

Fresh air



By Nate Smelle

As the old saying goes: "Where there's smoke, there's fire."

Usually this statement is used metaphorically, with the intention of acknowledging that when there is a sign of a problem or wrongdoing, such a problem or wrongdoing probably occurred or exists. However, in light of the toxic cloud of smoke billowing from the inferno that was up until recently part of Canada's majestic Boreal forests, this cliché has taken on a new, more literal meaning.

Over the past decade our understanding of the climate crisis, including its impact on our life-bestowing home planet and way of life has expanded exponentially. Along with our evolving understanding of Earth, nature, and our place within it, we have also come to realize that we, as individuals and as a species, are not immune to the perils a rapidly changing climate unleashes on its inhabitants. No matter what those trying to secure the disinformed vote might say, because of our disregard for what the scientific community has been telling us since the late 1950s, wildfires, blizzards, droughts, floods, hurricanes, and all the extreme weather events part and parcel of the climate crisis are becoming stronger, more devastating, and happening more frequently.

While it is true that our technology and ability to adapt to such dire living conditions are also evolving, every time a wildfire, flood, hurricane, etc. incinerates or levels a community, forest, crop, etc. our Earth ecosystem becomes less inhabitable.

Toronto, New York City, and all major urban centres for that matter, have never been synonymous with clean air. Nonetheless, seeing the "apocalyptic" and "Mars-like" images of smoke-filled cities in the media last week is proof that Dr. David Suzuki was absolutely correct when he said "What we do to the Earth, we do to ourselves."

With clean air, clean water, and clean soil becoming more and more scarce every moment because of our species over-exploitation of what we admittedly identify as "natural resources", our neglect as stewards is beginning to manifest as consequences that we are now experiencing as individuals. From now on, every time we choke on wildfire smoke, wipe the carcinogenic particles from our burning eyes, wear a mask and/or stay inside in an attempt to avoid the poisonous air quality, we will be reminded that we are biological beings inextricably connected to the natural world that nourishes us with its ecosystem services.

Tragically, for a rapidly growing number of those forced to evacuate the residences and communities where they live due to the

harsh environment we are manufacturing, there is no home to return to.

Standing on the corner of Hastings Street North and Bridge Street in Bancroft last Wednesday, witnessing the affects of anthropogenic climate change hover over the town I have called home for the past 16+ years, I imagined of how utterly defeated the people who are forced by the wildfires to flee their homes and the communities where they grew up, must be. Imagine returning to Bancroft once the flames subsided to find nothing but smoldering scarred earth. For those who called the village of Lytton in the interior of British Columbia home, a healthy imagination is not required to understand such a catastrophic reality.

Watching the news last week as I got dressed to attend a friend's funeral, who just happened to succumb to a respiratory illness, I recognized a serious shift in the tone of the weather report that morning.

My ears tuned in more keenly to the frequency when I heard the meteorologist say, "Certain outdoor activities are not recommended. People with chronic respiratory conditions are vulnerable to the toxic cloud of smoke hovering over us. The particles that make up the clouds of smoke can cause or worsen respiratory disease, heart attacks, strokes, and even death."

"What about those working outdoors?" I questioned.

"Those who work outdoors are recommended to stay home or wear an N95 mask to filter out these dangerous particles," the meteorologist responded, as if he could hear my question through the television screen.

Then, echoing Suzuki and directly linking the wildfires to the man-made climate crisis we are fueling, he surprisingly told viewers to "Think of the Earth as your body. If your temperature goes up by two degrees, you're in trouble. If your temperature goes up by five degrees, you're in a lot of trouble."

Yes, it is true that wildfires occur naturally in many instances. Still, if it wasn't for the decades of inaction on the climate crisis by government after government, we would not be seeing the severe global heating and extreme weather events that we are experiencing today.

The wave of wildfires burning up Canadian forests, wildlife, and the hometowns in its path are a much-needed and long over due wake-up call from our Mother Earth. If we do not come to terms with our new reality and the consequences of not taking significant action on the climate crisis immediately, the fresh air that we enjoy every time we step outside here in Bancroft will become nothing more than a fond, yet depressing memory.