

A warning from nature for Canadians

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One of Canada's foremost environmentalists, David Suzuki, once observed:

"I feel like we're in a giant car heading at a brick wall at a million miles an hour. Someone's got to say, 'For God's sake, put the brakes on and turn the wheel.' But everybody in the car is arguing about where they want to sit."

On Thursday, the [Canadian Index of Wellbeing \(CIW\)](http://ciw.ca) releases a report tracking trends in Canada's environmental performance from 1994 to 2009. My hope is that it will empower Canadians to say, "For God's sake, put the brakes on and turn the wheel" because we can no longer accept — in this country or any other — the degradation stemming from our seemingly endless and unsustainable appetite for fossil fuels, water, metals and energy. The notion of limitless growth is no longer a viable economic paradigm.

Canada today is not a country in crisis. But there are clear warning signs of

potential threats to our environment and wellbeing.

Soaring greenhouse gas emissions, increasing waste generation and energy use, declining stocks of large fish species and shrinking water supplies in parts of the country are offsetting gains like declining air pollution levels, good water quality and healthy forest bird populations.

Some of these trends could eventually result in poorer health, a weaker economy, lower standard of living and diminished quality of life.

A starting point for better protecting, managing, and restoring our natural environment — now valued at more than \$1 trillion — is to recognize that it does not exist in a self-contained silo. The health of our natural environment is intricately interwoven with many other dimensions of our quality of life.

Scientists tell us that concentrations of greenhouse gas emissions (Canada's are up 24 per cent since 1990) are

reaching a level not seen in thousands of years, with a trajectory for levels not seen in millions of years. Climate change is already having an impact on our economy through droughts, floods and invasive species, which have reduced crop yields and eradicated vast tracks of forests in parts of the country. The landmark [Stern Review](#) on the Economics of Climate Change predicts that climate change will decrease global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by up to 20 per cent.

Increased waste generation (up in every Canadian province and three times higher per capita in Alberta than New Brunswick) can harm community vitality (landfills are a divisive issue), and skew our time use by creating a society where people work longer hours to obtain more "stuff." Shrinking freshwater supplies in parts of the country (down 8.5 per cent in southern Canada over the past 30 years) coupled with growing demand, can restrict recreation activities like fishing, boating, and use of community pools.

Declines in select species populations ripple forth in a variety of ways. One need only consider the widespread impacts on wellbeing that the collapse of cod stocks had in Atlantic Canada — from living standards to community vitality.

Fortunately, we Canadians are not caught up in some form of predetermined drift, rushing headlong toward an inescapable future. We have the collective capacity to shape our future, to decide which values we will embrace, which visions we will pursue and which policy decisions we will enact.

But preserving our natural resources and improving our environment for

future generations will require more far-sighted policies and enforcement by government, better stewardship by industry and lifestyle changes by individuals.

The CIW Network — an independent, non-partisan group of Canadian and world-leading experts now based in the Faculty of Applied Health Sciences at the University of Waterloo — has put forward a number of ideas for positive change. These include: improving enforcement of environmental policy, encouraging consumers to spend their money in a way that "votes" for the type of world they would like to see, sharing ownership of resources like bicycles and cars, and becoming ecologically literate and passing that learning on to future generations.

The path toward ensuring resilient and sustainable ecosystems is ultimately a human choice. We must begin to recognize the true value of our environment through policies, pricing and cultural attitudes.

We must think about the value of natural capital not only to address environmental concerns, but to provide a stable foundation for human wellbeing in all of its dimensions.

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