

350: What we need to save planet

By Eric Hansen

April 22, 2013

Climate change is upon us.

Key insights into an effective response are nearby, within our own Wisconsin conservation history.

We don't have to travel to the far-off glaciers of Greenland to search for answers. That accelerating glacial meltdown may be notable, but it is a symptom of the crisis.

Rather, let us reflect on the ebb and flow of human behavior because that is where not only the source but the solution to climate change resides.

I believe it is timely to remind ourselves of two fundamental facts.

First, all conservation, whether the relatively complex notions of catastrophic global climate change or the familiar concepts of contour plowing or catch and release fishing, boils down to the common-sense goodness of one theme: What we have today we also want to be here for tomorrow.

Second, conservation work, forging communitywide agreements on vital landscape issues, is work Wisconsinites know well. If we review the notable record of Wisconsin's robust citizen conservation campaigns, we will find considerable evidence that Wisconsinites have displayed bedrock strength amid conservation crises - and our accomplishments here have direct relevance to the planetwide issues we face today.

For example, 45 years ago, in a scene eerily reminiscent of today's climate change controversy, citizens and scientists were becoming increasingly concerned about the pesticide DDT. Among other concerns, evidence was mounting that DDT weakens the shells of bird eggs, notably those of eagles and loons.

Hearings were held in Madison, and DDT proponents mounted a brutal counterattack on the pesticide's critics. Citizen pressure grew, logic prevailed and Wisconsin led the nation in effectively banning DDT in 1970 - action followed by a national ban in 1972.

Today, over 2,000 bald eagles raise their families here in Wisconsin - 10 times as many bald eagles as 40 years ago.

Other examples include the campaign that prevented Perrier's plans for massive extractions from the Mecan

River aquifer, the citizen-led efforts that revitalized the Lake Winnebago sturgeon population and the massive citizens revolt that blocked ill-advised plans for a mine at Crandon, on the headwaters of the Wolf River.

Finally, let's check a key climate change measurement. I believe author Bill McKibben, an authoritative expert on climate change, is spot on when he says 350 is the most important number in the world; 350 is the carbon dioxide parts per million in the atmosphere that we have to get back to - to have any chance of maintaining the good life on Earth. We are at 392 now, unstable and rising.

Question. Isn't the concept of 350 the same thing as when we list five bass as the daily bag limit?

Didn't we adopt communitywide fish and game regulations because they were necessary to protect a threatened resource?

Today we are seeing the urgent wisdom of a similar planetwide agreement. The 350 level is what we need, the level for sustainability, what we must push for.

So, consider this. Supporting McKibben and 350.org's program to respond to climate change is as much common-sense conservation as limiting the use of DDT, preventing topsoil erosion or implementing fish and game regulations.

Agreement on the perils of DDT was not unanimous or instantaneous, but the evidence became clear and citizens swung into action, insisting that government and industry stop DDT's dangerous pollution.

Now we must demand immediate action to halt an even more dangerous pollution: carbon emissions that cause climate change.

The alternative is horrifying: our planet spiraling out of control into a nightmarish future straight out of science fiction.

Three hundred fifty is the level for a liveable future. Settle for nothing less.

Milwaukee author Eric Hansen is an award-winning conservation essayist and public radio commentator.