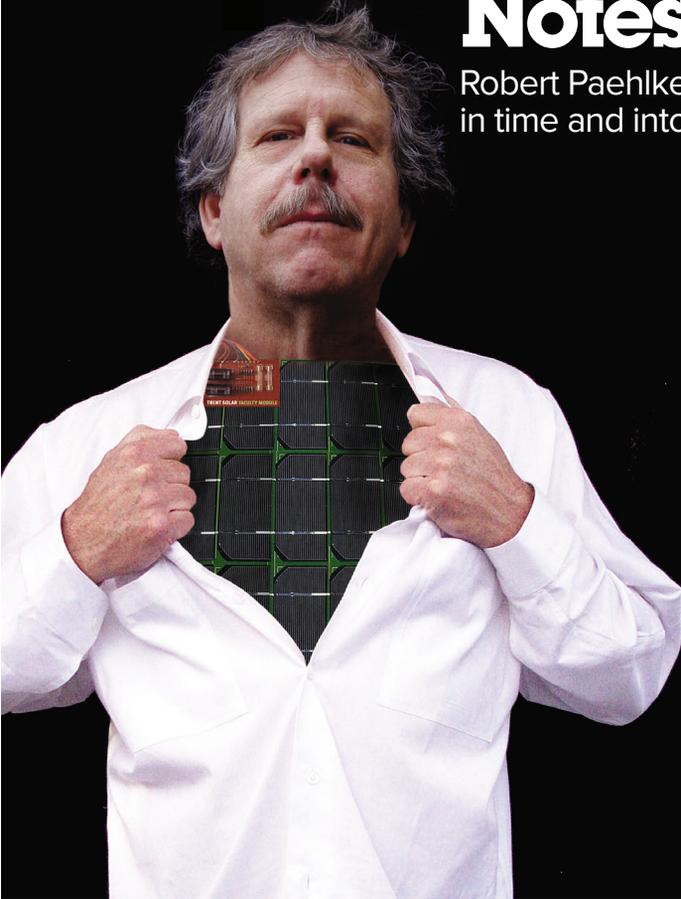


AJ

Founder's Notes

Robert Paehlke goes back in time and into the future.



ROBERT PAEHLKE was a leading mind behind the inception of *Alternatives Journal*, and like a proud father, has continuously driven **AJ** to grow and mature into the media organization it is today. In November 1971, when the environmental movement was gaining momentum, he helped launch the first issue of **AJ**. He couldn't have known that 45 years later it would still be going strong as Canada's only independent environmental media organization. In honour of our 45th anniversary, Robert shared with us the story of **AJ**'s beginnings, memories from the past and his hopes for the future.

AJ: *How did the idea of Alternatives Journal come up and how was it transformed from idea to reality?*

Robert Paehlke: Shortly after arriving in Peterborough to start my first permanent teaching position at Trent, I got into a conversation with Jim White at the Peterborough Farmers' Market, at the Pollution Probe information booth. He suggested that the local Probe wanted to start a publication about environmental issues, maybe a newsletter, maybe something more.

As I got to know many students and faculty at Trent that idea evolved and, with some funding from Trent, student governments and others, by the following spring we produced a first issue featuring articles by people we knew. We mailed subscription appeals to libraries and any list we could find. We got magazines into any bookstore or magazine rack we could find (even letting retailers keep 100% of the cover price). Amazingly, we soon had tons of subscribers and were able to pay the

printer and the post office (though no one was paid for writing or editing or anything else like that for years more, other than via summer make-a-job grants).

What was your goal when you started AJ? What did you expect would come of it?

The goal was to communicate across the academic disciplines and between academics and the wider public regarding environmental issues. We wanted to be different from academic journals written by specialists for other specialists. I thought that there was a real need for such publications that would alter the ivory tower mindset and that we could help to do that. We were cautious to avoid being too politically partisan, but did hope to get environmental concerns onto the policy agenda in Canada. I did not imagine a publication that would endure for 45 years. At the time, we were mostly hoping to have enough money to get the next issue out.

You've documented the environmental movement since the early 70s. What has been the most memorable and important turning point? What has been the biggest surprise?

An early important turning point was what might be called the shift from protest to professionalization. When *Alternatives* was founded, the environmental movement was mostly about protest and public demonstrations. Many environmentalists of the day had doubts about industrial society and consumer culture. In 1970, there were few environmental studies programs.

By the 1980s, there were many – and many environmental activists were thoroughly versed in environmental science and/or policy. Many former activists soon worked in relevant government agencies or for municipalities. Activists themselves spent more time writing briefs, attending hearings, and writing articles and less time picketing. They did not become “establishment”, but they did become more informed and professional.

