

A sustainable future and how we can create one for Canada

SCIENCE RESEARCH

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In the 18th century, the beaver was trapped until near extinction. In the 19th century, the forest was burned and logged to near exhaustion. In the 20th century, cod stocks were depleted while salmon runs were disrupted or halted.

What will be the legacy of the 21st century? How can we create a sustainable future for Canada?

To alter behaviour effectively, we first have to advance our knowledge and gain a deeper understanding of the results of our actions. Such conceptual and behavioural change is the focus of the social sciences and humanities. Where the environment is concerned, the dimensions are multiple: political, economic, sociological, ethical, cultural and historical as human interactions with the environment are very complex—and reciprocal.

Consider the Arctic as a case in point. The circumpolar region is home to a diversity of peoples and traditions, indigenous and non-indigenous. Knowledge of these traditions, and of the interplay among them, contributes to a deeper understanding of the human experience and the urgent issues affecting the global environment and contemporary society.

SSHRC-funded researcher Sherrill Grace, from the University of British Columbia, and winner of a 2008 Killam Prize, has emphasized the importance of understanding and rethinking our attitudes and perspectives on the North. In her book, *Canada and the Idea of North*, Professor Grace explores the ways in which Canadians have defined themselves as a northern people in their literature, art, music, drama, history, geography, politics and popular culture. At the same time, she emphasizes new and emerging northern voices that contest the long tradition of representations of the North by those in southern Canada.

Since SSHRC first opened its doors in 1978, Canadian top scholars have received support for research on the environment and the importance of this priority has significantly increased in recent years.

In 2006, for example, SSHRC participated in the BOREAS initiative, a humanities and social sciences research collaboration to broaden and deepen the scope of research in and on the circumpolar North.

BOREAS is part of the European Science Foundation Collaborative Research Scheme, which provides a framework for national research agencies to fund multinational, multi-disciplinary collaborative research projects in key areas. The objective of the BOREAS initiative was to support international and multidisciplinary research teams from Canada, Denmark and Greenland, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Poland, Sweden and the United States, to carry out, in collaboration with northern populations, innovative research in human cultural development and societal adaptation. The areas of study included human ecology, governance and sovereignty, cultural resilience, language and identity, and cross-cultural philosophical understanding.

As a result of such initiatives, Canadian scholars are now collaborating with other international experts to enhance our understanding of migration, relocation and resettlement, and cross-cultural similarities and differences in perceptions and responses to rapid environmental changes in the North. Such research is very timely with the creation of Nunavut, increased concern about northern ecosystems, and renewed attention to Canada's role as a circumpolar nation.

As illustrated by the example of research on the North, Canada's social sciences and humanities scholars strengthen our collective understanding of how society's behaviour affects the environment, and how environmental change affects our society. Moreover, such research underpins new thinking and action to produce meaningful, long-term transformations.

Profound behavioural change happens on many scales, at many levels: individually, collectively, throughout communities and societies. The work of Carleton University's Tessa Hebb, director of the Carleton Centre for Community Innovation, provides an illustration of the kind of mass-scale change that promotes environmental

sustainability. Professor Hebb has become a sought-after consultant to pension funds for her innovative approach to helping them direct their investments toward environmentally responsible companies. Her efforts are enabling investors to influence corporate policy and effect positive change for society.

Looking far beyond our own borders also provides us with an opportunity to analyze and deal more effectively with environmental issues here in Canada. The University of Regina's Harry Diaz, for example, is studying the drying out of Chile's Elqui River Basin to determine the potential consequences of similar climate changes in Canada's South Saskatchewan River Basin.

In Budget 2008, the federal government allocated \$12 million to SSHRC for investment in new research on the environment and the North. With this new funding, SSHRC will be able to increase the contribution of social sciences and humanities research to fostering the entrepreneurial, knowledge and people advantages identified in Canada's science and technology strategy.

The additional funding will build upon the success of SSHRC-funded research, to enrich our understanding and to rethink our attitudes and perspectives on the environment, so that we may better adapt our behaviour to the changing landscape in urban and rural communities across Canada.

It is often said that we inherit the environment from our ancestors but it is also true that we borrow it from our descendants. At SSHRC, we are committed to supporting the best students, scholars and research partners in their efforts to create a sustainable future for Canada in the 21st century.



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