

OPINION: Rural N.S. needs ethical, ecologically literate economics

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Buying local can help boost rural businesses in Nova Scotia, not only in the farm market sector, but in other businesses involved in the fisheries and forestry industries. (RYAN TAPLIN / Staff)

In his Feb. 3 column, **[How can rural N.S. prosper without resource extraction \(http://thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/1542500-black-how-can-rural-n.s.-prosper-without-resource-extraction\)?](http://thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/1542500-black-how-can-rural-n.s.-prosper-without-resource-extraction)**, (<http://thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/1542500-black-how-can-rural-n.s.-prosper-without-resource-extraction>) **Bill Black invited (<http://thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/1542500-black-how-can-rural-n.s.-prosper-without-resource-extraction>)** “those who want strong rural communities, but want to abolish all mining and quarrying, marine-based salmon farms, oil and gas development, and paper mills . . . to explain how they imagine those communities can keep their young people and thrive.”

This invitation comes at a fortuitous time for a growing movement of rural Atlantic Canadians, including scholars, public servants, businesspeople and other engaged citizens — more than the “tight-knit posse of activists” Black imagines he is speaking to — who are not only talking, but working to create thriving, self-determining, sustainable communities.

Our work suggests that the formulation of the challenge — how to “prosper without resource extraction” — is itself one of the major barriers in the way of sustainable, equitable rural economic and social development. It sets up a false choice.

The most obvious problem is the word “extraction.” It describes the relationship we have had with natural resources for decades, but it does not have to delimit our future. The choice of words like this one is a key aspect of maintaining a status-quo narrative and creating a social environment where alternatives can be quickly discounted.

Granted, we have a long history of “extraction” in Nova Scotia. Whether we look at fisheries, forestry or farming, we are looking at

locally-owned oligopolies or foreign-owned corporations, the difference between them mattering not that much in the end. Both operate with the sole objective of extracting a resource for a distant market and maximizing their and their investors' profits in doing so. It is never really about feeding people, or building shelters, or healing illness, or creating "thriving" communities. Extraction is usually done at least cost, using least-cost methods and meeting only minimal levels (if that) of any regulatory requirements. Exported outputs are usually lower-value commodities taken to distant markets where value-added processing can happen.

Importantly, the resource base is not the only thing "extracted;" so are the profits, the decision-making, our labour hours, creativity, and the very energy from our bodies. In return, most of us get hourly wage jobs, and collectively we get high levels of debt service for those who buy machinery to enter into contract work for corporations and the expense of government support services and/or subsidies. And we enjoy these "benefits" only while we wait for the industries to pack up and leave, or at least lay off workers, when the profits diminish.

And they usually do diminish. The longer-term value trendline of this least-cost extraction model is downwards. For example, while the trees might "grow back" as Black assures us they do, forests are irreparably degraded through clearcutting.

From a local economy perspective, extraction is a win-lose scenario every time. The ordinary person might see a short-term job here, a new customer there, but their livelihoods and their communities are insecure; they are always at risk of disappearing with the swipe of a pen in an office far away — from the community, geographically, but also socially far away from the lived experience of putting food on a table or protecting a local school. This is not thriving.

Yet these points should not lead us to split into the two "sides" one might be tempted to imagine from the conversation in these pages.

As Mike Lancaster begins to outline in his Jan. 27 **[Counterpoint \(Employment vs. environment a false choice\)](http://thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/1540416-counterpoint-employment-vs-environment-a-false-choice)** (<http://thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/1540416-counterpoint-employment-vs-environment-a-false-choice>), we are not actually involved in a debate over whether or not to pull resources from the ground, air or water for our survival. The question is really how, and to what ends? And this one depends on our answers to two prior questions: First, is infinite growth on a finite planet possible? And second, the more interesting, ethical question: Even if possible, is infinite growth desirable?

These deeper questions may just point us toward the most meaningful common ground. On a grand scale, that common ground might look something like what Tim Jackson, professor of sustainable development at the University of Surrey, describes as an "ecologically-literate macro-economics." In other words, a set of economic assumptions, theories and tools appropriate for a finite planet. In this space between "saving the environment" and "developing the economy," we find the possibility of considering where, why and how to use natural resources without falling into the economy-versus-environment trap.

It seems to us that the thing to get away from, if we care sincerely about the future of our rural communities, is the reality of our current economic system: We pump resources from the periphery into the centre, from the countryside into the city, from the poor to the rich, and it has become increasingly acceptable to ruin one place for the sake of another.

In this system, Canada's smaller communities are adversely affected from the inside by what writer and farmer Wendell Berry describes as "internal disaffection," and from the outside by "external exploitation." Both occur when communities send their riches away and become so dependent on imports that they are, paradoxically, unable to supply even the most basic local needs from the abundant local sources. There are fisheries-based communities in Nova Scotia where seniors' homes serve boxed frozen fish that was caught down the road but processed and packaged in China, at great environmental and social cost to all of us. This is what happens when we extract resources rather than carefully use them.

So what do we do? Thankfully, an ecologically-literate economics is not only possible, but is alive and well in Atlantic Canada. It animates our co-operatives, buy-local campaigns, and local small-business support systems. It is realized through sheer will on the part of municipal civil servants working to reduce local dependence on fossil fuels, small producers banding together in Community Supported Agriculture and Fisheries, wood-craft entrepreneurs teaming up to secure sustainably managed hardwood forests, and community advocates working tirelessly to compel local institutions to procure more of the things they need from local suppliers.

Over the last three years, the Centre for Local Prosperity has engaged rural residents in conversations on local economics and ecological health. Our study, *Import Replacement: Local Prosperity for Rural Atlantic Canada*, was released in a town hall meeting in Shelburne on Feb. 26. It demonstrates that by targeting even a 10-per-cent increase in local production of currently-imported goods and services across the region, we could add more than 43,000 new good jobs, \$2.6 billion in new wages, and \$219 million in new tax revenue, without running roughshod over the economic and social possibilities for the next generation.

The will is there. The tools exist. The potential is awesome. What remains now is to ensure that health, safety and environmental regulations, institutional procurement policies, government subsidies, taxation, and employment legislation are redesigned to privilege local ownership, import replacement and ecological integrity — to protect, support and enrich the people who live in rural communities and the natural environments on which they depend.

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