

# When to much precaution kills humans and wildlife: Part 1

By Pierre Desrochers & Hiroko Shimizu



TORONTO —Mark Twain is often (and apparently incorrectly) quoted as saying that “Everybody talks about the weather but nobody does anything about it.” This is much less true today as a large number of academics and activists are putting forward an ever growing list of actions that range from carbon taxes and restrictions on individual car ownership to jail time for oil industry executives and the destruction of industrial civilization.

In case Drill readers think we are pushing the envelope a bit much in the latter case, consider the case of Canadian journalist and activist Murray Dobbin, one of the country’s most popular progressive political commentators and analysts whose career span over four decades. In a column (“Can you Imagine? Toppling the Fossil Fuel Empire”) published in the July 7 2014 issue of the Hill Times (the country’s most prominent publication devoted solely to the coverage of national politics), he states matter-of-factly that our “failure of imagination regarding the ever-increasing production and use of fossil fuels will, over time, kill billions of us and irreversibly change all life on the planet.”

Unfortunately, the “unimaginable wealth” and “sheer power of the fossil fuel industry” makes it difficult to bring “the industry to heel in a serious effort to slow climate change.” The only reasonable way forward, he adds, is to treat it “like we eventually treated the tobacco industry: as an existential threat to human health,” a “criminal conspiracy” and “a plague.” Because the “fossil fuel empire” has triggered a “slow motion apocalypse of global climate change,” Dobbin calls for its CEOs to be arrested on the “charge of species murder.” What happens next isn’t entirely clear, although one suspects that the Canadian columnist wishes

them the fate of thousands of witches burnt at the stake a few centuries ago because of their alleged role in causing the Little Ice Age...

As we documented in previous columns, however, the available facts on the state of our planet (no global warming for over a decade and half, a greener planet because fossil fuels have been substituted to a wide range of things that grew or grazed on its surface, much more numerous people who live longer and healthier lives, etc.) do not back up the alarmist scenarios invoked by Dobbin. Besides, the Canadian columnist is oblivious to the fact there were barely one billion human beings around when they began to unleash the power of fossil fuels and that the very notion that “billions” of us might die would not even been possible without their widespread use in the last two centuries...

Another problem for the Canadian columnist is that our planet’s climate will continue to change with or without the burning of fossil fuels, just as it always did before humans came along. And because people don’t like change, they will find something else to blame. For instance, the author of a column published in an 1881 issue of the London St. James’s Gazette quoted American experts according to whom the expanding telegraph system of the time was triggering dangerous climate change. Indeed, with “sufficient electrical connection by wires around the earth,” they suggested, the planet’s polarity itself could be reversed. The result would be a “sudden melting of the vast ice fields” followed by a “glacial flood” and “tremendous earthquakes” that would wipe out the human race. In order to look somewhat reasonable, however, the author added that “whether this theory prove [sic] correct or not... there cannot be a doubt that something has of late gone wrong with atmospherical arrangements,

and perhaps the telegraph wires are not wholly blameless in the matter.” To our knowledge, however, he did not advocate throwing telegraph industry CEOs in jail...

Closer to us, the geographer William Dando wrote in his 1980 book *The Geography of Famine* that most climatologists and even a “declassified Central Intelligence Agency” report agreed that because of air pollution the Earth was “entering a period of climatic change” that had already resulted in “North African droughts, the lack of penetration of monsoonal rains in India and seasonal delay in the onset of spring rains in the Soviet Virgin Lands wheat area.” Global cooling, Dando told his readers, was “the greatest single challenge humans will face in coming years” because it would soon trigger “mass migration and all-encompassing international famines.” Who should be jailed for this, however, is not something the geographer expanded upon...

Another way to put modern fears of change in perspective is to consider the past reluctance to adopt products now considered innocuous or even beneficial. A prime example is the potato. Although consumed for millennia in South America, it was long despised by much of Europe’s peasantry after its introduction there because of its similarity with poisonous local tubers, poisonous leaves and, in the case of some English Puritans, because there was

no mention of it in the Bible. In 18th century France, potatoes were widely believed to cause leprosy, scrofula, cholera, tuberculosis, rickets, flatulence and to corrupt the blood. In 19th century Russia, government orders to grow what peasants labeled “Devil’s apples” and “Forbidden Fruits of Eden” on common lands provoked major riots. In time, however, the undeniable advantages of potatoes over alternative grain and root crops, especially their high yields (between two to four times more calories per acre than grain crops), nutritious value, capacity to grow in poor soil and on small plots, affordability and ease of preparation, proved too significant to be ignored.

By any historical standards Mr. Dobbin has lived a long and prosperous life because of the fossil fuels he despises – and we suspect, because he ate his fair share of potatoes. Apparently unbeknown to him, the apocalypse he fears is in the end nothing more than what our daily lives would look like if our ancestors had listened to the Jeremiahs of their days and turned their back on technological advances and fossil fuels. As we will discuss in our next column, the lives of our descendants will be much more miserable than it could be if we were to embrace the “precautionary principle” now advocated by the likes of the Canadian columnist.

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