

Common Sense: Really?



By Lorne Fitch, *P. Biol.*

What is “common sense” and is it really common? I’d be rich, if I had a dollar for every time I have heard the expression used, especially to dismiss solutions to a complex issue and offer a simple, but very flawed response.

Years ago, I helped a friend move a log cabin. It was elevated on blocks and all we had to do was back a flatbed trailer under it, lower the cabin, and move it. It wasn’t that simple in practice since the trailer was too high to get under the cabin without raising the structure higher. We tried that and the cabin teetered, swayed, and threatened to topple off its supports. If the cabin couldn’t go higher, I reasoned the trailer would have to get lower. So, we took the wheels off and dragged the now lowered trailer under the cabin, jacked it up, replaced the wheels and the move was underway.

An elderly friend, with years of practical experience complimented me on my “common sense” solution. In retrospect, I think it was less common sense than an analysis of the alternatives, of which only one was viable. If only all problems had that short list of alternative and clear solutions.

Common sense may be an admirable attribute in some, simple circumstances, like the cabin move. But there are clear limits on the application of common sense. To suggest the value of “common sense” conservation provides no more reassurance than to engage in “do it yourself” nuclear fission or “self-help” heart surgery.

One of the lessons of life is that for every complex problem there is a sim-

ple solution that will not work. Merely tacking the term, common sense, onto an action doesn’t make it sensible. Take the “Common Sense Revolution” that Premier Mike Harris pursued in Ontario. That was a catchphrase for his intent to reduce the size and role of government. Many sensible people questioned whether this version of “common sense” served the public interest.

Environment and Parks Minister Nixon has released his government’s vision for Alberta’s public lands. Called the “Alberta Crown Land Vision” it promises “a *common sense* approach to Crown land management that finds the *right* balance between conservation, recreation and economic use.” (my emphasis)

Given how little appreciation the Kenney government has so far shown to conservation science and scientists, I worry that this clarion call in favour of common sense is a backhanded way of attacking a perceived egg-headed, book-trained “elite,” in favor of corporations, industry, and off-highway vehicle users.

Merriam-Webster defines common sense as “sound practical judgement concerning everyday matters, or basic ability to perceive, understand and judge that is shared (common to) nearly all people.” The keys to the utility of common sense are the words “everyday matters” and “basic ability.” The definition also depends on whom you’re asking.

Often, the things that should guide us in life, like physics, chemistry, biology and mathematics, lie well outside our everyday experience, leaving us little to which

we can apply common sense. And, without their guidance, common sense can get things horribly wrong. Take our understanding of the relationship between the Sun and the Earth. Every morning the Sun rises; each evening it sets. Common sense told our ancestors the Sun travelled around the Earth. Copernicus challenged this common sense approach using reason and developed a model where the Earth orbits around the Sun.

Like conventional wisdom, common sense approaches may stop us from thinking “outside the box.” As Melissa Schilling, a professor of management reflects: “Rigid adherence to convention and agreeableness is the sweet way to prevent independent thinking and innovation.”

Gaps often arise between what “feels” true and what scientific research “proves” is true. Commonly held beliefs may animate actions even when scientific evidence shows the beliefs to be myths. Some government and industry foresters, for example, subscribe to the myths that logging is an ecological equivalent for fire and that logging prevents wildfire.

Independent forest ecologists recognize the significant difference between a tree killed with a feller buncher in a logging operation and one torched in a forest fire. Trees removed by logging create different effects on soils, watersheds, fish/wildlife habitat, and aesthetics than ones killed by fire and left on site to be recycled, reduce erosion, and aid in biodiversity maintenance. Logging demands an extensive road network, a significant sediment source for years.

Common sense will lead some to believe that, if a forest is logged, fire risk is removed, or reduced. That might hold true if forests were never allowed to regenerate and create new fuel loads to burn. But under conditions of natural and human-induced fire starts, exacerbated by drought and wind, even young, recently regenerating clearcuts will burn, and burn intensively.

