

ECONEWS

Issue 219

Promoting the Vision of a Sustainable Vancouver Island

DECEMBER 2011

THE DIRE, UNAVOIDABLE TRUTH

Al Gore called it *The Inconvenient Truth*, and I'll bet he's had many sleepless nights since his film came out.

We live in very troubling times, since the gravity of the looming climate crisis is being pushed out of people's minds by a desperate concern to restore economic growth, aided by a successful campaign by climate-deniers and fossil fuel interests to downplay the risks of climate change and emphasize the virtues of the so-called 'ethical' oil sands and so-called 'clean' natural gas.

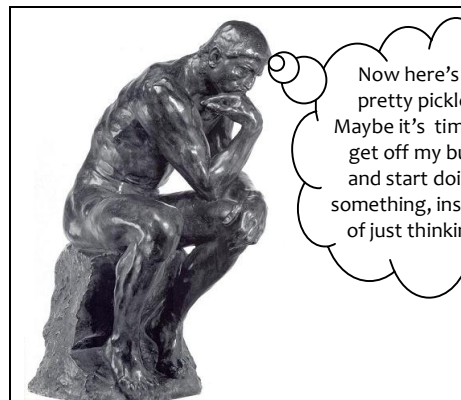
If anyone doubts the urgency of the climate crisis, they have only to consider the generally conservative International Energy Agency, which reported in November that the world is hurtling toward irreversible climate change, and that if bold action is not taken in the next five years the world will lose the chance to limit warming.

The current limited commitments that are on the table are so small that they guarantee the world's temperature will rise by more than 3.5°C. If these commitments are not met, it could rise by as much as 6°C. If tough controls are not put in place immediately, the world is likely to build so many fossil-fuelled power stations, energy-guzzling factories and inefficient buildings over the next five years, the IEA reported, that it will become impossible to hold global warming to safe levels, and the last chance of combating dangerous climate change will be "lost for ever", according to the most thorough analysis yet of world energy infrastructure.

"The door is closing," said Fatih Birol, chief economist at the International Energy Agency. "I am very worried – if we don't change direction now on how we use energy, we will end up beyond what scientists tell us is the minimum for safety. The door will be closed forever."

If current trends continue, and we go on building a high-carbon energy infrastructure, by 2015 at least 90% of the available carbon budget needed to prevent the temperature from rising

above 2°C will be swallowed up. By 2017, there will be no more room for manoeuvre, since the whole carbon budget will be spoken for, according to IEA calculations.



On November 20th, the *Guardian* reported that "governments of the world's richest countries have given up on forging a new treaty on climate change to take effect this decade, with potentially disastrous consequences for the environment through global warming. Postponing an operational agreement until 2020 would be fatal to hopes of avoiding catastrophic climate change, according to scientists, economists and green campaigners."

And yet, with the global temperature set to increase by 3.5° to 6°C, we need to remind ourselves very forcibly that the last time the world was 2°C warmer, the global sea level was 25 metres higher - that's the height of an 8-story building. The predicted increase in extreme droughts, floods, storms and forest fires, the predicted loss of species, the predicted dire water shortages - these are all additional reasons why we should be so alarmed. And in case you believe that the reality of peak oil will end the looming climate emergency, think again. CO₂ from fossil fuels represents 43% of the cause of global warming, and since oil is 40% of the fossil fuels, oil represent 17% of the overall cause. If the oil supply were to shrink by 5% a year, which is the

maximum predicted in the worst peak oil scenarios, this would be a less than 1% annual reduction in the total causes of global warming. Other scenarios see the oil supply increasing from 84 to 96 million barrels a day over the next ten years, with global production only being held in check by global recession.

In early December the world's nations are meeting in Durban South Africa for COP-17, the UN Summit, to continue the quest to craft a workable global treaty to address the looming crisis. It is *essential* that this work continue, and not be derailed by people who have never understood the reality of the climate crisis, and still think the only thing that matters is old-fashioned economic growth.

I spent two years writing my award-winning book *The Climate Challenge: 101 Solutions to Global Warming*, and I know how many solutions have yet to be embraced, or even understood. The United Nations Environment Program has just published *Bridging the Emissions Gap*, which combined analysis from 28 research centres around the world and found that while the current pledges on the table are not enough to do it, if sectors such as energy, farming, forestry and transport all cut emissions by feasible amounts, global warming can be kept below 2°C, reducing our total GHG emissions from the present 48 billion tonnes of CO₂e to 44, instead of rising to 56 by 2020.

The situation was also dire in June 1940, when Hitler had occupied most of Europe and the British army had only just escaped from the Nazis on the beaches at Dunkirk thanks to the spontaneous mobilization of a huge fleet of small boats.

We need the same Dunkirk spirit today. It does not matter if things seem dire. As long as we breathe, there are a host of things we can do and solutions we can embrace to build a green, sustainable world. - Guy Dauncey