

SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENT

Redefining 'progress'

BY DANIEL MCKILLOP

An eye-opening presentation was given by Ron Colman at the School for Resource and Environmental Studies late last week, which left everyone with a more accurate and comprehensive account of economic prosperity.

The attendance was impressive, but even more impressive was the surprisingly radical content of the speech. Dr. Colman is currently involved in the construction of a project that began two years ago, designed to guide a more balanced economy by sustaining our regional ecosystems, and making that sustenance a priority.

As for credentials, Dr. Colman received his Ph.D with distinction from Columbia University in 1976, and worked as a researcher and speech writer with the United Nations. He was a professor of political science at Saint Mary's University, and now holds a position as full-time director for Genuine Progress Index Atlantic.

As everyone knows, the current numerical language used by economists and commercial policy-makers holds that time is money. Prosperity is measured according to the total market value of our goods and services produced every year, which is our Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The greater the GDP, the better the economic growth. Conventionally, the domestic or national worth of absolutely everything comes down to a translation into the Canadian dollar.

However, since the GDP does not give any monetary value to unused resources, the more trees that are cut down and the more fish that are caught, the faster the economy grows.

As Dr. Colman said, this customized approach to assessing resource value is "equivalent to a factory owner selling off his machinery and counting it as profit." According to current commercial thinking, the more we spend and produce, the more

growth we experience and the better off we are as a result.

It is evident to nearly everyone that a healthy environment is absolutely indispensable. It is also clear that the countries that constitute our world have to manage their natural resources better than they have in the past in order to create a healthy environment.

"Everyone agrees on the importance of acting," Dr. Colman told us, adding that there is a "tremendous consensus on the quality of life generally."

Indeed, the environmental alarm bell has been ringing for decades, ranging from the weakening ozone layer to excessive deforestation. Everyone recognizes improper resource treatment and management as a serious global problem.

Yet, as environmental preservation generates little or no immediate growth, and the market statistics are centred around the products, there is little pressure for policy-makers to oppose the current economic system of values.

So, just how serious is the problem in Nova Scotia? In 1958, one quarter of the province's trees were 80 years and older, with eight percent of the total tree population over the 100 year mark. In 1998, only two percent of Nova Scotia's trees are older than 80 years, and less than one percent are over a 100. This means a profound loss of forest canopy and species diversity, which increases the likelihood of disease and parasite destruction to the province's forests, and thereby lowers or threatens to lower Nova Scotia's overall timber value.

Although the GDP of the province is higher now than in the 1950s, the quality of life that Dr. Colman spoke of is highly degraded. There are fewer fish, the forests are in poor shape, and the organic soil quality has decreased. The food supply is not nearly as secure as it was in the 50s, despite the increases in the GDP. The economy has grown, but this doesn't necessarily mean that we're better off.

According to Dr. Colman,

environmental and ecological matters must be placed at the core of our economic system, rather than at the fringe. Such ecological qualities as species diversity, watershed protection, and organic soil must first be taken into account in their own right. In addition, their indisputable economic value as limited and sustainable resources must also be considered.

The Genuine Progress Index report, although currently in its initial stages, will attempt to shift the focus of what is considered to be economically progressive. The GPI Atlantic is the non-profit organization responsible for orchestrating the Index report project, which will provide Statistics Canada with a pilot for incorporating environmental and natural resource accounts into conventional economic accounts. The report will offer a means of running the economy by balancing a Gross Product with the knowledge needed to sustain the province's natural resources. The GPI is a pioneering experiment, because the data required to make a report of this magnitude has only recently existed. They hope to complete the project by the year 2000, which is fast approaching.

Incidentally, GPI Atlantic is offering graduate students the opportunity to research for this project.

The path to reaching a flawless, full cost accounting system, however, is a long way from a final destination. None-the-less, natural resource accounts must necessarily be placed at the core of the system. Provincial and national policies must reflect the need for sustainable use of the earth. For instance, subsidy and tax policies must be changed in order to reward rather than punish those who maintain sustainable resource systems. This would reduce the business costs of prioritizing environmental preservation while increasing the current market value of those products.

What will actually be done with this Genuine Progress Index in the coming millennium, however, remains to be seen.

A look at the
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Progress Index

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