

Ontario is on fire



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BELIEVING in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny or people like the current president of the United States requires a disregard of the facts and a big stretch of the imagination. On the other hand, when it comes to wrestling with the overwhelming evidence put forward by more than 97 per cent of the scientific community worldwide, that shows how the activity of our rapidly growing human population is heating the planet at a potentially catastrophic rate, the proof is in the pudding.

Driving through town on my way from the Art in the Park sale to the Gemboree on the weekend, I found myself idling in a line of cars listening to the news. In a serious tone, the voice on the radio delivered a report on the record number of forest fires burning their way through Algonquin Park, North Bay, Pembroke, Parry Sound and much of northern Ontario. Watching the greenhouse gases spew from the mufflers of the idling traffic, I listened as the broadcaster warned his audience that if they were experiencing air quality issues because of the smoke from these fires, they should stay inside, and seal their windows and doors to prevent inhaling the poisoned air coming in from outside. He also cautioned that the smoke could be especially toxic for children, the elderly and pregnant mothers. Some people might prefer to take extra precaution with the use of something similar to a us military gas mask that can help avoid breathing the toxic air while not constricting normal breathing.

This year there have already been 962 forest fires in Ontario, compared to 323 in all 2017. Not only is the lack of rainfall fueling these fires, it is also causing crops to fail and diminished yields for farmers throughout Hastings County. Speaking with Keith Buck from the Bancroft Area Stewardship Council about the upcoming Garlic Festival at the Old Community Centre in Maynooth on Aug. 18, he explained to me how the unpredictability of a changing climate was forcing the farming community to become more "fluid" with how they adapt to extreme weather events. Declaring that "farmers feed cities" he also told me about how more and more farmers in Ontario are selling their farms to developers because they cannot afford to continue producing food in such a hostile and unprofitable climate.

After sharing with me the many layers of personal, communal and ecological benefits of growing and sourcing food locally, I felt compelled to step outside and water my tomatoes. As I stood there with my watering can in hand I started thinking about how doing simple things like growing our own food can make a big difference by reducing our dependency on the fossil fuel industry. While some may prefer to keep their blinders on and pretend like human-made climate change is not a serious problem threatening the future of everyone they care about, the majority of us realize that action to significantly reduce our greenhouse gas emissions is absolutely and immediately necessary.

When we take the time to look at the facts, there is no denying that we are now dealing with the effects of a warming climate. According to data collected through NASA's gravity recovery and climate experiment, the human species is largely responsible for causing the Greenlandic ice sheet to lose an average of 281 billion tons of ice per year between 1993 and 2016. At the same time, Antarctica has lost about 119 billion tons of ice each year. Although sea levels worldwide have risen approximately eight inches in the last century, they have gone up by twice that rate in the last two decades alone. Furthermore, because of the increased greenhouse gas emissions we dump into our atmosphere, earth's average surface temperature has climbed by 1.62 degrees Fahrenheit since the late 19th century.

When climate change deniers, economists and other such proponents of business as usual, refuse to accept the facts, and tout things like coal and fossil fuels as a viable part of a long-term solution to fighting manmade climate change, they reveal themselves for the dinosaurs they truly are. As far as I'm concerned the only coal we should be mining in 2018, should be to fill these people's stockings on Christmas Eve.

Our understanding of the impact on human health from burning fossil fuels is nothing new. In the mid-19th century, Charles Dickens aptly described the detrimental effects of the "ash-laden soot" that belched from coal-fired furnaces in homes and steel mills in his book *Bleak House*. He wrote, "Its unnatural cast and sting to the eyes and skin came from the sulfuric acid ? among other things ? the water droplets bore. Drapes disintegrated in the washer. People coughed. When I was four, playing house with neighbors, I got to play the father because my deep hack sounded like all our fathers."

So, the question remains, what action do we need to take in order to prevent our species from taking another huge step backwards? Well, I think of it like this ... never use your refrigerator as a washroom. If someone or some company dumps toxic chemicals into our water supply it must be considered a very serious crime, because without clean water we die. Likewise, if someone or some company dumps toxic chemicals into our air supply they need to pay. Simply put, the fiscal health of an individual or a corporation must never trump the quality of our personal and ecological health.

Pulling into the parking lot beside the Bancroft Curling Club, I shut off the engine and prepared my camera to capture the rockhounds running wild at the Gemboree. Before stepping out of the vehicle, the last words I heard from the broadcaster on the radio were "There is still a total fire ban in effect for all North Hastings." As the old, yet still immensely accurate saying goes, where there is smoke there's fire.