



UPFRONT

A move is afoot on North America's most easterly edge - rugged, sea-swept Newfoundland and Labrador - to bring a collective, energetic focus to integral ecology

Based on the simple yet erudite concept that the environment is everyone's issue, it stems from a belief that Newfoundland "with its unsustainable oil culture is ripe for organization around ecology."

The man with that vision is professor and Memorial University philosophy department head, Dr. Sean McGrath.

"We have a significant Celtic heritage and the Celts had a wonderful, mystical, non-exploitive relationship with nature," contends the resident of St. John's. "So it is fitting we should come together here to examine the future of nature."

A native Newfoundlander, McGrath believes the land visited by Vikings 1,000 years ago - and known for its complex geology, stunning seacoast, meandering freshwater fjords, majestic icebergs and sweeping barrens - can foster a new attitude toward nature.

"The consciousness is not here yet," he notes, "but the future of nature rests with cold water communities. We, in Newfoundland and Labrador, are responsible for the last bits of unspoiled nature on the planet,"

The term "integral ecology" is one McGrath borrows from Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical, in which he calls for an "ecological conversion."

"Pope Francis is issuing an ecological wake-up call to the whole of society," he explains. "He calls for a total mobilization of all areas of human inquiry and creative activity for the sake of producing a plan of 'care for our common home.'"

The call, as McGrath interprets it, is to collectively "change our ecological imaginary."

We need philosophers talking to scientists, sociologists talking to theologians and artists. For too long, scientists have had to carry the ball on ecology but when we all come together in a trans-disciplinary gathering, we talk as humans, bringing whatever strengths and resources we have.

That is the model McGrath used in crafting "a festival of ecological ideas" last fall in Newfoundland's Gros Morne National Park.

"We had academics from a variety of disciplines but we also had the public, made up of local people, aboriginal communities and students from high school to the graduate level. No one had the luxury of remaining within his or her discipline. As a result, powerful alliances were forged among specialists who would otherwise never have met and genuine conversation occurred."

As a field component of the event, participants hiked with wilderness guides and toured picturesque Bonne Bay by boat.

"People were introduced to the amazing ecology of the area, not only to witness its beauty and power, but also to become more cognizant of its fragility and the special challenges it faces as the climate changes in the coming years."

The response to the event was so encouraging McGrath, in collaboration with MUN's Faculty of Arts and The Rooms - Newfoundland's provincial art gallery - is holding a second event titled The Future, the Arts and Ecology in St. John's, North America's oldest city, March 3-5.

"Ecology is essentially about ethics, so it is vital that the humanists and the social scientists be involved. One of the hurdles we face - and it may prove insurmountable - is a radical transformation in our thinking about ethics."

In the case of Newfoundland, he suggests, it is no longer helpful to simply rail against the big oil companies.

"In recent years, oil in Newfoundland has been everybody's business. We've all made our dollar off fossil fuels, including me, so there is no villainous oil industry. We all have to form a new plan for our common home."

McGrath, who hopes to stage a third ecological festival in Labrador next year, acknowledges his first intention for the movement, now known as For a New Earth, was to garner global support. To that end, he has already lectured in Iceland.

"I've changed my opinion, because I now believe trying to move globally actually dis-empowers people and results in total apathy. The problem is seen as so large that apathy becomes an acceptable response. The concept, of course, remains global but we have to concentrate on applying it locally."

Sixty years ago Newfoundland, which is not known for its agriculture, managed to feed its own people, McGrath points out.

"We're quite capable of starting a local food movement in St. John's but have we the will to do it? Do we really need to be eating New Zealand lamb? We can shop green as individuals but it has to become communal."

He is confident the March event will build on the success of the one held last fall.

"I'm worried about the future of nature but I am hopeful Newfoundland, with its relatively intact oceans and huge wilderness, can take a new role in ecological leadership. It should not be too hard to wake up a responsibility for the bit of earth that's been entrusted to us."

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