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Climate change requires us to become an energy-efficient society

Alan Betts (<http://alanbetts.com/writings>)

After writing these columns about our changing weather and climate for four years, it seems time for some blunt realism. I read a pithy summary last month by Ken Caldeira on the Web site Climate Progress, which went like this: “When we use the atmosphere as a free waste dump for the CO₂ greenhouse gas emissions from our energy system, we are transforming the Earth to a hothouse climate that last existed on this planet when the dinosaurs were the top predators. Is this ethical and fair to our children, when we could convert our energy system to an efficient one that is not carbon-fuel based for only about 2 percent of our GNP?”

Well the dinosaurs will not be back to eat our grand-children, but this radical change in climate will drastically affect life on Earth. Yet we are surrounded by deception and outright lies everywhere. Jon Huntsman was the only Republican presidential candidate who accepted the science of climate change. Jokingly he thanked his wife for this — she said she would leave him if he denied the science like the other candidates. What are these politicians thinking? It was the integrity of the founding fathers that gave birth to the American dream. How can it survive without a respect for the land and the Earth?

Scientists are starting to protest more strongly about the fabricated arguments and personal attacks coming from those who are getting rich from the fossil fuel industry. With \$20-trillion of fossil fuel reserves at stake, the corruption is not surprising. But given the damage to life of Earth that is in progress, our opposition is essential.

Self-centered arguments abound. Our global demand for oil is pushing gas prices higher — so we complain it is costly to drive our heavy SUVs and trucks. In Europe, gas costs \$10 a gallon, so cars are smaller and more efficient. Not surprisingly, public transport is also far better.

There is no free lunch here — we are deeply in debt to the Earth. We have already used up our allowance of fossil fuel. But few are willing to pay the small price for the technologies that would help us make the needed transition to an energy-efficient society, where most of our energy comes from renewable resources. Fortunately Vermont is moving honestly towards this transition, one which will make our houses warmer and more comfortable in winter — and less costly to heat — and give us diverse sources of electricity. We still need to replace our vehicles with more efficient ones and develop a much better public transport system for the state.

In a recent 30-minute Insight interview on PEG-TV in Rutland, I discussed what is happening to the weather and climate of Vermont in recent months and years. The six months ending March 2012 set new high temperature records in every northern state from the Dakotas to Maine. I have enjoyed early lettuce and spinach and fresh vegetables this warm spring. But as the climate gives us a longer growing season in Vermont, people further south face much more difficult growing conditions from higher temperatures and longer droughts.

The future of the Earth — and the Vermont landscape — affects us all and our children. With the coming of another spring, we should resolve to find solutions that strengthen our connections to the Earth and slow the accelerating pace of climate change. We need well-designed solar and wind farms and high efficiency biomass plants that are sensitive to local issues.

We will never get away from our fossil fuel addiction if we are simply afraid of change. In Britain, the Red Flag law that required steam-driven coaches on highways to travel at 4 miles per hour with a flagman walking in front was not repealed until 1896, during my grandfather’s childhood. We resist change — but sometimes change is necessary.

Alan Betts on PEG-TV: <http://www.uvm.edu/~epscor/new02/?q=node/825>