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Cognitive dissonance underlies oil and gas push

by DAVID SUZUKI

We're experiencing a growing renewable energy revolution. It's reducing pollution and related health care costs, spurring technological innovation, creating good jobs and boosting economies ? and helping to slow the climate crisis.

At the same time, some people are suffering from varying degrees of cognitive dissonance ? a conflict between knowledge or belief and behaviour. Unfortunately, many of them hold the reins of power.

The truth is inescapable: Communities in North America and Europe are choked with wildfire smoke, people are forced to flee their homes, some are dying from unbearable temperatures, others are facing food and water shortages from ?extreme drought? and death and destruction from severe floods and intense storms. Entire towns are burning.

Scientists worldwide have proven that these events ? the increasingly lengthy and intense wildfire seasons, more devastating storms, growing water shortages and crop failures ? wouldn't be happening without the climate changes fuelled by burning coal, gas and oil and destroying carbon sinks such as forests and wetlands.

This year, it's exacerbated by an intense El Niño cycle ? when unusually warm surface waters from the Pacific Ocean flow along the western coast of South America, disrupting global weather patterns. Although El Niño events are natural, studies show they're likely made worse by global heating, which is causing ocean surface temperatures to rise.

The past 11 years have been the warmest on record. Scientists now say we're nearing the point of no return, when so many tipping points will be passed that we'll have a ?hothouse Earth,? where human survival will become increasingly difficulty, and impossible in some tropical areas.

?It's likely that global temperatures are [already] as warm as, or warmer than, at any point in the last 125,000 years and that climate change is advancing faster than many scientists predicted,? Christopher Wolf, a scientist at U.S.?based Terrestrial Ecosystems Research Associates, told the Guardian.

Yet, here in Canada, our prime minister and premiers across the country are doubling down (literally, in Alberta) on fossil fuel development: pipelines, oilsands development, fracking for liquefied natural gas, export terminals to send our polluting, climate-altering fuels to other countries, where we can ignore their impacts ? until they boomerang back in the form of more smoke and fire, drought, heat domes?

It's worse in the United States, where the current administration denies what everyone can see for themselves, even without the incontrovertible scientific evidence. The government is pouring support into fossil fuels and putting the brakes on renewable energy development (as is Alberta's).

And the president and his minions spout the most idiotic crap, such as blaming Canada for wildfires by not raking the forest floor! Forest management practices factor in, but the truth is, regardless of those practices, and whether a fire is sparked by lightning, arson or a carelessly tossed cigarette butt, fires are more likely to start, spread and become more intense as longer, hotter, dryer periods increase.

I feel sad for young people. We've failed them with our insatiable greed and ignorance about our place in nature. It's moving to see so many out doing good, protesting, joining the environmental and social justice movements and educating themselves. But it shouldn't be up to them. They should be having fun, going to school, learning about the range of human thought, enjoying life. We in the older generations caused the problems; we should be fixing them.

The solutions are there and are being employed worldwide ? but not quickly enough. We must stop burning fossil fuels, not expanding production. Not only are we putting human and other life in jeopardy, we're also missing out on tremendous economic opportunities. It's in large part because our current economic system encourages waste, short-term profit and destructive policies.

It's not too late to turn things around. But if we lock in fossil fuel development for decades to come with expanded oil and gas development and infrastructure such as pipelines and carbon capture facilities, it soon will be. And why? So greedy oil company executives can amass more obscene profits while most people struggle to pay for necessities like food and housing?

We know what the problem is. We can't keep acting as if we have all the time in the world to resolve it. It's time for change!

By David Suzuki with contributions from Senior Editor and Writer Ian Hanington