



**“A government that robs Peter to pay Paul can always depend on the support of Paul.”**

**George Bernard Shaw**

May 2014

## SAGE is Thirty

**SAGE AGM** at Country Kitchen Catering on Wednesday, May 21st. **30th Anniversary Celebration** begins at noon. **Please RSVP by May 9th.**

**Free Self-guided Xeriscaping Tour**, Saturday June 21st with presentation by Steve MacRae. [www.oldmanbasin.org](http://www.oldmanbasin.org) (see [Prairie Urban Garden](#) website for xeriscaping information)

**ACTia (Alberta Clean Technologies Industry Alliance) Clean Drinks Event**, Thursday, May 15, 6 pm - 8 pm

Alberta Water Council Refresh Symposium, June 24-25 [www.awcreusesymposium.ca](http://www.awcreusesymposium.ca)

SAGE has been operating in Lethbridge for thirty years.

### Happy Birthday to SAGE.

In those thirty years, SAGE members have been active in a number of issues promoting clean air, clean and abundant sources of water, and the stewardship of wild lands. An impressive list of projects follows on page 2, for your interest.

Over those same thirty years, we have seen the emergence of environmental issues, becoming the focus of policy and media attention.

This speaks to the alarming impacts humankind is having on our environment, but it also speaks to the importance of or-

ganized environmental expertise in the community. SAGE continues to share this important role in southern Alberta with other dedicated groups.

To celebrate thirty years of environmental attention, we invite you to join us for lunch on May 21st from noon to 1:30 p.m. at the Country Kitchen Caterers (basement of The Keg).

Please RSVP by May 9th to: [sage-communications@sage-environment.org](mailto:sage-communications@sage-environment.org) or phone 403-381-3606. Please note if you require a special menu.

We look forward to having SAGE members past and present to share in the celebration!

## Lethbridge By-election

A byelection has been scheduled for Monday, May 12th in Lethbridge. There are nine candidates running.

Accountability Lethbridge has compiled answers to a series of questions provided by the community, including questions related to curbside recycling, their awareness of climate change issues, and their support for Environment Lethbridge. Their answers can be reviewed at Accountability Lethbridge ([www.lethbridgeaccountability.ca/candidates](http://www.lethbridgeaccountability.ca/candidates)).

Greensense has organized an independent committee to review the environmental positions and given their rating at [www.greensense.ca](http://www.greensense.ca).

## TD FEF Funding in Southern Alberta

The TD Friends of the Environment Foundation directs donations from patrons to environmental projects in the region - money raised in a region stays in the region. Roughly \$60,000 is donated in southern Alberta.

In the past year projects that have been supported include scientific research projects like monitoring pronghorn antelope, and DNA monitoring of grizzly bear.

Environmental education projects have included collaboration between biologists and

ranchers to develop habitat indicators, programs introducing water issues in southern Alberta, engaging southern Albertans to help wildlife and preserve biodiversity, and supporting environmental learning programs at the Alberta Birds of Prey Foundation.

The [TD FEF](#) encourages groups to apply for funds for projects related to environmental education, urban greening and energy conservation. There are also [grants](#) available for leadership training within organizations.

## Blackfish - movie review.

This is partly the tragic tale of Tilikum, an Orca whale, captured off the coast of Iceland in 1983 when he was two years old and taken to become a performing animal, first in SeaLand, Victoria and then in SeaWorld, Florida. It's also a sad tale of troubled human relations with the non-human world.

In 1970, capturing whales for use in the entertainment industry was dangerous, exciting work with murky legal rules. A crew of adventurers, one a mercenary involved with shadowy Central and South

American revolutions, set off in an open boat to chase down and capture the smallest whale they can – because the smallest whale will cost the least to transport to an aquatic theme park.

Most Orca pods, as we know now, and were learning then, are highly intelligent, social creatures, usually matriarchal and often functioning in extended family units. When the whales are being hunted in Puget Sound, ...

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## SAGE AT THIRTY



SAGE members have volunteered their expertise and energy on provincial and municipal advisory groups, as liaisons in other non-government organizations, in providing environmental education in the community, as vocal advocates for the environment, and as active volunteers delivering services.

A sampling of SAGE member participation includes:

Oldman Dam Environmental Advisory Committee (1993 – 1995).

Oldman River Basin Advisory Committee (2000 – 2004).

Oldman River Basin Water Quality Initiative & Oldman Watershed Council (1998 to present).

Alberta Water Council (2006 – 2008).

Clean Air Strategic Alliance Board of Directors; Communications Committee, Risk Assessment Committee, Odour Project team; and Confined Feeding Operations Project (2005 to present).

