

Now is not the time for sanctimonious climate debate

Circumstance, not bad karma, caused wildfire

An ethical argument seizes environmentalists as events unfold across northern B.C. and Alberta, where fire threatens Fort St. John and 80,000 people were forced to escape from Fort McMurray — bedroom community, supply depot and staging point for oilsands development.



LARRY WONG A fire-ravaged neighbourhood in Fort McMurray, Alta., is seen Monday. Columnist Stephen Hume writes that people who blame climate change for the wildfire, which forced the evacuation of the oilsands town, are misguided and ‘should have a serious conversation with the mirror.’

Is it appropriate to indulge in victim-blaming by declaring it is all bad karma for the inhabitants now fleeing a vast forest conflagration caused by the global warming for which petroleum development is demonized? Or would that be bad taste, bad public relations and misplaced blame — not to mention colossal insensitivity to the sadness of this human calamity — since weather is not climate and linking one hot spell in a particular place to global warming is dubious?

The answers are, first, that this has nothing to do with karma.

Albertans are no more to blame for global warming than the people of Metro Vancouver, where growth in the number of motor vehicles exceeded growth in the number of people by 36 per cent from 2010 through 2014.

Licensed motor vehicles, most of which are fuelled by oil, increased 7.1 per cent. The human population increased 5.2 per cent. Less than two per cent of those new vehicles were electric or hybrids.

So, anybody wanting to wax sanctimonious should start by having a serious conversation with the mirror.

Second, while the calamitous events at Fort McMurray have been propelled to the top of public awareness thanks to social media and the web's 24-hour news cycle, this isn't a new phenomenon either for the region or for Canada.

My career in journalism hits the 50-year milestone at the end of June. I began at the Edmonton Journal in 1966.

Forty-four years ago, I was bumping along dirt roads in a pickup truck south of Great Slave Lake covering a fire growing by 50 square kilometres a day. The total area in flames was the size of Prince Edward Island.

Evacuations were underway or imminent at Paradise Gardens, Hay River and the mining town of Pine Point, then to the world's largest lead-zinc mine what Fort McMurray is now to the oilsands, although on smaller scale.

A two-tonne cache of dynamite had been abandoned at Prairie Creek. One huge blaze roared toward Wood Buffalo National Park. Another, burning along a 35-kilometre front, covered 500 square kilometres and was pushed toward Nahanni National Park Reserve by a 40-kilometre-an-hour wind.

So, that was roughly half a century ago.

My father-in-law, Art Mayse, covered "the Big Fire" on Vancouver Island for The Province in 1938. It burned from Campbell River to just north of Nanaimo, forcing evacuations of mining towns like Bevan.

That fire burned so hot it generated winds of up to 150 km/h.

And Art's dad told him stories of the Merville fire. In 1922, it razed the Vancouver Island community settled north of Courtenay by returned First World War veterans.

In 1919, the biggest forest fire in recorded Canadian history swept through Alberta's boreal forest just south of where Fort McMurray now suffers. That fire burned through 30,000 square kilometres of timber and razed Lac La Biche, the town now providing safe haven for evacuees from the north. The fire began near Prince Albert, Sask. It blackened an area the size of Belgium. Like the fires of 2016, it began in early May following a dry winter. Const. Fred Moses of the Alberta Provincial Police, out on a murder investigation, reported a Dante's Inferno. Smoke was so dense it was dark in the afternoon, the horizon pulsed with fire-generated lightning and new blazes ignited everywhere down the fire front.

Telegraph cables melted, molten copper ran down scorched poles.

In Lac La Biche, people rushed into the lake, stood neck deep in the water and covered their heads with wet blankets while their town burned.

In 1908, wildfire destroyed Fernie. More than a thousand buildings burned. The heat was so intense that metal ore cars melted where they sat.

In 1894, wildfire around the Great Lakes killed 500 people in the town of Hinckley.

In 1825, a wildfire on the Miramichi River killed 200 people.

No, the visitation upon Fort McMurray is not bad karma, it's physics and circumstance.

Yes, there is a discussion to be held about wildfire, global warming and what it portends for forested cities like Metro.



This is not the moment for it.