

life

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Editor JIM HENDRY life@peterboroughexaminer.com 745-4641 ext. 242

A change has got to come

Environment is under seige, and we don't seem to see it

I have wondered for many years why it is that the environmental movement has generally failed to bring about any substantive change in human behaviour or, by extension, in laws and regulations. Why, for example, are we so slow to heed the advice of climate scientists?



Drew Monkman

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Only two years ago, it seemed that Canadians had finally woken up to the reality of climate change with public opinion polls showing the environment at the top of our list of concerns. People said they were ready to support tough government action on this problem, even if it might affect their own pocket-books. How quickly things change. The idea of a carbon tax was soundly defeated in the last election, and a recent poll shows a majority of Canadians would choose to save money instead of buying environmentally friendly products if they cost more.

Certainly the present economic crisis is part of problem. However, I believe it goes much deeper than that. Clearly, knowledge of impending doom is not enough. Science has known for nearly 40 years what's in store for us with climate change and what we have to do to mitigate the worst impacts. There is a huge consensus on the part of scientists that we are barreling head-first into unmitigated climatic disaster. Yet, with the exception of a very modest carbon tax in British Columbia, Canada has essentially done nothing. Compare this to the anti-smoking debate. As the scientific evidence of the danger of smoking has rolled in, government action has been decisive and extremely effective. It

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has produced a societal shift away from tobacco use.

Why then has there not been a similar reaction to climate change and other environmental threats? Why haven't we seen a response even remotely on par with the reaction to smoking or to the present economic crisis? When we have nearly all of the information necessary to predict the future, why do we keep on acting in such a way that is leading us to disaster?

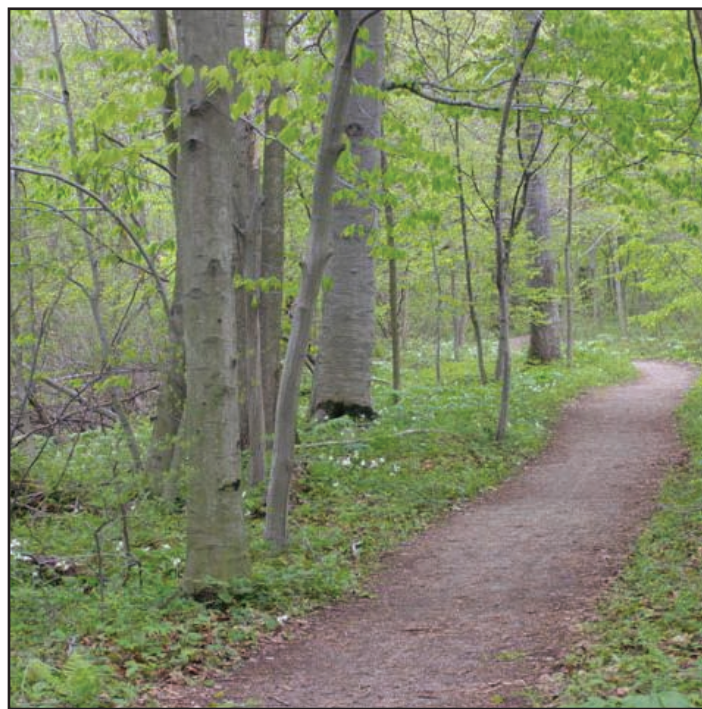
It's obviously not because we just don't care about the future. In fact, the ability to think ahead is one of the defining characteristics of what it means to be human. More than anything else, it is what has made us so successful as a species. We go to great lengths to act prudently in most domains of life where we perceive future threats based on what science, medicine, and economics are telling us. For the most part, we don't smoke, we save for retirement, we try to keep our weight under control, and we save for our children's future.

So why do we respond to the threat of climate change by essentially just shrugging?

According to Daniel Gilbert, a social psychologist at Harvard University, cli-



DREW MONKMAN photos



From a Costa Rican beach (top) to the hardwood grove of an Ontario provincial park (left) to the iconic lakes and pine forests of the Canadian Shield, the natural world is threatened by climate change and our collective refusal to recognize that solutions must be found.



mate change and many other environmental problems represent a fundamentally different kind of threat – a threat our brains are not well designed to handle. Gilbert believes that our brains do not react well to climate change because as a threat it lacks four essential features.