Natural Resources Conservation Board Policy Advisory Group (2006 to present).

Alberta Environmental Network Board of Directors, Water Caucus and Clean Air/Energy Caucus (ongoing).

South Country Protected Areas Project (1993 – 1998).

Milk River Natural Area Management Society (2000 to present).

City of Lethbridge Ecosystem Management Advisory Group (2000 – 2002).

Economic Development Lethbridge (2003 to present).

Lethbridge Integrated Community Sustainability Plan Citizen Advisory Group (2006 – 2010).

Music with Nature in Mind (2008).

Lethbridge Field Notes Collective for Arts & Science (2012 to present).

Environment Lethbridge formation (2011 to present).

Environment Lethbridge Alberta Ecotrust Foundation (1998 to present).

TD Friends of the Environment Foundation (2012 to present).

SAGE has also been involved in promoting constructive perspectives and advocacy for policy development and issues including water management, Alberta Wetlands Policy, headwaters protection, South Saskatchewan Regional Plan, energy development and regulation, conservation of natural prairie grasslands and protection of species-at-risk. Finally, members have been active in events ranging from Earth Day to Coulee Clean Up to Home & Garden shows over the years.

# Mitigation Tonic ?

(Courtesy of Lorne Fitch, P. Biol., written 2013)

A tonic is a nostrum, something that is purported to be good for all that ails you (and if nothing ails you it's good for that too). Like the elixir that "takes hold of the vitals and elevates the soul; it opens the faculties, clears the canals of the heart and improves the feeling of contentedness— 5 cents a glass". It's cheaper than real medicine, avoids all that contradictory science and allows one to continue a life style with habits of excess. It is really liberating to not be burdened with insight and knowledge, to simply blindly trust that something works as stated.

Tonics are like patent medicines promoted and sold as medical cures that do not work as advertised. In ancient times these were called *nostrum remedium* ("our remedy" in Latin). Today's penchant for mitigation, an unrealistic

remedy for our development fever, fits the same mould.

The elixirs and tonics of the patent medicine era had high purchase costs even though they were concocted of cheap materials. The ingredients included turpentine, camphor, grain alcohol, cocaine and opium. Alcohol and opiates dulled the senses giving the impression the medicine was working. Turpentine and camphor probably covered the smell of deception. Mitigation similarly blinds us to loss, refocuses our attention and whips up zeal for unsatisfactory substitutes.

The remedies proved inadequate to cover the bewildering array of medical conditions, diseases, afflictions and symptoms. Given the slow state of evidence based research into real cures and preven-

tatives many early pharmacists and charlatans (the term "snake oil salesman" comes from this period) put together concoctions of substances to meet patient demands for "something to take". With mitigation and the many salesmen of the product we may not be so far removed from the era of patent medicine.

A mitigation tonic promotes the advantages of a compensatory mechanism for a loss of ecosystem services, functions, habitat or biodiversity. It's a panacea shielding us from the grim reality and pain of loss. Mitigation tonic is the one stop, one size cure for land use ailments. It's supposedly able to cure just about everything. When the accepted answer to development isn't no, all that's required is to have faith and blindly apply as necessary to the affected parts of the landscape.

## Interesting Links:

Manure into Megawatts: Lethbridge Biogas

[www.albertafarmexpress.ca/](http://www.albertafarmexpress.ca/)

Alberta Pours \$1 Billion into Wildfire Prevention

[www.edmontonjournal.com/](http://www.edmontonjournal.com/)

OWC Stormwater Project Report

[2013 Storm Water Project Report](#)



Southern Alberta Group for the Environment (SAGE)

A Leading Voice for a Healthy and Environmentally Sustainable Community.

Visit us at: <http://sage-environment.org/>

If you are interesting in getting involved, contact us at:

[sage-communications@sage-environment.org](mailto:sage-communications@sage-environment.org)

The tonic is supposed to compensate for the exponential overconsumption of natural resources by an increasing human population with machine slaves fueled by the fire of petroleum and other commodities. At the same time primary systems that provide ecosystem services like air, water and food are all going downhill. Applying a mitigation tonic means we can continue to do everything, everywhere, all the time, any time at a revved up pace and never have to worry about the consequences.

There should be a warning label or at least a full disclosure of the contents. It's suggested that any mitigation effort or project have the following attached in recognition of honesty, accuracy and fairness.

**Caution: Techno-fix Mitigation Tonic**

Always seek the advice of a competent, objective professional before starting treatment. Extended use may be damaging and permanent. Stop treatment if symptoms of excessive and cumulative land use effects persist. Always evaluate before repeating treatment. This product may not be right for every situation.

