

Earth Hour just saves guilty consciences

Though we'd like to think we make an impact, 60 minutes of environmentalism can't accomplish much



BRIAN GOULD

Saturday, 29 March, 2008: it was happening all across the city, but downtown in the City Centre Mall, it felt even more special. Hundreds of people came together, united with one purpose. For one hour that day, I truly felt alive, as if the spirit of humanity was coursing through me. It was symbolic of how, together, we can do more than ever before. Lights were switched off and homes were dark as everyone came together in the name of saving—on everything in the store! 40 per cent off! 60 per cent off! Everything must go!

That's right, the Home Outfitters store downtown was having a gigantic, blow-out closing sale. For those who missed it, oh what a spectacular spectacle it was. Prices were slashed on sheets, comforters, towels, housewares, cookware, kitchen electrics, microwaves, glassware, flatware, dinnerware, home decor, bath decor, bath mats, personal care, accent furniture, area rugs, lamps, window treatments, vacuums, and more!

Oh, you thought I was talking about Earth Hour? Sorry, but even though the idea of shutting off the lights for an hour makes people and

the media feel all warm and fuzzy inside, this sale had more impact and was more representative of where we are as a species. Earth Hour is symbolic only of the lengths we'll go to in order to give ourselves another undeserved pat on the back for being "green."

I know it's supposed to be a proclamation of commitment to reducing energy consumption, but the effort required to participate was laughably minor. Intentional or not, the message is that we don't have to bother to think about our actions for the rest of the year because we've already done our part. Not only is this a dangerous idea to propagate, but the actual event likely increased energy use.

When the original event was held in Sydney, Australia, the high estimate for reduction in power consumption was ten per cent (the low was two per cent). That was a concerted effort targeted at just one city, but chances are that any reduction in Edmonton was minuscule by comparison. That's less than 0.001 per cent reduction in annual direct electricity consumption—much less still for total energy consumption. Any savings during the hour were statistically insignificant, and consumption was probably up both before and after.

For those who prepared for the hour of darkness by trying to score some crazy deals on cloyingly scented votive candles at Home Outfitters that day, I've got bad news: most manufactured candles are made of paraffin

wax, which is actually a heavier hydrocarbon than jet fuel. Five grams of candle burned over an hour releases more CO₂ than a 60-Watt bulb—not including the energy used to manufacture and transport that candle from China.

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Unless you bought a single tea-light or used old candles, you actually did more harm than good—and if you bought big ones planning to never use them again, you cancelled out hundreds of other people's efforts as well.

Let's say that everyone did everything that they could and basically just sat in the dark for an hour. Unfortunately, energy production needs to be carefully controlled so that blackouts don't occur—coal powerplants don't instantly shut off when someone temporarily flicks off a light. Congratulations, you achieved nothing except a smug sense of self-satisfaction.

In order for this to demonstrate any real action and be productive in any

way, it needs to be much longer—at least a week. Not so much fun now, is it? After that week, there would have to be real, lasting behavioural changes towards energy efficiency, something that I can't see happening from a single hour. Besides, lighting is only one of the countless ways modern society consumes energy and resources. It doesn't deal in any way with energy for heating, transportation, or manufacturing, for example.

If reducing consumption doesn't hurt initially, it probably isn't helping that much either—but don't worry, the hurt doesn't last. I just sold my car, which I hadn't used in a year, and I feel better for it. There's a joy in knowing that you don't need to buy and consume things to be happy or to build your sense of self-worth. In the last two months, I haven't bought much more than food and a water bottle—and that new water bottle made my month.

I'm sure some of you will bash me for being egotistical, but while I've got a similarly smug sense of self-satisfaction, at least I'm actually making a difference. Call me an elitist all you want—if yelling that out of your Hummer window while I'm on my bicycle makes you feel better—but there's really nothing I can do for you.

"Earth Hour" certainly won't help, and though an Earth Week might help a bit, permanent changes are the only thing that's going to cut it in the long term.

This Burlap Sack goes out to all you computer squatters on the main floor of Rutherford Library.

Nothing is more infuriating than trying to find a book's call number in the ten minutes before you have to go catch a bus and having to wait in line behind a horde of essay-writing, keyboard-pillow-using miscreants who have nothing better to do than waste the time of upstanding young bookfinders like yours truly.

Not that there's anything wrong with you spending an hour refreshing your Facebook profile every 30 seconds in a desperate bid for socialite glory. The problem is that there are countless computer labs around campus built for doing just that.

Heck, you could even use all the time you're wasting to get a job and buy a laptop. Then you can steal my favourite couch in SUB as often as you'd like because you'll be using that area for what it's designed: writing essays, using your keyboard as a pillow, and refreshing your Facebook profile to see what "hilarious" comments are being written on your wall—and I won't complain, honest.

In the meantime, leave Rutherford Library's computers available to people who need them for what they're there for: looking for library books.

And if you're reading this online, while sitting at a library computer, you might want to read faster because a burlap sack's about to come down over your head.

SEAN STEELS

Painless Publicity
Learning to talk to the media about your research

Lessons that make it easier to talk to just about anyone about what you do.



MEDIA WORKSHOP

The University of Alberta and Alberta Ingenuity invite you to a media and communications training workshop for researchers on April 8.

The workshop will bring together some of Edmonton's top journalists to talk about what they need from you, so you can advance your work and participate in the big conversations on the shape of things to come. The workshop will also help you learn how to talk to others outside of your labs, including potential partners, funders, students — and others. Edmonton Journal culture columnist Todd Babiak will facilitate the workshop and a U of A media relations consultant will be on hand to provide a primer on how to access media resources on campus.

WHAT: Media and Communications Workshop for Researchers, facilitated by award-winning Alberta author and columnist, Todd Babiak www.toddbabiak.com


WHEN: Tuesday, April 8
4 PM to 6 PM

WHERE: University of Alberta
Stollery Executive Development Centre
Business Building
Room 5-40A/B

FOR MORE INFORMATION: sandra.robertson@albertaingenuity.ca



Please RSVP by April 4 to: mediaevent@albertaingenuity.ca
Everyone welcome!



PIZZA PARTY!

You are invited to join
President Indira Samarasekera
for a few slices of pizza and a soft drink
to celebrate the end of winter term.

<p>When: Tuesday, April 8; noon</p> <p>Where: Celebration Plaza, outside the main entrance of the Administration Building.</p>	<p>Complimentary pizza will be available just show your valid student ONEcard.</p> <p>Bring your classmates — the first 1200 students will be served.</p>
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For more information contact the event coordinator at 492-1525.