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It's a season for reflection and celebration

Michele Deakin, Special to Oceanside Star
Published: Monday, December 22, 2008

It's that time of year when we all join in traditions that are thousands of years old. Whether we celebrate the story of a child in the manger, the solstice, Kwanzaa, Hanukkah, or one of the many other cultural or spiritual events of this season, we often do so as part of a community. Even if we just enjoy the season, good food and visiting others, we do it as part of a community.

Some of these celebrations are based on stories and events of communities working together to fight a common war. Others are about the coming of a leader who united many. Still others are about celebrating the end of long days of winter and the coming of light, and/or the time to enjoy the harvest together after many months of toil. Regardless of the specific meaning, it is a time for celebration and reflection.

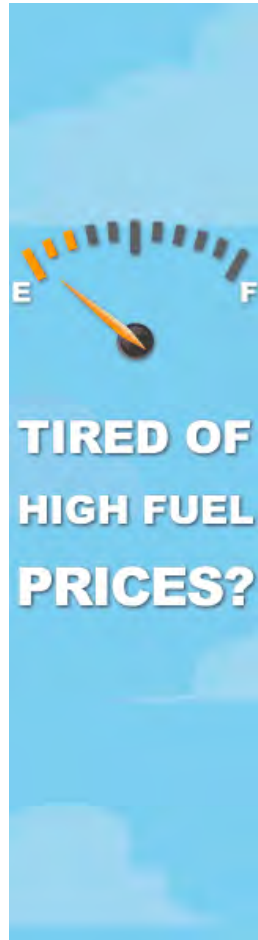
Throughout the year we have been inundated with many significant issues including the impacts of climate change, peak oil, concerns over water quantity and quality, debate over the future of the local harvest, and many other issues. Perhaps this time of financial downturn gives us an opening for more than the usual celebration and reflection.

For example, we can celebrate the many good things we have in our community that could help ensure a sustainable future should we choose to move in that direction. These include our existing natural areas that provide our quality of life and many critical services such as biodiversity, clean air and water, nutrient recycling, and others. We also have the potential to rehabilitate more of these natural areas and thereby increase the free services from nature. Our area also has many lands that are excellent for farming, or could be made so with limited effort, to support various crops and ensure our self-sufficiency in food basics. We have an existing small business economy, created and supported by people who live in and care for our communities. We also have a wide variety of skills and knowledge in this region, especially from retirees and our elders. These resources can help us find solutions to many future problems or issues.

Many of us in Oceanside came here for the same reasons: to live in a non-urban setting or in communities with small town atmospheres, lots of green space, high biodiversity, and a good quality of life.

In other communities it is this shared vision that becomes the basis of planning for the future. On Haida Gwaii/Queen Charlotte Islands, where I lived for 12 years, the varied interests in the communities came together and discovered that they had similar interests in what was important about how and why they lived there and not somewhere else. They identified these elements and decided to protect those parts of daily life in order to keep their community unique and healthy with a high quality of life for residents, and also from a tourism perspective.

It was these elements that became the basis for a Haida Gwaii-wide community plan. By reflecting on what is important about why and how they live where they do, people there found they shared experiences or criteria for good living.



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These indicators of a quality community crossed boundaries of age, culture, profession and education. They also highlighted the connections to the places that needed to be protected in order to maintain the very reasons people lived there. Once described in detail, people found that these connections included natural food sources and natural biodiversity as the basis for the other elements including community celebrations, expressions of culture, management of sustainable forests, and development of a tourism industry.

One definition of "community" from Wikipedia is "a group that is organized around common values and social cohesion within a shared geographical location..."

What also defines and shapes a community is the ability of its members to participate in its economy. The current financial crisis will test our community like few other challenges in recent memory. We will see increasing homelessness, poverty, and despair but also possibly the opportunity to explore new economic relationships based on local sustainability. This type of economy would focus on supplying our basic needs for food shelter and transportation at the local level.

Perhaps now is the time to pause and reflect on what Oceanside characteristics are important to each and every one of us. Why do we live here and not somewhere else, what characteristics would we like to maintain and which ones are non-negotiable?

What would our communities look like if they were sustainable?, And how can we best celebrate those elements we have already in

place? After all, a crisis is a terrible thing to waste.

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



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