

Fossil award fuels action

Posted 3 months ago

When your country wins an award at an international conference, you might normally feel a sense of pride.

Thea Whitman cringed. Canada copped the Colossal

Fossil prize, awarded by Climate Action Network, at last year's United Nations Climate Change Conference in Poznan, Poland.

"I hope it won't happen this year," said the 23-year-old Queen's University alumnus who's now doing graduate research at Cornell University in Ithaca, N. Y.

During the Poznan conference, Canada won 10 Fossil of the Day awards, including prizes for blocking progress toward science-based targets and insisting that a reference to indigenous peoples' rights be removed in a deforestation text.

That was enough to earn the prize as the conference's overall champion, also known as the Colossal Fossil.

Whitman, a Wolfville, N. S., native, will be a youth delegate again at this year's conference in Copenhagen, where she'll be joined by another Queen's Arts and Science grad, Vancouver native Maryam Adrangi, 23.

They both would like to see Canadian government representatives make a better impression.

"I'm hoping to see Canada play a more progressive role," said Whitman, who served as Adrangi's deputy sustainability co-ordinator with the Alma Mater Society.

"Lately we've been an embarrassment on the climate change stage," said Whitman. "It was embarrassing to be a Canadian at the conference sometimes.

"The way Canada is represented is not necessarily how Canadians feel about climate change."

She wants Canada to take on a stronger role at the Copenhagen conference, which takes place Dec. 7 to 18.

"I would like to see the government delegation commit to ambitious climate change reduction," she said, "and express solid support to provide funds to developing countries to help them reduce greenhouse gas emissions."

Adrangi feels the same way.

"We want to have the Canadian delegates actively represent Canada's interests -- to protect the environment, work for climate change and green energy in the future -- and show the international participants that Canadians don't think the same way that Canadian decision makers think.

"The Canadian government needs to be a leader."

They both hope that the government will pass Bill C-311, the Climate Change Accountability Act, before the conference.

"It's good because it's a science-based target, aiming for a 25% reduction of greenhouse gases below 1990 levels by 2020," said Whitman.

Many environmentalists believe this year's conference is critical because time is running out on the Kyoto Protocol -- an agreement signed by 184 countries, including Canada, to reduce greenhouse gases -- which needs to be ratified by governments in time for it to come into effect on Jan. 1, 2013.

Adrangi says Canada isn't doing enough to live up to the agreement.

"Canadians have been halting the process the last four years, said Adrangi. "We're not willing to negotiate; that really makes it difficult for an agreement to be made.

"We need to cut (greenhouse gas) emissions, to force industry to cut emissions. Our country doesn't want to change its business- as-usual attitude."

Whitman, albeit embarrassed at last year's conference, called it "probably the biggest life-changing experience I've had to date. It was awesome, overwhelming.

"You're totally immersed in the world of climate change. You're learning about climate policy and how negotiations work. You also learn what Canada's delegation is actually doing and how Canada is represented.

"It was really inspiring to be among the group of young people."

Canada's 30-member youth delegation (ranging in ages from 18 to 26) has two objectives, said Adrangi, who works for the Council of Canadians, in Toronto, on a regional organizational team in various capacities, including healthcare, energy, water.

"Our main role is holding Canadian delegates accountable to Canadians," she said.

"We also we want to get what's happening in Copenhagen out to Canadian citizens."

She said they will do that through a website that's under construction and through Facebook.

Whitman said people will be able to keep abreast of conference news on Podcasts, while a network of people will keep the media up to date on what's happening in Copenhagen.

"Canada's youth delegation is working on domestic action to raise support and awareness of climate change."

It was an attempt by last year's youth delegation to raise awareness of the government's environmental philosophy that helped Canada win a Fossil of the Day award.

Canadian representatives were successful in getting the Secretariat to tear down a photo presentation on the Alberta Tar Sands on display at a table. The display, set up by youth delegates, highlighted the tar sands, which are projected to create 80 million tonnes of new annual CO2 emissions between now and 2020 and will prevent Canada from meeting any significant emissions reductions targets.

"We want to halt the Tar Sands," said Adrangi. "It's one of the most destructive programs on earth. To extract the oil, they've deforested an area in the boreal forest in northern Alberta about the size of Florida.

She said what it's doing to the environment is "catastrophic."

Still, there are people who believe that climate change is just a figment of an environmentalist's imagination.

That's not so, said Adrangi. "Glaciers are melting, sea levels

are rising, in Canada we're having more extreme weather events," she said. "Look around you. Climate change is happening."

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