

Canadians invited to join the “walkolution” By Mandy Walker

A “revolution” is defined as a radical and pervasive change in society and social structure, especially one made suddenly. If so, then Canada urgently needs a “walkolution,” i.e., “a radical and pervasive change that will create a culture of walking and reduce the threat to health and well being posed by the epidemic of obesity and the juggernaut of climate change.”

Green Communities Canada and its partner organizations call all Canadians to join the *walkolution* by participating in the World Record Walk (October 3, 2007), by increasing their use of human-powered transportation (active transportation), and by encouraging their municipal leaders to adopt the International Charter for Walking.

Climate change and obesity



The first three months of 2007 saw a rash of headlines and TV reports on the dramatic effects of climate change. Media attention focused on the February release of the *Fourth Assessment Report* of the International Panel On Climate Change (IPCC),

a working group established by the United Nations that is universally recognized as the world's most authoritative voice on the science of climate change (1). The IPCC concluded that evidence of global warming is “unequivocal” and that human activity is the main driver of this warming, asserting with near certainty – over 90 per cent confidence – that carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping greenhouse gases from human activities have been the main causes of warming since 1950 (2).

Also in February, Al Gore visited Toronto, focusing attention on the Oscar-winning documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. The documentary details climate change impacts that are underway now and will worsen if we do not act immediately to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

A country-wide tour by Dr. David Suzuki, “If I Were Prime Minister,” wrapped up successfully on February 28, urging Canadians to express their concerns about climate change and broader environmental concerns to the federal government.

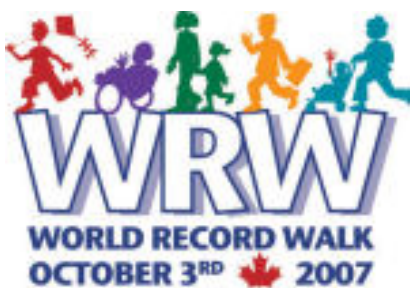
A similar level of media attention has recently focused on Canada's obesity epidemic. There was intensive coverage following the March release of *Healthy Weights For Healthy Kids*, the report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health. According to this report, Canada has one of the highest rates of childhood obesity in the developed world, ranking fifth out of 34 countries that are members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Of young Canadians aged 2 to 17, 26 per cent are overweight or obese.

The Committee shared "the fears of many experts who predict that today's children will be the first generation for some time to have poorer health outcomes and a shorter life expectancy than their parents." These children face the development at an uncharacteristic early age of preventable chronic diseases, including Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, joint problems, and mental health problems (3).

With such visions of the doom and gloom pervading the media, and the seeming lack of action on both climate change and obesity, Canadians could easily be overcome by despair and helplessness. However, Green Communities Canada (GCC) and its partners have a positive vision of individual and community action that will help to make a difference. GCC, a national association of community-based non-profit organizations, is set to start a *walkolution* and invites every Canadian to get involved.

World Record Walk

With the help of a Communities In Action Fund grant from the Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion, Green Communities Canada is kick-starting the



walkolution with an Ontario-wide World Record Walk on Wednesday, October 3, 2007, at 12:30 pm EDT (www.worldrecordwalk.ca). The goal is to break the existing Guinness World Record for the largest number of people walking one kilometre simultaneously. The current record was set in September 2006 by Western Australia, with just over 100,000 participants (www.wagiantwalk.com.au/whatis.php).

Although Ontario is confident of smashing Western Australia's record on its own, other provinces have been encouraged to join in the world record attempt in the spirit of friendly competition, with the outcome being a much bigger Canadian total. Alberta, which held the record in 2005, has already accepted the challenge, and so has British Columbia.

Municipalities, schools, workplaces, trails organizations and walking/hiking clubs are urged to organize a simple 1 km walk, publicizing their event

internally or locally as is appropriate, and reporting the results. Registering your event or finding out where you can participate in an organized walk is very simple with a visit to www.worldrecordwalk.ca.

Schools will be the backbone of the World Record Walk. In Ontario alone, it is anticipated that over 2,500 schools will lead their students in a 1 km walk as part of their ongoing Active and Safe Routes to School program. The World Record Walk has been set to coordinate with International Walk to School Day events happening across Canada on October 3.

The logo for ACTIVE2010 features the word "ACTIVE" in a bold, red, sans-serif font, followed by "2010" in a smaller, red, sans-serif font. The text is set against a white background that is part of a larger, grey, oval-shaped graphic element that tapers at both ends, resembling a stylized path or a swoosh.

Active Transportation

Smashing the existing Guinness world record is just a small part of the *walkolution* strategy. Children and adults are encouraged to make walking a regular part of their daily routine. There are many ways to do this. Canadians are traditionally accustomed to walking for recreation but we are NOT accustomed to walking as a mode of transportation, to replace car trips for short distances. This human-powered, environmentally friendly means of getting from A to B is called "active transportation" and it includes cycling, rollerblading, skiing, and skating.