May contain: spin, hype, empty hyperbole, platitudes, political meddling, corporate pressure, cosmetic solutions, false advertising, false optimism, baseless hope, empty promises, faith-based solutions, unproven technology, inadequate evaluation,

no biological benchmarks, junk science, inequities in compensation, public naivety, hidden costs, partial truths, half truths, lies.

Side effects: blindness to impacts, self deception, unrealistic expectations, unrealized costs, unrecognized effects, unintended consequences, unfulfilled plans, failure to implement, inadequate measurement, lack of avoidance strategies, increased human footprint, biodiversity declines, species loss, fragmented landscapes, incremental losses, cumulative impacts, lost future opportunity, reputational failure, repetitive use without effect, suspension of reality.

As Tom Waits, American singer-songwriter said, "You get it buddy; the large print giveth; the small print taketh away." And I'll bet Tom never realized he was speaking of mitigation.

The real medicine isn't an ineffective tonic, doesn't act as a sedative, is not a panacea and can't be a substitute for thought, responsibility and change. If taken, and it will taste bad, it will clear our vision, opening the faculties for information, balance, restraint and consequences. That will help us connect the dots between us, land use pressures and the essentials of the landscape disappearing quickly under the footprint of economic development. It will rock us out of symptoms of complacency, false optimism and defensive apathy towards unrestrained development.

Mostly it will put mitigation into its proper role of a last ditch, cosmetic and ineffectual attempt to rationalize our inability to say no. Mitigation has become the triumph of hope over experience. The process inevitable starts with brave words and positive intent which then slip, inexorably into fudging and equivocating about the outcomes. Instead of that slide down a slippery slope of compromise we need first to employ the precautionary principle, judged in part by cumulative effects analysis.

We need to stop the seductive delusion that all our land use issues have solutions, that our pace of development can continue and we can salvage ecosystems and, that the industrial/urban footprint can be restored or compensated for in some inexplicable fashion. The greatest of delusions is we can have it all. The optimism that comes with mitigation is akin to having a bad cold— if you wait long enough the feeling will end.

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*Lorne Fitch is a Professional Biologist, a retired Fish and Wildlife Biologist and an Adjunct Professor with the University of Calgary*

# Blackfish

Premiered at Sundance 2013  
Currently on Netflix  
Director: Gabriela Cowperthwaite  
Running time: 90 minutes

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... they split into two groups with the males drawing off the pursuers while the females and young submerge and veer off in another direction. It's a great strategy as the men in boats cannot tell they are being duped. Unfortunately for the whales, airplanes overhead are not so readily fooled and they radio whale locations to the boats.



Tilikum performing @ SeaWorld 2009. Wiki.

From capture to today, life seems pretty tough for Tillikum. In both Victoria and later in Orlando, 2 year old motherless Tillikum is at the mercy of humans as well as the other captive whales who dominate and punish him and each other as they sort out hierarchical roles. These are whales from different cultural groups and in any case, social structure in the wild does not translate in captivity; even something as basic as room to get away from a dominant animal is tragically restricted.

Interviews with former SeaWorld trainers provide some welcome humanity in the documentary. Audiences watching whales, seals, dolphins and others being put through their repertoire of tricks at aquatic parks might reasonably assume the trainers are themselves, trained marine biologists. Not so according to the film; trainers are young, vivacious and good swimmers – they know nothing about whales in the wild and only as much about the whales in captivity as management wants them to know. Which doesn't include the information that newly transferred Tilikum helped drag a trainer to her watery death in Victoria. In SeaWorld, over the course of many years, whales breach onto trainers, drag other trainers to near death and Tilikum alone will kill 2 more people.

Given the violence Tilikum has exacted, why Sea World keeps him on as an attraction is perhaps the most atrocious thing revealed in this documentary. Tilikum is milked of his semen for Sea World's captive breeding programme – it no longer being legal anywhere in the world to catch wild whales. The offspring are then taken from their mothers at various ages, from 4 to 12, and shipped to other water circuses to perform.

The name Tilikum is informed by west coast Chinook trade language and as such, is unintentionally metaphoric. Trade languages are always pared to their simplest forms as their purpose is to facilitate movement of goods between peoples who do not speak one another's languages – and have neither the time nor the interest to learn. Humans neither speak nor understand whale systems of communication and many, such as the owners of Sea World, don't speak much at all, refusing to be interviewed for this documentary. Fortunately trainers, film makers and many others strive to understand other worlds; it makes for some humble moments when trainers are discussing their youthful days on the job. Older and embarrassed at best, they squirm at video clips of their younger selves promoting Sea World with jingoist claims of training whales as “just like training your dog”.

