

# localnews

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## LIVING

# Dethroning King Consumption

## To fashion a better, liveable future we must understand what is truly important

Last Thursday was a beautiful spring day. I was north of Buckhorn with a friend doing an informal census of the unprecedented wave of butterflies that arrived last week and enjoying the record-early emergence of spring ephemeral wildflowers. The voices of migrants such as hermit thrushes, ruby-crowned kinglets and yellow-bellied sapsuckers were everywhere.



Drew Monkman

OUR CHANGING SEASONS



DREW MONKMAN Special to The Examiner

Is it not time that we seriously consider limits to growth? If not, what will be left?

However, in a number of locations, the bird song had to compete with the constant din of heavy machinery and trucks operating at nearby quarries. Although quarry operations have every right to be there, I couldn't help but see them as indicative of the ever-expanding presence of development - here and everywhere else in the world - slowly consuming and degrading the natural world around us. I also wondered: "At what point does this stop? How much is enough? Does the ever-increasing flow of consumer goods like granite counter tops actually make us happier? What can ever remain of the natural world and our quality of life if we continue down this path?"

### A HEALTHY BIAS

As you can see, I am biased in this debate. Many would say naive. My bias is that a healthy environment, rich in biodiversity, should be allowed to exist deep into the future, not only for the benefit of future generations but for the happiness of people living today - including me. What a tragedy it is to be losing so much beauty, mystery and stunning accomplishments of millions of years of evolution. Yet, I think I can safely say that many others share my sense of foreboding and feel at some deep level that we cannot keep going the way we have been. We know that our present economic system is not making us happier, is detrimental to the planet and is not sustainable.

I am going to be presumptuous enough this week to present the broad strokes of what a sustainable, best-possible future might look like and how (this is the hard part) we might get there. Just about everything I'll say is wrought with conflict and may appear impractical but I'll put it out there anyhow.

I dream of a society in which the economic system and lifestyle of its inhabitants can continue far into the future. It is a profoundly conservative society - but true conservatism, dedicated to organizing human culture in such a way as to persist for millennia without degrading the life-support systems and sources of joy and wonder provided by nature. This is a world deeply respectful of the accomplishments of the past - everything from architecture to the arts - where we can feel deeply rooted in a "sense of place." This feeling of belonging would be further bolstered by witnessing the same natural phenomena and species year in and year out.

And now, for the first time in human history and thanks mostly to science, we have a much clearer idea of the sorts of behaviours and values that are necessary to build this kind of sustainable



A pedestrian mall in Munich, Germany

society. Here is a partial list.

- A new value structure. The integrity of the planet's ecosystem (environment) has to become society's most fundamental value. Without a viable ecosystem, society cannot function and there is no quality in living. We also need to realize that growth, at least in terms of material output, is not a sustainable value and is destructive when pursued vigorously.
- An ethic of conservation in everything from the best possible energy conservation practices to legislating that consumer goods must be easily repairable and built to last.

### GOVERNMENT ROLE CRUCIAL

- A re-engagement with the role of government. Voluntary, individual action will not get us where we want to go. It is human nature to want to take the easiest (and cheapest) path. Put more broadly, each of us will take the path of least resistance in how we live unless we all forced to take a different, more sustainable path. As in the case of tobacco control, a combination of new laws and taxes will be necessary - not taxes on income but on lifestyles and products that are destroying the planet.
- A reconnection with the natural world, its cycles and all it provides us: air, water, stable climate, food and the companionship of other species. Maybe most importantly, we need a much deeper understanding of how we, as humans, fit into the story of the universe and of evolution. This is a story that holds an unimaginable richness - and is true.

