

Having lived in Singapore all my life, I have always thought that we were a pretty 'green' country. Now do not get me wrong - I still feel like this is mostly the case. After all, are we not known as the nation that struck a cohesive balance between creating a concrete jungle tempered by refreshing greenery manicured to absolute perfection? From our stunning Marina Barrage to the magnificent Supertrees towering over the skyline, we have clearly punched above our weight in showcasing to the world how far we have come environmentally. And yet, the subtle irony of our success is perhaps we have developed a paradigm where we think of ourselves as greater than and separate from the environment – almost like we as the supreme species are destined to conquer whatever lies in the way of our progress; nature included.

As the reality of climate change becomes more palpable (regardless of whatever alternate facts detractors choose to believe), I remember asking myself earlier this year against the backdrop of our climate pledge how Singapore could move forward environmentally. Would a carbon tax work? The proposed water price hike? More solar panels?

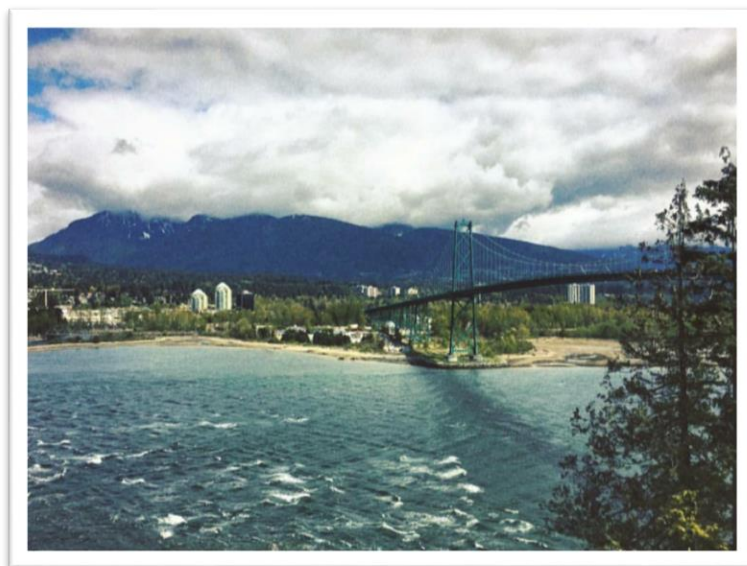
Sure.

These measures were all comforting in the sense that they were steps in the right direction. Still, I could not shake off the nagging feeling that something about all this felt odd. It was not so much the measures per se, but more so the way these solutions were being suggested and implemented.

A month ago, I finally placed my finger on what was missing:

Engagement. Actual bottom-up engagement.

Let me explain. You see, a month ago, I had the good fortune of visiting Vancouver.



*View of Downtown Vancouver*

In many ways, Vancouver is a lot like Singapore. Both are moving away from fossil fuels, both have a strong interest in urban greenery and both are committed to creating sustainable communities. As I explored more and more of Vancouver, I came to appreciate how environmental strategies are not one-size-fits-all because the texture of every city is different. With that said, it was refreshing to have a glimpse of what Singapore could work towards to,

in terms of encouraging responsible consumption and disposal, improving green transportation and cultivating an understanding that we are not apart from nature, but a part of.

These were some of my key takeaways:

The first thing that hit me as I toured Vancouver was funnily enough, the disposal bins. The prevalence of recycling bins -for paper and plastics- was commendable to say the least. Sorting of wastes has somewhat become the norm, for there was no general waste chute to throw your trash in. Next, quite a few shops and grocery outlets encouraged consumers to bring their own bags or provided paper ones for a small charge. This involvement was invigorating because of how natural this practice took root.

Vancouver is known for her strong coffee culture - but this does not get in the way of environmental friendliness. Most beverage cups and food packs I encountered were made of biodegradable packaging, with relatively few businesses opting to use plastic or styrofoam packaging. Singapore has made huge steps in this aspect, slowly phasing out styrofoam containers and should continue to keep up the good work.

Speaking of packaging, I vividly recall dropping by the produce section of many supermarkets and being amazed at how minimal the packaging was for fruits and vegetables (something I know Singapore has recently been working to cutting down!)

In terms of responsible consumption, it was fascinating how consumers were more involved in what they were buying food-wise, opting for ethically-sourced fruits, coffee, cheese and the like. In that sense, business that were environmentally sustainable were rewarded for their focus and it really does go to show how consumers can gradually catalyse change through their dollar vote.



*Inside Granville Market*

On another note, I was particularly impressed with Granville Island, an outstanding example of the need for pedestrian-centric, urban spaces to bring communities together in the way they shop, market and play. It reminded me vaguely of Tiong Bahru and Bugis, which was amusing indeed.

The second aspect which really struck me was transportation. Vancouver has lots of cyclists and pay-to-ride bikes. And the bikes are all in pretty good shape. One might argue that the weather in Vancouver is a lot more conducive for cycling than in our sweltering Singapore. Still, it was cool to see how cycling culture was so ingrained in some of the locals that they even pedalled in the rain!

Electric and hybrid cars were also common in Vancouver, with some of the public buses running entirely on electricity. There were also numerous charging stations downtown, which was a nice sight to behold seeing that Singapore may choose to follow suit by increasing the number of car charging facilities locally.

Finally, what I saw in Vancouver that I feel was the most important aspect in driving environmental success is the understanding amongst the locals that they belong to nature - that nature is central to their identity and should be cherished. It certainly does help that Vancouver is nestled amongst gorgeous temperate forests, bounded by breath-taking mountains and that Canada in general has majestic scenery and wildlife. Because they feel that nature is integral to who they are, this sense of ownership drives the country to find real meaning in their efforts to combat climate change. It is not the far-fetched polar bears they think of when they hear about sea levels rising, but the grizzly bears and elks that flourish just outside the city.



*Stunning Canada!*

They understand. They relate.

And so, they act.

What then, does this mean for my beloved home Singapore? It means we must rethink how we go about living our lives. It means we must reflect on the way we produce and consume. Most importantly, it means that you and I must get in touch with what it means to be an inhabitant of this earth - the time is now.