

Collaboration can solve our Environmental Challenges

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Although a few colder areas in Vermont had a frost in September, we had no killing frost in Pittsford until practically the end of October. This past week my garden was still producing a few summer squash on long vines, and a second crop of volunteer tomatoes was ripening. These sprouted out of the compost made from the organic waste from the Rutland Food Co-op.

The beauty of gardening is the close contact with the natural world and its endless surprises. The first fall frosts have been getting noticeably later this past decade. My latest so far was October 27 in 2011. So far this season I still haven't planted my winter rye cover crop.

High above the flood plain of the Otter Creek, I can contemplate the surreal collapse of the federal government from afar.

The long weekend of October 9-13 was gloomy in the nation's capital. Furloughed government employees suffered in silence through more than 6 inches of rain, while a frustrated tea party slowly drowned in the dismal deluge. The remains of tropical storm Karen formed a Nor'easter which stalled over Congress for five days, as a reminder that the Earth's changing climate does not answer to the so-called leaders-of-the-free-world. Memories are so short – Congress has long forgotten the blizzard that crowned the January 1996 shutdown! And with the government computers inaccessible, real data was missing.

The United States was founded with a Constitution that divided responsibilities and powers, because the colonists were fearful of monarchs and dictators. They set up a collaborative democracy, where no one person was in command, to debate and decide what would benefit the people. It was a powerful vision that has worked for a couple of centuries – as long as the President, Congress and Supreme Court, remember that the good of the whole, the nation and now the planet, depend on their collaboration. As that has decayed into polemical narcissism, gerrymandering and financial extortion, the American dream and constitution are crumbling. Trampling on the U.S. Constitution is a bit like destroying an ecosystem – it is very hard to put it back together.

What can the natural world teach us about our interdependence and about being grounded in the real world? When I talk to groups in Vermont — whether high school students or citizens groups — I remind them that we need roots in the natural world, if we are to work with the Earth and solve some of our complex environmental challenges. This connection is a source of trust and hope that frees us to be creative, responsive and make wiser choices.

The global environment won't wait for the foolish who are disconnected from reality. We have a short window left – a decade or so – when we can work with the Earth, reduce our waste streams, particularly our CO₂ emissions from fossil fuels, build an efficient society and reduce the climate change we face.

This speculation leads me to another: We the people could impose a congressional wasted-time tax. We would stop paying federal income taxes whenever the government shuts down and put the money into a trust fund to build climate change and disaster resilience. This month's shutdown would give us a good start of \$50 billion. We could invest this wisely on the local scale.

Meanwhile, let us bring the fruits of our harvest to support those community groups who lead where our 'leaders' fear to tread. We will need new forms of adaptive governance to build resilience in changing times. The creative vision will have to come from us.