

Local activists demand climate action in Quebec City



By Nate Smelle

The historic streets of Québec City were filled with the passionate voices of more than 25,000 environmental activists, Indigenous leaders, unions and students' groups demanding a sincere and substantive response to anthropogenic climate change by all levels of government in Canada. The march held on Saturday, April 11 was intended to send a message to provincial and territorial leaders meeting in Québec City later in the week to discuss how they plan to adapt to our changing climate.

Hastings Highlands was well represented at the demonstration with local activists Deb Jeffrey and Jim and Marjory McPherson all making the trip north to Québec City along with a group of activists from the organization Ecology Ottawa. The bus left Ottawa at 7 a.m. on Saturday morning and returned later that night after a long day of marching through the sun-soaked stone streets. Tired but inspired Jeffrey reflected on her experience in Québec City while enjoying a snack as she waited for the bus back to Ottawa.

"I have been concerned about climate change for a long time I really needed the energy of being with a lot of other people who are equally concerned," said Jeffrey.

"It's a really important time to come because the premiers are going to be here and they will certainly be talking about this.

Unfortunately all of the initiatives in Canada are happening at the grassroots level and a couple of notches up from that. There really has been nothing from our federal government."

Knowlton Hunter and Jenn Warr, who own land in Hastings Highlands, also travelled north to Quebec City to add their voices to the massive collective. They, like many others, believe humanity is at a critical moment in its history as it faces off with a changing climate. People and governments across the country and around the globe need to understand that business as usual is no longer sustainable as the fossil fuel age winds down. Unless action is taken immediately, Hunter said the environment will continue to deteriorate making it even more difficult for the planet to heal as time fades away. When governments and corporations try and force people to choose between a healthy economy and a healthy environment, they are forcing people to make a false choice. In reality, he said, the two go hand in hand.

"The truth is that they are interdependent," Hunter said.

"The Harper government clearly does not believe this and has gutted environmental regulations in an attempt to make it easier for development and distribution of fossil fuels. So Fort McMurray has boomed while downstream native communities are faced with polluted rivers. Long after the tar sands have been depleted or abandoned those communities will still be suffering. Corporations may not factor the environment into their accounting but should if health of their employees is important to them."

"The Conservatives don't seem to be at all interested in doing anything about climate change," added Hastings Highlands resident and environmental activist Jim McPherson.

"We really need to start taking this [climate change] seriously."

One of Canada's leading climate activists and co-founder of Forest Ethics Tzaporah Berman echoed this sentiment along with her fellow panel members during a pre-march press conference at Hotel Château Laurier Québec.

"All provinces and the federal government need to play a role in protecting the climate," said Berman.

A Canadian energy strategy that includes climate change is being developed because of a lack of action on the federal level. The federal government has left a vacuum in the provinces are stepping in to fill it. This leadership in the face of federal inaction is appreciated, however you now I very important crossroads.

This crossroads referred to by Berman was highlighted in a report recently released by Environmental Defence last week. The report reveals Alberta as the main contributor to the growth of greenhouse gas emissions in Canada with the province adding 73 per cent of the total increase in emissions. If the status quo in the tar sands remains one province with 11 per cent of the population, driven by an industry that represents only two per cent of Canada's Gross Domestic Product will be responsible for 93 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions in Canada by the year 2020.

I feel we are past the point of no return for very unpleasant effects in the next 20 to 30 years, but we can still jump in and make it last that? she said.

If we don't jump in though, things will get really bad. I am mainly here for the preschoolers I work with and their future.

Marjory and Jim McPherson said they decided to go to Québec City for the same reason as Jeffrey...the health and well-being of future generations and the planet.

I am a supporter of Greenpeace and of course I'm concerned about what is happening with our planet,? Marjory said.

We're not going to be around much longer to do much about it so we better do it now on behalf of our grandchildren.?

Another reason the McPhersons felt compelled to be part of this demonstration is their respect and concern for clean water. Vocal defenders of the lake ecosystems in Hastings Highlands the couple also wanted to be a part of this monumental climate action and to take a stand for the health of water everywhere.

First of all you will die of thirst before you die of starvation,? said Marjory.

If you can't get water food won't matter. When you really think about what will happen if we keep not attending to this whole issue of climate change and it just keeps going in such a bad direction. The earth itself is so overpopulated now there's going to be millions of people were going to die a horrible slow down or are going to die bizarre deaths if we don't change.?

It's pretty simple,? Jim said, ?nothing can live without clean water to drink.?

At the end of the march the 25,000 plus in attendance raised their red flags, signs and banners over their heads to form a giant red-hot thermometer at the Fontaine de Tourny. Addressing the crowd after the marching had stopped Karel Maynard of the David Suzuki Foundation in Quebec stressed the fundamental importance for all living things to have access to clean water and a healthy environment.

If you want to protect any species you have to protect its habitat,? said general director of the David Suzuki Foundation in Quebec Karel Maynard.

How can you protect habitat if there is no water left because of climate change? How can you protect habitat if the forest burns because of repeated drought? You cannot protect habitat you don't protect the climate because species and habitats cannot move as fast as the climate is changing.?

Maynard believes that climate change is not only an environmental issue but a social justice issue between the current generation and future generations. Unlike previous generations, Maynard said this generation cannot justify its destructive actions and inactions out of ignorance. This awareness of our species role in rapidly accelerating climate change implies a moral obligation for humanity to halt its assault on the environment.