Go for Green, Active Living and Environmental Solutions, is a national not-for-profit, charitable organization that encourages Canadians to pursue healthy, outdoor physical activities that protect, enhance or restore the environment. In a March 2004 article, [The Business Case For Active Transportation](#), Go For Green reported on the use of active transportation in Canada as compared with eight European countries and the United States. Sad to say, Canada fared horribly in the comparisons, falling behind every other country except our neighbours to the south. Look at how shamefully Canadians compare with the leading country, Sweden (see table 1. More than four times as many Swedes use walking and cycling as a mode of transportation. Climate cannot be used as an excuse, as countries like Sweden have a comparable climate.

Table One: Active Transportation Use By Country

	Walk (%)	Bicycle (%)	Transit (%)	Car (%)	Total Active (%)
Austria	31	9	13	39	40
Canada	10	1	14	74	11
Denmark	21	20	14	42	41
France	30	4	12	54	34
Germany	27	10	11	52	37
Netherlands	19	27	8	44	46
Sweden	39	10	11	36	49
Switzerland	29	10	20	38	39
United Kingdom	12	8	14	62	20
United States	9	1	3	84	10

Some of you may recall the ParticipAction comparison (in the 1970's) of the physical activity level of the 30 year old Canadian versus the 60 year old Swede. Due to ParticipAction's prompting, we began to close the gap, but sadly we have fallen behind once more!

In countries like Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, Austria, and Sweden, their high levels of active transportation use result in much lower levels of car use. A similar chart would show that countries with high levels of car use and lower levels of active transportation also have higher levels of obesity.

What sets the European countries apart from ours is that they have adopted a culture where walking and cycling are the norm. They walk and bike to work, to the theatre, to school, to the bars, all year round, despite the weather. This cultural shift came about purposefully over the last three decades as these countries developed an infrastructure to support active transportation. They have pedestrian friendly communities that make walking safe and appealing. They have bicycle lanes, and trails that connect schools, stores, residential areas, workplaces, etc.

Healthy communities play a tremendous role in combating obesity in both children and adults. Sustainable community design has a huge impact on reducing car-dependency and greenhouse gases. People who live in walkable neighbourhoods are 2.4 times more likely to get the recommended amount of physical activity (4). In a Go for Green Canadian study, a



vast majority of Canadians said they would ideally like to walk (82%) and/or cycle (66%) more than they do at present. But one of the significant barriers discouraging active transportation in Canada is the lack of safe and appealing routes (5).

Thus, the *walkolution* is also very much about change at the community level. Green Communities is encouraging individual Canadians to lobby their municipal leaders to sign the International Charter For Walking (www.walk21.com). The Charter acknowledges the benefits of walking as a key indicator of healthy, efficient, socially inclusive and sustainable communities, while committing signatories to reducing physical, social, and institutional barriers to walking.

Attend Walk21, Toronto 2007

Community leaders can take a major step towards creating a culture of walking by attending the eighth annual international conference, *Walk21*, being held for the first time in Canada on Oct 1-4, 2007 in Toronto.



This exciting event will bring together hundreds of delegates from across Canada and around the world, including leaders from government, academia, the private sector, non-profit, community, and advocacy groups. Dr. David Suzuki will be the keynote speaker. The conference - *Putting Pedestrians First* - will motivate people to build on examples of best practice from their home communities and around the globe, and turn plans into action.

Walkolution now!

Immediate intervention is required at all levels - individual, family, community, school, municipal, provincial/territorial, and federal - to address the obesity epidemic and climate change. Green Communities invites all Canadians to be part of the solution by joining the *walkolution*. Hold a World Record Walk event in your community, commit to increasing your use of active transportation, and encourage the mayors of your communities to commit to the International Charter for Walking. Then implement simple, cost-effective changes to improve the walkability (and bikeability) of your community. These are positive, green, active, low cost steps individuals and municipal leaders can take to make a difference and bring a sense of hope and optimism for a sustainable, healthy future to Canadians everywhere.

Web links:

- Green Communities Canada: www.greencommunitiescanada.org.
- Active & Safe Routes to School: www.saferoutestoschool.ca.

- World Record Walk, www.worldrecordwalk.ca
- Charter For Walking, www.walk21.com
- Walk21 Toronto 2007, www.toronto.ca/walk21
- *Healthy Weights For Healthy Kids*, www.sportmatters.ca
- Go for Green, www.goforgreen.ca

Word count: 1696

Footnotes:

- (1) http://www.davidsuzuki.org/Climate_Change/Science/IPCC/
- (2) Contribution of Working Group I to the Fourth Assessment Report, *Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis, Summary for Policymakers*, February 2007.
- (3) House of Commons, Canada, Report of The Standing Committee On Health, *Healthy Weights For Healthy Kids*, March 2007
- (4) House of Commons, Canada, Report of The Standing Committee On Health, *Healthy Weights For Healthy Kids*, March 2007
- (5) Go for Green, *The Business Case for Active Transportation*, March 2004