

Dr. Reese Halter: Guest opinion

Climate change, bark beetles: dead pine trees

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The Aspen Times

Aspen, CO Colorado

Sunday, January 8, 2012

Recently one of my colleagues sent a story that sums up the media's apathetic appetite for covering the environment. It is perplexing and disturbing.

The economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment, despite the rhetoric from every GOP candidate.

Climate change dropped further from the world headlines in 2011 compared to the previous year even though a viscous one-in-100-year drought in Texas has entered its second year; 70 percent of Mexico is enveloped by its worst drought in 70 years; Australia faced epic flooding costing taxpayers in excess of \$5 billion in infrastructure costs; and plants are so confused in their biorhythmic cycles that the white petals of snowdrops, normally a spring flower, are now unfurling in the National Arboretum in Washington, D.C.

Clearly, nature is showing climatologists, ecologists, physiologists and oceanographers that the web of life is being brutally dismantled by rising greenhouse gases. Humans are exceptional problem solvers, so why has the media chosen not to focus on positive solutions? After all, Americans have the highest concentration of brainpower in our colleges compared to any other nation on the globe.

For those who do not believe that anything is going on – walk, ride or fly anywhere across western North America, and you'll see vast amounts of dead trees. In the past 40 years across the West, temperatures have risen on average in excess of 1.8 degrees Fahrenheit. Although this number appears to be small, it has effectively removed nature's ecological cold-curtain, enabling mountain pine beetles to speed up their life cycle and invade and decimate high elevation pine forests across the continent.

Instead of absorbing carbon dioxide, billions of beetle-killed trees across the West are decaying and stoking the ever-rising pool of greenhouse

gases.

Death rates of white-bark and limber pines – the sentinels of the high country – across the Western U.S. are as high as 90 percent and have become the tsunami sirens of global warming, showing scientists that a warming world is irrevocably altering the landscape across the entire mountainous region of Western North America.

It's not just the forests that are disappearing but also immense amounts of ice that reflect incoming solar radiation. One-hundred billion tons of ice melted from Greenland during the blistering-warm summer of 2010. This year alone 50 percent of Canada's millennia-old Arctic ice shelves along the coast of Elsmere Island vanished.

And far worse, the Antarctic Ocean, which occupies 22 percent of the total ocean on the globe, absorbing 40 percent of Earth's CO₂, is acidifying so quickly (as a byproduct of absorbing rising CO₂) that by 2030 the seawater will be corrosive to crustaceans, dissolving shells that the animals are making. This amplification will reverberate all the way up the food chain to the whales.

Data from the Global Carbon Project showed the carbon emissions from the planet had increased 5.9 percent between 2009 and 2010; that's the largest jump in any year since the Industrial Revolution.

The \$17 trillion Alberta's oil sands must spend carbon energy and precious freshwater to separate the gooey, toxic oil from the sand. Moreover, by burning this petroleum, humans will knowingly raise atmospheric CO₂ levels by an astounding 150 parts per million. Earth will be uninhabitable for life as we know it.

If Australia, with its \$10 trillion coke-coal industry, can ratify a carbon tax, then surely we in America can set a low-carbon standard that China and India will follow.

We are running out of time to combat rising CO₂ emissions: Earth's forests are dying.

It's time to embrace innovation and the dictum of the London School of Economics co-founder George Bernard Shaw: Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.

Earth Dr. Reese Halter is an award-winning science communicator: voice for ecology and visiting distinguished conservation biologist from California Lutheran University. His latest book is “The Insatiable Bark Beetle.” Contact: DrReese@DrReese.com.

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