On closer examination the facts of scientific research get in the way of common-sense explanations.

Models allow us to assemble the disconnected bits of information together to understand the workings of a complex system. In these situations, the dictates of common sense are not the most reliable guide to predict an outcome. Common sense favors familiar and simple explanations over unfamiliar, complex, and perhaps unpopular ones. Common sense seems so simple as to be self-evident.

A common sense approach may not allow us to analyze data, the facts, as objectively as possible. Realistically, what is common sense is that no one likes to see their “theories” disproven. Use of the scientific method provides impartiality, tempering human biases and blinkered vision. Science is the umpire of facts, not of defending positions.

If we were to think in ways more open and rigorous, especially on matters out-

side of our everyday lives, we would stand a better chance of drawing the most accurate conclusions, leading to better decisions on the issues we face every day, whether they are mundane or impactful. That is the test we should apply to common sense, especially as it relates to the new “Alberta Crown Land Vision.”

For example: Would “common sense” suggest the wisdom of slashing provincial parks and recreation areas in a time of Covid, when these are the essential safety valves for Albertans? The outcry from Albertans over that common sense approach provides a clear answer. Promoting a 13 percent increase in timber harvest, even though logging may not be sustainable at present levels—common sense? Facilitating a coal rush in the Eastern Slopes, a place that supplies water to two-thirds of Albertans, is a favored recreation/tourism destination, and harbors fish and wildlife populations, some of which are species at risk doesn’t seem to fall under the banner of common sense.

If, indeed, the new “Alberta Crown Land Vision” is, as explained, another “common sense approach” we should be wary, very wary. Buzz words and phrases like “common sense,” “the right balance,” “a modern approach,” and “reducing red tape” should ratchet up our attentiveness to what we’re being sold. The “Vision,” which is hazy at

best, might contain a spoonful of truth, to make the nonsense go down easier. I don’t disagree we need a new vision (or perhaps even a return to an old one like the Coal Policy) but not one that supports more of everything on Crown land. It is doubtful whether this version of “common sense” will take us into a sustainable future, one that serves the broad public interest.

On reflection, we might find common sense isn’t really common, or sense. Perhaps when it is truly displayed, and useful, we should call it “uncommon” sense. Churchill said that common sense is so seldom encountered, when it is it seems like brilliance. The last word on common sense might go to Albert Einstein who reflected it was “the collection of prejudices acquired by age eighteen.” That’s the category in which the “Alberta Crown Land Vision” should be placed.

Maybe we should acknowledge that this thing called common sense might be severely over-rated, beyond simple explanations and solutions. That would be common sense. 🐟

Lorne Fitch is a professional biologist, a retired fish and wildlife biologist, and a former Adjunct Professor with the University of Calgary.

The Snow-Storm

By Ralph Waldo Emerson

Announced by all the trumpets of the sky,
Arrives the snow, and, driving o’er the fields,
Seems nowhere to alight: the whited air
Hides hills and woods, the river, and the heaven,
And veils the farm-house at the garden’s end.
The sled and traveller stopped, the courier’s feet
Delayed, all friends shut out, the housemates sit
Around the radiant fireplace, enclosed
In a tumultuous privacy of storm.

Come see the north wind’s masonry.
Out of an unseen quarry
Furnished with tile, the fierce artificer
Curves his white bastions with projected roof
Round every windward stake, or tree, or door.

Speeding, the myriad-handed, his wild work
So fanciful, so savage, nought cares he
For number or proportion. Mockingly,
On coop or kennel he hangs Parian wreaths;
A swan-like form invests the hidden thorn;
Fills up the farmer’s lane from wall to wall,
Maugre the farmer’s sighs; and at the gate
A tapering turret overtops the work.
And when his hours are numbered, and the world
Is all his own, retiring, as he were not,
Leaves, when the sun appears, astonished Art
To mimic in slow structures, stone by stone,
Built in an age, the mad wind’s night-work,
The frolic architecture of the snow.