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Nature has not exempted humans from evolution

Neil Dawe, Oceanside Star

Published: Monday, December 15, 2008

One spring in the late 1980s, a Canada Goose and her mate came to the Little Qualicum River estuary to nest. She selected a high spot in the marsh, built her scrape of a nest, and laid her eggs. Then she began her 28-day incubation duties while the gander stood guard nearby.

But her eggs never hatched. The high spot she had selected wasn't high enough. At some time during incubation in each of the years I followed the pair's efforts, tides in excess of 4.4 metres would flood the nest. The inundating waters would chill the eggs, sometimes for more than three hours.

This goose returned to nest in each of the following two years, only to select the same nest site, and have her eggs suffer the same fate. After the third year, she may have learned to nest on higher ground for I never saw the pair there again. But I doubt it.

Nature has ways of dealing with individuals that cannot adjust to changes in their environment. This maladaptive behaviour usually results in the elimination of an individual's genes from the gene pool – in this example young were never produced.

Occasionally, such behaviour results in the elimination of entire species, when individuals cannot adjust to change. They become trapped

by the normally adaptive, evolutionary responses to their environmental prompts. For example, some ground-nesting birds, such as the Tanna Ground-dove, became extinct when rats and other predators were introduced to their island habitat. The birds were wiped out, unable to change their nesting habits and avoid the ground-dwelling predators.

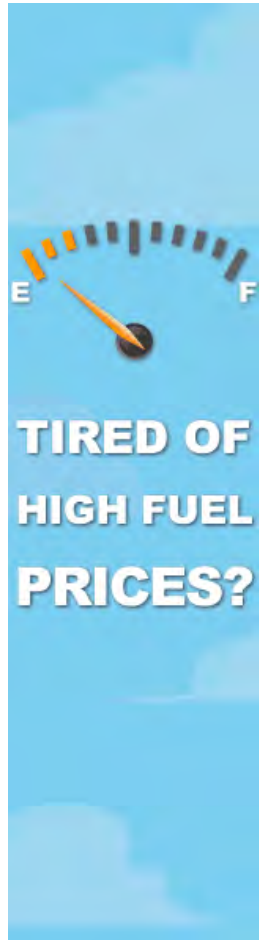
Despite our ingenuity and technological capabilities, Nature has not exempted humanity from evolution and its main mechanism, natural selection. And we too, have one maladaptive behaviour that could ultimately do us in: our unfettered belief in economic growth. This belief is so much a part of our culture that it is virtually taboo to question it, even when occurrences happen that should encourage us to learn anew.

Recently, we had a complete meltdown of our global financial system. Some causes have been put forward from the collapse of the housing bubble, to the sub-prime mortgage crisis, to the greed of the Wall Street bankers. But, in reality, our paper or financial wealth simply outgrew its collateral, our real wealth.

Real wealth is goods and services produced through labour and natural resources; it results in real income. Fiat money, on the other hand, is created out of thin air through debt. It is not real wealth nor does it produce real income, a fact sadly noted by investors of late.

Real wealth and real income have limits because labour and natural resources have limits. Fiat money, created from nothing through debt, has no limits. When fiat money exceeds real production, financial crises are likely to occur.

Because of our demand for more and more economic growth, economists and bankers on Wall Street were forced to look for more and different methods by which they might keep their part of the economy growing. Much of this growth was accomplished through debt such as sub-prime mortgages and credit default swaps. While real wealth is bound by the limits of the biosphere, financial wealth based on debt has no limits. Financial wealth is a gross overestimation of real wealth.



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So what do our current leaders do to recover from this economic crisis? They seek advice from the very economists and bankers who brought us to this unfortunate situation. Anything to get the economy growing again.

For example, President-elect Barak Obama sought advice from Lawrence Summers, former Chief Economist of the World Bank and now part of Obama's Transition Economic Advisory Board.

This is the same Lawrence Summers who, after a cursory review, co-signed an infamous World Bank memo, supposedly to "stimulate internal debate."

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waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that."

This idea, as some pundits have put it, is "undeniably correct," from a conventional economics perspective. Political commentator, Michael Kinsley, pointed out, "When you deny a rich country the opportunity to unload some toxic waste on a poor one, you are also denying that poor country the opportunity to get paid for taking the toxic waste."

How thoughtful. In conventional economics, economic growth knows no bounds, even when it comes to the health and welfare of the poor.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper also sought the advice of conventional economists through a round table at the C.D. Howe Institute (CDHI), an economic think-tank.

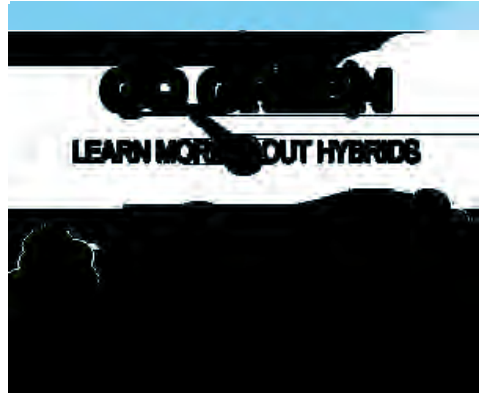
A recent CDHI report notes, "[Policy] effects over the decades would be fairly trivial compared to what can be accomplished by sustained economic growth."

There's that oxymoronic statement again. The fact that sustainable economic growth is physically impossible makes no difference as long as you believe it isn't.

Even the predictive capabilities of our conventional economic model are lacking. A July 2008 CDHI report notes that "Large improvements in Canada's terms of trade drive up Canadians' real income – freeing up money to buy more cars, homes, foreign goods, and other domestic goods [= economic growth]. This helps to explain our relatively steady housing markets and employment strength, amid slowing GDP growth."

Some readers might find it disconcerting – or at least interesting – that the Institute couldn't foresee this economic downturn we're in, which was to occur but two short months after the report was published.

This unbridled belief in economic growth will likely turn out to be our maladaptive Achilles heel unless we recognize and accept the physical and ecological limits under which the economy and all of us must operate.



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As Charles Darwin said in his famous work, *On the Origin of Species*, "In the struggle for survival, the fittest win out at the expense of their rivals because they succeed in adapting themselves best to their environment."

Memo to politicians, economists and corporate lackeys: please note Darwin does not say, "...because they succeed in getting their environment to adapt to them."

We need to bring our consumption, population and our economy in line with the carrying capacity of the planet. And soon. Failing this, we shouldn't be surprised to discover that our goose may well have been cooked!

Neil Dawe is a Registered Professional Biologist living in Parksville. Reach him at nkdawe@qualicuminstitute.ca

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