The biggest surprise, I think, came in 2008 when after the global economy

fell into deep recession, many global leaders opted to push, of all things, a green economy for the economic future – an idea dreamed up by those who once rejected industrial society to grow rutabagas in the wilderness somewhere.

What were the top five issues/pieces in AJ through the years?

Let's start with the early years. Most notable to me were issues on *Agriculture and Shelter* [volumes 5:3/4 and 6:1] and the 1979-80 issues featuring a province-by-province *Soft Energy Path for Canada* [8:3/4, 9:1 and 9:2]. I was especially proud of these two because they addressed today's issues decades ago.

More recently, I loved our many issues and articles linking the environment to social justice. For example *Who Pays?: Distributive Justice, Sustainability and the Market* [21:1, 1995] and *Reflections on*

Ecofeminism [21:2]. Finally, a recent article I really enjoyed was the 2014 interview with Jane Goodall [40:4].

What are the most important issues today?

Without question, the most important issue is climate change and the need to transition rapidly to a post-carbon economy. Many important issues are linked to that, including local and organic food, renewable energy, urban re-design and resistance to pipelines and to the expansion of tar sands development. Taken together, these things require creating a quite different economy through both public policy and through market-based, ecologically mindful work, investment, entrepreneurship and technologies. Beyond that, as if we needed more to do, another crucial issue we face is habitat preservation.

What are you working on now?

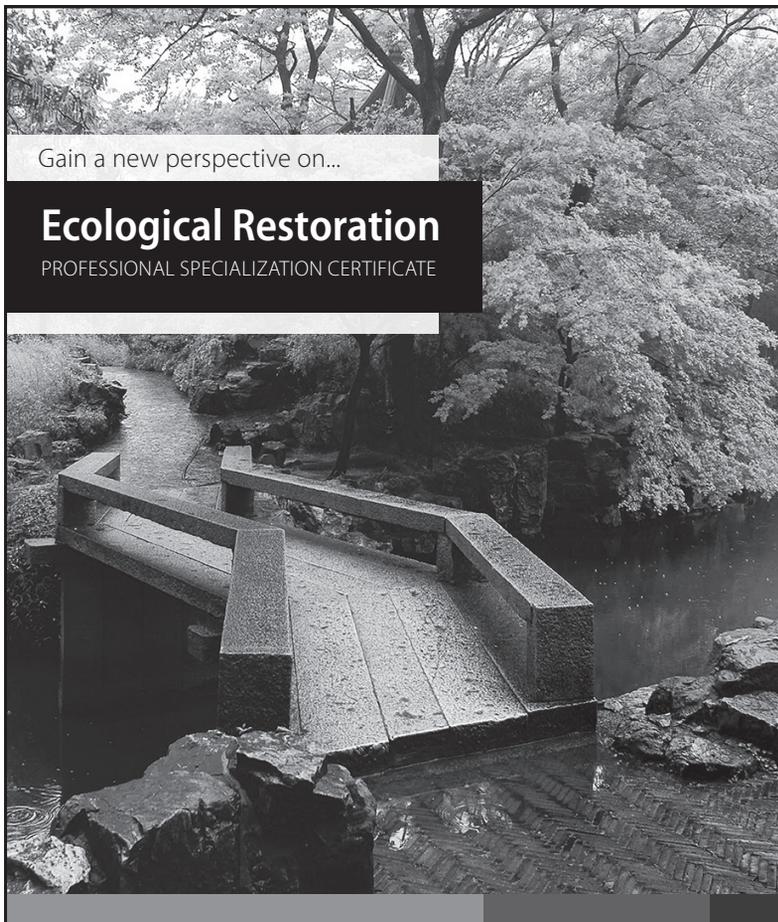
I have just finished a draft of a book, tentatively called *The Citizen Economy*,

about some of the things noted in the previous two answers. The book documents a pattern of change in five economic sectors: food, energy, media, shelter and stuff (manufacturing). In all five sectors the shift is toward greener, more local-oriented, citizen-owned enterprises and citizen-driven change in municipal governance and institutional economic behaviour.

Any final words?

It is easy to get discouraged in the pursuit of environmental action, but we have come a very long way from when this all started. I find enormous inspiration in what we have accomplished over the past 45 years and in the willingness of so many young (and not-so-young) people to imagine their life work as contributing to improved environmental protection and a better society. 

Associate editor Leah Gerber interviewed Robert Paehlke in November 2016.



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