Sustainability & The Storm
The Green Paradox

This month I'd like to talk about two topics: "sustainability and the storm", and the "green paradox".

Let's talk about the storm first while it's still fresh in our minds. I met a friend from Waldron the other day and asked him how he had faired during the storm. He joked "What storm?" For most people living on Waldron, and the other more remote islands, the storm made little difference to their daily routines. Their homes are more sustainable mainly because they live off-grid. They know how to store food and water, and salt away supplies for a 'rainy day'. They don't depend on the county and state infrastructure to support their lifestyles. If the grid is down they hardly notice - except for maybe not coming to the 'big island' to shop.

Contrast this with many other people around the islands. The family in the huge home with vaulted ceilings and all electric heating, with one small wood burning stove - mainly for effect. Or my neighbors who's radiant floor heating system (an efficient way to heat) didn't work because they needed electricity to run the pump. The inside air temperature dropped to 37 degrees. For someone elderly this could have been fatal - as could have been trying to heat the house with a propane cooking range.

You can build any style of house you want to today because with enough energy (and money) you can heat and cool anything. We've lost the incentive to be efficient and self-sustaining.

Part of the definition of sustainability is that you can live in your home without needing large inputs of outside resources such as water or energy. A well insulated home needs little energy to heat it - energy that could easily be supplied by small wood-burning stove if need be. In Canada there are some super-insulated homes that get all their heat from the occupants body heat (about 150 watts per person, plus pets) and the waste heat from appliances. A small rainwater catchment system could provide all the drinking water you need for months - even when you can't pump from your well. A small solar PV system could provide enough energy for lights during a power cut, and so on. If you grow or raise your own produce you usually learn how to preserve the excess for the winter season. Now you have provisions for most emergencies.

The lesson here is that leading a sustainable life naturally makes us less dependent on the outside world for power, water, food and other 'necessities'. As an island community we are even more dependent on the outside world for so much of what we need and take for granted. Take oil, gas, and propane - does anyone think that the situation in the middle east is getting better? Water, food and energy are now becoming security issues.

The Green Paradox

Caring for our environment means that we are constantly making informed choices and just as often we are making compromises. One of the keys to leading a more sustainable life is to understand the choices we are making and then making the best choice we can, at that time, and in those circumstances.

Consider cars: I'd love to drive a hybrid. They get great mileage and have ultra-low emissions. But I have a farm tractor that I tow from time to time and there aren't any hybrids that will tow 5,000

lbs. I am also remodeling my house and being able to carry 30 sheets of plywood in the truck bed is a great advantage. But knowing that I needed a truck I purchased the 'greenest' that I could - a Honda Ridgeline. Like most trucks it only gets 15 MPG to 22 MPG. But it is also an ultra-low emissions vehicle (ULEV) and on my mileage of about 8,000 miles per year it emits a similar amount of emissions to a hybrid driving 20,000 miles a year. As a second car I drive a Toyota Scion that gets about 38 MPG - at about half the price of a hybrid.

Forbes Magazine were recently trying to 'debunk' many green practices and they raised a few interesting points for debate. The first was that hybrid cars aren't green because of the extra embodied energy in them: they have more complex engines and many batteries for example. They argue that the energy used to create the cars far outweighs the energy they save. When hybrids first became available this was true, but now economies of scale are kicking in and this is less of an issue. Hybrids are also forcing many other car manufacturers to produce more frugal cars so that they can compete and this is good for all of us. Personally I am not a huge fan of hybrids - with my mileage a Scion serves me well, and the money I save could buy a modest solar PV system (after rebates). Or even better I could install a solar hot water heating system that would pay for itself much quicker. So many choices, so little time!

As we approach christmas and new year it's a good time to think about our priorities, and how we can lessen our impact on our land, our islands and our world. It's not always possible to make the perfect choice but with education and thought we can always make better choices. And if enough people make better choices...

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