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ON THE TRAIL OF SUSTAINABLE HAPPINESS

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Contributions from Dr. Catherine O'Brien and Kristina Groves

Have you heard, there is an exciting, new movement sweeping across the green landscape?

If not, we are betting our carbon credits that many of you already live it in your day-to-day life – especially while out playing in the great outdoors.

It's called **Sustainable Happiness**.

The term was coined by Dr. Catherine O'Brien, a professor at Cape Breton University who created the world's first course on Sustainable Happiness (more on that later). Catherine is an advisor for the work we do at Clean Air Champions, and also brings with her a wealth of experience on transportation and its impact on the health and well-being of Canadians, particularly children.

In Catherine's own words...

What is Sustainable Happiness?

Sustainable Happiness is happiness that contributes to individual, community, and/or global well-being and does not exploit other people, the environment or future generations. The concept merges happiness with sustainability, spotlighting the integral relationship between our happiness, well-being and natural environment.

It reinforces the fact that our lives touch, and are touched, by other people, other species and the natural environment every day. The choices we make can have a positive, or adverse, impact on ourselves, other people and the world around us.

In other words, when it comes to this complex and interconnected reality we fondly refer to as "life on earth", we can either choose to be part of the solution, or somehow default into being part of the problem for all kinds of wacky reasons.

What's the connection between Sustainable Happiness and people who love the outdoors, being active, and exploring their competitive potential?

It's our assumption that members of the adventure/endurance/outdoor community are the kinds of people who are doing what happiness experts tell us is very good for us – doing things that make our heart sing.

Rick Foster and Greg Hicks (Foster/Hicks Happiness Model – How We Choose to Be Happy) refer to this as living your Bliss List. Knowing what makes our heart sing and living it may be as important to our long term health as clean air and water. Sustainable Happiness reminds us that we live in an interconnected and interdependent world, and that how we pursue our own happiness inevitably affects other people, other species and the natural environment.

On a daily basis, we can ask ourselves if we are making choices that are leaving a legacy of sustainable happiness. Are the activities that we're engaging in having a harmful impact? If so, what options do we have for reducing that harm? I.e. Where have our clothes come from? If they were made in a sweatshop then it's very possible that our "happiness" has come at the expense of

someone else's happiness. Conversely, our choices and activities might be spreading well-being in the world and we ought to celebrate that! (This is where happiness begets more happiness as we reap the results of our thoughtful choices).

Why does the world need Sustainable Happiness?

We need Sustainable Happiness for LOTS of reasons.

Traditionally, education has not taught us about happiness. However, the media have picked up on the happiness buzz. Happiness is so often "packaged" by the media as something that comes from consuming things and we can forget, perhaps all too conveniently, that our consumption rarely translates into any kind of meaningful or long term happiness. Indeed, we can easily lose sight of the things that bring enduring happiness. Deep down many of us already know, but are loathe to admit that our current consumer societies are not sustainable.

Sustainable Happiness guides us into opportunities for creating a high quality of life that is both sustainable and doesn't have to cost the earth. Integrating Sustainable Happiness brings inner happiness and well-being to an exciting new level that has us jumping out of bed in the morning, ready to embrace the mystery of the day ahead.

So, you may wonder, how does this relate to Clean Air Champions, our national charity that delivers curriculum-connected programs to youth across Canada on the topics of air quality, climate change and health? Over the past decade of managing CAC I have seen an exciting shift in the public mindset around the environment, one that was originally rooted in fear and alarmism is now maturing to identify and embrace core values and ethics. More and more people now get the interconnections as well as the urgency of our current environmental and related health challenges. There is a shift from the 'deer in the headlights' to "we can and must take action".

Athletes have a stronger natural connection to the environment due to all their interaction with the outdoors when training, and also because their world orbits around the physical – senses are alive and invigorated, muscles energized and awakened. Not only is the pursuit of excellence about pushing our bodies to the next level, it's about feeding our bodies the best of clean air, water and nourishing food for our personal, best performance.

It's much tougher to be a happy camper if you are injured, out of shape, dehydrated, continually short-changing your training program, or allowing the stress of life to keep you from doing what you love.

Sure, we waiver by being workaholics or eat junk in our diets. But, there is nothing wrong with downing that beer and wings after a great adventure race – it's all part of that happiness factor; celebrating the good, and being grateful for all we have.

