The Examiner

An Earth Day cleanup of Bear's Creek by Edmison Heights Public School students in 2006.

ernment that is openly hostile towards the environmental agenda, at least with regard to limiting large-scale development projects like the oil sands or forcing industry to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The hostility is easy to understand. Meaningful environmental protection is fundamentally at odds with an expanding economy.

It doesn't require much effort to connect the dots and to realize that the developed world's hyper-consumptive ways are at the heart of the problem. Advertising continually tells us not to be content with what we already have but to go out and buy new and more stuff. Therefore, it's not surprising that most politicians follow suit. The central message we hear is that everything from one's personal level of consumption to the size of the Canadian economy as a whole must always continue to grow. When do our so-called leaders ever discuss limits to growth or consumption? To listen to most of them talk, you would think that our economy and our physical and emotional well-being exist in some sort of vacuum, immune to what happens to our air, water, soil, climate, forests

and biological diversity.

And don't get me wrong. I see my own lifestyle as being as problematic as anyone else's. Let's face it. When you are caught up in a consumer society, it is difficult to live otherwise. Individual action is hard work and sometimes even isolating, especially when few others in your family or social circle don't share your zeal.

I suppose that the difficulty of abandoning a consumer lifestyle and moving away from a model of continual economic growth explains why there isn't more of a sense of urgency about environmental threats, even in light of everything science is telling us. Why do we take warnings about trans-fats, tobacco and concussions so very seriously but essentially choose to ignore - as a society, at least - warnings about impending climatic chaos and its severe impacts on every aspect of modern civilization, not to mention the natural world?

I have come to the conclusion that there are essentially two opposing mindsets when it comes to environmental problems. In the mainstream view, one held by many well-intentioned, intelligent people - including many who call

themselves environmentalists - environmental threats are basically controllable. There will be challenges, setbacks, maybe a disaster or two, but, in the long run, human ingenuity will find a solution to environmental problems. In this issue-by-issue approach, oil spills can be cleaned up; greenhouse gas emissions from cars can gradually be reduced; degraded habitats can be rehabilitated; industry can become sustainable; and societies can adapt to any changes in the climate that may occur. This view holds that concerns over projects such as the Alberta oil sands - or fossil fuel development projects in general - are those of doomsayers and pessimists who will be proven wrong. In other words, be optimistic. Canada's energy reserves are going to mean great things for the country.

There is a second viewpoint. It is one that many environmentalists have come to espouse rather late in the game. This opinion holds that true environmental responsibility and protection cannot co-exist with economic growth. It foresees a world rocked by the impact of climate change, with little remaining natural habitat and greatly reduced biodiversity. Where once the woods rang out with the songs of dozens of different bird species each spring, we fear a future where only the sounds of commoners like starlings and blue jays are heard. Yes, there may be clean air and water but it will probably be a lonelier world - at least for those of us who remember how it was.

As David Suzuki expressed in his meeting with the editorial board of *The Globe and Mail* last week, environmentalists should have been fighting for the abandonment of economic growth altogether. "We thought that if we stop this dam, if we stop this clear-cutting, that's a great success. But we didn't deal with the underlying destructiveness, which was the mindset that attacked the forest or wanted to build the dam," said Suzuki. He has realized, as have many others, that meaningful protection of the environment is impossible in a scenario of continual growth. In a showdown between growth and the environment, growth always wins. In

order to achieve this growth, of course, we have to burn fossil fuels, which, in turn, causes climate change, the biggest game changer of all. Growth also means increased consumption and habitat destruction, since everything we consume comes from nature. Habitat destruction, in turn, spells the end of the road for countless species.

I guess it really all come down to whether or not you accept what science is saying as being true. In other words, do you believe what the climate scientists are forecasting about future weather patterns, what oceanographers are observing in the coral reefs, what ecologists are saying us about the demise of the cloud forests and what birders are observing each increasingly silent spring? Why would we not take their findings as seriously as we do the research on the causes of heart disease and cancer? For those of us who do believe what science is saying and who have grown up with a close connection to the natural world, we can't help but feel a deep sense of sorrow.

So this weekend, like many others, I'll be out picking up litter, enjoying the spring weather and trying to feel positive about my efforts. However, in the back of my mind, I'll also be thinking that healthy, species-rich environment is fundamentally at odds with how we function as a society in 2012. What the solutions might be is hard to say. I suppose we can only speculate at this point and hope for the best. Let's not forget, though, that change can come about deceptively fast. I will talk more about that next week.

For those wanting to take part in an Earth Day event, the annual Jackson Creek Clean Up is once again being organized by Otonabee Conservation. Meet at the Monaghan Rd. entrance to Jackson Park at 10 a.m. on Saturday. You'll be provided with bags and gloves, but don't forget to wear boots.

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