

review

Achieving a Balance:

NRTEE Identifies New Environmental Challenges

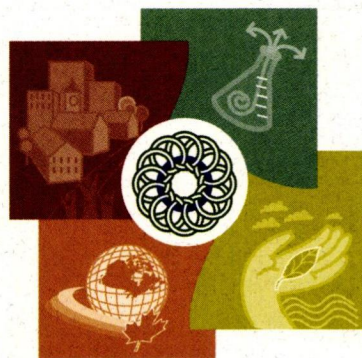
This special issue of Review explores four major challenges facing Canada as it moves into the first decade of the millennium and suggests some of the steps that governments and others should take to help ensure Canada's long-term prosperity and sustainability.

With its healthy population, strong economy and plentiful natural space, Canada has been consistently rated as one of the best countries in which to live. But how much longer can Canada maintain its privileged status and at what cost?

In a recently released statement entitled *Achieving a Balance: Four Challenges for Canada in the Next Decade*, the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (NRTEE) identifies four major challenges to Canada's medium-term prospects: accumulation of toxic contaminants, loss of natural spaces, deterioration of urban environments and global economic changes. "There are challenges on the horizon which will jeopardize our status within the decade, unless we begin mapping a response now," says Dr. Stuart Smith, NRTEE Chairman.

Two convictions underlie NRTEE's commitment to these challenges. First, the environment has not received the attention it deserves in recent years.

Governments have been preoccupied with economic matters, and essential activities such as government-sponsored monitoring of environmental changes have significantly decreased. As a result, the ability to track and deal with existing environmental issues and to predict new ones has suffered, as the recent contaminated water tragedy in Walkerton, Ontario illustrates.



Second, quality of life and economic prosperity are now and increasingly will be linked to the quality of the environment. Caring for the environment is one of the best investments Canada can make to ensure a healthy, sustainable economy.

Protection from environmental contaminants

Little wonder Canadians are worried that environmental hazards are affecting their children's health (Ekos poll, September 2000: 93 percent). In the past quarter century, the incidence of asthma has increased fourfold and there has been a 25 percent increase in the incidence of childhood cancers. As well, the proportion of children with allergies has risen dramatically in recent years.



Up to now, governments have acted to control the health risk of chemicals by examining individual substances and determining safe thresholds of exposure for each. But very little is known about how these chemicals interact.

Environmental Contaminants



Natural Environments



Global Economy



Urban Spaces



New Virtual Library (see page 3)

National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy

Canada Building, 344 Slater Street, Suite 200
Ottawa, Ontario Canada K1R 7Y3



Table ronde nationale sur l'environnement et l'économie

Édifice Canada, 344, rue Slater, bureau 200
Ottawa (Ontario) Canada K1R 7Y3

In fact, researchers now suspect that accumulated pollution and low-level exposure to several pollutants at once (also known as 'total pollutant loads') can have negative interactive and cumulative impacts on human health.

Accumulation of environmental contaminants may be causing subtle but widespread damage to human health. More resources must be invested in researching and monitoring the combined effects of substances, especially with respect to neurological and immunological functioning.

The health risks are especially high among the unborn, young children and the elderly, whose immunological and neurological systems are particularly vulnerable. Impaired neurological function can cause learning disabilities and diminished intellectual capacity, while weakened immune systems make people more vulnerable to disease.

The time to act is now. Children's health and the longevity and quality of life of all Canadians may depend on comprehensive and coordinated research on the effects of total pollutant loads and a revamped regulatory approach to implement this new knowledge.

Conserving the natural environment

Canada is home to one-quarter of the world's remaining 'frontier' of intact forests, one-quarter of global wetlands, and the largest caribou herds on the planet. But the pressures on Canadian wilderness areas are intense. It is estimated that 340 wildlife species are currently at risk of extinction in Canada, largely due to habitat loss as a result of industrial development, roads, agriculture and urban development.

Conservation biologists maintain that establishing isolated parklands is not enough. Integrated systems of land management are needed to protect Canadian wildlife areas by designating core protected

areas, adjacent buffer zones and outlying multi-use zones in ways that balance the need for resources, the livelihoods of inhabitants and the integrity of ecosystems.



