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Sustainability or growth -- what's your choice?

Michele Deakin, Oceanside Star
Published: Monday, November 17, 2008

The current, global economic situation and its harmful effects fill our media and our discussions lately. But are we missing the opportunities? As someone wisely remarked, "a crisis is a terrible thing to waste."

Perhaps these slowdowns can give us a real chance to step back and determine how we really want to proceed into the future, and how we can work together to try something new.

Pressing issues include a lack of affordable housing, cuts to funding for education and social programs, sustainable local water supplies, and dead zones and acidification affecting the oceans. Bird species are dying off, scientists are predicting the loss of Pacific salmon as a species by the end of this century, and 80% of mammals are expected to have disappeared within the same time. The current disappearance of bees, and thus their role as pollinators, is especially disconcerting as technology cannot provide that natural function, nor many of the functions provided by the myriad of organisms that are suffering these losses.

Governments and industry have been predicting these and similar impacts for years. The large oil companies have their own petroleum geologists who cautioned us about peak oil over 50 years ago.

Well over 20 years ago, climate change was predicted and now we know its effects occur much faster than even our most liberal models have predicted. Why has so little been done?

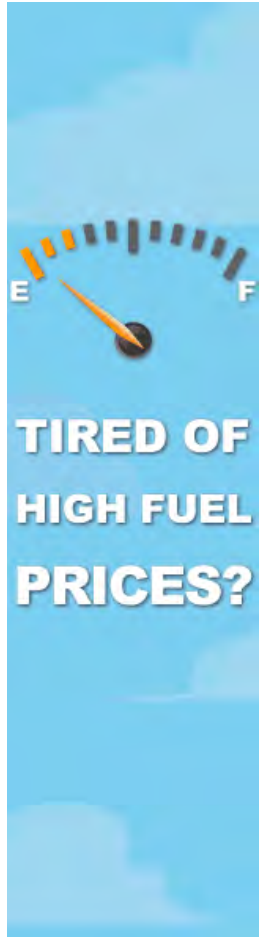
In 1988 Brian Mulroney established the National Roundtable on the Environment and Economy because the public demanded he do something about the environment. Lucien Bouchard was named Minister of the Environment. Bouchard believed the most important issue we had to address was global warming; it threatened our existence as a species, he said. Bouchard worked to develop a Green Plan to address these issues, but it was watered down to become something that was easily palatable to the public, business community, and particularly, the economy.

In 1977, the Canadian government produced the Franklin report, which pointed out that, in order to survive as a nation, Canada needed to conserve its resources and move into renewable energy. It was pointed out that Canada could become a world leader in those industries. That report was shelved by the Government of Canada, but countries like Denmark and Germany took similar reports to heart. Today, Germany has about 200,000 jobs in the wind energy industry. And Canada? Well, about 150 companies in the wind energy field today create about 1,000 jobs across the nation.

The point is that we have known about these issues and the solutions required for many years and have chosen to do nothing. Imagine if we had responded 20 years ago to Mr. Bouchard and the original intent of his Green Plan. Imagine if we had heeded the Franklin Report. Imagine if we had not let only the economic view colour our government's decisions.

What kind of opportunities have we missed and are we still missing because we let the economy control us?

As David Suzuki recently pointed out, we invented the economy. It is not a natural process over which we have no control. But it is, as ecological economist Herman Daly wisely pointed out, "a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment." We should be shaping it to work for us and not the other way around.



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There are people working in government and there are people running for office who would like to see change, but are afraid to make change without the support of the community. The public of all ages needs to understand these issues and clearly and firmly demand that they want a change even if they don't know the exact solution to the problems. Like the smoking issue, it was community understanding and acceptance of the problem that smoking was hazardous to everyone's health that encouraged the exploration and implementation of solutions.

In the meantime, we can look to the past for inspiration and ideas to see what change might look like on our path to a sustainable region. Back in the 1930s a lot of infrastructure, especially roads and bridges, were built in this country through government funding – they paid people to work on these projects. Perhaps we can look to a similar solution to maintain an income for people and restore the environments, while we determine our carrying capacities so we can then move forward with real information on local and regional sustainability issues.

Or we can look to the many communities looking to curb growth throughout California, Colorado and other regions of the U.S. None of these communities are anti-business or anti-economy. When asked about why changes are being made, most local administrators cite concerns about quality of life, traffic congestion, water and sewage capacity limitations, and preservation of natural and sensitive areas, rapid housing growth and more.

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Michele Deakin has an education in business and parks management and is involved in watershed planning, coordinating field work and public discussions related to healthy shorelines, and recovery work in local watersheds and estuaries. Contact her at mdeakin@qualicuminstitute.ca

