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Making some Earth Day resolutions

By Skid Crease

Another year passes and another Earth Day rolls around full of hope and inspiration and the promise of a brighter future.
But it's more like the old Merle Travis coal miner's lament, ?Sixteen Tons?:
?You load sixteen tons, what do you get?
Another day older and deeper in debt,
St. Peter don't you call me ?cause I can't go.
I owe my soul to the company store.?
Those 16 tons of coal are now 37 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide and methane and nitrous oxides spewed into the atmosphere every year. Just to put that into perspective for us, there are a trillion tons in a gigatonne, so our 16 tons has become 37,000,000,000 tonnes in the span of a century. Yeah, Merle, I'd say we're way over our credit limit.
It's been a long time since those Kentucky coals mines were the engine of employment and energy. But the carbon dioxide released in the burning of so much plentiful coal is probably one of the major reasons we celebrate Earth Day today. That and a book by Rachel Carson called ?Silent Spring.?
While we were making the transition from coal to oil, the chemical industry, driven by the adrenalin of world wars, was in full swing putting together combinations of every industrial by-product and extract they could test to help our syphilis end quickly and our crops grow faster. Concerns about the residual effects of all those new chemicals, and the materials released into the waste stream during their production, weren't really a consideration. We were all well fed, healthy (we thought), and business was booming.
And then Silent Spring was published. The chemical industry responded with brute force and indignation, and like the old tobacco lobby and the petrochemical industry today, denied that there was anything harmful about their production process or their products. Like CFCs and DDT, these miracle compounds were all helping us ?live better through chemistry,? a concept the residents of Bopal, India, still question.
So, between the rock and the hard place of carbon and chemicals, Earth Day was born, and it was a difficult birth. The original day was conceived by John McConnell at a1969 UNESCO conference in San Franscisco and championed by renowned anthropologist Margaret Mead to take place each year on the March spring equinox.
That was a little too chilly for mass public gatherings in most of the U.S., so Senator Gaylord Nelson hired young law student Denis Hayes to bring Earth Day to the masses on April 22 in 1970. Fueled by the success of anti-Vietnam war protests, it was a resounding success that captured the American imagination, and the movement became a global success.
It is now observed in 175 countries, and coordinated by the nonprofit Earth Day Network, according to which Earth Day is now ?the largest secular holiday in the world, celebrated by more than a half billion people every year.?
So as the more popular Earth Day 2015 came and went, how are we doing in our local and global progress? Global carbon emissions from fossil fuels have significantly increased since 1900. Emissions increased by over 16 times between 1900 and 2008 and by about 1.5 times between 1990 and 2008. Hmmm ? once again over budget.
According to the Carbon Dioxide Information Analysis Centre (CDIAC) and the Global Carbon Project:
? In 2013, global CO2 emissions due to fossil fuel use (and cement production) were 36 gigatonnes (GtCO2); this is 61% higher than 1990 (the Kyoto Protocol reference year) and 2.3% higher than 2012.
? In 2014, global CO2 emissions are projected to increase by an additional 2.5% over the 2013 level (to 37 gigatonnes).
? China, the U.S.A., and the EU still win the gold, silver and bronze medals for CO2 emissions, with Canada contributing only 2% to the global total. So it's not the quantity of our contribution that matters, it is the quality of our resolve to be part of the bigger picture that is our Home Planet.
Every year for a week we clean up parks and backyards and roadsides, we turn down our lights, we recycle properly, we buy locally, we drive our cars properly for just a week. And then we forget because life in Canada is generally pretty good. Unless you don't have proper sewage treatment or drinking water, but Canada's apartheid treatment of its First Nations is another story.
We may naturalize a local schoolyard or park, maintain a local trail system, or even write our local MP to wake up and smell the 21st Century. But then we go back to leaving our trucks idling in the NO-Parking Zone outside of the convenience store, or leaving our cars idling to warm up or cool down, or driving our Hummers 5 kilometres to the local shopping mall for that one small purchase that costs us all so much.

Earth Day is much more than a day. It is a way of life. And the sooner we all begin to celebrate its importance all year, the longer our children, and all living things, will thank us.

Skid Crease is an award-winning outdoor and environmental educator, a keynote speaker, a storyteller, an author, and a community volunteer. He taught with the North York and Toronto District School boards for 35 years, and officially ?retired? from the Faculty of Education, York University, where he was a Course Director and Environmental Science Advisor. Skid has worked with scientists from Environment Canada (pre-2005), NASA, and the Hadley Centre for Climate Prediction and Research in a quest to put an understandable story behind the wealth of their scientific data.