

Happiness is . . . not what you may think

PUBLICATION: The Chronicle–Herald
DATE: 2005.06.20
SECTION: NovaScotia
PAGE: A1
COLUMN: Donald
SOURCE: The Canadian Press
BYLINE: Jim Mac

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 an important indicator of a country's success as its economic well-being.

About 400 people from 35 countries will meet in Antigonish today 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, the non-profit research group that is organizing the meeting.

"The conventional paradigm 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 a better way of determining a person's well-being and the well-being of their surroundings is by looking at several factors – environmental preservation, sustainable economic development, cultural promotion and good governance.

Colman was one of 70 foreign dignitaries at last year's inaugural conference. Thirty years ago, Bhutan's king established the philosophy that gross national happiness is more important than gross national product.

Several things must happen for this idea to have any meaning, Mr. Colman said. They include good governance, sustainable and equitable economic development, social and cultural cohesion, as well as environmental conservation.

Colman said the old model of thinking that it was either jobs versus 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. As well, 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.

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."

Each factor will be analyzed during the conference in workshops and seminars hosted by those considered forerunners in their respective fields.

Also on hand will be Sierra Club of Canada executive director Elizabeth May, who will be involved in a session discussing good governance and engaged citizenship, as well as Joel Salatin, who has been described as a guru of organic farming.

"What we have here is all the elements of what it really takes to create a good society," Colman said.

"What we really want to encourage is all these people to talk with each other, to interact, to dialogue, because it's through the collective wisdom (the goal can be accomplished)."