And that mercenary revolutionary - big, bushy haired and covered in tattoos whom I mentioned earlier? He is also filmed close to tears as he describes the self confessed most horrible thing he has done in life; the baby whale capture, complete with old film footage. The littlest whale is indeed caught and strung in a stretcher preparatory to being airlifted away – while the entire extended whale family agitates, their heads above the waves, crying, clicking and calling. Animal and human are all in close enough proximity to literally reach out and touch one another. It's heart wrenching.

Perhaps good can be gleaned from the grimness of this film through raising awareness of the dark cruelty we are inflicting on whales, and ourselves, in pursuit of entertainment. Various organizations work to end abuse of performing animals; what the movie *Free Willy* did for Keiko, this film may do for other captive whales.

Since release of *Blackfish*, controversy has ensued. The internet is full of information, some of it actually useful. Huffington Post is a reasonable place to begin looking: [www.huffingtonpost.com/tag/blackfish/](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tag/blackfish/)

SeaWorld is running a disclaimer accusing the film of inaccuracy, animal activism and bias:

<http://seaworld.com/en/truth/truth-about-blackfish>

National Geographic has a sort of third party assessment by Kenneth Brower: SeaWorld vs. the Whale That Killed Its Trainer <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/08/130803-blackfish-orca-killer-whale-keiko-tilikum-sea-world/>



## How Institutions Think (1986)

Mary Douglas is an eclectic thinker. She is a trained anthropologist but has written extensively on symbols, modern society, and culture. *How Institutions Think* asks not so much how institutions think (as the title implies), but how institutions are created. It is an interesting question.

Douglas begins by pointing out that most anthropology and modern philosophies address institutions as having already been created - they form circular arguments that institutions are created through social coercion, through rational choice of shared benefits, and so on. In other words, the institution or community must already be in existence to be able to attract or coerce its members. But they don't address how institutions are created in the first place.

She cites Durkheim approaching institutions from two directions, functionalist and rational choice - "One strand is cognitive: the individual demand for order and coherence and control of uncertainty. The other strand is transactional: the individual utility maximizing activity described in a cost-benefit calculus" (p.18).

Douglas posits that "an institution is only a convention. ... a convention arises when all parties have a common interest in there being a rule to insure coordination, none has a conflicting interest, and none will deviate lest the desired coordination is lost" (p.46).

People create communities and institutions for coherence and meaning-making, and they create them when there are mutual benefits. Intuitively, one can see that these motivations might be necessary, but are they sufficient?

One of the tantalizing foundations that Douglas introduces (but doesn't expand on) is the effect of scarcity and abundance on creating institutions and community. She says: "Sparsity of population, abundance of the where-withal to satisfy wants at a low level, plus easy movement between bands allows conflict to be diffused by separation ... These are the conditions in which Olson's theory expects latent groups to abound: nothing much for an individual to gain or lose by staying with the group, easy switches of allegiance, easy resistance to attempted coercion by threatening to secede. Their low level of energy expenditure and the small degree to which their existence has made a dint in the environmental resources suggest corroboration of at least the thesis that when conditions are thus favorable to individuals, not much is achieved in the way of collaboration" (p.26).

This really speaks of institutional growth and its relative decline since the Industrial Revolution. Scarcity has predominated for most of human history, most production was consumed. Even the advent of creating capital (primitive accumulation) was grounded in scarcity of energy, labour and investment and required new institutions to meet the demand. It seems that the era of abundance over the past century has weakened community and institutional control, with a concomitant intensification of individualism. As Douglas suggests, when conditions are favourable for individuals, they are less likely to adhere to groups.

Unfortunately, Douglas does not elaborate on scarcity as a natural motivation for creating institutions. Instead she suggests "institutions need to be established by a cognitive device. ... The cognitive device grounds the in-

stitution at once in nature and in reason by discovering that the institutions' formal structure corresponds to formal structures in non-human realms" (p.55). It is quite unclear, however, what 'formal structures' in nature ground the creation of institutions. Is she suggesting an innate mutualism in nature? the effects of scarcity? Sharing symbols in meaning-making? What ever it is, Douglas leaves it unsaid.

Douglas concludes: "For better or worse, individuals really do share their thoughts and they do to some extent harmonize their preferences, and they have no other way to make the big decisions except within the scope of institutions they build" (p.128). This is a return to human sharing cognitive and transactional functions.

What I enjoyed about this book is the asking of the question on how institutions and communities are created. Identifying the circular arguments commonly used for explanation was enlightening. And using current institutional perspectives to evaluate the question is biased, as it is difficult to think outside of one's 'thought style'. How does a society create and change institutional thinking?

The question remains unanswered, but there is much food for thought - particularly as we leave the era of abundance and individual atomization, and enter a period of greater scarcity.

