

## *Analysis*

### **Seeing the Trees through the Forest: Navigating Toward Environmental Citizenship in Canada**

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In Canada we seem to have matured from a society possessed with finding its "identity" to one which is now consumed with establishing new bearings and directions for environmental policies and education — incessant orienteering.

The Government of Canada, through its *Green Plan*, vowed to make Canada the industrial world's most environmentally friendly country by the year 2000. Through this initiative it sought to convey the new underlying realities of environmental policy. Problems were now seen as global, not just local or national. Solutions lay in changing the very nature of decision making in all institutions. A concept of sustainable development, of "planning for life," was promoted as the vehicle for establishing an environmentally literate citizenship.

The *Green Plan* set out a comprehensive series of goals, more than 100 specific initiatives, promised \$3 billion in new federal money, defined targets and scheduled action plans. The plan committed the federal government, among other things, to the reduction of the generation of waste in Canada by 50 per cent by the year 2000. It also promoted the practice of applied sustainable development in the forestry, agriculture, and fishery sectors (Doern and Conway, 1994). It was assumed that by providing educational materials related to these initiatives, the population would subsequently become more environmentally literate.

However, in the spring of 1995, the federal government announced it was no longer committed to the *Green Plan* and would be assessing possible replacements. This was followed by drastic reductions in Environment Canada funding. Though viewed as devastating by environmentalists, can this be seen as one more excursion, seeking a different path to the same destination?

## Back to the Forest

How does one make sense of what has taken place over the past few decades? In *The Greening of Canada*, Doern and Conway (1994) identified six areas of inquiry which might guide us to some understanding of what has led to the present state of confusion. These include:

- examining the political priorities of the Liberal governments of Pierre Trudeau and the Mulroney Conservatives including a close look at the effects of lobbying by scientific, environmental and business communities,
- identifying where environmental progress has been greatest and where failure has been most evident in the Canadian environmental record. And, considering the regulatory, economic, and exhortative instruments of environmental policy, and their interconnections,
- examining the relationship between the success or failure of environmental policy and key players such as political parties, other government departments, the provinces, business interests, environmental groups, and international institutions.
- inquiring into the federal government's capacity to advance the concept of sustainable development from its current status as a latent policy paradigm to a more entrenched one, central to all future decision making,
- probing keys to environmental progress in an age of increased economic competitiveness and business complexity - both domestic and international, and
- considering issues of communicating a more integrated green philosophy in an age of mass-media politics and the potential for environmental issues to become a source of Canadian national unity (pp. 4-6).

In addition to this, Doern and Conway (1994) warn that even if these complex institutional relationships are resolved, and organizational resources are properly managed, there will still be other dynamics to consider. These include relationships between biophysical features, scientific uncertainty, and spatial realities. There is, in short, the enormous task in coming to grips with the

unpredictable and subtle interdependencies of ecosystems and environmental problems.

### **A Meadow or a Bog: Activities Related to Environmental Literacy**

In focusing on the role of post-secondary institutions in developing environmental citizenship, one becomes increasingly aware of the limitations of any one institution in meeting diverse needs of peoples. In order to have any significant impact upon the environmental problems faced in North America, strategies employed must be built on partnerships.

In addition to the dissemination of applied technology training, our universities, colleges and other institutions are also an important focus for community development. It would be hard to imagine any area of training in Canada's post-secondary institutes which will not be affected to some degree by the urgent challenges we now face in discovering and applying more environmentally sustainable forms of development activity.

The National Round Table on the Environment and Economy identified environmental advocacy roles for educators and researchers associated with colleges and universities. These include corporate citizenship, academic programming, and some form of community outreach, all of which contribute to the development of environmental literacy. Eight areas related to environmental education were emphasized (NRTEE, 1992):

- *Curriculum Design/Student Projects.* One of the most effective way of instilling an environmental ethic in students is to keep returning to environmental concepts in a variety of projects.
- *Consulting.* There is a shortage of trained communicators available, at low cost, to help community groups formulate and express their opinion on environmental issues. As consultants to these groups, post-secondary personnel can be a valuable community asset by contributing their abilities and professional networks.
- *Research.* Post-secondary personnel can establish their own research programs. These help proponents maintain disciplinary currency and provide students with opportunities

to become involved in real field work. This can lead to links between the local community and the research community.

- *Public Involvement.* It is likely development issues will be increasingly subjected to public review. Post-secondary personnel are well placed to assist others in answering specific questions, and to contribute their own opinions.
- *Co-Management.* As the result of aboriginal land claim negotiations, a host of co-management institutes have arisen to provide governments with local input in management decision-making. Post-secondary personnel can be effective co-management board members because they are familiar with bureaucratic and collegial modes of decision-making. They can also be comfortable with, and sensitive to, local customs.
- *Non-Government Organizations.* Environmental NGOs have become effective lobby groups at all levels of policy making. They are valuable sounding boards for political decision-makers and have become effective at promoting their environmental agendas at the international level. Again, because of their communications skills, academic background and local perspective, post-secondary personnel can be effective advocates for the environment through affiliation with NGOs.
- *Municipal Government Involvement.* A popular environmental slogan is to “think globally, act locally.” Local decisions are the ones most likely to affect one's daily life, yet many people think of local governments as junior and therefore less important. However, important opportunities do arise to promote environmental perspectives at this level.
- *Media Relations.* The media are an increasingly effective educational tool. Good media relations can enhance one's ability to be an effective environmental advocate. Often reporters look for someone with local knowledge and credibility to comment on controversial environmental issues. Post-secondary personnel can act as resource persons to the media and thus advocate effectively, and at little cost.

No matter which of these areas are addressed by post-secondary institutions, they must be built directly into the mission statements and mandates of the institutions if they are to survive the political, social, and economic pressures of the 1990s. They must become responsibilities, not just added niceties.

### Marking Future Paths

In Canada, most are confident we can continue to build upon the positive directions that started with the National Roundtable on Environment and Economy. Even though we are faced with setbacks such the abandonment of the *Green Plan* and economic conditions which tend to drive environmental consciousness into a coma, we can continue to move towards an environmentally responsible population.

In our rapidly changing world, post-secondary institutions are being challenged to provide leadership in helping Canada, and our global community, move toward an environmentally literate citizenry. Even if we are successful in rethinking this leadership role, will it be quick enough to outpace the growing Canadian consumerism and degradation of our environment? The challenge is there: will there be any takers?

### Notes on Contributor

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### References

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