

It's not easy being green

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In June of 1989, a remarkable thing happened. When Environics asked Canadians what they saw as the top problem facing the country, the most common answer was the environment. We've asked this question quarterly since 1983, and answers have varied. Health care and national unity are common as top issues; unemployment and inflation appear depending on the economic weather. But 1989 was the first time the environment emerged as Canadians' most pressing concern.

It was an important signal. Certainly, Canadians were alarmed by the environmental disasters in the news then. The Exxon Valdez oil spill occurred in March, 1989, dousing that iconic oil-soaked seabird in Prince William Sound. Talk of acid rain and the depleted ozone layer were causing unease, and the summer of 1988 was the hottest on record, with droughts throughout North America.

But in addition to alarm about these events, Canadians were developing a new orientation to the environment, and a new understanding of where they fit into the ecosystem. In a sense, as Canadians moved away from traditional religion and the rules and relationships it entailed, environmentalism became a kind of secular religion; we moved from deference to a patriarchal God to harmony with a matriarchal Gaia. Like religion, environmentalism involves a commitment to something larger than oneself -- the earth and its systems. Environmentalism asks people to suppress their egotism and say, "I will make this sacrifice -- be it walking when I would rather drive, or kicking hard-earned dollars into the collection plate -- because my own desires are not the only things that count."

Today, amid mounting evidence of global climate change, we see the environment once again moving to the top of the public agenda. At our last measure, Canadians saw the environment as second only to health care as a pressing issue facing the country. It remains to be seen now whether Canadians will view the Conservatives' "made-in-Canada" environmental policy as a sufficiently serious offering to the green gods.

Like religion, environmentalism offers opportunities to individuals and their governments for both guilt and redemption. And like religion, the imperatives of environmentalism can be sufficiently demanding that we sometimes believe in them more than we actually adhere to them. If Canadian environmentalism was baptized in the sludge of the Exxon Valdez and underwent its confirmation in Kyoto, it still manages on occasion to lapse into sin.

When we have polled Canadians about their views on the environment over the past decade, they have consistently told us that they:

View environmental threats to be significant, and more serious than nuclear war or worldwide pandemics.

Believe that individual citizens can make a difference in helping to protect the environment.

Are willing to do their part, in terms of environmental purchases, recycling, and supporting regulations and taxes to further environmental protection.

Report taking some green steps, cutting back on home energy use and reducing unnecessary driving.

Despite these eco-pieties, we see behaviour among Canadians that is not entirely green. We see rising levels of per capita energy and resource consumption, as well as the growing popularity of SUVs, whose share of the Canadian new car market has almost quadrupled since 1990. Household waste is a perennial issue across Canada.

Are Canadians hypocrites who talk a good game but in the end do not really care about the Earth? We think not. Like righteous souls in a fallen world, Canadians are doing their best but encounter obstacles in their efforts to act green.

First, there is the matter of where we live. An increasing proportion of us live in low-density suburban housing tracts with limited public transit options, where a car is the only way to get by.

Second, like the rewards and punishments of the afterlife, fallout from the environmental damage we cause is difficult to predict and sometimes does not show itself until it's too late. Most people take it on faith that they should conserve energy and reduce waste, but don't feel immediate negative effects of environmental damage.

Third, Canadians receive mixed signals about the environment. On one channel, Rick Mercer tells us to reduce our consumption; on the next, we find an ad for a Hummer. Often, glossy ads from marketers make a stronger impression than devout messages about restraint and conservation.

This brings us to perhaps the greatest factor in the inconsistency between Canadians' claims about the environment and their actual behaviour: the tension between our roles as citizens and consumers. As citizens, we have a collective interest in a sustainable future. As individuals, we have daily needs -- and desires that our consumer society encourages us to see as needs.

This dual identity is every bit as true of governments that must balance the long-term necessity of maintaining an environment in which its citizens can live and work healthfully, and the short-term need to foster industry. Often the economic demands of today edge out ecological concerns about tomorrow -- whether for the individual getting to work or the government making a policy trade-off.

Government, of course, cannot fix everything on its own; we are all consumers and all guilty in some way. To a great extent, Canadians' behaviour vis-à-vis the environment will come from

peer pressure. The country's many successful blue-box programs offer a perfect example of social norms evolving around green behaviour: Everyone sees who puts out their box in the morning. It's like going to confession in the public square.

Our research suggests that Canadians genuinely want to lighten their footprints on the Earth; their expressions of concern about the environment are neither superficial nor hypocritical. But they cannot walk the narrow path of ecological righteousness alone. Canadians will look to government, institutions, and the private sector for active and visible leadership. It will be fascinating to see whether the current government, with its emphasis on traditional values including religiosity, will be able to integrate Canadians' secular religion into their policy agenda.

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