

CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 14a:

Is Climate Change Causing Natural Disasters?

As I write this Chronicle on a beautiful Sunday morning in the Comox Valley I'm distracted. I keep walking back and forth to the television to watch the impact of Hurricane Irma crashing into Florida. But Irma is only the latest recent disaster. Over the last three weeks of late August and early September 2017 there have been a series of "natural" disasters.

First came Hurricane Harvey with its floods devastating Houston, smaller towns within a 100mile radius and parts of Mississippi.

About the same time came the news of vast monsoon floods in India and parts of South East Asia. They have killed 1200 people, destroyed or damaged a thousand schools attended by 1.8 million children, and left many millions homeless.

To what extent were these natural disasters caused by, or affected by, climate change?

Most scientists do not say that climate change is the direct cause of hurricanes. But they agree that it is a significant contributing factor. It amplifies the damage of weather events. Sea levels are rising, the oceans are warming, more moisture is sucked up into the atmosphere and it comes down as rain especially in hurricanes.

So how is climate change acting as a "contributing factor" in our own neck of the woods? Consider the increasing number of forests fires in western Canada and the Northwest Territories. Large swaths of forests are being decimated.

In our warmer northern climate pine beetles and spruce bud worms that used to be killed by the colder temperatures are thriving. They are now munching their way through our forests and turning healthy, living trees into huge piles of kindling wood. Increasing numbers of thunder storms with lightning come along and zap the dead trees.

When Hurricane Irma touched the north coast of Cuba it was a level 3 hurricane. But, by the time it had travelled across the ninety miles to Florida it was a level 4 hurricane. It picked up energy from the very warm waters of the Caribbean Sea. The warming of the waters was caused not by the hurricane but by climate change.

In the coming months the U.S. federal and state agencies will meet to evaluate their response to these hurricanes. This will help them prepare for the next hurricanes. But, since we have always had hurricanes, planners often accept them as something natural-- just a fact of life we have to adjust to. So the emphasis will be on dealing with hurricanes when they arrive not on asking questions about the underlying causes.

So what to do?

There is an old saying, "If we change the way we think about things, the things we think about will change." Einstein added a cautionary note. "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."

First we begin by realizing that we are now living in the very different Anthropocene context. Things that used to work well may not continue to work, nor should we expect them to. So we are in a trial and error process. . We need to develop viable alternatives and transitions. This can be very frustrating and trying work.

Second, we do know that the economic, political and corporate systems we have put in place are causing the problem. But, given the strong commitments to these systems and their power bases, our efforts to change them will meet strong opposition and hostility no matter how carefully we try to proceed. It will be like trying to pirouette in a mine field. (According to media reports both Scott Pruitt, the administrator of the federal Environmental Protection Agency and Rick Scott, the Republican Governor of Florida forbid employees to use the terms "climate change" or "global warming" in public communications.)

Third, we need the cooperation of everyone. There are no good guys and bad guys, the right and left, the rich, the middle class and poor, the old and the young, the different races and so forth. As Hurricane Harvey and Irma have demonstrated, everyone is affected regardless of gender, race or economic status. So we must all learn to work together.

Fourth, we must realize that we cannot be saved by top-down processes. As Donald Trump's rejection of the U.N. COP 21 climate change agreement has demonstrated we must adopt a bottom up approach. To use Margaret Wheatley's term, we need to develop "islands of sanity" to help create community climate change cultures. Fortunately these islands have been appearing around the world.

Finally, in writing this I'm reminded of that line in Brandi Carlyle's song The Eye. "You can dance in a hurricane but only if you are standing in the eye". We have to learn to dance in the eye of this Mother of All Hurricanes called "Climate Change".

Mike Bell

Comox Valley Climate Change Network