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Pine beetles, melting glaciers are only symptoms

Roy Ostling, Special to Oceanside Star
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A media blitz is now underway to sell us on the benefits of the BC's carbon tax and its Climate Action Plan. Open a newspaper, turn on the TV or listen to the radio and you'll get cleverly crafted messages about how the government of "The Best Place on Earth" is taking action against global warming.

There are full-colour ads with photos of timber stands turned to red by the mountain pine beetle, flooded homes, melting glaciers, and blazing forest fires – all attributed to the impacts of climate change. Below the touching image of a young mother comforting her child is the slogan "It's our choice, It's their future."

There's no doubt that rising greenhouse gas levels in our atmosphere and their impact on our climate and ecosystems is an urgent issue. But climate change is just one symptom of our unsustainable economic model. It's an indication that the wastes involved in making and then disposing of the goods we consume exceed our environment's capacity to assimilate them.

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BC's legislated target of a 33% reduction in provincial greenhouse gas emissions by 2020 and its proposed carbon cap and trade framework at least shows some leadership. But to put that in perspective, in 2006 BC emitted an estimated 62 million tonnes of greenhouse gases. China and the U.S alone emitted a combined 12,000 million tonnes, so any real progress on climate change will

require international commitments and solutions.

BC's climate change strategy largely relies on market forces, such as pricing, to influence consumer behaviour. For example, taxing carbon at \$10 per tonne this year is supposed to reduce consumption and encourage a shift to low-emissions products. Since last October Canadian gas prices have risen by more than 40% or about 40.5 cents per litre with limited decline in consumption, so an added 2.4-cents per litre carbon tax will likely have little impact.

This year's budget for BC's Climate Action Secretariat allocates \$5 million for communications and education. A key component of this public education is LiveSmart BC, which can be viewed at www.livesmartbc.ca. This program focuses on enlightened consumerism as the way to reduce greenhouse gases and drive innovation that creates new jobs and opportunities, which is certainly worth considering.

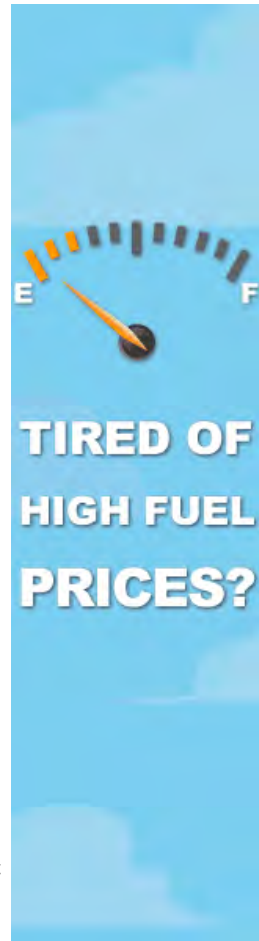
LiveSmart, however, is based on the belief that encouraging small, pain-free changes in behaviour, such as buying fluorescent light bulbs or hybrid cars, will lead to the major lifestyle changes required to achieve a carbon-neutral society, an assumption that has been disproved. This "green consumerism" distracts us from the real problem: consumerism itself. For example, not once in "The 52 Ways to Reduce Emissions" is buying less – one of the most effective ways to reduce our environmental footprint – mentioned as an option.

Most governments, including BC's, assure us that we can have an ever-growing economy and reduce greenhouse gas emissions at the same time. That seems unlikely when 65% of the increase in greenhouse gas emissions since 2000 is directly attributable to global economic growth.

Moving to a service-based economy may decrease our emissions, but since we are still purchasing material goods we merely shift our emissions to the countries that produce the goods. Thus we continue to contribute to a global problem instead of being part of the solution.

Even if we achieve our emissions targets, the unsustainable extraction and consumption of resources demanded by economic growth will further erode the health of the Earth's ecosystems and its biodiversity. And it's those ecosystems that provide the life-support services all living things need to survive, including us.

If we hope to adapt to climate change and get human activities in balance with natural systems, we have to start by embracing our own limitations and those of the Earth. We need to do this not only for ourselves but also for future generations because, as our provincial government's ads tell us, "It's our choice, It's



their future."

Roy Ostling owns Ostling & Associates Communications. Email him at rostling@qualicum institute.ca

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