Conservation: Evolution vs. Revolution

Can we afford to 'tinker' around the edges of our crises, or do we need more radical action?

A well known 'green' website from the Pacific Northwest had a slot on national television early one morning recently. Their staff writer listed a few easy steps that people could take to make their lives more sustainable, such as switching from regular incandescent bulbs to Compact Florescent Lamps (CFLs), or by driving a hybrid car such as a Prius. This was featured on their blog (an interactive web log for those over 25).

A few people commented online to say how great this was, until one poster had the audacity to say that this was all very well, but that we're in such a mess that we really need a major shift in direction, not tinkering around the edges. This started a moderately heated discussion about whether a cautious approach works or whether we need to radically confront the issues. One of the points raised was that we must not do anything that upsets anyone, especially the media. The suggestion was to win the 'trust' of the media by starting with simple steps that we shouldn't 'rock the boat' until a point is reached where the media will 'trust' the green movement to promote more radical steps. Will this approach work? Should we devote time and money to it? What difference will it make?

I have nothing against taking small steps to make our society more sustainable. If every household replaced just one bulb with a CFL we would save enormous amounts of electricity. But is that enough? Not if we still drive a gas-guzzling SUV to the store to purchase it. Or if the other 20 bulbs in the house are still incandescent. Or if our houses are under-insulated so that we needlessly consume more energy to keep our homes heated. But what if like Australia our government banned all incandescent bulbs? Ultimately everyone would have to replace every bulb with more efficient versions. Now the savings would be tremendous. (Although I'm sure their would be an outcry from the usual suspects about their constitutional right to bear light bulbs.)

It might take a long time to persuade the current congress to do anything worthwhile but what if we persuaded our county to do it? Or persuaded our local retailers to stop selling incandescent bulbs? (I can see the headlines now: "Local police break up illegal light bulb ring on Decatur Island. Possession of 100 watt bulb triggers felony charges!") Now we are starting to make a real impact. If you prefer incentives to disincentives then how about if OPALCO offered a one-for-one trade in - one old style bulb could be traded in for one equivalent CFL bulb at no cost? One connection that few people make here is the relationship between electricity and water. The Bonneville Power Association generates the bulk of its power from hydro-electricity. Hydroelectric power plants have a significant effect on our rivers and the fish that depend on them. And the people that depend on the fish. And the Orcas that depend on the fish…

The different approaches of small steps versus big steps are not mutually exclusive. Small steps don't require people to make any significant sacrifices (like giving up their Ford 350) and are easy to implement. They can make significant savings, but not enough. Consider the advice from the Automobile Association of America to keep your tires at the correct pressure. It's good advice and easy to do, and it may save you 0.5 to 1.0 miles per gallon.

What if the government set the CAFE (Corporate Average Fuel Efficiency) standards higher? The auto industry will howl for a while - it claims it cannot possibly increase the fuel economy of its models without endangering human life (the passengers and drivers in its vehicles). The Japanese of course have figured out how to, as have the Europeans.

It's the same of course with water. Mandating low-flow toilets helps - but all the savings our lost when we wash our cars using the garden hose. In our urban growth areas we spend a lot of money and power to clean our water to drinking water standards then we flush it down the toilet, or water our lawns with it. Metering our water usage is often a sensitive subject - but paying for the water we actually use tends to focus us on whether we are using this valuable wisely. Nobody questions have their power supply metered - and offering lower rates to people who use power wisely helps to keep power demand lower, while having tiered rates to penalize energy hogs can also help reduce power demand.

The problem with the 'big' solutions is that they are often driven by policy - set either by the local or state government, or the boards of the utilities. It's much more difficult to get policy making organizations to upset the status quo, or take the risk of enduring any political fall out. It's also difficult to get any group of people to agree on a particular solution. (Witness global warming.)

But it's about time we came up with some major shifts in our policies. Be it keeping farmland in sustainable production, removing toxins from our soils and water, preserving and recharging our aquifers with clean water, reducing our energy demands, restoring salmon runs or cleaning up Puget Sound.

We can't sustain 'business as usual'. It's too late to be tweaking around the edges.

This article was written by Steve Hussey, a Natural Resources Planner with the San Juan Islands Conservation District.