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Green Lessons from Across the Pond

I recently had the opportunity to spend a week in England, and while there I learned a few lessons about the climate crisis from their perspective – both consequences and solutions.

Several of my conversations with British folks focused on the effects of climate change on their country, without me mentioning what I do for a living. I was astounded at their observations and thoughts.

A gentleman from Scotland mentioned that the winters are much warmer now than only 10 to 15 years ago. How do they know this? Ten to fifteen years ago they used to hold curling bonspiels on the lochs (think Loch Ness or Loch Lomond) but can't anymore because the water doesn't freeze.

Another gentleman told me that they used to go skiing in the north up to a few years ago but cannot now because there is no more snow. He also told me he can now play golf all year, but unfortunately there are new bodies of water on the golf course now that weren't there a few years ago due to constant flooding.

Climate change is affecting their lifestyles right now. Not twenty or fifty years from now – right now!

Canada generates twice the amount of greenhouse gas emissions per capita than does Great Britain. Granted, we do have a colder climate, but that doesn't account for twice the emissions. So if that is the case, what are they doing differently than us?

The population of Britain is about twice that of Canada (60 million vs. 32 million). The area of Britain is about three times the size of New Brunswick. In other words, if this province had the same population density as Britain, 13 million people would call New Brunswick home. Can you imagine that many people living here?

The British don't have to travel as far between cities and towns, which is another reason that their greenhouse gas emissions are lower than ours. But, just as importantly, they don't travel as far within cities themselves. Their cities are much more densely populated than ours. Other than London, urban sprawl doesn't really exist. For example, the City of Sheffield has a population ten times that of Fredericton but its area is only three times larger.

Decades ago Britain decided that cities must have a green belt around them. It is absolutely fascinating - one minute you are in a city of half a million, then minutes later you are in the countryside. There is no urban sprawl. We can learn from that! Just because we live in a huge country with few people doesn't mean that cities the size of Fredericton should sprawl endlessly.

Population density aside, what are some of the environmentally-minded things happening over there that we should be doing more of over here on our side of the pond?

- Wind turbines are everywhere.
- Many pub menus state that they do not serve genetically modified (GM) foods, as well as listing local suppliers of food.
- A growing number of retailers in London use environmental benefits as their primary marketing tools for products, such as boots made of recycled plastic bottles and handbags made of recycled candy wrappers.
- Napkins in restaurants are sparse, and many napkins have notes printed on them like ‘we like our planet...so please use only what you need’.

We may justify to ourselves that because Great Britain (and Europe in general) is densely populated and warmer than Canada we can accept that our environmental impact is higher than theirs. They are not perfect, and neither are we. But the bottom line is that there is no harm in learning from others from around the planet, after all – we are all citizens of this earth.

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