



The Graying of Green

A Green Hearts Essay by Ken Finch
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Conservationists like yours truly are basking in the glow of the recent "green" boom. Suddenly it seems like everything's going green, from shopping bags to architecture, from carpets to cars, and from light bulbs to skateboards. (Yes, even green skateboards....) It's wonderful to see all this positive environmental change finally happening! Yet from the curmudgeonly perspective of one who'd much rather be paddling in the Boundary Waters than leading a neighborhood recycling drive, I have a personal observation that is gradually evolving into a real concern: *The green boom doesn't seem to include much greenery!*

For the past year I've been privileged to listen and learn by the sides of Omaha's most passionate green advocates — my colleagues on the Board of the Green Omaha Coalition (GOC). They are remarkably well-informed about new green products and innovations, and especially about green initiatives in architecture and engineering. Yet through this learning I've come to realize how much of the current green "explosion" is about energy, housewares, and architectural design. In fact, today's ecology "buzz" seems to be less about the green of actual nature, and more about the gray of concrete and steel.

This concern of mine doesn't reflect on the GOC Board, which is doing great work. In truth, I see the same phenomena everywhere: the green boom seems to be stressing new products and materials, rather than nature *per se*. Countless news stories extol the legitimate benefits of non-toxic cleaners, CFLs, high-mileage cars, bamboo flooring, and buildings that are finally being designed with common sense (which we now call "green"). My problem is, I don't think the essence of green is *stuff*. I think it's about *people*. More particularly, people's core values and beliefs.

Green Hearts' focus is on conservation's future, and we believe that the key to that future is personal conservation values. All the great progress in the current green boom, along with all the environmental successes of the past 50 years, are ultimately only as good as how well future generations carry them on. Ecological protection isn't correlated to the life span of a light bulb, or a car, or even a building. Ecology works in millennia, and the only way to protect it over such an extreme time frame is to make conservation a dominant value of our children, and their children, and all the generations of children to come.

Will we reach this level of personal and societal commitment to conservation through the excitement and delight of 20% fly-ash concrete and low-E windows? I don't think so. Research tells us that conservation values are most often formed during childhood, through frequent, informal, play-based interactions with actual nature. That is, the kind of green that *grows*, along with all the wonderful bugs, rocks, birds, and adventures that come with it.

Don't get me wrong: the new green products and processes are great, and have real impact. But if we want a *lasting* culture of conservation, we need to find ways to ensure that all future generations of kids will be able to enjoy "nature play" *frequently* — which, as a practical matter, means close to their homes.

"Green" cannot just be about recycling, rain barrels, straw-bale construction, and pervious concrete. *Real, lasting green* will require family neighborhoods replete with native plants and micro-habitats thriving in every nook and cranny. Years of play in these small patches of nature is what will steer generations of children into life-long conservation values. To *really go green*, we must make an extraordinary commitment to ensuring that *nearby nature* is a part of our children's lives.

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