

ECONEWS

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Promoting the Vision of a Sustainable Vancouver Island

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HOW MUCH DO WE VALUE YOU, NATURE?

It's tucked away in a small corner of Victoria's daily paper, the Times Colonist. "One in five species of world's vertebrates at risk, study reports", the headline reads.

A fifth of the world's mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and fishes are threatened with extinction, and in need of urgent conservation efforts, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature reports.

This story goes to the heart of our existence on this planet, and yet it merits only 11 column inches. In the same paper, a story about a teenage girl being murdered received 420 column inches - almost four full pages.

Is this how things will end - that we were so obsessed with our own affairs that we failed to see the larger threat until it was too late, and our planet's ecosystems were crumbling around us?

The Zoological Society of London says ordinary animals are suffering too. Their *Evolution Lost* report found that total populations of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish have declined by 30% since 1970.

In 2000, the world's nations agreed to reduce the rate at which habitats and species were being lost by 2010 - but every target has been missed.

What will it take for us to wake up? The whole fabric of our existence, which depends on nature's ecosystems, is unraveling. When our consumer-driven behaviour destroys their habitats, many species have nowhere left to live.

At the heart of the problem lie three destructive human behaviours.

The first is that we are acquisitive. If there are fish in the ocean, we like to catch them. If there is oil to be had by tearing down a forest, we tear it down.

The second, compounding the first, is that we are ecologically ignorant. Most humans can't explain how the carbon cycle works, or how the Earth's forests help cool the atmosphere.

There is no formal environmental education in our schools and colleges. Not a single political party seeks any evidence that candidates for office have any environmental education. The Good Ship Earth is heading for the iceberg of ecological collapse, but none of the crew has any eco-navigation skills. And nor do the journalists who cover the story. They report, in that scant 11 column inches, but they do not see or understand.



The waters off Vancouver Island used to be full of sea otters, which ate the sea urchins that grazed on the kelp beds. Inspired by the money they could get for their fur pelts, European sailors forced native Nuuchah-nulth men to catch them until there were none left. With the sea otters gone, the sea urchins ate all the kelp beds, and many marine species lost a safe habitat. That's how things unravel, while we're counting the money.

Our third destructive behaviour is that while accountants keep meticulous tabs on our financial affairs, they pay no attention to the value that Earth's forests, oceans, bees and beetles provide. Is there a single financial accounting certification program that provides a training of this kind?

In Switzerland, we are just learning that bee colonies provide an agricultural service worth \$213 million a year, thanks to their free pollination services.

Globally, the value of Nature's services has just been estimated at \$2 to \$4.5 trillion a year - up to 7% of the

global GDP - and yet we continue to allow its destruction. 60% of Earth's ecosystem services have been degraded in the last 50 years, with human impacts being the root cause.

In the lands west of Victoria, and south of Shawnigan Lake, privately owned forests are being clearcut for large-lot housing developments with zero attention to their ecological value. Only in the 1000-acre Elkington Forest are things being done differently, with a visionary plan to build a living eco-community while protecting 85% of the forest. (www.elkingtonforest.com).

What's to be done? The world's nations have just met in Nagoya, Japan, where they have hopefully crafted a new Convention on Global Biodiversity, with 20 new goals they will promise to meet.

We need to start putting a value on all of Nature's services, paying attention to a new thing called TEEB - The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity. (See www.teebweb.org and the Bank of Natural Capital - www.bankofnaturalcapital.com)

In Norway, the government is using 309 indicators to create the world's first official index of nature, with each scoring 0-10. The World Bank is working with ten nations, including India and Columbia, to help them include the costs of destroying nature in their national accounts. In Britain, there's a recommendation to create a new Minister for Green Economics.

Ecological education in every school and college. Ecological accounting for every major project. Annual ecological accounting for every province, state, and nation. If GDP is rising, but Earth's ecosystems are collapsing, what value will our trinkets have? All change. Everyone one deck. The iceberg is approaching, and we need to change course immediately.

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