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FISH BAY REFLECTIONS

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Boiling Frogs and Muddy Coral

At the first meeting of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, then Vice President Al Gore told a story about boiling frogs. Supposedly, if you try to put a frog into a pot of boiling water, he will hop out. Wisely. But if you put him in a pot of cool water and then slowly heat it up, he will not realize he is getting cooked until it is too late.

That was 1993 and Al Gore was talking about lack of attention to the threats of climate change. I always wondered if he had tried that experiment at home, or if it was just a made up story. There was a big frog on my railing a few weeks ago, but I was afraid he was one of those toxic Cuban ones, and I didn't want to touch him. I don't think I could have wrestled him into a pot of water anyway, no matter what the temperature, though he was probably on his way into our cistern for a nice cool dip.

The year after Al Gore gave his speech there was an international meeting in Barbados to discuss the special environmental and development problems affecting small islands. At that time the discussion about climate change primarily focused on the responsibility of the industrialized countries to reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases (mostly from burning fossil fuels) in order to avert dangerous interference with the earth's atmosphere. There were warnings about special threats to small islands, especially the low-lying ones in the Pacific, but there seemed to be little the islands could do to prevent that, not being major producers of greenhouse gases.

Now, ten years after the Barbados conference, the emissions from industrialized countries continue to increase, while the US government argues that the scientific evidence on climate change is not convincing. The small island states, however, are now talking less about averting danger and more about adapting to inevitable change. Even in the Caribbean, research centers are starting to study the particular vulnerabilities and adaptation needs of the islands.

The problem is that when things are still cool there does not seem to be any real reason to act, and by the time the pot starts to boil, it is too late for the poor frog (or the rest of us) to get out.

The boiling frog story also has applications closer to home. At least since the early 1990s, researchers have been studying soil erosion in Fish Bay and warning that runoff from unpaved roads and careless construction sites will cause the bay to silt up, killing the corals and other marine life. I myself have written a number of articles on the topic,

annoying my neighbors, but otherwise having no appreciable effect. The problem has increased because there has been little enforcement of existing environmental laws, and little effort by local builders and architects to put in place the recommended sediment control measures, even when all that is required is care and attention rather than substantial additional expense. Many of the owners do not know anything about the environmental sensitivity of the area, and won't discover the impacts of the ways their driveways were cut and their houses were built until after the bay is irreversibly damaged. Maybe they will never make the connection, because they will not realize that there was ever anything living in the bay.

Recently my husband and son went diving to explore the reef on the Ditliff side of Fish Bay, an area where a local scientist had asked about the current condition of elkhorn coral heads. They came back and reported that the coral seemed to be covered with a layer of mud. Even in water as deep as 25 feet, well out into the bay away from the shoreline, the water was murky with suspended particles, with visibility of only a few feet, even though that day the surface was flat, not wavy, and there had not been any significant recent rains to cause runoff into the bay. It seems that much of the silt from months ago has stayed suspended in the bay rather than getting flushed out by the waves and currents. Much of the rest is collecting on the sea bed and the corals.

Viewed from our deck, the bay doesn't look too bad, and not very many people go in to check out the water quality. But gradually the bay will be transformed from a living ecosystem into a dead zone. It is easier to just let it happen than to do something about it. Maybe it is not such a big deal. What difference does it make if the bay fills in with silt. Nobody swims there. And maybe it is getting too hot in the pot for us to do anything anyway.