The long-term prosperity of the economy must be built on the sustained integrity of Canada's environment. An integrated approach to managing large areas is needed that includes representation by governments, private landowners, resource industries, non-government organizations, Aboriginal peoples and rural communities.

For the past decade, governments in Canada have been working to establish a network of protected areas across the country. However, their success has been limited—only British Columbia met the target of protecting at least 12 percent of its land base by the year 2000.

It is clear that nature cannot be protected through government-owned lands alone. A truly integrated approach must recognize that important ecosystems often exist on private land, sometimes in close proximity to urban areas. Private transfers of land to conservation trusts and conservation easements have proven to be highly effective voluntary measures. Integrated approaches must also include partnerships with resource industries, Aboriginal peoples and rural communities, creating new opportunities for them to work towards habitat conservation while sustaining their livelihoods.

Managing urban spaces

Local communities — the places where Canadians work, live and play — are becoming overwhelmingly urban. It is estimated that, within 10 years, 80 percent of Canada's population will live in cities and 90 percent will live within a few hours' drive of the U.S. border.

Rapid urbanization has already led to a host of environmental problems such as poor air quality and loss of green space. Poor plan-

ning and design criteria have resulted in urban sprawl, inadequate infrastructure, contaminated sites and the loss of buildings with heritage or historical value. Often, the adverse effects fall disproportionately upon people who are poor, elderly, Aboriginal or young.



Improving the quality of life in cities will make communities more competitive in attracting firms and workers. The federal government must take a more active role with provinces and municipalities to support quality of life in cities.

Far-flung suburbs also have hidden costs, increasing dependence on personal vehicles and extended road systems which, in turn, lead to longer travel times, greater congestion, air pollution and a worsening of the climate change problem.

"There's an emerging window of opportunity to redesign and retrofit our cities," says Dr. Smith. Community commitment to a vision of urban sustainability is essential. So is strong political leadership. The federal budget for 2000, which allocated \$125 million to municipalities for 'green' investments, was a good start. However, the federal government should play an even more active role, cooperating with provincial and municipal governments to support projects such as public transit, protection of urban green space and social housing.

Keeping pace with the new global economy

In the new global economy, materials are being replaced by knowledge and technology. Globalization has also heightened awareness that long-term survival and prosperity are linked to the ability to produce goods without destroying the planet's 'natural capital.' While this trend bodes well for the environment, it may pose a significant challenge for Canada, whose economy has traditionally been resource-intensive.

Among the recent changes is a growing conversion to a reuse/recycle economy. The Worldwatch Institute notes that 56 percent of the steel produced in the United States now comes from scrap metal. In 1997, British Petroleum began to transform itself from an oil and gas company to a sustainable energy company. Here in Canada, Alberta's TransAlta Inc. has invested in wind energy as part of a \$100 million commitment to sustainable development.

To be successful in the new global economy, Canada's resource-intensive economy must diversify. Successful industries will also be those that minimize waste and maximize resource productivity. To navigate these changes, governments must support work force training and provide market incentives for change.

Because jobs will be significantly affected by these developments, training a skilled workforce will become imperative for Canada. Recognizing that better tools are needed to gauge current and future policies and approaches, NRTEE has embarked on a major effort to develop improved indicators of the draw-down of Canada's natural capital, as a complement to conventional measures of economic growth such as GNP. As well, NRTEE is pioneering the application of waste and energy minimization measures at the company level.

NRTEE also recommends that governments adopt more market mechanisms, such as emissions trading systems, and assess and redesign fiscal policies to benefit the environment and the economy.

Achieving a Better Balance

NRTEE has identified four major challenges facing Canada in this decade. These challenges result from an imbalance among Canada's environment, economy and standard of living, all of which are interconnected and subject to rapid change. Correcting that imbalance and meeting the challenges will involve significantly increasing investments in scientific research and monitoring capacity in order to manage environmental change.

Government and industry must truly value our ecosystem as an essential service for survival and prosperity. All decision making must now integrate a "triple bottom line" of concern for the economy, the environment and society.

