

Climate Change:

Finding Hope in the Face of Adversity



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My relationship with the news is akin to staring at a burning garbage fire: what I see is foul, it's dangerous, but I can't look away. As a result, I'm flooded by a barrage of news and each day of the barrage seems worse than the previous. And let's be honest, there are lots of reasons why we should be troubled or depressed by the news.

In October, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a report stating that human activities have already caused 1.0 °C of warming and that we have less than 12 years to try to limit warming to 1.5 degrees. If we can achieve no more than 1.5 degrees of warming instead of 2 degrees (which is the more likely outcome), the report predicts we can realize some important goals. We would avoid the thawing of at least 1.5 million km² of permafrost, significantly decrease the probability of an ice-free Arctic Ocean, and reduce risks to our food systems and economies.

In order to reach our goal of limiting warming, we have to act swiftly and unhesitatingly. The report has outlined what needs to occur in order to achieve 1.5 degrees. Those measures include:

- Rapid and profound transition to renewable and sustainable biomass along with rapid deployment of carbon capture systems, with a zero-emission energy supply by 2050.
- Switching from fossil fuels to electricity for transportation and residential use.
- Considerable shifts in investment patterns away from fossil fuels and into renewable energy.

So in 12 years, or from another perspec-

tive, only 3 election cycles, we have to make profound changes to our societies as we know them in order to protect them and life on earth. Having survived a single election cycle in my advocacy work, I've seen just how little gets accomplished in that time.

It has, quite frankly, made me both skeptical and terrified – skeptical of our ability to “turn this ship around” and terrified of what awaits us if we don't succeed. Britain's Met Office (with responsibilities for weather forecasting and climate change) estimates



Glacier retreats are often used to underline the seriousness of climate change. These two photos illustrate the extent to which the Robson Glacier retreated over 100 years. The black and white photo was taken by A.O. Wheeler in 1911; the same scene was rephotographed from the same location by the Mountain

a 10 percent probability of reaching 1.5°C warming in four years, by 2023.

According to the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the four hottest years on record were 2016, 2015, 2017, and 2018. They are listed this way to show that, of these years, 2016 was the hottest and 2018 the “coolest.” From widespread forest fires, to heat waves and floods, it’s clear to many that we are already shouldering the costs of climate change to human life and our economies.

Additional threats, from habitat loss to pollution and introduced species, also have caused significant impacts on our ecosystems. It’s estimated that over 40 percent of our insect species are threatened with extinction. Anecdotally, it’s clear to me that

widespread die-offs of insects already are occurring; summer air that used to be filled with the thrumming of bugs is much more quiet now.

Governments have been acting like toddlers through their refusals to take strong action. Canada’s climate policies, for one, are rated by the Climate Action Tracker as being “highly insufficient.” This means that, if every country followed our approach, the world would see between 3-4°C of warming. In my mind, calling it “highly insufficient” is generous. Experts generally agree that at 3-4°C, we likely will be bordering on societal and ecosystem collapse.

Facing the Facts

So what do you do in the face of what sometimes feels like an insurmountable problem, one that has only magnified over a generation of ineffective action? I don’t recommend you do what I sometimes find myself doing – carrying around an existential dread with me that is paralyzing.

Here’s where the generations that got us into this mess should look to youth, specifically to Greta Thunberg, a 16 year old Swede who is no longer willing to take any of the old guard’s excuses. Her motto? “I want you to panic.” Her mission has been to mobilize students to demand action from our governments. Thousands of school children have been taking to the streets, in school strikes dubbed as “Fridays for the Future”. In November 2018, 15,000 students took to the streets in Australia. Switzerland saw 23,000 strike on January 18 – that protest grew to 65,000 on February 2. The signs expressing the messages of these protests are both powerful and damning. “The climate is changing, why aren’t we?;” “I’m sure the dinosaurs thought they had time too;” “Our House is on Fire;” “The Emperor has no Clothes;” those are just some of my personal favourites.

So far government responses have been both patronizing and dismissive. Lies and smear campaigns have been launched against Greta and other strike organizers. Governments are asking children to return to school and leave the worrying about climate change to them. But as one protest sign so perfectly replied: “I’ll do my homework when you do yours.”

This movement gives me hope on the climate change front. In my years at school in Alberta, I remember being taught only a handful of times about climate change. We actually debated whether or not it was happening and in many ways, this rhetoric and uncertainty has strong roots in Alberta. In 2018 Canada’s Ecofiscal Commission retained Abacus Data to poll Canadians on climate change. It’s shocking to see that only 54 percent of Albertans, the smallest percentage in any province/region, responded that global warming is caused



Legacy Project in 2011. The Robson Glacier clearly has lost a great deal of its mass over the last century. PHOTO: Images courtesy of the Mountain Legacy Project under the Creative Commons license.

mostly by “human and industrial activity such as burning fossil fuels.” Forty-six percent of Albertans who conceded that global warming is taking place attributed the warming primarily to “natural patterns in the earth’s environment.”

A recent United Conservative Party conference expanded on their 2018 Policy Declaration to “eliminate all political indoctrination from the curriculum.” Climate change and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, among other subjects, were considered to be examples of “political indoctrination.” Since climate change is both a scientifically established fact and a very real threat to the futures of schoolchildren, wouldn’t a better example of political indoctrination be not teaching about it in schools? I hope that Alberta’s youth follow the example of Thunberg and her fellow activists: don’t take any more nonsense from authority figures. It’s high time we do our youth justice by actually taking climate change seriously.

The biggest “elephant in the room” is, of course, our neighbours to south. The Trump Administration’s reversals of climate change initiatives spurred the Climate Action Tracker to award the United States with the lowest possible ranking for climate action, “critically insufficient.” This means U.S. commitments are not at all consistent with holding us to even 2°C; if all countries were to follow the US targets, we’d exceed 4°C.

But, even in the U.S. there are signs of hope. The Sunrise Movement, self-described as “ordinary young people who are scared about what the climate crisis means for the people and places we love” has been taking America by storm. Their proposed Green New Deal, while yet to be fleshed out, already has committed to five goals:

- achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions through a fair and just transition for all communities and workers;
- create millions of good, high-wage jobs; and ensure prosperity and economic security for all people of the United States;

- invest in the infrastructure and industry of the United States to sustainably meet the challenges of the 21st century;
- secure clean air and water, climate and community resilience, healthy food, access to nature, and a sustainable environment for all;
- promote justice and equity by stopping current, preventing future, and repairing the historic oppression of frontline and vulnerable communities.

One of the most compelling pieces of the proposal is that it tackles the human and societal aspects of climate change. While life – whether in the forms of rats, cockroaches, or bacteria – likely will survive long after we’re gone, the fabrics of human society depend on us getting this right. 🌱