

ECONEWS

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Promoting the Vision of a Sustainable Vancouver Island

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THE GREAT DENIAL

The big issues that threaten our existence were entirely ignored in the recent Canadian federal election, except by the Green Party. We should call it The Great Denial.

There are so many strands that are part of The Great Unraveling. Let me name just one:

The oceans are absorbing 50% of the carbon emissions that we pour into the atmosphere by burning fossil fuels. As a result, Earth's oceans are acidifying ten times faster than happened 55 million years ago, when acidification caused mass extinctions among marine species. For the full scary story, see www.bit.ly/oceanCO2.

There are those who insist that air quality has improved, water quality has improved, and many eco-things are better than they were 40 years ago.

It's true, there has been progress - after fierce opposition against the legislation that made it possible. When we look at the big issues, however, including the build-up of CO₂ in the atmosphere and oceans, the overconsumption of Earth's resources, and the extinction of species, which is between 100 and 1,000 times faster than the background rate, the smaller changes seem scarily like improvements in the air and water quality on the dance floor of the Titanic.

The instinct for denial is ancient. We use it to protect the bad habits we enjoy, such as smoking, drinking, and the consumer bounties that flow from credit card debt.

Our ancestors doubtless used it to pretend that the sea level was not rising after the last ice age. The Caliph of Baghdad used it in 1258 to pretend that the invading Mongol hoards were just another petty invader - days before the entire city was ground into dust, all its people killed, and the incomparable House of Wisdom library thrown into the river Tigris, turning its waters black

for months with the ink that flowed from its books.

How do we escape an equivalent fate for our civilization, and the many species we share the planet with?



There are two kinds of denial - soft (the regular version), and hard, which is accompanied by bristly pride and a personal self-image tied to always being right. The latter may be an incurable condition, requiring complete collapse before an unpleasant reality is finally acknowledged.

The environmental movement has been presenting the evidence of danger for over 40 years. Many people know that things are falling apart, and yet the trends continue, and our politicians remain in denial, stuck to the fixation with economic growth, and better ways to share the wealth that results from our ransacking the planet.

If our only tool of persuasion is further evidence of danger, we're in very deep trouble, for we have already seen that it is not working sufficiently to make a difference.

The other approach is the carrot - the vision of how good life would be without the smoking, drinking or credit card debt. We've got to give people reason to give up the benefits they think flow from one behaviour because they can see the benefits that would flow from a second behaviour.

The source of The Great Denial is the fear that if we act on the big ecological problems, the economy will fail, jobs will disappear and we'll all be broke. The response, therefore, must be a credible vision of a robust and flourishing green economy in which people can still earn a good income and enjoy their lives, while every economic transaction heals and restores nature instead of destroying it.

The task can be broken down into manageable chunks. For energy, including transport, electricity and heat, there is accumulating evidence that a future world economy could operate on 100% green energy, with no use of fossil fuels or nuclear energy.

For food, there is strong evidence that organic farming can feed the world, while restoring the soil and natural habitats with every turn of the spade.

For forestry, the WWF has found that if all the world's forests followed Forest Stewardship Council standards, we could meet our need for timber and pulp with far less forest than we do, allowing the rest to be left undisturbed.

We need to develop a similarly robust vision for each sector of the economy, and show how jobs can be created in the new green economy to replace those that will be phased out in the brown economy.

We need to do the same for critical subsystems, including investments, advertising, accountancy, and the rule-books that govern corporations, trade, and political lobbying and financing.

Every green project on the ground is a step in this direction, be it a bike lane, a green business or Vancouver's goal to become the greenest city in the world by 2020. We have to somehow synthesize it all together, to show how we can leave the danger zone, and enter the green, sustainable world we need and want so much.

Guy Dauncey