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50 years from now, Florida's environment

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What about environmental issues in 50 years? It is a question recently asked by a friend who will soon be discussing the subject with a group of Florida's newest lawyers.

Here is the good news:

Florida, on the leading edge of effects from global warming, will lead the nation in changing energy consumption from fossil fuels.

Florida, with unexplained concentrations of mercury pollution threatening public health, will eliminate toxics contributing to the rise in cognitive learning disabilities and chronic disease.

Water conservation and green building practices will be mandatory features of new construction. Wastewater will be safely recycled. Cost-shifting to the environment will not be tolerated.

Florida, with traffic congestion that harshly penalizes families and commuters, will lead the way in requiring zoning that reconnects people to communities, instead of segregating people behind gates or fencing them apart with highways.

Mandatory inclusionary zoning will provide a safety net that assures that the poorest among us will not be concentrated in pockets of pollution.

Florida will lead the nation in building civic participation by broadening the access of people to government.

Florida will lead the way by requiring government agencies to publish all statistics related to environmental harm, and the Florida Department of Health will leave no stone unturned in its public quest to disclose how and why certain communities are vulnerable to cancer clusters.

No downstream water body will ever be ruined from upstream sources because polluters won't stop polluting.

Here is the bad news:

Today, there are neither rules nor regulations in the state -- and no political momentum -- for these common-sense steps.

A contrary order prevails, and that is a shame.

Fifty years is a blink of an eye. Fifty years ago, Florida was a sleepy backwater whose pristine environment was still available to those who sought its experience.

I remember, as a child, Memorial Day parades with sturdy, gray ranks of World War I soldiers and a veteran or two hobbling from even earlier wars.

Today, people have a hard time remembering Vietnam, much less earlier wars -- like the one Rachel Carson joined nearly 50 years ago, when she began thinking about the effects of chemicals on the environment and on people -- DDT in particular -- leading her to write *Silent Spring*. Its publication marked the dawn of the environmental movement in America and broad, sweeping rules and regulations to protect the nation's natural resources, air and water, and public health.

Much has changed in 50 years. From a high altitude, the Everglades still defines the landscape of Florida. But from a low altitude, our attention is diverted by the minutest functions of biology, chemistry and physics.

Specialization cannot make up for a deficit in values. This is true in the law and public policy.

How bad is it?

When rainfall endangers a river, you know something is very wrong.

That is what is happening when Lake Okeechobee spills into nearby waterways draining to the coasts, laying waste to everything in its path.

Today, powerful state elected officials who swung to office on the ropes of campaign contributions from interests that profit when the costs of development are shifted to future taxpayers now hang by knots over Lake O, whose waters cannot be released without killing whatever they touch, including the price of real estate.

Our relationship to the environment reflects more disturbing contradictions.

Environmental agencies are increasingly reluctant to use baselines for rules and regulations as anchors, even though popular religious orthodoxy insists on baselines to cure the absence of values.

It is no wonder the state has not responded to the startling evidence of "Vanishing Wetlands," a series of investigative reports by the *St. Petersburg Times* disclosing that despite a presidential policy of "no net loss" of wetlands, Florida has lost 84,000 acres of wetlands in the past 15 years. Or to the excellent investigation by the *Palm Beach Post*, in articles that detail the abuse of pesticide regulations by industry.

Protecting the environment and public health nurtures the common good for the commonwealth.

But today, the balance between environmental and economic interests has radically tipped away from common sense. You can't put a price on the bright marketing the state of Florida is using to obscure the facts.

Regulatory and enforcement authority is picked over in the state capital by lobbyists and elected officials like crows after harvest. Power resides in accommodating polluters and faith in voluntary compliance with law. Next to God, there is no higher authority than quarterly profits.

It is an earful, I know, for Florida's newest attorneys. But 50 years from now, the economic Darwinism that now prevails over our environment and public health may not be enough to save our democracy, much less a civil society.

It is time to get to work.

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