

West Islander leads shore clean-up

The Suburban West Island News By Irene Chwalkowski 2007-09-26

Ryan Young is in the woods.

That's the most likely place to find the popular John Abbott College communications and film teacher on a weekend — that's if he isn't out interviewing the likes of David Suzuki, Jane Goodall, or shooting the breeze with Captain Paul Watson of The Sea Shepherd, a vessel famed for stopping seal hunts and saving whales, where Young crewed as a cook for three months back in the '90s.

Young has also run for the Green Party at the provincial and federal levels, and is a founding member of the Ste. Anne Environmental Committee.

Last Saturday, Young, along with members of SOS Planète, John Abbott College students and Green Coalition members, was knee deep in mud along the shores of the Anse à l'Orme river in western Pierrefonds hauling out garbage, old tires, Styrofoam, bottles, cans and car parts from the stream which originates south of Autoroute 20 in Baie d'Urfé and meanders down to Rivière des Prairies.

The Great Canadian Shore Clean-Up is part of the International Coastal Cleanup, organized by the Ocean Conservancy. Participants remove litter and also collect data on the types of debris found along their shoreline, and the activities that produce this debris. The Ocean Conservancy uses this information to target, through education and legislation, those behaviours that lead to the pollution of our watersheds and coastlines.

For Young, these are exciting times in the environmental movement.

"There has been a change. Angus Reid polls have actually shown that definitely. I also think that institutions and corporations are feeling the push — they're noticing the change and they're realizing it's important to get themselves at last on the bandwagon symbolically if not more practically," Young said.

"The awareness comes first and then the actions come next. And I think it's starting to happen."

Young sees changes in the habits of people around him.

"More people are buying organic, more people are thinking about their transportation, and more people are making little changes for energy efficiency in their houses," he said.

But the biggest change he's seen has been in the media. "The mainstream media is covering environmental stories like crazy."

Young teaches a course in Animals and Nature through Modern Cinema at John Abbott College.

"Basically it's a crash course in environmental stuff through the world of documentary and feature films," he said.

"It doesn't get advertised with that name — it's called Cinema and Society.

"But once [the students] get there I tell them — this is what you're going to be learning — if you don't like it you should change course. They love it," he said. "I think that's what drives you as a teacher. When you get people like that."

“Events like this shore clean-up — people that are here are committed. Big time. There’s more people at this event that there would have been four years ago.”

Greg Stienstra is a Beaconsfield resident in his early 50s, who was at the Anse à l’Orme river bright and early to begin his first shore cleanup.

“The event started at 9:30 this morning. We picked up old tires, this old sign, lots of steel wire, many bottles, a kid’s swimming pool, insulators from the power lines that must have come down years ago,” he said.

“With all the things we got, it does make a difference, (but) it won’t stop people from doing this.” Stienstra said he’ll be back next year.

“The next step is to get the water cleaned up to get the contamination out. The stream comes a long way. It actually comes south of Highway 40, from Baie d’Urfé. When there’s material left over [from construction] near a stream, we need to keep a buffer zone on each side of it or else it will just flow in there towards the lowest point where the water is. That’s something we can’t solve in one day, but it’s something we want to work on,” he said.

This was Stienstra’s first shore clean-up, but he’s been involved in environmental causes for 10 years.

He has seen a trend towards more involvement by more and more people within his community in environmental concerns.

“I think sometimes while doing everyday things we take the convenient ways of doing things in our life that might be degrading to the environment. We might have to go a little bit out of our way, take more time, be a little bit more careful, buy less stuff. We buy a lot of stuff these days [for] which I see no point really. That’s a lot of it — consumption of things no one really needs. And the wrapping gets thrown out ... and for what? We can’t enjoy life without having this stuff to make us happy like advertising always wants to make us think — this shirt, a bigger TV,” Stienstra said.

“We need to be a little bit more curious, inform ourselves better on a lot of things. Not take everything for granted,” he said.