Failed Sustainability: An Evening with Bruce Lourie

On November 20, the Riverwood Conservancy and the Master of Science in Sustainability Management Program joined together to host Bruce Lourie for a special evening at the UTM Campus. 140 audience members attended *Failed Sustainability: An Evening with Bruce Lourie* to learn about the current state of sustainability in Canada and globally, toxins in our everyday life, and to think about what we can do differently to lead healthier lives.

Bruce touched on a number of issues at play in sustainability both in Canada and around the world. He called attention to the rapidly increasing disparity in income between the world's wealthiest and poorest, highlighting the particular spike in the "0.1% income" in the last few years. He spoke about Greenhouse Gas Emissions and the challenges with a national policy across a country like Canada, with immense size and scope, while also acknowledging Canada's impressive strides toward voluntary standards such as the Forest Stewardship Council, Marine Stewardship Council and Green Building Council.

Having set the stage for the current landscape, Bruce then queried the audience: "what do you think of when you think of pollution?" Audience members suggested smokestacks, dumping garbage into lakes, and smog – but in reality, Bruce pointed out, there is far less of that occurring than there once was in Canada. Now, he argued, pollution has moved into products, and moved indoors. Toxic pollutants are now embedded in our carpets, our furniture, our toothpaste and our children's toys – among others.

As outlined in his co-authored book, *Slow Death by Rubber Duck*, Bruce retold the story of embarking on a scientific adventure, in which he and co-author Rick Smith experimented with levels of toxins in everyday life, with the goal of proving how alarmingly easy it is to increase levels of hazardous materials within our own bodies. From eating tuna, to using scented shampoos and buying plastic shower curtains, to using antibacterial dish soap and perfumes of the "parfume" variety, Bruce and Rick were able to show spikes from anywhere between twice as many to two thousand, nine hundred times as many levels of chemicals such as triclosan, phthalates and mercury in their bodies.

What's alarming in this, Bruce suggests, is that many of these chemicals act as endocrine disruptors – which is to say they behave like artificial hormones in our bodies. This finding is powerfully disruptive, particularly to children, who are in rapid stages of brain and body development. Bruce argued that this kind of toxic intake has been tied to epidemics such as asthma, autism, cancer, ADD, obesity and more.

On the subject of organic food, Bruce shared that it isn't necessarily better for you because it has more nutrients; rather, it's better for you because it has less, if any, pesticides. Bruce provided insight on a little known fact; strawberries, of all the fruits and vegetables, are often the most pesticide filled fruit because of their soft skin.

There was, however, some positive news. Bruce and Rick have been able to show that by avoiding such chemicals in daily life, our bodies are well prepared to rid themselves of these toxins fairly quickly, should they enter. In this regard, Bruce offered some quick tips:

- Avoid using plastics with food, and never heat your plastic containers!
- Don't use strongly scented shampoo, lotions and other body care products
- If you are pregnant, or may become pregnant, avoid tuna and swordfish
- Don't use Teflon (non-stick), stain-free or stain-guarded, or fire retardant items in your home
- Don't use pesticides
- Eat more organic food
- Drink lots of water
- Use natural products and low-VOC paints in your home
- Eat more veggies and less meat
- Sweat more – that's how many toxins are released
- Ues less, and waste less
- Buy less, and buy green
- Support politicians who believe in a greener – and healthier – economy

Ultimately, Bruce suggested, "life chose water." In nature, he commented, all living things are created from water and natural resources. A beetle, for instance, with a shell that may look like plastic, in fact has a shell that is derived from water. While at the same time, we humans have opted to choose chemicals, pesticides and toxins to eat, fill our houses with, and put on our bodies. Perhaps, he suggested, we should choose water too?

Books by Bruce Lourie and Rick Smith:

1. Slow Death by Rubber Duck
2. Toxin Toxout: Getting Harmful Chemicals Out of Our Bodies