

Redefining value



By Nate Smelle

It is Monday, April 21 and in a week from now Canadians will elect our next Prime Minister. As critical as this election is given the current state of global politics, at this point there is really nothing more that can be said to change anyone's mind about which party, leader, or local candidate will serve us best.

By now, most of us know the issues that those running care about, and where everyone stands in terms of their values. And for those who don't, well, the clock is ticking on your opportunity to cast an informed vote, so start asking questions and paying attention to the messages between the lines.

Last week I received a letter from an attentive reader in Saskatoon, in response to a piece I wrote a few weeks ago about, 'The ultra-greedy and the rest of us.' Shining a light on how the obscene accumulation of wealth among the world's greediest individuals is exacerbating global inequality and suffering, the article suggests that by making these billionaire hoarders pay their fair share in taxes we could dramatically improve the lives of millions of people worldwide. Essentially, the piece is meant to challenge readers to question why society protects the interests of the ultra-greedy at the expense of basic human needs.

Nonetheless, in the letter, the reader asks 'how much is the just right amount to accumulate, without ignoring the needs of the impoverished world?'

Great question! One million dollars? Ten million? One hundred million? One billion? Certainly a savvy economist could crunch the numbers and determine how much one individual needs to live a happy and healthy life free of unnecessary suffering to come up with a 'fair' number. This equation becomes more complex, however, when you factor in: the value of one's work; how they define a 'happy' and 'healthy' life; and, their contribution to society.

Subjective as they may be, each of these variables provide us insight into the measure of an individual's worth. For example, if an individual dedicates their life to leaving behind a legacy that fosters a peaceful and sustainable future for generations to come, would the value of their life and work not be greater than someone who has spends their time exploiting people and the planet for their personal gain?

The reader also questioned where I drew the line in regard to the limits of 'institutional' wealth such as that collected by churches which is allowed to 'accumulate with governmental help and limited accountability.' Just like measuring an individual's

worth, when calculating that of an institution such as a church or a fossil fuel corporation, it serves us well to look at the value of the institution's work; how they define success; and, their overall contribution to society.

In other words: Who is benefiting from the work being performed by said institution? Does this institution improve the health and happiness of more people than it harms? And, what kind of legacy does it leave behind for future generations?

So, here we are, less than 24 hours away from the 55th Earth Day—a day of observance not really assigned much worth by the powers that be—contemplating our definition of value. On this one day of the year we are asked to celebrate our home it is imperative to remember that we are living organisms interconnected with a planetary ecosystem that gives us everything we need to live and thrive.

Living in a world in which power is defined by profit margins and one's endless potential to accumulate wealth, it can become easy to lose sight of the basic truth that everything we value—including our life, loved ones, and even money—comes from nature. So the next time you hear a politician telling us that we can't afford to protect our life source, but we can afford to subsidize ultra-greedy individuals and institutions, we must not forget that the air, water, soil, and biodiversity upon which our existence depends is far more valuable than all the money on Earth. No economy, however booming, can replace the forests that breathe life into our planet, the wetlands that purify our water, or the pollinators that feed us. As one of our top five greatest Canadians Dr. David Suzuki suggests, we need to ask ourselves, "What is an economy for? Are there no limits? How much is enough?"

Our obsession with economic growth blinds us to the reality that true wealth is not measured in dollars, but in the vitality of our natural world and potential to love life. Nature is not a luxury to be taken advantage of by the ultra-greedy; it is the foundation of life itself. As the poet laureate of deep ecology Gary Snyder reminds us, "Nature is not a place to visit, it is home." Every breath we take, every sip of water, every bite of food depends on healthy ecosystems. Forests absorb 2.6 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide annually, buffering us against the worst effects of the climate crisis. Wetlands filter the water that sustains over two billion people. More than half of modern medicines are derived from natural sources. Yet we repeatedly choose tear down forests, drain wetlands, and drive species to extinction at an alarming rate—ignorant to the staggering costs we are incurring.

The numbers detailing our destructive behaviour recently released in a report by World Health Organization paint a grim picture of the future ahead. Biodiversity loss alone costs the global economy an estimated \$10-trillion each year, crippling sectors from agriculture to health-care. Invasive species contribute to 60 per cent of species extinctions, causing \$423-billion in damage annually. Meanwhile, more than 75 per cent of global food crops depend on pollinators like bees, whose populations are in dangerous decline. Despite our vast knowledge of the damage our species is doing to our home planet's capacity to nurture life, we continue to systematically dismantle the very systems that feed, heal, and sustain us—all in the name of economic growth.

It is a tragic irony that we measure success by the accumulation of wealth while undermining the true wealth of the Earth. As the American poet, author, farmer, and environmental activist Wendell Berry said simply, "The Earth is what we all have in common." Without it, there can be no billionaires, no stock markets, no civilizations. All the money in the world cannot buy clean air, safe drinking water, or a stable climate once they are gone.

Indigenous Peoples, who manage 40 per cent of the world's protected areas, show us that sustainable stewardship is possible. Their knowledge and traditions remind us that living in harmony with nature is not a relic of the past, but a necessity for the future. Chief Seattle's wisdom rings more urgent than ever: "We don't inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children." If we squander it now, merely for the short-term gains of the ultra-greedy, we leave future generations not wealth, but ruin. The climate crisis, biodiversity loss, water scarcity—these are not distant problems to be solved by someone else in the future. They are happening now, and they are the direct consequence of valuing profit over planet. If we fail to address this intersection of crises, we do so at our own peril.

Yet it is not too late. As the Swedish environmentalist and peace activist Greta Thunberg insists, "All we have to do is to wake up and change." It really is that simple. We must stop looking at the act of protecting nature as a sacrifice. Instead we must start seeing environmentalism for what it truly is—an investment in our personal survival.

So, how do we get out of this mess? Well, there is plenty of good advice out there when it comes to building a better, more nurturing world. For instance, the American philosopher and naturalist Henry David Thoreau suggested we, "Live in each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influence of each." Philosopher and advocate for the preservation of wilderness John Muir observed, "In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks." Nature offers us beauty, peace, and meaning—things that no amount of money can buy.

The world's foremost expert on chimpanzees, English primatologist Jane Goodall once suggested that naming trees could inspire a sense of personal responsibility: "If we have a tree in our name, we want that tree to live." Perhaps if we see the natural world not as a resource to be exploited but as family to be cared for, we will start to prioritize the long-term preservation of nature over short-term profit, restoration over extraction.

In the end, nature's value transcends economics. Without thriving ecosystems, there are no thriving societies, no innovation, no wealth, no future. It is time to recognize that the real treasure lies not in vaults or markets, but in the forests, rivers, oceans, and skies that give life to the web of biodiversity to which we belong.

Happy Earth Day!