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OPINION

Environmentalism can be hazardous to your health

Guest Shot / By Robert Frodeman

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The crowds have arrived. They come for the beauty, but that does not mean that they are environmentalists. In fact, taking an environmental attitude can be harmful to your health.

Recently I turned onto Highway 89 at Moose Junction. It was just past 3 p.m. Almost immediately the traffic slowed into a stop and go pattern. A blue SUV crawled along in front of me. Someone rolled down the passenger side window and threw out an orange peel that landed in the brush. Over the next 10 minutes a steady stream of peanut shells came out of both sides of the vehicle.

There was no traffic coming north, so I pulled alongside and rolled down my window. "Please don't treat the park like a trash can!"

In reply, I was greeted with a volley of obscenities. I did get one coherent response: a young woman in the car called out, "it was just an orange peel!"

I answered, "Do you know how long an orange peel lasts out here?" She responded with a hand gesture.

The rest of the comments from the vehicle consisted of obscenities, so I pulled my car back behind theirs. From there to the Gros Ventre roundabout I was treated to a steady stream of shouts and middle fingers. They put quite the effort into it. At the roundabout the woman seated in the back propelled half of herself out the window to flip me off one last time.

I was tempted to follow them to their campsite. Not to start a fight (which is why I didn't go), but to ask them a question: Why so uncivil?

Overall, I was troubled by two things. First, why would people come from out of state (in this case, Montana) to enjoy the wonders of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and then dump trash

on the place? Why the disconnect between awe at the surroundings and taking care of these surroundings? I bet they thought of the orange peel and peanut shells as “natural.” But they’re certainly out of place out here. That’s one definition of pollution — things not being where they belong.

Second, what’s happened to our public conversations? My tone was as friendly as I could make it given the distance between the cars. Why did the response consist almost exclusively of F-bombs?

Public discourse today is conducted at a shout. The assumptions of courtesy — patience with others, and sympathy to other points of view — have vanished. Those who disagree with us aren’t treated as our fellow citizens worthy of a hearing. Instead, they’re the enemy to be repudiated and repulsed.

It’s creating a dangerous situation. I recently listened to our local park leaders on a Zoom call. They were asked what their greatest fear is for this summer. It wasn’t COVID-19; rather, they were concerned for the safety of park personnel. It’s in the nature of that job to correct people’s behavior. But people increasingly go off when they see any kind of uniform — even the shirts worn by the often-elderly volunteers.

This coarsening of our public conversation has more than one cause. Part of it consists of the role played by our technologies. Rather than dealing with one another face to face, our relationships are increasingly mediated by technology. We email or text rather than meet, and we buy things online rather than at the local store. The distance makes it easier to be cruel. We can dehumanize one another when it’s just a small image or a few words on Twitter and when we don’t have to look into one another’s eyes.

The pandemic has made this worse. For a year we hardly interacted with each other, and when we did, we were hidden behind masks. We’re coming out of the pandemic, but the habits we formed over the last year remain.

Healing our civic life, whether in the park or at the Town Square, should be a priority. It might begin by lessening our dependence on technology. We might ask whether it is a good thing that cell reception is being improved in Yellowstone. But most people seem delighted with their technology, and don’t see a connection between cell phones and the lack of public manners.

Healing will also require us to rebalance our rights with the sense of our responsibilities. I

support the free speech rights of the people in the SUV. But free speech without civility leads to civil war. We need gentler conversations, especially when we disagree.

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