

# Green Scene: A Happy New Year?

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Like most people, I prefer to be the eternal optimist and would like to believe that each year brings a little progress towards a more perfect and just world. This past year, however, the actions of the federal government have dashed my faith. From the perspective of the environment, this has been an “annus horribilus” for Canada. It all started last December when the Harper government pulled out of the Kyoto Accord which was intended to limit greenhouse gas emissions and help to prevent global warming. Then, with the tabling of two omnibus bills in the House of Commons in March and October, the resulting repeal of progressive legislation which had effectively protected the environment, in some cases for decades, rolled Canada back into the dark ages.

Bill C-38, which passed in June, was an unprecedented so-called “budget” bill of 452 pages which introduced, repealed or amended 70 federal laws. It repealed the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act* and the Kyoto Accord plus allowed for increased off-shore seismic testing and drilling. It eliminated the National Round Table on Environment, and severely limited opportunities for public input into proposed new projects. It gutted the *Fisheries Act* by eliminating habitat protection and exempted the National Energy Board (NEB) from requirements to protect species at risk. Just in case that wasn’t sufficient, the Bill also gave Cabinet the authority to overrule any wayward NEB decisions. It also eliminated support for world-class research which had been conducted since 1968 in the Experimental Lakes Area near Kenora, Ontario as well as a highly respected research lab in Sidney, BC which has been conducting research into marine pollutants. (This was the lab which showed our resident orcas are the most contaminated marine mammal in the world). Hundreds of people lost their jobs. The environmental and research community was stunned.

In a quick one-two punch, the federal government then introduced Bill C-45 in October. This was another omnibus – or would that be that ominous – bill of 450 pages. This Bill will replace the *Navigable Waters Protection Act* which has protected all such waters from industrial development since 1882 with a much weakened Act which will exclude 99.7% of the lakes and 99.9% of the rivers in Canada from this protection. Strangely, the lakes which retained some degree of protection were mainly located in the Muskoka cottage country north of Toronto where many of Canada’s millionaires have summer residences. Additional changes were proposed to the *Fisheries Act* which would further weaken protection for fish habitat. In addition, the bill weakens First Nations rights and eliminates the Hazardous Material Information Review Commission which helps to protect Canadians from exposure to harmful toxins.

**Protesting pipelines and increased oil tanker traffic.**  
*Anne Tseng photo.*

Those who wish to profit from Canada’s exceptional fossil fuel wealth believe we should ignore our Kyoto commitment and weaken environmental protection so that we can more efficiently extract oil and gas...and fatten their bulging wallets. But, there are alternatives – consider the example of Norway. Like Canada, Norway is rich in fossil fuels which it exports mainly to Europe. Norway, however, is managing its wealth to the benefit of all its citizens...and increasing environmental protection.



When their oil and gas fields were discovered, Norway undertook extensive public consultation to determine how best these resources could be developed with full environmental protection and benefits that would accrue to all. In 1990, the government established a Petroleum Fund which equitably distributes wealth from their fossil fuel exports. Norway is also acknowledged to be a leader in Europe with regard to legislation which protects the environment and implemented a carbon tax back in 1990. By 2011, their carbon emissions were less than 2% above 1990 levels, in accordance with their Kyoto commitments. Under the Copenhagen Accord (2009), they have promised to further reduce net carbon emissions by 30-40% from 1990 levels by 2020. Canada could certainly take a page from their book.

Instead, our federal government now appears to be taking more specific aim at the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA). The existing Act was passed by government only in 2002 after thorough public consultation. This fall, the Minister of the Environment announced the Act was “ready for an overhaul” and needed to be made “more efficient”. These statements have been taken by many people as code words to indicate government plans to substantially weaken SARA. Yet, according to a new poll released December 13, Canadians overwhelmingly support a strong federal government commitment to protect species at risk. The poll, commissioned by the Canadian Wildlife Federation, indicates that 96% of Canadians feel that the federal government’s current commitment to the protection and recovery of Canada’s species at risk should be maintained or strengthened.

Thus, while I can’t say I am looking forward to what the coming year might bring, it seems likely to be a time when we will need to stand up and remind the government of what the vast majority of its citizens really want.