

Consumers share the blame for climate change

by Mark Pavilons

Human beings are experts at turning a blind eye to really important issues.

We're quite proficient at ignoring facts, twisting truths, spinning and even altering our own perception.

Climate change is nothing new and yet we're still not frantically ringing the alarm bells. Or is that we're just not listening?

Maybe average citizens consumers are just too self-centred and concentrated on living pay cheque to pay cheque. Maybe we're fixated on modern conveniences, smart tech, automobiles and Black Friday sales.

As one of the strongest collective forces on the planet, consumers are also quite good at filling their needs, despite the costs. With such economic might at our fingertips, why is that consumers haven't done anything about climate change?

With a click of a mouse, or tap of our cards, we can use our collective muscle to sway public spending power away from carbon wasting, polluting products and companies. But our selfish need is overwhelming.

King is known for its knowledge and advocacy for the environment. Council, like many others, declared a climate emergency and have set some targets to reduce power consumption at municipal facilities and embrace environmentally friendly methods.

Council was chastized for fiddling with the target numbers recently, but the intent and political seems to be there.

That's all well and good, but the public will of the public has to run with the solar-powered football. We have to make the final touchdown or all of these efforts are in vain.

How can we save the world when a significant portion of our population ignores the science, with their ears jammed by airbuds?

We also need to lead by example. We can't espouse conservation, protection and reduction if we're driving around in massive gas-guzzling SUVs or European sports cars. There are more Maseratis in King than there are Teslas. We can't criticize the Township for its reduction goals when we're enjoying our heated garages and indoor swimming pools.

A grim report released by the United Nations Environment Program revealed that our current pace of global greenhouse gas emission has us reaching as much of a global temperature increase of 3.9 degrees Celsius (almost 7 degrees Fahrenheit) by 2100.

The report states that global greenhouse gas emissions would have to be cut by 7.6 per cent annually for the next decade to meet the 1.5 degree Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) warming goal set by the Paris Climate Accord.

Every year of delay beyond 2020 brings a need for faster cuts, which become increasingly expensive, unlikely and impractical, the report's authors state. Delays will also quickly put the 1.5C goal out of reach.

Greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide and methane released into the atmosphere (through the production and transport of fossil fuels) trap heat in Earth's atmosphere and dramatically change our climate. In the last decade, global greenhouse gas emissions have risen by about 1.5 per cent each year on average.

Are we listening as we head to the overcrowded shopping malls and spend like drunken sailors?

For anyone over 40, they should be fully aware that grim signs have been before us for decades.

King's own Dr. Hans Martin worked with the Canadian government on analyzing 'acid rain' back in the 1980s. I remember when it made all the headlines and like today, people talked about it for years. Did we think this was a one-off or a fluke?

Acidic precipitation has elevated levels of hydrogen ions (low pH). It can have harmful effects on plants, aquatic animals and infrastructure. Acid rain is caused by emissions of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide, which react with the water molecules in the atmosphere to produce acids.

Some governments have made efforts since the 1970s to reduce the release of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide into the atmosphere with positive results. Acid rain has been shown to have adverse impacts on forests, freshwaters and soils, killing insect and aquatic life-forms, causing paint to peel, corrosion of steel structures such as bridges, and weathering of stone buildings and statues as well as having impacts on human health.

More than century ago, Robert Angus Smith in 1852 was the first to show the relationship between acid rain and atmospheric pollution in England.

In the late 1960s scientists began widely observing and studying the phenomenon.

How about that infamous hole in the ozone layer that made the news in the late '70s and early '80s? Should we be concerned?

The main cause of ozone depletion and the 'hole' is manufactured chemicals, especially manufactured halocarbon refrigerants, solvents, propellants and foam-blowing agents (chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), HCFCs, halons), referred to as ozone-depleting substances (ODS).

Ozone depletion and the ozone hole have generated worldwide concern over increased cancer risks and other negative effects. The ozone layer prevents most harmful UV wavelengths of ultraviolet light (UV light) from passing through the Earth's atmosphere. These wavelengths cause skin cancer, sunburn and cataracts, which were projected to increase dramatically as a result of thinning ozone, as well as harming plants and animals. These concerns led to the adoption of the Montreal Protocol in 1987, which bans the production of CFCs, halons and other ozone-depleting chemicals.

The ban came into effect in 1989 and ozone levels stabilized by the mid-1990s and began to recover in the 2000s. Recovery is projected to continue over the next century, and the ozone hole is expected to reach pre-1980 levels by around 2075. The Montreal Protocol is considered the most successful international environmental agreement to date.

The bottom line is there's no denying we've destroyed much of our environment through our own selfishness. The pursuit of the all-mighty dollar has led us down this path.

We're a smart bunch, we humans. Smart enough to rally around a problem and offer concrete solutions.

So where are the throngs of concerned consumers?