

# localnews

www.peterboroughexaminer.com

Editor JIM HENDRY jim.hendry@sunmedia.ca 745-4641 ext. 242

## LIVING

# Earth Day fights a losing battle

When so many live, work and play indoors, April 22 is a bittersweet marker

*"We cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well - for we will not fight to save what we do not love."*

Stephen Jay Gould

Like just about everyone who grew up in the 1960s, I almost always played outside as a child. In other words, I had the privilege of a childhood immersed in plants, animals and freedom from many parental constraints. Good times were associated with nature, be they canoe trips to Algonquin Park with my father, fishing with my grandfather, or simply spending an entire day catching frogs and turtles along the margins of Jackson Creek. Even during long car trips, I was always glued to the car window in the hope of seeing a bird or mammal of interest.



**DREW MONKMAN**

### OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Fast forward 50 years. On a recent March Sunday, my wife and I went out for a long walk in west end Peterborough. The sunshine and mild temperatures were wonderful. But yet, something was missing. It took me a while to realize that practically no one was outside. There was a complete absence of kids playing in the street or even in yards and driveways. For that matter, the only adults out walking were at least 50 years old. Had this been 1965, or even 1985, the streets would have been filled with kids out on their bikes, playing road hockey, having fun in the woods and fields or simply hanging out.

### EARTH DAY

Which brings me to Earth Day. Instead of a sign of hope, April 22 has become a bittersweet occasion. As much as we have seen some environmental victories in recent decades, the overall trend continues to be one of regulatory inaction, loss and decline. Despite all that science is telling us about everything from climate change to species extinction, woefully little is being done to address these problems.

Sadly, I don't even sense that the majority of Canadians are really bothered by this lack of response. I am perpetually astounded that there is not more public outcry over the direction that our federal government is taking when it comes to dismantling environmental protection, research and monitoring. It's as if climate change and habitat destruction are abstractions and that the near-extinction of so many species is of no real importance. I get very little sense that most people are even aware that nearly every aspect of our planet's environment is under siege.

Why don't we care more deeply? Have people somehow become completely self-absorbed? I don't think so. I



DREW MONKMAN photo



CY MONKMAN photo



DREW MONKMAN photo

have come to the conclusion that much of the reason simply lies in our lack of personal connection to the natural world and our scanty knowledge of even the most common plants and animals. The end result of this disconnection is a very limited sense of what we are losing.

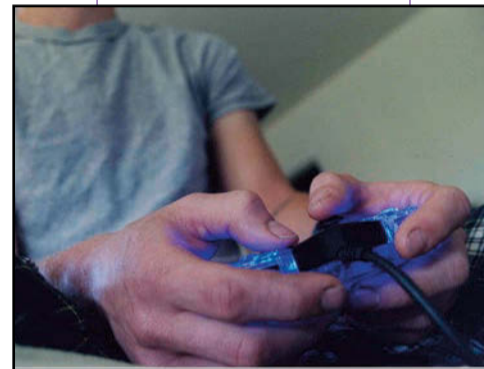
### RETREATING INDOORS

You might ask yourself how this disconnection manifests itself. Let me provide a few rather telling examples. As I wrote in the introduction, maybe the most telling manifestation of a nature disconnection is that fewer and fewer children and younger adults are spending time outside. A manifestation of this is that the number of visitors to national

parks in both the U.S. and Canada is in a persistent decline, as is the membership in nature and environmental organizations in general. Those that do belong to groups such as Ontario Nature form a sea of white hair at most meetings. Related to this, when I am birding at Point Pelee National Park each spring, I am now hard-pressed to find more than a handful of people under 50. I even hear that first year students in biology and environmental studies at Trent University (students who you would think would be knowledgeable) are largely unfamiliar with Ontario's common plants and animals.

Flipping the problem around, let's consider what a strong personal con-

nection to nature might look and feel like. There are, of course, countless ways to connect to the natural world, be it through birding, cottaging, fishing, hunting, camping, hiking or simply spending time outside walking. For a naturalist such as myself, it can be summarized as "always paying attention" and noticing what is happening around you. It means being aware each and every day of signs that the seasons are slowly changing, tuning in to the presence or absence of bird, frog and insect song, noticing the mix of tree species around us, appreciating how the smell of the air changes with each passing month and being able to identify and describe the most typical elements of the flora, fauna, landforms and climate that characterize the Kawartha region. As much as anything, it is simply a feeling of comfort, integration and familiarity - being among friends - when out in nature. The upside for society as a whole is that by feeling this emotional connectedness, you automatically want to do your part to protect the natural environment.



Children who take part in activities like this "bioblitz" (top left) are less likely to spend their leisure time indoors. The author's early exposure to nature included canoe trips with family and friends to Algonquin Park (left right: Ian Blaiklock, Doug Sadler, Drew Monkman, Clay Campbell, Eric Monkman). That all leads to adult outings like a birding trip to Point Pelee Provincial Park (left).

There are lots of reasons that explain how this disconnection has come to be. Some, I have already alluded to. At the largest scale, centuries of human

coverage about sexual predators. For some people, there is also a fear of the unknown and even that nature is inherently scary and dangerous. According to Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods* factors such as these have literally "scared children straight out of the woods and fields." Having four children myself, I fully understand, too, that the many demands of homework, sports, music lessons and work consume much of the time and energy that young families have available - but certainly not all of it.

### URBANIZED SOCIETY

There is also the fact that 82% of Canadians now live in urban settings. This means that the traditional ways that humans have experienced nature - as farmers or simply by living in rural communities - are vanishing. Because we are increasingly crowding into denatured cities, those natural areas that do remain take on more importance than ever. That is why I am hoping that you may consider voicing opposition to the strong possibility that a road will soon be built through the Parkway Corridor, one of Peterborough's most significant and easily accessible natural areas. Your comments, however, have to be submitted by tomorrow, April 19. Email them to [kevin.jones@aecom.com](mailto:kevin.jones@aecom.com), including your name and address. More information on the Parkway can be found at [http://www.peterborough.ca/Business/Studies/Parkway\\_Corridor\\_EA/Public\\_Consultation.htm](http://www.peterborough.ca/Business/Studies/Parkway_Corridor_EA/Public_Consultation.htm)

This year, let's not limit our involvement with Earth Day to picking up garbage. Let's not even worry about the inherent death knell to the environment of an economic system based on perpetual growth. Rather, let's think about our own relationship with nature and the example we are setting to our children and grand-children. Let's get outside, go for long walks and really start noticing and appreciating the wonderful natural world around us. You might even want to start by walking or biking the Parkway Corridor.

**NOTE:** In last week's article on El Salvador, I forgot to add that the cost of the all-inclusive package at Royal Decameron is very reasonable. December departures from Toronto are now available from Nolitours for \$749 + \$313 taxes and fees.

*Drew Monkman is a retired Peterborough teacher and author of Nature's Year: Changing Seasons in Central and Eastern Ontario. He can be reached at [dmonkman1@cogeco.ca](mailto:dmonkman1@cogeco.ca). Visit his website and see past columns at [www.drew-monkman.com](http://www.drew-monkman.com)*