

Reflections on Environmental Advocacy Work by Ken Rubin January 2022

Summary: My career as an independent investigative researcher has included uncovering challenging environmental situations. But it was more a long-time love of the land and work as an organic farmer that gave me a personal environmental commitment. And it was a recent decision with my wife Debbie to eco-gift that land that got me labelled an “environmental activist”. Looking back over the years, I have identified some of that environmental advocacy work. That over fifty years effort includes organizing, investigating, educating around a wide variety of environmental issues. That story I share here.

What is a direct commitment to the environment mean, both personally and in the course of one's public activities? This is my story and why I'm telling it now.

Recently, I was identified as an “environmental activist” in an Ottawa Citizen July, 2021 article about my wife Debbie and I gifting our farm as a eco reserve in Quebec. That got me thinking about the extent of my past environmental advocacy work as I was not a career environmentalist with an exclusive focus on pursuing environmental causes.

Rather, I have been more recognized for my citizen/consumer, transparency advocacy and investigative research work. And most often, as one whose regular numerous battles have meant using access to information legislation to ferret out information on a wide variety of issues.

But the singular action of eco-gifting was a thought-out environmental action brought on by a lifetime of respect for the environment. It was an act for area biodiversity to prevent the farmland with so many interesting features from being one more housing development site in the eco-sensitive Eardley Plateau area.

So I'm thankful upon reflection that a part of my past over fifty-five years of work has involved learning about and tackling environmental issues. Here I set out some of that work.

In the nineteen-sixties and seventies, that activist work centred around getting better urban environments. It took the form of fighting for tenant rights especially in Ottawa's downtown low-income areas, and in being engaged with fellow citizens in several neighbourhood planning exercises in Centre Town, Dalhousie and Sandy Hill.

The idea that cities could be better environments if planned at the neighbourhood level with better housing, transport and green spaces was addressed at countless meetings. But, alas, on the whole, that advocacy work was not taken to heart by most local landlords, developers, city officials or politicians.

My community research and advocacy has included, starting in the late

nineteen-sixties, continually monitoring the capital's major influencer and land owner, the National Capital Commission. The NCC has been both a friend and foe of the environment with a mixed record for the Capital's landscape – from green space maintenance, bike paths to being an arrogant and unaccountable facilitator, along with private partners, of ill-thought-out massive development, largely begun, in-camera, behind closed doors.

My investigative research on the national level began in the nineteen-seventies, and included probes into the conserver society, the alternate food marketplace, unsafe workplace environments, and toxic chemical uses in the food marketplace. One examination, for instance, as presented in 1971 to the annual Canadian Federation of Mayors and Municipalities meeting, was on citizen participation in a consumer-oriented transportation system in Canada. It went after poor planning, the car and express highways in cities. Another 1976 short study examined safety deficiencies leading to campaigns in environmental, transportation, food and drug, occupational, and home safety in Canada.

Much of my action research and organizing work in that period culminated with helping at Pollution Probe Ottawa coordinate, and produce information kits for a Canada-wide sustainable food awareness week in September, 1977. There were over three hundred activities in over thirty cities that sought to raise and encourage environmental changes in the food marketplace and healthier personal nutritional choices.

At the same time, I was, like others of my generation, turning more to healthy foods and food coops and to outdoor pursuits like year-round biking, camping, swimming and cross-country skiing.

But it was an interest in what a countryside environment could offer that captured my attention and that turned into a passion and enterprise. It was made possible by acquiring in 1977 a beautiful fifteen hectare farmland near Luskville, Quebec.

Becoming an organic farmer was undoubtedly the biggest personal environmental commitment and challenge that Debbie and I had made until then. We had done home composting and recycling and gardening but nothing on this scale. It helped that Debbie had a horticulture degree and some work experience in the floral industry as we began growing and selling vegetables, herbs and flowers.

We wanted nothing more than to grow such field crops organically and bring that harvest to receptive consumers and restaurants in the Ottawa-Gatineau area. We linked up with other organic growers and helped out in the local Canadian Organic Growers chapter with its events and projects. This activity - sustainable farming without chemicals and fertilizers and paying attention to the soil, was done for over forty years.

It meant growing and harvesting and marketing crops to area restaurants, hotels and others and a lot of hard work, and some public education efforts.

By the nineteen-eighties and nineties, I was more intensely investigating environmental problems like the continued use of DDT in Ontario, toxic sites such as at Le Breton Flats in Ottawa, the use of deadly herbicides like 2-4-D and dinoseb on crops that affected area environments and well drinking water, the alarming rate of pesticides found in fruits and vegetables, the secret files of the Atomic Energy Control Board on nuclear site problems, the effects of radon, asbestos and UFFI on the home and workplace environment, poor drinking water for first nations communities, and industry use/misuse of curbside recycling.

I did some of that work back then for the media, some for environmental groups like the Sierra Club of Canada and Greenpeace, and some on my own. One such investigation on my own uncovered just how many contaminants were found in Canada's national parks that many had assumed were pristine.

One local citizen environment group I helped create in Ottawa, in 1989-1990, was an umbrella group called Ecovision. It did draw from existing groups and individuals and campaigned against developing housing on area wetlands and sought more conservation planning and green space in Ottawa.

Ecovision lasted a few years and was the forerunner to a now-successful established group, Ecology Ottawa. Ecology Ottawa was recently deeply involved in trying through a 'people's plan' to get more consideration of environmental factors into Ottawa's new official plan.

