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Beetles the new canary in a coal mine

By Dr. Reese Halter

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Recently one of my colleagues sent me 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-one-hundred-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 bio-rhythmic cycles that the white petals of snow drops, normally a spring flower, are now unfurling in the National Arboretum in Washington, DC.

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 brain power in our colleges compared to any other nation on the globe.

For those that 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. Although this number appears to be small, it has effectively removed nature's ecological cold curtain enabling mountain pine beetles an opportunity to speed up their life cycle, invade and decimate high elevation pine forests across the continent.

Instead of absorbing CO₂, billions of beetle-killed trees across the West are decaying and stoking the ever-rising pool of greenhouse gases. Death rates of whitebark and limber pines across the western U.S. are as high as 90 percent — the sentinels of the high country — 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 rather 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 Southern 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 sea water 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 our planet had increased 5.9 percent between 2009-2010; that's the largest jump in any year since the Industrial Revolution.

The \$17 trillion Albertan oil sands must spend carbon energy and precious fresh water 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 ppm. 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 co-founder of the London School of Economics, George Bernard Shaw's dictum: "Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything."

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