

Weathering the storm



By Nate Smelle

Lakefront dwellers along with those who spend a significant amount of time at higher elevations are gifted with the unique opportunity to attain a special appreciation of the commanding power of weather.

Watching as a thunderstorm approaches from atop the Eagles Nest in Bancroft, or from the shoreline of any of our local lakes in North Hastings, one begins to earn such an appreciation. I first got hooked on the thrill of storm watching in my youth, while fishing on Cameron Lake near Fenelon Falls with my father and grandfather. It always amazed me to see how quickly a calm sunny day on the water could change into a potentially life-threatening situation. On several occasions I remember having to quickly pull up our lines and rush to outrun the rain and lightning on our way back to land after waiting a little too long to pack up because the fish were biting.

Everyone with a passion for experiencing weather events firsthand eventually develops an ability to spot the signs of a coming storm. Of course the appearance of whitecaps and ripples on the surface of the water are good indicators that it is time to head for shore. The movement of the trees also tells us a story. For example, if paying attention to the leaves on the trees lining the shoreline, we may detect a change in the direction of the wind when the leaves turn upside down. If getting a little too close to the action, one might even experience a physical connection with their environment when the hair on their arms and neck reaches for the sky.

With a little more help from science, by using radar meteorologists are able to track weather systems with a much higher degree of accuracy. In most cases, the scientific modeling we use to make these projections provides us with fair warning of any potentially dangerous weather heading our way. However, despite the relative precision of these methods, we still sometimes are caught off guard by dangerous and deadly storms such as the one that ripped through south-central Ontario and Quebec on the afternoon of Saturday, May 21.

By stepping back and observing how the behaviour of these weather patterns change over an extended period of time; and, through analyzing this information along with all the data our environment produces, climatologists gain a more complete understanding of the current global climate crisis in relation to the earth's atmospheric history.

In putting together this puzzle and finding a solution to this existential threat, we soon discover that we have a formidable task ahead of us, no matter which course of action or inaction we choose to address the climate crisis. One thing for certain is that as the changing climate transforms our weather systems, we will continue to see an increasing number of killer storms and extreme weather events worldwide.

The freakishly powerful storm that uprooted trees, downed Hydro lines, damaged property, and killed 10 people throughout Ontario and Quebec over the weekend is a perfect example of the unpredictable dangers our rapidly heating planet will produce more frequently as we navigate our way into the future. Knowing the struggles that lie ahead as a result of this unpredictability, it becomes our responsibility to take action now.

Although a decreasing fraction of those with their life savings tied up in big oil still choose to perpetuate the pointed lie that the science is unclear when it comes to whether human activity ... especially our consumption of highly toxic fossil fuels ... is accelerating the climate crisis and making our home planet less hospitable, there is an even smaller faction denying that the climate is changing. Other than bickering with these folks over where the poison arrow at the heart of the climate crisis came from when we already know it's anthropogenic origins, we need to pull it out and deal with the potentially catastrophic situation at hand.

As with all of the most pressing crises, all levels of government must step up and take the lead on implementing the solutions we have available. Ensuring this implementation is effective will require that all our elected officials take the time to understand the science behind the climate crisis. Because for some, usually the majority of those who we elect this will not be as financially lucrative as kicking the can down the road for the next government to deal with, it is unlikely that we will see a mass awakening of politicians in Ontario and across the country in our lifetime. And this of course, in a democracy where the people have the power, is our fault as the electorate.

Nevertheless, this does not mean we need to concede defeat and go down without a fight. Thankfully, although the loss of life caused by the climate crisis doesn't seem to be a motivating factor, there appears to be a wider agreement among those making decisions regarding the fact that our changing climate is becoming more costly in terms of its impact on the global economy. Here we find hope in our ability to reduce the damages and death toll through a carefully coordinated climate change mitigation strategy.

Tree planting, renewable energy, urban agriculture, improved energy efficiency, eco-effective architecture and urban design - there are no shortages of solutions ready for us to embrace that would have a meaningful impact immediately. It's just a matter of pulling out the arrow in time for us to be able to weather the storm.