During the same time period, was when I joined the Board of Directors of Friends of the Earth (FOE). My focus was on their attempt at a campaign on sustainable agriculture and food. I encountered environmental group politics there, especially over acceptance of corporate monies where I helped them work on the adoption of stricter corporate funding guidelines. But given their acceptance of natural gas industry funds for their climate change campaign, I ended up leaving the FOE Board in 1990.

While there at FOE, I conducted research on what a sustainable food system would look like. Out of that initial work came a self-published report in 1992 entitled, "Ecological Diet for Canada" .

It examined past citizen group efforts on issues like food irradiation, and alternatives to pesticide use. It identified many obstacles to widespread adoption of eating locally grown foods and made suggestions to begin to overcome the many barriers to a sustainable food system. It was ambitious in trying to provide a framework for those seeking to link the food we eat to the planet we inhabit. But it unfortunately at

the time generated little interest. It was to be my only environment-focused major study.

A one-time incredible experience occurred in late 1991 while coming to a Gatineau Park lake near our farm. Spotting three ancient ten foot-wide white pine trees near the road with red x-marks, I sprung into action with local authorities and saved those three trees that very day. Thus becoming a tree hugger and direct environmental activist for a day!

My environmental research efforts continued and centred in the 1990-2010 period more on three areas of environment concern: use of genetic engineering in crops; asbestos products' lethal effects, especially overseas, and on toxic mining contamination damage.

In the first area, I uncovered a whole set of questionable GE crop experimental activities like Monsanto tailored faulty GE research for its GE potatoes in Atlantic Canada. That did not go ahead but many GE products did. One particularly repugnant discovery was that public experimental farms were in conjunction with companies like Monsanto growing experimental GE crops. That led to cross-country 1993 protest demonstrations at those public farms organized by the Canadian Organic Growers.

As well, I did investigations into the lobbying efforts of the Canadian asbestos industry that federal and Quebec government contributed millions to for the promotion of this unsafe mineral here and abroad. Those records showed governments themselves lobbied countries looking at banning asbestos use.

I also did some research/access work on domestic and international contamination issues associated with the effects of mining. One probe was on the detrimental effects of mine tailings in Cree communities in northern Quebec, on people's health, the fish in the waterways, and on the lands. I also, with Mining Watch Canada, sought various records on the contamination Canadian mining companies were doing to communities around the world.

My only parliamentary environmental submission occurred in December, 1999 when I presented a brief to the House of Commons Environment and Sustainability Development Committee on the harmful widespread use of pesticides and lax pesticide regulation in Canada.

That same month, I coordinated a national environment awareness campaign to raise awareness about the dangers to the environment of permitting GE crops to be grown and possibly released into the surrounding environment and on GE foods not being labelled. The campaign events were done with local celebrity chefs and organic farmers in several large Canadian cities and received an enormous amount of publicity.

Another area that Debbie and I entered into beginning in 1999 was through an advocacy fund we set up with the Ottawa Community Foundation. It was and is for funding social change projects, including environmental research/advocacy ones.

Grants have included environment groups looking at toxic products in grocery stores, on the advisability of new pipelines, on the attempt to build a highway through environmental-sensitive land north of Toronto, the need for a buffer zone to prevent oil and gas drilling near Gros Morne, and a review of faulty regulations and practices that lead to problematic drinking water out West.

Continuing investigative work has, for example, shown Parks Canada wanting to build, without adequate study or consultations, a large pathway between Banff and Jasper. That helped get that project cancelled.

One access to information query resulted in 2010 showing the very active promotion of oil sands by the federal and Alberta government. And 2012 records obtained revealed that the top Privy Council Office official acknowledged that oil sands developments posed serious environmental and financial risks. That's now at the forefront given the recognized climate change crisis Canada and the world faces.

And digging for data on federal-provincial emergency and climate change planning helped show just how unprepared Canada is, including in BC.

Recently, I have been helping get government data for environmental groups on how the 2018-19 industrial project list under federal impact assessment legislation was set up so as to exclude smaller projects and just how the legislation is working. It reminded me that rigorous environmental assessment systems have not been in place when needed, as was the case when Canada dropped doing a full assessment of AECL's nuclear reactors' sale to China.

I am now as well engaged in looking at the lobbying the oil and gas industry is doing as climate change advocates demand the quick phasing out of fossil fuels while the industry's preference is to slow changes and continue the use of their extraction technologies while still getting public subsidies.

Over the years, I have participated in conferences and workshops highlighting the difficulties and strategies at getting environmental data. One such effort back in 1991 was where I spoke to this at an Ontario-based AD Latornell environment symposium; another effort was in 2019 where I held a hands-on FOI workshop with the Ottawa Riverkeeper citizen group.

It brings me finally to my most recent action, inspired after our eco-gifting of our farm last year. In an Ottawa Citizen January 14, 2022 op-ed, I advocated for much

greater area and national community conservation than Canada has been doing. And for that to succeed, it requires local volunteer land and property donations through land trusts.

The environmental forces we face are immense, not just because of climate change. The need for broader grass-root action is important.

So the challenge for all of us is how can we play a small part and engage in environment action?

I'll for one still be digging for government and corporate information, helping increase public awareness, and encouraging greater environmental advocacy.

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