- **It doesn't have a face.** We are highly social mammals that think a great deal about other people. Our brains have a huge amount of capacity to process information about other human beings, what they are up to, and how they might affect us. We are obsessed with all that it is human. Our brains are therefore on constant lookout for any signs of human plotting and nefarious actions. But climate change involves no deliberate human agency. This is not a plot hatched by a foreign country or terrorist group to take over our country. As Gilbert says, “Global warming is not trying to kill us and that's a shame.” If global warming was indeed an evil plot being carried out by foreigners with little black mustaches, you can be sure our political leaders

would have us doing everything we could to stop it.

- **It doesn't violate our moral sensibilities.** Climate change doesn't disgust us or make us seethe with anger. There is nothing about it that goes against our moral codes, although it really should be considered a moral issue. Traditionally, human societies have been preoccupied with matters such as who we can sleep with and what we can eat. When these rules are broken, our brains react with feelings of revulsion. It is these sorts of feelings that compel us into action. Climate change doesn't make us feel disgraced or morally uncomfortable, so we don't get all worked up about it like some people would over an issue like gay marriage, for example.

- **We don't see it as a threat to our present.** Our brains are superb at reacting to clear and present danger. We duck in milliseconds if a ball is thrown towards our head. However, the brain's ability to act rationally in the face of future threats is still a work in process. Only a very small

part of our brain is actually devoted to thinking about the future, whereas a huge area is devoted to dealing with threats in the present. Even though most us – or at least our children – will be around to suffer the consequences of an overheated planet, Gilbert believes that “we still haven't quite got the knack of treating the future like the present, because we've only been practising for a couple of million years.” It would appear we almost need an environmental Pearl Harbor before we can act. Collapsing ice shelves in the Arctic and Antarctic don't appear to be enough.

- **We are sensitive to relative change and not absolute change.** When change is happening slowly enough, our brains don't detect it. Like the frog sit-

ting motionless in a pan of water that is slowly heating up to the boiling point, we seem unable to react. In other words, climate change is approaching too slowly to trigger our “fight-or-flight” response. The human brain is actually quite ready to accept changes that happen gradually; however, we'd be abhorred by these same changes if they happened suddenly. We have now become quite used to warnings about not eating fish from certain lakes, not swimming at beaches because of polluted water, and not doing strenuous work outside on smog days. We hardly seem to notice the disappearance of the calls of nighthawks and whip-poor-wills from our lives. Our grandparents, on the other hand, would have been horrified by many of these events. They would have been the stuff of science fiction, but for us its become business as usual. Why? Because the change has happened so slowly. “Scientists lament the fact that global warming is happening so fast. The fact is, it's not happening nearly fast enough,” says Gilbert.

Gilbert uses the acronym PAIN to describe the kinds of threats that really catch our attention – Personal, Abrupt, Immoral, and Now. In other words, an evil person with a stick who is threatening our immediate well-being. In this kind of situation, our brain is perfectly designed to react quickly and with firm resolve. Terrorism, for example, is a threat that encompasses all of these characteristics. That's why we are willing to occasionally relinquish some of our civil rights, stand in line for hours going through security checks at airports, and send our sons and daughters off to risk their lives in Afghanistan. Climate change, on the other hand, has none of these attributes and therefore almost totally fails to trigger any alarms. That's why we won't pay a carbon tax, give up our big cars, or accept any major changes in lifestyle. Because climate change is impersonal, slow, and quiet, it is unlike any enemy we've had to confront in the past. Ultimately, however, it is much more dangerous.

There are several other important factors in addition to Gilbert's reasons. Environmentalists have become increasingly marginalized in many quarters and written off as the Birkenstock-wearing, tree-hugging, seal-protecting crowd. There is also a sense that experts change their opinions. Some people therefore feel – albeit incorrectly – that there is still a lot of disagreement in the scientific community over how real the threat of climate change actually is. This is partly due to the hugely successful campaign waged by the fossil fuel industry to disinform. It's not surprising, then, that people feel that until the scientists make up their minds, we don't really need to worry about it.

There are also too many environmental messages out there. With so much information about how to be green, it's easy to lose sight of what the benefits are to our families and children of changing the way we live. The idea of just having a greener world is too vague. We end up losing the key message, which is to greatly reduce the world's output of greenhouse gases to protect ourselves and our children from worldwide chaos created by climate change.

In the final analysis, there will be no solution until we can overcome the rampant political apathy we suffer from. We need activist, engaged citizens who will demand leadership and vision on the environment. We can only hope that the election of Barack Obama will be the catalyst for real progress.

Drew Monkman is a Peterborough teacher and author of Nature's Year in the Kawarthas. He can be reached at dmonkman1@cogeco.ca. Visit his website and see past columns at www.drewmonkman.com.