



# Mitigation

**Less bad is no longer good enough.**

**P**ROBABLY in every large institution, minor minions circulate illuminating and possibly accurate stories about the doings of their superiors. Back in the mid-1970s, the best story in Environment Canada concerned a file informally titled “What to do about the Queen’s brown trout.”

The Olympic Games were under way in Montreal at the time, and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, who had arrived on the Royal Yacht Britannia, was among the dignitaries.

Sensing a strategic opportunity, some Québécois activists claimed that the royal yacht did not have proper holding tanks, and asked federal authorities to charge Her Majesty under the *Ocean Dumping Control Act* for releasing contaminants into the St. Lawrence River.

Officials at Environment Canada chose to not comply. Perhaps they did not relish the research required to confirm or dismiss the allegations. Probably they were not eager to encourage irritating activists or embarrass the Queen or darken the Olympic mood. But their main concern was almost certainly that such attention to the Queen’s contributions would lead to unwanted comment about inaction on a much larger problem.

The City of Montreal itself had no effective sewage treatment and was dumping most of its raw sewage into the mighty St. Lawrence. Any brown trout of royal origin would be swimming in a great school of common floaters.

Regulatory hesitation in such matters was common then, as now, mostly

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because of priority attention to political allies and elite interests, desire to avoid public costs, and vain hopes that future technological advances would deliver cheap and easy solutions.

Action came more quickly when downstream recipients could exercise political influence and predictably lagged when the victims were poor, unorganized and/or not human. Greater Victoria still dumps its raw waste into the Strait of Juan de Fuca (despite active lobbying by a public-spirited citizen in a costume best left to your imagination), and the record of water quality protection for Aboriginal communities in Canada remains appalling. But elsewhere, the responsible authorities eventually staunch the flow of human digestive products into Canadian waterways. By 1998, even Montreal had managed to provide primary sewage treatment.

Much the same can be said for many other old contaminants. Columns of black chimney smoke are mostly gone. Acid precipitation threats have been reduced. Lead exposure is a fraction of what it once was.

All of these accomplishments, however, required decades of public agitation, insider lobbying and political wrangling.

The problems that were addressed reasonably well were less complex than the problems that remain – including the stir of multichemical soups and the rising tides of greenhouse gas emissions. And the successes achieved were the products of aiming low.

For the past half-century, we have focused our environmental efforts on reducing the adverse effects of our activities: abating serious pollution, recycling some used products, correcting the most boneheaded resource and energy inefficiencies, and setting aside a few wildish places as relic samples of what has otherwise been lost.

Meanwhile our global footprint has grown steadily beyond the sustainable carrying capacity of the planet for humans at our demonstrated level of managerial competence. In such a world, mitigation of significant adverse effects is not enough. The necessary objective now is to reverse direction, and to reconceive our institutions and behaviours to deliver human and ecological well-being at the same time.

When the Montreal Olympics were in full swing, it was still possible to believe that a growing economy and advancing technology would ensure the will, wealth and wizardry to rein in our abuses and fix what we have broken. That theory has failed. It is now just another common floater in the river of hopes betrayed. ♣

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