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Top environmental issues for the coming year

By Skid Crease

After gazing into my green crystal ball, and consulting with several legitimate scientific organizations (like the mythical anchor William Duncan McAvoy on The Newsroom, I protect my sources) I can pronounce with more certainty than a long-term Weather Channel forecast, the top environmental issues of 2015.

To put a positive spin on it, I can also announce the things we can do individually and collectively to address those issues.

#5 War and Terror: whether they are radicalized Tea Party republicans or radicalized Islamic jihadists, they are equally dangerous. The policies of hate produce displaced and disenfranchised peoples by the millions. They could be the American poor living downstream and downwind of toxic corporate waste, waiting for the trickle down of free market capitalism to get to them. Or they could be the thousands of families fleeing war and oppression in the Middle East, from Palestine to Syria.

Peoples in extreme need do not care one whit about environmental issues. They care about safety, shelter, water, and food. Then education. And maybe then the home planet.

#4 Conservation and Protection of Land, Water, and Air: it is long overdue that every municipality put the primary needs of their communities first, by ensuring that any development does not adversely affect the quality of the land, water, and air in their communities. The agribusiness lobby must finally acknowledge that water pollution from phosphate enriched fertilizers and manure runoff is one of the biggest water contaminant sources in Ontario. Business and industry must finally acknowledge that many of the most toxic substances in our environment enter the planetary waste stream via their effluent. And both groups must accept responsibility to clean up their acts by complying with safety regulations such as proper storage of chemicals (more info here).

#3 Species at Risk: and that includes us. From Woodland Caribou to the Northern Shrike to the Blandings Turtle to the Wood Poppy, habitat alteration has vastly decreased the ability of species to adapt and survive. Whether it be resource extraction from forests or the tar sands, or urban sprawl and expansive residential development on agricultural lands, the impact is the same. More room for us, less room for them. Also, fewer healthy sustainable ecosystems for everyone.

#2 Toxic Chemicals: no more neonicotinoids on our plants; no more Triclosan in our toothpaste and hand sanitizers. Ontario Nature began a campaign last year to protect our pollinators, without whom our food sources would become totally dependent on Monsanto. And those who watch Kelly and Michael in the mornings might want to remind Ms. Ripa that Colgate Total toothpaste is NOT a healthy lifestyle choice.

#1 Accelerating Climate Change: still the number one issue on the planet. This single issue affects everything from environmental refugees to food production to insect disease vector displacement to species extinctions. From Nov. 30 to Dec. 11, the attention of the world should be focused on Paris at the UN Climate Change Conference, perhaps our last gasp to do something meaningful for life on Earth.

In Canada, we have a federal election coming up in October, hopefully. Whatever the government, a clear policy on conservation, species protection, economic sustainable development, human well being, climate change mitigation, and a carbon tax, polluter pay principle must be articulated. Every citizen can begin to demand that our elected officials at all levels acknowledge these priorities.

What do we as individuals and communities do about these issues? War ? be peaceful as a family and a community. Seek consensus resolution to our issues, and learn to live together. The optional choice is social chaos. Conservation ? the old adage, use less, buy for the long term, and "reduce, reuse, and recycle."

Species at Risk ? plant native plants in our yards and greenspaces, ensure developers respect wetlands and woodlots and watersheds, and if not stop their projects! Find out who are our wild neighbours. Look at how popular the Jefferson salamander has become!

To reduce toxic chemicals, simply refuse to buy products sprayed with them or containing them. Triclosan is an insidious ingredient in many "antibacterial" products. I would rather my children eat dirt. And let Home Depot and Walmart and Canadian Tire know that we will NOT be buying any of their spring plants if they have been sprayed, again, with neonicotinoids.

So, the future is really what we create, and if we are apathetic to the issues, if they are just sound bites on the nightly newscast, then we are truly deserving of our government and the future of our planet. It is only when we become informed, communicate our concerns to our municipal, provincial and federal representatives, that we can truly claim that we are a democracy.

If not, we are simply a herd, following the leader with the most bull.

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

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