- An economy fueled by alternative energy, primarily wind and solar. Unbridled climate change, degraded oceans and global strife are not the future we want.
- Strict limits on the expansion of cities and roads, the size of houses, the availability of cheap, soon-to-be-obsolete consumer goods, etc. At the same time, we must promote growth in innovation, research and the development of sustainable, long-lasting products.
- Policies to bring about a gradual decline in world population through education, birth control, poverty reduction and the empowerment of women.
- A "new urbanism" based on cities designed for people instead of automobiles. This, of course, puts a premium on public transit, bicycles and walkable spaces.
- A society where most structures are small, dispersed and decentralized. Local rules and customs must be central to all decision making. Would we have got ourselves into the PCVS mess if we still had small, local school boards? I don't think so.
- A society in which decisions are based not on ideology but on the best peer-reviewed science, including the physical, biological and social sciences. To make the best decisions possible, the electorate needs to be well informed, hence the importance of gathering the best possible statistics and having a strong, impartial public broadcasters like the CBC. Social media like Facebook and Twitter are hugely important in this regard, too.

Of course, the obstacles are many.



If we do not find new development models, what will ever be left of the natural world and our quality of life?

Industry and government are very successful in convincing us not to take action towards moving to the kind of society described above. The message is always the same: "Don't interfere in today's economy just to possibly reap some future benefit." We are attracted by the lure of quick, easy profit and jobs - no matter what the cost to the future. The best current example is the environmentally destructive Alberta tar sands project. But we shouldn't be surprised by this state of affairs. With the way our political system is structured, politicians have no incentive to tackle - or even analyze and acknowledge - long-term threats like climate change or the collapse of natural systems. Everything hinges on the short term and on re-election a few years down the road.

### REJECT CONSUMPTION

It is not surprising that they are able to get away with this. Most of us still buy into the idea that "non-growth" in economic output equals decline. Furthermore, we continue to think (erroneously) that high levels of consumption make us happier. Numerous studies have shown that this is not true. Beyond a certain minimum level of material well-being (e.g., healthy food, a small but comfortable house, attractive clothing, etc.) additional consumption does not add to happiness. Because human wants are insatiable, a consumer society can never deliver its promise of fulfillment. The main determinants of well-being are barely related to consumption at all. Rather, they are linked to health, family life, friendships, meaningful

employment and leisure time.

For many people, the signs of environmental decline and economic unsustainability are not yet apparent. Supermarkets and malls still overflow with every manner of consumer goods and, for those people who are not paying attention, the steady decline of species, habitats, climatic stability and resources like phosphorus and easily accessible oil is not yet apparent. It's ironic that the slow pace of the decline is largely to blame for our inability to act. If it were happening faster - a sort of environmental Pearl Harbour - we could probably react much more adequately.

As I alluded to above, values might be the biggest part of the problem. There is still an unwillingness to point to certain values as unsustainable - the primacy of growth, for example. It needs to be said that some values lead to both personal and societal well-being and some don't. Certain religious values, too, especially around issues such as birth control and human dominion over nature, are still problematic in parts of the world.

### COGNITIVE SHIFT

So, how do we make the shift to this new society? How do we create the social and political will? These are the most difficult questions. I suppose we can look to examples of dramatic change elsewhere for inspiration: the rapid change in attitudes towards smoking, Germany's hugely successful move towards renewable energy through a "feed-in tariff," the success of blue box recycling, etc. It is quite clear, however, that top-down, international agreements such as Kyoto are not part of the solution. What appears to be most important is that there be a massive "cognitive shift." In other

words, a critical mass of people must simply come to recognize the folly of our present trajectory and demand government policies at all levels that move towards new economic and societal models. Half measures are unlikely to work. It's doubtful that we can have cities that are friendly to both cars and people, nor can we reduce CO2 emissions and at the same time have low gas prices and exploit the tar sands.

As Chris Turner says in his new book *The Leap*, we literally have to make the leap across the "chasm," leaving one way of doing business behind and moving to a new, sustainable operating system. We already have inspiring examples here in Peterborough of what the future can look like in sustainable buildings (Camp Kawartha Environment Centre), landscape (Ecology Park) and how our city can meet the challenges of climate change and declining oil reserves (Transition Town Peterborough). In fact, most of the tools and technologies are at hand. We simply need to commit to them whole-heartedly.

Nature is leaving us no alternative but to change, as "impractical" as change may seem. The question is whether change can be orderly and planned or chaotic and improvised as a result of some impossible-to-predict environmental collapse. I wish I could answer that question.

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