

Wanted: a world happiness standard: Movement seeks a way to measure countries' well-being rather than their wealth

PUBLICATION: Edmonton Journal
DATE: 2005.06.20
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A1 / Front
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SOURCE: The Canadian Press
DATELINE: HALIFAX

HALIFAX — Happiness, it seems, is something that can be measured.

Hundreds of academics, farmers, environmentalists, business people, entertainers and health professionals are trying to figure just how to do that, and to convince others that it is just as important an indicator of a country's success as its economic well-being.

They will meet today in Antigonish, N.S., for the second International Conference on Gross National Happiness, a movement that is attracting a varied mix of adherents around the world.

"We don't claim to measure well-being directly, but rather what are some of the social, economic and environmental conditions which are likely to produce higher levels of well-being," said Ron Colman of GPI Atlantic, a non-profit research group in Nova Scotia that is organizing the meeting.

Conventional thinking "that bases progress just on economic growth alone is not satisfactory."

"It's too narrow, so we know we have to assess our progress in a more comprehensive and accurate way."

Colman and other delegates contend that this better way is to look at several factors -- environmental preservation, sustainable economic development, cultural promotion and good governance.

The theory was developed more than 30 years ago in Bhutan, where the king declared gross national happiness to be more important than the small Asian country's gross national product.

Colman went to Bhutan last year to attend the first conference on gross national happiness and discovered a group of people keen on "redirecting global development towards socially and environmentally responsible policy and practices.

"The goal is to ensure long-term prosperity and equity for all."

Colman said the old model of thinking that it was either jobs or the environment no longer works, since the two can be inextricably tied. For example, there can't be uncontrolled fisheries without considering how that's going to affect jobs in the future, he added.

About 400 people from 35 countries will look at that approach this week, examining things like how Brazil is creating a "sustainable city" based on mass transit rather than automobile use and how the Dutch government

gave its citizens far more free time and sharply reduced unemployment by encouraging shorter work hours.

Also, Denmark is phasing out agricultural pesticides and encouraging organic agriculture. Honey Care Africa has pioneered sustainable community-based development practices in Kenya.

A natural builder will also demonstrate how to construct a building of straw, clay, earth and tires.

The head of an international interior furnishings company will explain how he turned his business into an environmentally friendly, sustainable organization that he hopes won't produce waste.

"We're bringing all these people together to try to say, 'What would a sane, decent, good society look like when you put all of these parts together?' " said Colman.

"People who have secure incomes, a good quality environment, strong and safe communities tend to score higher on measures of well-being."