As NRTEE's report points out, research and new data can help pinpoint the right course. But there is an even more pressing need for immediate action on the basis of what is known now. Either Canada addresses these problems within the new decade or risks its admirable quality of life. All Canadians — in governments, industry and the community — have a responsibility in the search for solutions. Says Dr. Smith, "This Millennium Statement is intended as the start of a national

discussion on these new challenges. Canadians are certainly capable of working together to maintain this country as the most desirable address on earth."

Copies of the Millennium Statement are available free of charge and an electronic copy is posted on the NRTEE Web site. Please visit our Web site (www.nrtee-trnee.ca) or contact the NRTEE Secretariat for a copy.

Identifying Sustainable Development Priorities: the Process

Given the complexity of the issues and conflicting views from different sectors of society, it is not surprising that decision makers and the public often find it difficult to respond appropriately. Sustainable solutions require the reconciliation of economic, environmental and social concerns at local, regional, national and global levels. Deciding where to act has become a major policy challenge.

The NRTEE's Millennium program addressed the challenges of identifying sustainable development priorities for Canada and proposed priorities for action by policy and decision makers. The year-long program saw the NRTEE travel across Canada raising public awareness on the four themes while engaging citizens to contribute their experiences and perspectives.



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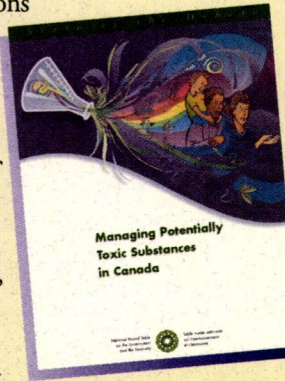
The NRTEE is pleased to announce the recent launch of the Virtual Library section on the National Round Table's Web site (www.nrtee-trnee.ca). The new section allows access to over 150 NRTEE documents and publications that are organized into 15 easy to search categories including;

- natural resources,
- community awareness,
- atmospheric issues,
- greening
- government policy and health.

New Releases

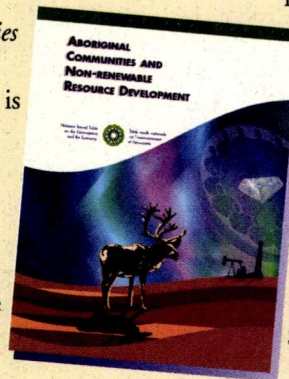
Canadians are increasingly concerned about the health impacts of chemical substances in the environment. Yet they still want the economic benefits of new chemicals, materials and medicines. In 1998, the NRTEE began a multistakeholder process to investigate how government assesses chemical substances and how it makes decisions about their use.

Managing Potentially Toxic Substances in Canada - A State of the Debate Report documents the results of that work, presenting 11 recommendations aimed at improving the decision-making processes designed to protect Canadians from health impacts that



could result from contact with dangerous chemicals in air, water, soil and food. \$15.95 plus taxes. ISBN 1-894737-00-8.

This report, *Aboriginal Communities and Non-renewable Resource Development*, is the sixth in the NRTEE's State of the Debate series. Based on research and consultations with over 300 key players in the Northwest Territories, the report provides recommendations to ensure that non-renewable resource development contributes to building sustainable Aboriginal communities over the next 10 to 25 years.



The report is a reference tool for all concerned with policy and decision making affecting non-renewable resource development and the sustainability of Aboriginal communities throughout Canada's North. The NRTEE expects that the findings and recommendations will resonate in all three northern territories and, indeed, elsewhere in Canada where opportunities exist to promote the economic, social, cultural and environmental sustainability of Aboriginal communities through the prudent development of non-renewable resources. \$15.95 plus taxes. ISBN 1-894737-01-6.

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Receptionist/Secretary

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Tania Tremblay

For more information, contact:

The National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy

Canada Building
344 Slater Street, Suite 200
Ottawa, Ontario
Canada K1R 7Y3

Tel: (613) 992-7189

Fax: (613) 992-7385

E-Mail: admin@nrtee-trnee.ca

Web: <http://www.nrtee-trnee.ca>

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