When you put all of that into context of our natural environment it's easy to see how inextricably

connected the pursuit of personal happiness is to that of Sustainable Happiness. Air that is polluted, water that is contaminated, food that is genetically modified or laced with pesticides, and gear that has been made in sweatshops, starts to drag like an anchor on our personal and sustainable goals of happiness.

Yes, there is such a thing as finding the balance but it takes wanting to change from chaos to calm. From over consumption and waste to minimal footprint and regeneration.

Competing in a recent 5Peaks Enduro cross-country running race (13.8 km) near Ottawa I had my own Sustainable Happiness moment. I was a tad anxious about the whole thing as I am nursing a foot injury that prevented me from racing last year. I was a last minute registrant and told myself that I would stick to my plan to be careful over the rough terrain.

I have always loved to compete so the voices in my head before the race were saying “run hard for that podium finish” versus “take it easy as you sure don’t want to re-injure that foot!” As I ran along the trails and up yet another hill the words “Sustainable Happiness” popped into my head. I realized how completely happy I was out there on a gorgeous, sun-kissed fall day doing what I love to do. I had a great race and knew that this was my moment of contentment, regardless how I finished

It is the same sort of feeling I have when I am doing something good for others, or for our environment. . . I realized that all those moments do add up for me to be able to say, “I am doing my best in life, and that feels amazing.”

We see Sustainable Happiness in many of our Champions simply by their love for what they do. Kristina Groves, 4 X Olympic Medalist, Speed Skating and long time Clean Air Champion recently held a press conference to announce her retirement from the national team. I know how completely committed Kristina is to whatever she takes on, including environmental issues, so I was delighted to read in her blog how happy and at peace she was with her decision to retire (<http://kristinagroves.ca>). Leaving the life of high performance sport can, and has been, devastating for many top level athletes.

I asked Kristina to share where she sees herself on the Sustainable Happiness scale.

“I think people generally get themselves into trouble when they equate happiness in their lives with feeling constant joy. Being human means we go through many ups and downs and the experience of living is intimately related to the emotions we feel when times are good or times are tough. The unrealistic expectation that we’re supposed to feel endlessly joyful is impossible to live up to and leads to feeling inadequate or unfulfilled. Instead I think of sustainable happiness as a philosophy towards life that embraces all of its experiences, good and bad, but is rooted in the pursuit of things that we find meaningful and rewarding. Being kind to each other and to the planet is paramount to achieving

true sustainable happiness but it can be difficult to understand how to achieve that.

I recently retired from high performance sport, which was a difficult thing to do, but the peace I feel from making this decision is extremely satisfying. Being aware that sometimes life is hard but that we can still be happy, to me is an important component of sustainable happiness.”

Yes, the world has a long way to go to achieve Sustainable Happiness – but each of us can follow the Sustainable Happiness path simply by the intentions we hold and the choices we make every day.

Clean Air Champions is now sharing Sustainable Happiness with our Champion athletes knowing that this will equip them to find a new level of contentment and excellence in their own lives. We hope that they will each carry this forward like a bright torch as they educate and inspire our audiences in classrooms and communities across Canada.

Sustainable Happiness is a paradigm shift from ego-centrism to ethos-centrism – a deep, knowing that true happiness and genuine wealth come with being in balance and harmony with the world around you.

So, where do you start?

Why not start with observing how the things that spark a smile from somewhere inside of you have a link to our environment. Build on this awareness by turning it into more actions that lead to more happiness moments. That could be carpooling to work with friends, planting a vegetable garden, buying organic and fair trade products, giving things away to those in greater need, saying “no” to an impulsive purchase, or getting your house in top energy efficiency shape. There are no end of ways to bring Sustainable Happiness into your, and others’ lives.

Next, why not expand your horizons by taking an online course on the virtues of Sustainable Happiness offered by Catherine O’Brien and her colleagues at: <http://www.sustainablehappinesscourse.com>

As the world news bombards us with threats of global recession, Arab Spring events, more hurricanes and floods, or the appalling tar sands and XL pipeline projects, it’s so important to remember what you can do to find that balance. Think if millions of people could choose to do the same where our planet could be. There is so much power in the “we” but it has to come from the desire from ‘me’ to be the change.

As the very wise anthropologist, Margaret Mead once said...

“Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world.

Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.



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