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There is Happiness on the Road to Saving the Planet

Who says saving the planet means sacrifice?

I recently purchased a new car gets around 800km for \$30. It is not a hybrid or a Smart Car, it is a Mini Cooper. And it is a blast to drive!

This column is not meant to be an endorsement for this car, but a statement on how we can make reducing our environmental impact both fun and financially beneficial. Even though I do what I can to lower my carbon footprint for moral reasons, I am still very interested in the associated economic savings. So in the case of my new car, I admit don't always focus on the litres per 100km number on the dashboard – it is the km to empty number I like to watch, after knowing I filled up for about \$30!

You may have read that the sales of hybrid vehicles have plummeted recently in line with falling gas prices. This gives some evidence that economics still rule most purchasing decisions. So I expect that once oil prices rise again, so too will hybrid sales.

The strong connection between the economy and the environment may become even more apparent in this period of economic slowdown. The reality is that we all have a finite amount of financial resources to invest in 'green stuff', whether it is as a government, an industry, or a household (on that note, my Mini cost less than a Prius). But the other reality is that we can make many environmentally minded changes for free that will actually save us money. For example, even though my car gets great mileage, I choose to drive as little as possible.

Another example is that insulating a basement will cost about \$1000, depending on how it is done, and it will pay for itself in two to three years. This is a wise investment if you intend to own your current home for a few years at least. And an incredibly easy change to implement in your life (particularly if you have programmable thermostats) is to turn the heat down a degree or two this time of year. This will save you a few hundred dollars per year - for free!

Changing to more energy efficient light bulbs in a government building or a business can be costly, and the payback can range from a few months to a few years depending on the type of lighting and how much labour is involved. But taking 'first steps' right away by just turning lights off in these large buildings has a huge energy-saving impact and can save thousands of dollars per year.

The reality is that the economy and the environment go hand in hand, and I believe that governments and the corporate world are beginning to accept this truth. If we keep consuming goods at such an alarming rate, we will, at some point in time, run out of natural resources to supply these goods. Yes, it is that stark and that simple.

So perhaps this economic downturn will push us into a new beginning - where the environmental impact of what we consume is considered equally with how much it costs.

As David Suzuki so wisely said, “Our personal consumer choices have ecological, social, and spiritual consequences. It is time to re-examine some of our deeply held notions that underlie our lifestyles.”

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