

Sink or swim?



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By Nate Smelle

Heart-to-heart conversations are the best way of communicating about the things that matter most. These discussions are useless though if those doing the talking are not being fully open and honest. Each week, I take time to think about all that has happened in the past seven days and then try to put it into the context of the bigger picture. Having written on the impacts of climate change on several occasions recently, I told myself that this week I would focus in on something different.

Thinking about the enlightening conversation regarding waste diversion strategies at the last Hastings Highlands council meeting, I thought maybe this would be a subject to investigate a little further. With half the column written on Sunday I figured I was in good shape to polish off the piece with plenty of time to spare before the deadline arrived. Driving to the office on Monday morning I realized that I was going to have to shelve the column for another week when I was delayed en route by what less than three per cent of the scientific community would describe as unforeseen circumstances. Attempting to bypass the lineup of school buses sharing the road with me on this morning, I turned onto Landon Road to beat the traffic and enjoy the scenery.

Spotting a pair of turkey vultures on the side of the road, I pulled over to try and get a photo of them as they peeled away the flesh from a rotting carcass in the ditch. Sensing my presence before I could even get out of the car, they abandoned their breakfast and took to the sky. Continuing on my way, I watched them as they disappeared into the canopy as I rounded the bend before the Landon Bridge. Turning the corner I had to stomp on the brakes when I noticed the road I was traveling had suddenly vanished into the river. Skidding to a stop in the wet sand only a few feet away from the river's new edge, I got out of my vehicle and stared in disbelief at the ruinous road ahead.

Aware of the flood watch declared by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry over the weekend, I had expected to find flooding in low-lying areas along the York River around town. What I didn't expect was to see the flood waters running so deep in Dungannon. Under regular conditions there is usually six or seven feet of space between the water's surface and the road crossing the Landon Bridge. On this day however, the river had completely overtaken the road ? rising to the halfway mark of the guardrail and extending the river's edge at least 100-metres beyond the riverbanks that usually contain it.

Walking along the York River in town later that day, I found myself repeatedly experiencing moments of déjà vu as I focused my camera on familiar-looking reflections of the municipality's flooded parklands, homes and businesses. While the water levels in town have yet to reach those achieved during the last so-called ?100 year flood? six years ago, with more rain in the forecast and snow in the bush it appears that the river will continue to rise for at least the next week.

The floods of 2013 were devastating, but while speaking with residents whose lives had been turned upside down by the floods, I was moved by their strength and resilience in the face of loss. From these conversations I learned that when talking with individuals who have lost nearly all their worldly possessions, there is no room for small talk. Ironically in this case the weather did not qualify

as frivolous conversation. More times than I can remember, these heart-to-heart discussions inevitably resulted in a mutual agreement that anthropogenic climate change was making extreme weather events such as these the new norm. I recall interviewing one man who had lived in Bancroft for more than 80 years. In all that time, he said the floods of 2013 were the worst he had ever seen. When it takes one man more than eight decades to see the York River rise to the level it did in 2013, and then it only takes six years for us to see the water reach a similar level, it doesn't take a degree in climate science to recognize that we are living in a climate-shaped world that is changing in ways that jeopardize our future.

The other main inspiration I withdrew from covering the flood in 2013 came from watching the community band together to overcome a crisis. Now on the verge of our second ?100-year flood? just six years later, we stand with wet feet at a crossroads. Using our firsthand experience of the consequences of not taking serious action on climate change; and employing our knowledge that human activity is creating the crisis, we quite literally need to decide whether we want to sink or swim.

As these major flooding events continue to become more frequent year after year, the hill we need to climb gets steeper. Likewise, the pockets of the insurance companies bailing people out after the floods get deeper. Considering the increasing frequency of extreme weather events, eventually these companies will run out of the financial resources they possess to help us rebuild. Without such coverage, rebuilding our communities every six years or so is not sustainable for very long.

Piling sandbags to help save your neighbours' homes is one way we can work together. However, as necessary as these reactionary measures are, there needs to be a better coordinated and more proactive approach if we are going to seriously address this crisis. That means our community and all communities need to continue working together well beyond when the waters recede by actually implementing solutions to the root cause of the crisis. Knowing that we are the root cause, we are the only ones who can make the changes that are essential for our survival.

It is time for everyone, including climate change deniers, to be honest with themselves. Climate change is real, it is happening now, we are speeding it up and we need to take action immediately.