

Environmental literacy for dummies

By Skid Crease

Black Friday. Black Thursday. Black Friday Week. Or just the weekend.

The pre-religious holyday, pre-elf holiday sales always remind me how truly environmentally illiterate we are as a western society. It was headlined this week by a scene from a Walmart store where two customers battled over a \$5 Barbie doll.

Time for a refresher in environmental literacy.

The first rule of environmental literacy is that you cannot consume yourself into happiness. The inhabitants of Easter Island tried this and it did not turn out well for them.

The second rule is that if you do not learn from the patterns, the patterns will consume you. Noah understood this, which is why he built the ark. But like most who predict drastic climate change, Noah was considered a nutcase by mainstream society.

Environmental literacy has its roots in simple survival issues that were immediate to early humans. For example, you observe that the farming is good in the floodplain after the waters have receded. You build a village there. The village is wiped out in the next spring floods. You stop building your village there and move it to the highlands and farm in the lowlands seasonally. We are still working on this concept in the Red River Valley.

Another example is trees. Trees are the climate control centres of the world. If you take down too many trees in a short period of time, you do four things: disrupt the water cycle, remove the ability of the land to enrich the soil, release stored carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, and degrade all aquatic life downstream. The peoples of the Sahara Desert, Uttar Pradesh in northern India, and the inhabitants surrounding the Bay of Bengal understand this very well.

Environmental literacy can be easily understood in this example. You see a dog whose ears are flattened to his head, fur on his neck is bristled, lips are curled back revealing all of his very formidable teeth, and he is snarling menacingly. Do you a) back away slowly with your eyes down, or b) rush up to pat him saying, "Good doggie!?"

If we need to tell you the correct answer, you could be on your way to winning the next Darwin Award.

Here's another: you are in a busy office building waiting for an elevator at lunchtime. You know that many others will be on the elevator already either ready to return to work or leave for lunch. You a) press up close to the elevator door to get in first, or b) you leave room in front of the door for those leaving to get off before you enter.

Or try this one. You know that idling your car for longer than one minute builds up corrosive particles in your engine, wastes gasoline, and emits polluting effluent into the neighbourhood air. However, it is cold outside and your car has frosty windows. Do you a) leave your car idling for ten minutes until it is warm and the windows have defrosted, or b) dress warmly, brush off the snow, scrape the windows, and short idle before you drive away?

If you picked a) take the vehicle line-up behind Stephen Harper.

The Black Friday sales are simply an extreme example of environmental illiteracy. Here we take a season of the year in western society that is supposed to be devoted to love and remembrance, to family and community, and we turn it into an orgy of excess. Even the Grinch realized that this season doesn't come from a store. Perhaps this season means something much more.

I remember when I first began my environmental speaking engagements back in 1989. My children received one very meaningful present each, wrapped in a pillow case, and one certificate for the WWF Guardians of the Rainforest Program protecting the jaguar sanctuary in Belize. Together, as a family we protected over 20 acres of rainforest in gifts given to family members. I had the opportunity to meet one of the park rangers in Central America in 1990 to ask him if those gifts really made a difference. He said, "We would not be able to patrol and protect the sanctuaries if we were not for those donations. Thank you."

I remember one relative at the time, scoffing at the idea of giving back to the planet and reducing our consumption. I saw him on television recently, with his family, volunteering at the food bank, before heading out to all of the holiday sales. One step forward, two steps back.

Today, my municipality permits unlimited garbage bags the week after Christmas and New Year's holidays so that all of the Black Friday packaging can be carted off to the local landfill.

Perhaps this winter, or next, we can show a little greater level of environmental literacy in how we shop, commute, and care. If not, good luck with that Barbie doll.

Skid Crease is an award-winning outdoor and environmental educator, a keynote speaker, a storyteller, an author, and a community

volunteer. He taught with the North York and Toronto District School boards for 35 years, and officially "retired" from the Faculty of Education, York University, where he was a Course Director and Environmental Science Advisor. Skid has worked with scientists from Environment Canada (pre-2005), NASA, and the Hadley Centre for Climate Prediction and Research in a quest to put an understandable story behind the wealth of their scientific data.