

It's on the Ground, Stupid!

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Environmentalists have something to learn from the election of the new President and Vice-President of the United States. At election headquarters in Arkansas, someone had the foresight to place a sign on the wall: "It's the economy, stupid!" It was a constant reminder to the two candidates to keep their eye on the ball – to focus on what was then the single most important concern of the American public – the economy.

The lesson for environmentalists, whether we are concerned citizens or work for conservation groups, government, industry, or the media, is that we also should keep our eye on the ball and not get involved in activities and actions that lead nowhere.

Environmentalists too need a guiding sign: "It's on the ground, stupid!" The proof of success or failure of our work comes from observing what is actually happening to forests, lakes, streams, oceans, soils, fisheries, wildlife, upon whose health and productivity humanity is so dependent.

Tens of millions of dollars are spent annually by government and industry to convince the public that the environment is being taken seriously. An arsenal of public relations techniques is directed at controlling and misdirecting public opinion

There is a blizzard of press releases, meetings, workshops, round tables, green plans, policy reviews, working groups, task forces, public relation ads, conferences and reports. Many people involved in these time consuming, paper-generating processes even come to believe that talking is a form of doing.

I, myself, volunteer considerable time to these processes but with increasing disappointment and cynicism. A few of these "greening" activities seem to be well intentioned and lead to the odd positive change on the ground. But most (like Canada's Green Plan) are charades aimed at lulling the public into believing that important concrete steps are being taken to solve problems of over-exploitation and destruction of planetary ecosystems.

The situation is so bad that it has spawned a questionable kind of green growth. The new "green industry" has created hundreds, possibly thousands of jobs across the country – in governments, in polluting and resource industries, public relations firms, and for lawyers.

Volunteers and staff from environmental groups are invited (and expected) to donate their time to these seemingly green activities, thus unwittingly providing a veneer of legitimacy to this process. Worse, participation of environmentalists diverts efforts of our volunteers, saps our energies and blunts our criticisms. When environmental groups avoid these "green industry" activities, they are

sometimes accused of failing to participate – a subtle form of blackmail. Many who do participate eventually suffer "burnout" from the perpetual lack of concrete results. In the meantime, exploitation continues and intensifies.

The forest industry is one example. Someone should tally up the time spent on talk, studies, reports, and public relations. The latest deceptive practice is the use of ecological language such as; "managing on an ecosystem basis," "caring," "tending" and "ecosystem integrity" to mislead the public into thinking that the industry has suddenly become green.

In reality, in British Columbia, Ontario, Alberta and Manitoba (to mention a few) senior decision makers are waging the worst sort of hardball aimed at ravaging forests, reducing wilderness areas and generally exploiting anything that can be converted into a dollar.

The forest industry, backed by government, is studying ways to "improve the consumer's opinion of the industry's environmental record." An Environics poll recently revealed that 71 per cent of Canadians oppose the use of toxic chemicals in the forest. In response, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) which uses such chemicals widely, hired a consultant to analyse public opinion and advise the MNR on how to manipulate it. Many such examples exist.

So, is anyone getting things done right on the ground? Yes, environmental groups like the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) with the help of the Sierra Defence Fund, sued the federal government and stopped logging in Wood Buffalo National Park.*

CPAWS also helped prevent a mega-development from destroying an ecologically vital wilderness valley near Canmore, Alberta and is now trying to stop the logging in Algonquin Park. The Western Canada Wilderness Committee has worked for years to expose the B.C. forest industry's devastating logging practices, save some old-growth rain forests from destruction, and forced a major reappraisal of deforestation policy in the province.

And front line Greenpeace activists are succeeding through direct confrontation in places where excessive exploitation is taking place, risking their lives to protect the environment.

So, the next time you are invited to participate in yet another government or industry talkfest, ask yourself if the event or forum is really needed. Or, is the objective primarily to burnish the sponsor's image? If so, stay home. Write them a letter–challenging them to come down to earth, and say: "It's on the ground, stupid!"

*Editor's Note: However, while logging in Wood Buffalo was stopped, 10 years later (in 2001) the Government of Canada deliberately violated the ecological integrity clause in Canada's National Parks Act by giving formal approval for a major new road to be cut through the heart of the Park.

[Other Ecocentric Texts](#)