

GREEN SCENE

Blue Dot fights for rights to a clean world

by Elaine Golds

(published in the *TriCity News* – April 10 2015)



One of the spectacular “blue marble” images of our planet from space. NASA photo.

The Blue Dot initiative is a program undertaken last year by David Suzuki when he travelled across Canada to urge 20 municipalities to adopt a resolution to ensure Canadians have a right to clean water, unpolluted air, healthy food and the ability to live in a healthy environment. The name refers to the famous photo of Earth taken from the Apollo spaceship. This beautiful photo, which revealed our planet to be a fragile and finite blue planet provided a startling new perspective for many of its inhabitants.

Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms, adopted in the 1970s, does not explicitly protect or even address environmental rights, although it does guarantee us freedom of expression and protection from discrimination. This omission has left Canada in the minority of nations that do not yet recognize the right to a healthy environment. More than 110 nations currently recognize the right of their citizens to live in a healthy environment. It’s unfortunate Canada does not rank among them.

Within Canada, the province of Quebec included such rights in its Environmental Quality Act of 1978 and, more recently, in its Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms in 2006. Ontario passed an Environmental Bill of Rights in 1993. The Yukon, Nunavut and the Northwest territories have all passed similar legislation. To date, B.C. has no such legislation, although the NDP government attempted to introduce a bill in 1994 that, regrettably, was blocked by unions associated with the logging industry.

When municipalities pass such a resolution, they are declaring their residents have a right to breathe clean air, drink clean water, consume safe food, have access to nature, know about pollutants released into the local environment and participate in decision-making that affects the environment. The resolution also says that municipalities will apply the precautionary principle and that where threats of serious or irreversible damage to human health or the environment exist, the municipality will take cost-effective measures to prevent degradation of the environment and protect the health of its residents.

This declaration then goes on to state the municipality will, by the end of 2015: (1) ensure equitable distribution of environmental benefits and prevent the development of pollution hotspots; (2) ensure infrastructure and development projects protect the environment including air quality; (3) address climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and implementing adaptation measures; (4) responsibly increase density; (5) prioritize walking, cycling and public transit as preferred modes of transportation; (6) ensure adequate infrastructure for safe drinking water; (7) promote the availability of safe foods; (8) reduce solid waste, promote recycling and composting; and finally, (9) establish and maintain accessible green spaces.

While this list may seem like a tall order, it is, in fact, what most responsible municipalities are already trying to achieve. Some of these initiatives refer to responsibilities assumed or shared by Metro Vancouver (such as drinking water, clean air, waste-related issues, green spaces) while others, such as the availability of safe food, overlap considerably with federal or provincial responsibilities.

There is little doubt that most people want to live in such a place and that, in a warming world, we must take more progressive actions to ensure our world will remain capable of supporting billions of people.

The goal of encouraging local municipalities to pass such resolutions is also to build momentum so that such resolutions will eventually be adopted by the Union of BC Municipalities and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. Ideally, it is our federal government that should be adopting such a resolution but, with a pro-industry, anti-environment government currently in place, there seems to be little hope of achieving this in the near future.

We still have much to do to ensure a safe living environment for all Canadians. Adoption of the Blue Dot resolution would by no means be a magic bullet that will automatically ensure a safe and clean environment for all. But it would provide a legal framework that would underpin the passing of other much-needed and more detailed legislation by municipalities, provinces and, ultimately, the federal government. It's a good first step to take — and then, we must ensure our actions live up to our best intentions.