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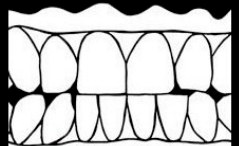
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Let's resolve to make it a real Happy New Year

By David Suzuki

Wouldn't it be wonderful if world leaders resolved to look at life in a different light this New Year? They could follow the example of Bhutan. In 1971, the small country, nestled in the Himalayas between China and India, rejected the idea of gross domestic product as the measure of progress. Instead, leaders focused on gross national happiness.

The idea is finally gaining traction around the world, and I'm humbled and pleased to be involved with a global initiative to promote it. World leaders took the concept seriously enough to hold a United Nations Conference on Happiness in April 2012, and Bhutan was recognized for its environmental leadership at the recent UN climate summit in Doha, Qatar.

Life isn't perfect in Bhutan. It's a poor country where most homes don't have electricity. Crime is increasing and climate change is making life difficult for the farmers who provide much of the landlocked country's food. Still, according to the *Guardian*, life expectancy in Bhutan has doubled over the past 20 years, almost all children now go to primary school and the country has been improving its infrastructure.

Bhutan has also enshrined environmental protection and intergenerational equity in its constitution. The Right to a Healthy Environment is another initiative I'm excited about. The David Suzuki Foundation and I have been working with environmental lawyer and professor David R. Boyd and Ecojustice to promote the idea in Canada. Boyd's book, *The Right to a Healthy Environment*:

Revitalizing Canada's Constitution, offers a wonderful analysis of where the world's nations now stand on the concept, as well as strong arguments for why Canada should join the more than 140 nations that have put environmental protection in their constitutions.

Caring for the environment can help achieve gross national happiness in many ways – by giving our children a more secure future, improving human health, ensuring resources are available to meet the needs of citizens, offering recreational and spiritual connections with nature and giving people a sense of pride and respect for the natural systems that keep us alive and healthy.

There's more to happiness than just having a clean environment – and Bhutan has yet to get there. According to research for the UN Conference on Happiness, "The happiest countries in the world are all in Northern Europe (Denmark, Norway, Finland, Netherlands)." Although these countries are wealthy, the study points out that money isn't the only factor, as happiness is decreasing in countries like the U.S. "Political freedom, strong social networks and an absence of corruption are together more important than income in explaining well-being differences between the top and bottom countries," the researchers write. "At the individual level, good mental and physical health, someone to count on, job security and stable families are crucial." Note that the happiest countries all have healthy economies and robust social programs.

We can also look at how various countries responded to the recent economic crisis. Those

that bailed out banks and reduced social spending are facing the same kinds of problems as before. Iceland approached its massive financial meltdown in a way that was pretty much the opposite of that taken by the U.S. and Europe, refusing to rescue its banks and increasing social spending, among other measures.

Iceland still has problems, but it has recovered faster than other nations, and its social safety net remains strong. Inequality has been reduced, and the crisis spurred citizens to propose and develop a new constitution, which is being considered by parliament.

There's an old saw that says the definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing over and over expecting different results. In the case of leaders who focus almost entirely on economic growth and corporate interests, it's a recipe for disaster. As George Monbiot recently wrote in the U.K.'s *Guardian*, "In return for 150 years of explosive consumption, much of which does nothing to advance human welfare, we are atomising the natural world and the human systems that depend on it."


As light gradually returns to the north and we celebrate a season of sharing, our leaders could brighten all our lives by considering what really makes our societies strong, healthy and happy.

I wish you all good health and happiness for the holiday season.

Written with contributions from David Suzuki Foundation Communications Manager Ian Hanington.

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