

Ecosphere more than house of straw

If people change habits by 10%, the environment can be enriched 10%, the organizer of a sustainable development fair says

STEPHANIE WHITTAKER

Freelance

Tuesday, October 03, 2006

There was a bitter irony in the timing of the environmental fair at Brome during the weekend.

At the very moment that 130 exhibitors were showing off their wares at Project Ecosphere, a country fair focusing exclusively on the environment, fair trade and sustainable development, a bloom of blue-green algae was toxifying Lake Massawippi, a few kilometres to the east.

But the good news was that 130 exhibitors at Project ecosphere represented a small percentage of the organizations that could potentially have been there.

"When I started organizing this event, I put together a list of companies and organizations in the environmental sector in Quebec and I came up with more than 1,000," Eric Ferland said.

Ferland, a professional organizer who is behind the Frelighsburg Festiv'Art and is a former leader of Quebec's Green Party, devised the idea for an environmental country fair while he was visiting Barcelona in 1999.

"I saw a poster there about an environmental fair and attended it," he said. He said he was surprised that the event featured an exhibit of garbage trucks and the triage of recyclables, viewed there as cutting edge.

Then Ferland attended an environmental fair in Maine that featured 400 exhibitors and he decided to test-drive a similar concept in Quebec. He was pleasantly surprised to find many companies doing business in the sustainable development field.

"I phoned everyone I could," he said. "I wanted to show people that there are things we can do about the environment. If people change their lifestyle even 10 per cent by changing the way they eat, buy cars and consume goods, the environment can improve by 10 per cent."

The other pleasant surprise, says Ferland, was the fact that once he started planning the event, he discovered other, similar fairs being planned in Sherbrooke and Montreal.

Projet Ecosphere showcased a broad spectrum of products in the environmental sector: geothermal heating, wind power, solar panels, electric and hybrid cars, sustainable agriculture, chemical-free water-treatment, ecologically friendly housing, fair trade clothing and non-polluting stains and varnishes among many others.

Standing beside one of the Stiebel Eltron solar panels his company, DISPAQ,

distributes in Canada, exhibitor Jean-Pierre Paquette conceded that there is a growing awareness of the need for alternative energy sources.

The solar panel industry died abruptly in 1980, he said, when governments shut off subsidies.

"This market then was built on subsidies. The difference between then and now is that that now, we're building the market not with subsidies but by working hard and selling products to people who want to prevent environmental problems."

Paquette, who has been selling the German-made solar panels in Canada for the past five years, added that most of the calls he gets are economically motivated. "Oil is expensive and people want to find alternative ways of heating their homes," he said. "Only about five to 10 per cent of people who contact me do so for environmental reasons."

He said 2006 marked the first year that his company turned a profit.

"I sold 12 solar panels in two houses last year," he said. "This year, I've outfitted 20 homes with them. I'm projecting 100 for next year."

But Paquette added that the biggest obstacle to selling more is ignorance.

"When people say solar energy is more likely to work in Europe than here, I remind them that it's the same sun that shines here as in Europe," he said.

Like Paquette, many exhibitors at Project Ecosphere said there is a dawning awareness of the need for sustainable development and environmental protection. "It's starting," several of them said when asked if their companies were carving out a niche in the marketplace.

One such company is H2O Innovations (2000) Inc., which designs, builds and installs water treatment systems that use membrane technology rather than chemicals.

Company representative Simon Bouchard said the H2O technology uses no polymers, chemicals that in traditional treatment are used in flocculation, a process in which particles in the water coagulate. "This technology is greener," he said. "It pushes pressurize water through membranes."

The company is selling its technology to industry, municipalities and such tourist sites as campgrounds. It boasts such large clients as Loblaw Cos., Pratt & Whitney and Hydro-Quebec.

Like the other exhibitors at the fair, Bouchard said the technology is catching on and he added that it would be able to purify water contaminated by blue-green algae.

At a neighbouring booth at the fair, Phillippe Mazur was explaining how geothermal energy systems are increasingly being sought by homeowners who are tired of the rising cost of fossil fuels.

Mazur, an architect, is a consultant to Geonergy, a Quebec company that installs geothermal heating systems, which draw heat from the earth. He's assembled a network of installers across the province who are experts in building the system in new homes or retrofitting it in existing buildings.

Many of the companies on display at the fair have been created in response to environmental needs. Solutions Alternatives Environment Inc. is a Quebec company that consults to municipalities and individuals about how to deal with pests without resorting to pesticide use.

Michel Tabib and his brother, Pierre, were talking to fair visitors about their company, www.larevanchedes3petitscochons.com, which builds straw bale houses.

Tabib and his girlfriend, Patricia Kelly, one of the fair's organizers, live in a straw bale home they built.

When asked whether the concept is catching on in Quebec, they answered like just everyone else at the fair.

"It's starting," they said.

Next week: Tembec leads in good forestry practise, but finds it hard to make money

- - -

Hotrods are on the road to sustainability

The first thing that comes to mind when you look at the Silence PT2 is a marriage of sports car, hotrod and motorcycle. Paul Laprade hopes that will be a long, happy marriage.

Laprade heads Silence, the firm that designed the Silence PT2, an electric car he hopes will be sold to Californians in 2007.

Silence teamed with two other companies, Univerco and T-Rex, to build the car,

the prototype of which was on display during the weekend at Project Ecosphere, a fair in Brome focusing exclusively on the environment, fair trade and sustainable development.

"Right now, we have this two-seater," he said. "By 2009 or 2010, we hope to have a four-seater version."

The two-seater is ready to go to production in Plessisville and is perfect for California's climate because it's open, like a roadster, Laprade says."

The car runs on a 900-pound lithium battery and can travel between 200 and 400 kilometres before needing to be recharged. It'll sell for \$60,000.

Stephanie Whittaker

© The Gazette (Montreal) 2006

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2006 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#) All rights reserved.