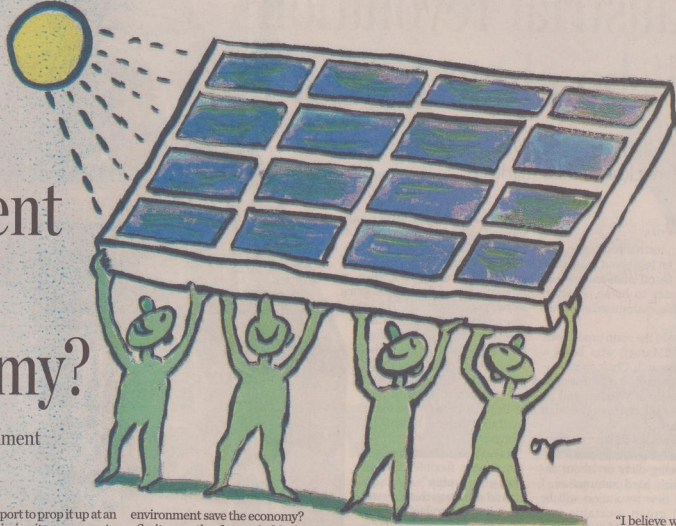


CANADA: THINKING AHEAD

Can the environment help save the economy?

Researcher believes the environment will be one of the big industries



BRIAN MCANDREW
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Joe Repovs built his Scarborough auto parts company from the ground up over four decades and watched it falter as business disappeared during the economic recession of the past few years.

But with his son, Bob, secure at the helm as company president, Repovs, who is chairman, has had the good fortune to sit back and brainstorm future business opportunities.

The little company that Repovs started in 1972 — Samco Machinery Ltd. — now does business in 39 countries around the world. But the Canadian operation needed something new to keep it not just growing but going.

And that meant going green, one example of how the environmental industrial sector is playing a growing role in the economy.

Repovs has strong environmental values and the growth of the solar industry in Canada caught his eye. Electricity-producing solar farms and building installations were cropping up in Ontario and there was something every solar-panel

needed: a support to prop it up at an angle to maximize its exposure to the sunlight.

Repovs had the answer and, with the support of Ontario's Green Energy Act that's boosting clean energy production in the province, has started supplying SunEdison with the support structures needed for its solar roof-top installations.

SunEdison is the largest solar energy provider in North America. The Samco Solar division of Repovs' company will be supplying SunEdison with tens of thousands of support systems.

Can the environment sector grow quickly enough to become a major component of the Canadian economy?

That question will be at the forefront of the CRC conference this week, where a select group of research chair holders at Ontario universities will gather to debate what the country will look like by 2050.

Barry Smit, who holds the research chair in global environmental change at the University of Guelph, will play the role of skeptic on the five-member panel on Economy and the environment. Can the

environment save the economy?

Smit says the future is bleak as long as the environment takes a back seat to the economy and that has to change before any progress can be made.

The advent of global warming should be a wake-up call but society continues to hit the snooze button. As one example, Smit cites the increased temperatures causing diminishing ice cover in the Arctic and threatening the polar bear population, which is finding it increasingly difficult to reach food sources.

Survival of the polar bear means nothing to the larger economic picture and for that reason alone the species may be doomed. Only a shift in society's values — wanting to protect the polar bear solely in the interest of the polar bear — will bring a sign that environmental concerns can become a major factor as a part of the economy, Smit says.

That moment won't be reached until society realizes that global warming is not threatening the planet, just its occupants.

"The Earth will adapt just fine," Smit says. "But what about us? We have to transform the way we live

on this Earth. We'll need a change of attitude in that when we want something, we just can't take it."

Society has ignored the threats of global warming the same way it once held a lack of concern about cigarette smoking despite the medical evidence that it caused deadly lung cancer, Smit says.

The oil and gas industries are working just as hard to persuade people and governments that global warming is not a looming man-made disaster as the tobacco companies tried to downplay cancer decades ago, he adds.

Last week's stunning setback to global warming concerns in Canada when the Senate, acting at the behest of the Conservative government, killed climate change policy legislation passed by the united opposition parties in the House of Commons. That underscores the pessimism that pervades much of the environmental movement.

Meanwhile, we'll have to content ourselves with the small steps being taken — like the solar panel supports coming from Samco.

"I believe we have to deal with the pressing environment, not only the air we breathe but the water we drink. I think the environment will be one of the big industries going forward," says Repovs, who started Samco after training in metallurgy at what is now Ryerson University.

"Will it surpass the size of automotive? Probably not, but will it be significant? Absolutely. I firmly believe that we have to stop polluting, the Earth and start using renewable energy. I've put my money up and made the necessary investment needed to be a leader in this province."

Also slated to participate in the panel discussion are professors Paul Wilson of Trent University, John Gunn of Laurentian University, Vincenzo DeLuca of Brock University and McMaster University's Stephen McBride.

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