

Mel Phadtare is a Sustainability Practitioner, an Instructor with UBC Continuing Studies, and a Board Director of both EcoUrbia Network and Projecting Change Film Festival



Sustainability Reflections: How far has Vancouver come in five years?

Vancouver life through a sustainability lens 2006 – 2011

Mel Phadtare shares her personal observations

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In mid-2000 Vancouver, there was a real absence of ‘green jobs’ on the market. Unless you were looking for a volunteer placement, below market paid not-for-profit role or a role with extractives – which had an edge of green to it, typically in compliance – there were slim pickings. Certainly there was and remains a thriving scene of entrepreneurial small, start up firms – some of these have blossomed into big business such as Westport Innovations and Pulse Energy. Others have hit the sweet spot of social enterprise such as Saul Good Gift Co.

Today things are in a very different place – with a current BC green economy worth \$15 billion and 166,000 jobs to boot, the future is looking bright. In fact 2020 forecasts are up to \$27 billion for the BC green economy alone.

Today we are seeing new positions at senior levels being recruited across government, corporate and not-for-profit organizations. With titles like; ‘Director of Sustainability’, ‘Corporate Social Responsibility Consultant’, ‘Green Web Designer’ and ‘Green Innovator’, the green jobs market in Canada is buoyant. A series of elements underpin this massive shift in what has been, a relatively short time:

- BC Province’s pro-active, but not altogether supported, stance in 2007 to **tax carbon**. This effectively signaled market transition towards low energy infrastructure, products, and services in order to meet 80% GHG reductions by 2050.
- Gregor Robertson, former organic farmer and co-founder of ‘Happy Planet’ taking up Vancouver City’s Mayoral role in 2008. Shortly after in 2009, he recruited Sadhu Johnson, former Environment Czar with City of Chicago, as Vancouver’s Deputy City Manager. Add Councilor Andrea Reimer to the mix and this **dynamic trio** was bound to kick-off Vancouver’s sustainability trajectory in the right direction.
- **Vancouver City Council** pledging to be the ‘greenest city by 2020’ and committing to a string of initiatives including: Talk Green to Us, Food Policy Council, Green Streets, EcoDensity and Fair Trade City, to name a few.
- respected **organizations** like The David Suzuki Foundation and The Pembina Institute evolving from advocacy roles, to actively collaborate with business and government to achieve the fundamental change required, while refusing to compromise on environmental ethics.
- **media** ramping up their role in reporting on, and showcasing genuine change, such as: Green Space BC, Corporate Knights, The Tyee and blogger Miss64, to name a few.
- **events** playing a pivotal role in facilitating networks and bridging ideas include: Projecting Change Film Festival, Power Plant, Cascadia, Gaining Ground Summit, GLOBE, EPIC, Design Nerd Jams, Board of Change, LoCo, Cool North Shore Drinks, Connecting Environmental Professionals and Green Drinks Vancouver.
- **institutions** delivering on sustainability education accessible to non-degree seeking students, such as: UBC’s Continuing Studies Sustainability Certificate, Langara College’s Design for Sustainability, Kwantlen Polytechnic University Introduction to Sustainable Horticulture.

- changing role of **philanthropy** from ‘random acts of kindness’ and ‘hand outs’ to strategic investment, ‘hand ups’ and participatory investment. For example: Whole Foods Market selects charities to donate to, providing each customer with the opportunity to contribute a matched amount. Businesses are developing closer investment ties to their brand and impacts, for example 1% to Frogs is a signature program of Frogbox. Annual competitions, like Aviva’s \$1 million annual community grants allow citizens to vote for their favourites.
- changing **landscape of topics** from stakeholder engagement, recycling, CSR and climate change to: Site C, IPPs, zero waste, food security, affordable housing and biodiversity.
- shift to **Co-ops**: Vancity, and MEC have always shown leadership in ‘getting it’ when it comes to building community through doing good business. The cooperative model is diversifying with additions such as: The Car Co-op, Victoria Community Health Co-operative, and in 2007 the addition of a sustainability and GHG offset program as part of the Co-operative Housing Federation of BC.
- growing **presence** of sustainable programs such as: Bullfrog Powered, Vancouver Aquarium’s Ocean Wise, Green Table Network, and Climate Smart .

Even with all of this opportunity, sustainability in BC is still in its infancy with gaps in ecosystem service asset valuation and management, governance and accountability, and consumption patterns answering to what David Korten refers to as ‘phantom wealth’. We still need to reconcile as a society what we have as “perceived abundance” and how we chose to waste resources. Water use in Vancouver offers a good case in point. There remains an opportunity to carve out roles that do not currently exist, and to service a more sustainable society. Many people and organizations are fulfilling this niche, including groups like SOLEfood and EcoUrbia Network.

Much has changed in the past five years in the sustainability scene in Canada – for one – people are debating the term ‘sustainability’. As frustrating as this may be on one hand, on the other it’s a signal that sustainability has hit the mainstream. The general populous are seeing it, hearing it, and wondering what role it plays in their lives.

I would say quite a significant role in terms of our limits to growth and opportunity to conserve. Money always seems to be the lynch pin in our current capitalist dilemma. On the planet today there is 300 billion philanthropic dollars available. A further 18,000 billion government dollars exist. But 125,000 billion private dollars are available for investment right now. Those dollars can quite easily be ear marked for sustainability, saving the planet a near fortune in future costs, and peril.