

Copenhagen, climate change and common sense conservation

By Eric Hansen | Milwaukee writer

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The eyes of the world are on the U.N. Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen -- and rightly so. It is a critical moment.

Scientific evidence of catastrophic climate change is steadily accumulating and it is timely to remind ourselves of two fundamental facts. First, all conservation, whether the complex notions of catastrophic global climate change or the familiar concepts of contour plowing, boils down to the common sense goodness of one theme: What we have today we also want to be there for tomorrow. Second, conservation work, forging wide agreements on vital landscape issues, is work Wisconsinites know well -- and excel at.

So let's not let complexity become an excuse for complacency here, because the essence of our task is not the technical aspects of climate change but the spiritual aspects of the issue. Our real challenge is developing and sustaining the willpower to meet the immense challenge of climate change, and articulating a credible belief that humans are up to the task.

If we review the notable record of Wisconsin's robust citizen conservation campaigns, we will find considerable evidence that Wisconsinites have found bedrock strength amid conservation crises -- and our accomplishments here have direct relevance to the planet-wide issues we face today.

We've done it before and we can do it again.

For example, 40 years ago, in a scene eerily reminiscent of today's climate change controversy, scientists were becoming increasingly concerned about the pesticide DDT. Among other concerns, evidence was mounting that DDT weakens the shells of

bird eggs. Hearings were held in Madison, and DDT proponents mounted a brutal counterattack on critics. Citizen pressure grew, logic prevailed and Wisconsin led the nation in effectively banning DDT in 1969 -- action followed by a national ban in 1972.

Today, over 2,000 bald eagles opt to raise their families here in Wisconsin -- 10 times as many bald eagles as 40 years ago.

Another notable citizen campaign -- a 27-year-long saga worthy of a Hollywood epic -- protected the Wolf River from an ill-advised metallic sulfide mine proposal near its headwaters at Crandon. Wisconsinites never blinked, and among the mine proponents that decided the grass was greener elsewhere was Exxon, then our planet's largest corporation.

In 1997, Wisconsin adapted a moratorium on metallic sulfide mining, a process with a notorious history of serious water pollution. With that law in place, the Wolf River continues to run clear and true.

Downstream, around the shores of Lake Winnebago, a commotion erupted in 1977 as that winter's season for spearing sturgeon through the lake ice proved to be a poor one. The future of the sturgeon was in doubt. Local anglers created Sturgeon for Tomorrow and a pioneering program to aid sturgeon propagation came into being.

Soon the sometimes contentious relationship between local sportsmen and the state Department of Natural Resources became a formidable alliance and a significant shift in public opinion began. A generation ago, snagging sturgeon, against the rules, was considered almost a birthright by some folks. Now it is almost nonexistent, and

hundreds of local volunteers guard the sturgeon during their spawning spectacle each spring along the Wolf River.

Today, the 50,000 sturgeon of Lake Winnebago are the largest self-sustaining population of these ancient fish on Earth.

So consider this: To win our campaign against catastrophic climate change we need the foresight and willingness to act on compelling scientific evidence, so evident today as we look back at the DDT story.

We also need the ferocious persistence Wisconsinites exhibited so well during the 27-year-long campaign against metallic sulfide mining.

In addition, the Lake Winnebago sturgeon campaign shows us the community-wide dialogue, and willingness to modify our behavior, that our challenges today call for.

Our Wisconsin history offers one more critical insight: When citizens organize and demand meaningful conservation action, governments move into motion. Copenhagen is important. Even more important though is that citizens here, and around the world, keep up the pressure for solutions.

Finally, let's check the numbers. I believe author Bill McKibben is spot on when he says 350 is the most important number in the world. It is the carbon dioxide parts per million in the atmosphere that we have to get back to -- to have any chance of maintaining the good life on Earth. We are at 390 now.

Isn't the concept of 350 the same thing as when we list five bass as the daily bag limit? Didn't we adopt fish and game regulations because they were necessary to protect a threatened resource?

Now we are seeing the urgent wisdom of a similar planet-wide agreement. The 350 level is what we need, the level for sustainability, what we must push for.

This is work we know how to do. If we act wisely now, what we have today will still be there tomorrow, both for ourselves and for generations to come.

Eric Hansen of Milwaukee is an award-winning writer and the author of "Hiking Wisconsin" and "Hiking Michigan's Upper Peninsula."