

THE INEQUITY OF “BALANCE”

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My mother would give my older brother a chocolate bar, to be shared “equally” with me. He would break the bar in roughly half, then nibble off the extraneous edges so the halves were even. If too much was removed from one piece, the other one required attention, to achieve “balance”. Eventually we would each get the same amount, although he had a head start on the share. This is where I first perceived the inequity of balance.

In discussions about development and the environment, those on the side of development always make the case we need a “balanced” approach, meaning the environment has to give so they can get their share. I have flashbacks to my brother dividing up scarce chocolate bars when I hear this dubious reasoning.

If the expression, balance, meant an equitable, or proportional sharing of resources, landscapes or chocolate, it would be easier to swallow. The reality is most of our landscapes and a majority of our natural resources have already been developed, changed, or in some way lost. If we have already converted 80 per cent of the natural world into some economic endeavor it seems a bit of a stretch to achieve balance as we carve up the remaining 20 per cent. We are not weighing two equal things.

The word balance is a chameleon, depending on who is using it. When the off-highway vehicle community uses the word what they say is “Yes, the environment is important, but we must find a balance.” What they mean is, “We want to continue to drive off road with a minimum of restriction.” Loggers say it’s important to balance protection of old growth forest against forest renewal through clear-cutting. What they really mean is “Keep the annual allowable cut high for better economic return.” The oil patch says we need a balanced approach on controls of greenhouse gas emissions because the proposed actions would cost too much. In other words, “action on climate change is aspirational and breathing is optional.”

Politicians talk of “balancing responsible resource development with the needs

of our diverse landscapes.” Only current politicians could combine two plastic words — balance and responsible — into a fog of bureaucratic bafflelegab.

Without a starting point, a benchmark in time to measure from, trend analysis and a sense of thresholds and limits, balance is a meaningless term. Instead of giving us direction for resource management it sets the stage for continuing to divide up the spoils until the bits left are not worth fighting over. It avoids all that uncomfortable argument about resource depletion, loss of biodiversity and ecosystem failure and allows one to think the status quo can continue.

In planning we tend to ignore everything that happened prior to the plan and allocate resources based on what’s left. Institutional amnesia magically erases the existing development footprint allowing further division to be made, as we continually add to the imbalance of future development against protection. And, as the imbalance grows, we are further separated from the environment that sustains and provides for us.

Balance sounds appropriate, as any smooth-sounding word does, but it is a disingenuous term with much room for manipulation and misunderstanding. Balance is a word much used in public relations spin. The hidden meaning of balance seems to be excessive, unequal division and use of resources, not an equitable sharing, proportional use or restraint. Balance has to convey something more than two wolves and a sheep voting on what to have for dinner.

When the word balance is used, look for imbalance instead. Instead of acts of self-restraint, “balancing” competing demands liberates us from the tough decisions of limits. Writer and conservationist Kevin van Tighem, obviously fed up with this word and how it is used has suggested a moratorium on its use.

Life balances itself on a precarious ledge; through our actions we can maintain it or propel it off the edge. In many cases, to restore ecosystem function and lost or declining biodiversity a drastic re-balance is necessary. That means rolling back the tide of development in a fine adjustment between giving and taking. Imagine the thorns and thistles of local resistance and

business opposition to that idea of balance.

So, how much is enough? Ecologists, like the world-renowned E. O. Wilson, have long called for “Nature needs half.” The rationale is we need to protect and maintain half of the landscape to maintain ecosystem functions, just to allow us to survive. Of course, much of the world’s biodiversity would ride our coattails on this one.

To this I suggest we use the term balance as you might for your bank account. Too many withdrawals, too many expenses and not enough income means we are going broke. Calculations from the WorldWatch Institute indicate the planet has available 1.9 hectares of biologically productive land per person to supply resources and absorb wastes. Yet, the average person on earth already uses 2.3 hectares worth. A report prepared by 1,360 scientists for the World Bank warns that about two-thirds of the natural machinery that supports life on Earth is being degraded by human pressure. Dr. Bill Rees calculates we in the western world are using the equivalent of something like two and half earths to meet our demands.

One might think we have failed to balance our ecological cheque books. It is ironic that those most obsessed with the idea government needs to eliminate deficit spending in the economy continue to promote it in the environment.

Victor Hugo, the famous 19th century writer, remarked that, “To put everything in balance is good, to put everything in harmony is better.” Harmony implies restraint, stewardship and sustainability. To that end we have to decide between what we want and what we need; a gulf exists between these two points, in part due to the blind use of the word balance. We can fall into a deadly trap of thinking balance implies we need not concern ourselves with limits. The implication is we can carry on this ecological Ponzi scheme forever.

In the end it is the recognition we can’t have it all, only a little. If we’ve taken too much, some needs to be given back. Balance that against the prevailing use of the term “balance.”

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