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In Other Words

Time to Pull Out Heads of the Sand

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Description :

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What is the biggest environmental challenge of the 21st century? Global warming? Resource depletion? Pollution? No one really knows. Probably the sum of all these. But I'm beginning to think one of the biggest challenges is overcoming the fact that people are tired of all the depressing news about the environment.

The prevailing scientific opinion is that we're quite rapidly depleting many of the resources we depend on for our well-being. We've heard variations on these stories over and over to the point that its all become quite overwhelming. In fact, many people have stopped paying attention and the media has stopped reporting all but the most frightening predictions.

Pundits and the public often lambaste the media for focussing on bad news. But I think a real problem is not so much the focus on the negative, but the focus on conflict and controversy - especially in science. So, for example, while 99% of climate scientists think global warming is a serious problem that needs to be addressed, the media love to focus on the few who disagree.

This spring a European statistician wrote a book saying the environment is healthy and actually improving. The many scientists, environmentalists and citizens who worry about most environmental problems are misguided, he argued. They just don't understand nature like he does.

In spite of the facts that this man is not an expert in the fields he is critiquing and has been widely discredited by his peers, he has become a media darling. He has had speaking engagements across North America, front-page stories, editorials and more. Why is he so popular? Simple - he assuages our guilt about ecological problems. Like a travelling tonic salesman, he tours the land telling us what we would prefer to hear, making us feel better about ourselves and the world.

Contrast that with the UN Environment Programme's report, *The State of the Environment: Past, Present, Future*. It's pretty depressing stuff. According to the report, if we follow current trends of putting the "market first," and emphasising unchecked economic growth, 55% of the world's population will suffer from moderate to severe water shortages by 2032. We'll also lose up to 11,000 species of plants and animals, including one quarter of all mammals!

Not surprisingly, it has not exactly piqued the media's interest. Oh, it got its requisite billing as the "depressing environment story of the day." But then it disappeared. Shelved with many other such stories in the "let's not worry about it right now" file. How can we keep doing this? Are we so jaded as a society that we're willing to stick our heads in the sand when it comes to environmental problems, only to pop up when the soothing sounds of a Scandinavian statistician tell us not to worry?

I hate depressing news as much as anyone. Lately, I've found myself searching for good environment news, just to hang on to hope for the future. As Holly Dressel and I document in our book *Good News for a Change*, there are many examples of individuals, companies, organisations and governments trying to take a sustainable path into the future. We just have to stop ignoring the bad news and start taking the steps necessary to avoid the fate of the dire predictions we all hate so much. Maybe then, 20 years from now, the media will come to me looking for a contrarian view - something bad to say about the environment when the evidence shows that it has been improving for years. It's my hope that all I could do then is sit back in my rocking chair, smile and have nothing to say.

Post-scriptum :

Time to Pull Out Heads of the Sand

The author is the Chair of the David Suzuki Foundation, an award-winning scientist, environmentalist and broadcaster. He is well known to millions as the host of the CBC's popular science television series, The Nature of Things.