



Why is Climate Change So hard to Believe? Pine Beetles and Common Climate Misunderstandings

People walk around with their heads down, stuck in their own place, not looking up, not leaving town, not paying attention to life as it flies past. Life is hard, it requires a lot of effort to get up in the morning, many people require more effort than others. It is human nature to totally be observant of life in ones direct vicinity and much less observant of more distant things. This is a part of the survival patterning that is innately built into us all.

When one looks up and notices others, or other things, one is compelled into action for some reason or another. This action, whatever it is, takes a lot of time and energy. Ignorance is bliss. We have enough to do in our busy lives.

We become accustomed to the seemingly unchangeable. How many times have we driven by that same vacant piece of property with the old (insert something here) on it and then one day, there is a new strip mall there and we never saw it being built? Why did someone cut down that magnificent old tree at the corner of this street and that street? When did the McWhat'stheirnames paint their house pink?

Climate change is sneaking up on us like old age. Billions of trees are dieing in the American West and people are just flat missing it. They do not see it, then they deny it is happening because it does not seem right, it does not fit their model. Why do wee need another strip mall? Why in the world would anyone in their right mind paint their house pink? Why would someone cut down that beautiful old tree? How in the world could that new mall have been built so fast over there where the old (insert something here) used to be?

To understand how our society has come to the point where climate change could destroy the planet requires the understanding of how we came to be at this place in time in the first place. Society today does not understand that we are on this astonishing brink of the demise of Earth's complete habitable environment. They understand that climate change is not good and that it will make life less "rosy" than it otherwise would be. Their understanding is based on widespread knowledge transmitted from years of newsreels and environmental articles. They understand climate change as it was commonly understood by scientists in the 1990s. But things have changed. Climate change has accelerated rapidly since the turn of the century. Yet the new discoveries, for many reasons, are difficult to see. People don't see the 18.5 billion dead trees in the North American Rockies. They don't see Greenland ice melting 30 feet per year, and accelerating wildly. They don't see Antarctica going form a stable place to one where ice melt and discharge has, in a decade, caught up to that of Greenland.

People also don't do their homework. It is natural to believe the first thing that comes along that supports one or more of our existing beliefs. It confirms our sense of well-being. Conversely, when

something arises that is contrary to our accepted beliefs (especially bad news), it is natural to think that that information is suspect because we don't know how to react to it, it makes us nervous; it disrupts our predetermined natural order, it threatens the precarious stability of our lives. The new negative information tells us that what we are thinking is wrong, that we don't understand what is happening around us.

We tend to believe the things we trust. We trust that the McWhat'sthiernames are not going to paint their house pink! We trust television, the newspaper, a favorite blog, a friend an authority figure. The authority figure in particular is often trusted with great sincerity, why not – that authority figure did not get to the position of authority that he or she is in by chance. I am constantly bombarded with examples of why climate change is not happening, or that it is natural, or that it is not as bad as the alarmist media says it is, etc. because something or someone somewhere, a trusted entity, has convinced us that climate change is either not real, or because it is natural it is OK. (Thankfully though, this is not happening as often today as it was just a few years ago.)

A good friend and I got together recently after not seeing each other for a year. He lives in Colorado. We were sitting around a campfire burning a few pine bows with long dead red needles like those of the beetle-killed trees in the Rockies. Those bright red limbs burn like they were soaked in gasoline - the needles are explosive.

The conversation got around to the extreme risk of extraordinary fire because of the beetle kill in Colorado. My friend started talking about the forest industry friend of his that says that all of those beetle killed trees are totally worthless. I have read this opinion, and it seemed logical enough at the time because the article went on to talk about the blue fungus that always goes with the beetle. It infects the outer two to six inches of the tree, turning the wood in the infected area blue.

My friend also told me that "environmentalists" were blocking logging sales of the dead trees, and I have read an article reporting the same thing. This statement about environmentalists is another thing that is easily believed by a large section of society. To many, "Environmentalists" are against anyone doing anything in a forest - except taking pictures and leaving footprints. Rightly so, I know a lot of environmentalists who are like that. But predominantly, environmental advocates are extremely sensitive to others rights. They understand that environmental rights are States rights or the rights of the people, the rights of others; the rights of society as a whole. And they understand that there is a great conflict between private rights and societal rights. The conflict arises of course, because some people are not concerned with the rights of society as a whole. Otherwise, why would there be issue with societal rights?

The article, and the story goes on: after the trees die from the beetle infestation, the wood is supposed to be virtually useless because of the fungus staining. Deeper thought led me to more investigation. Why would the rest of the tree be worthless? Also, fungal staining often does not weaken the wood structurally - a fact I learned from building things out of what is called "spalted" pecan. (Spalting is the staining that happens when pecan wood, or any other wood, is attacked by fungus. If the wood rots; sure it's useless. But the wood doesn't necessarily rot. The results of the fungus stain are fabulously beautiful and intricate patterning that makes for very desirable and expensive carpentry items.) So my research went on to unearth a half dozen or more articles and opinions on the value of beetle killed, blue stained wood. It seems that all of the articles that I could find, written by forest industry personnel or forest researchers say this fungus generally has no effect on the structural strength of the wood and in fact demand rising for use of the wood for cabinet doors and high end furniture because it is very pretty when crafted by a skilled carpenter. The wood is also, by far, structurally sound and not

only is it good for normal use, but remains structurally sound in the standing dead tree, just like trees killed by fire - for ten or twenty years or longer.

The bark beetles themselves only eat the outer fraction of an inch of the tree - the part just under the bark. They do not burrow into the tree at all. The beetles eat only that part of the tree that carries the water and nutrient up from the roots to the crown and the food from photosynthesis down from the crown to the roots - the xylem and phloem right under the bark. Why would that forest industries employee say that about the beetle killed trees? Shouldn't he know? And why would my friend say that "environmentalists" are blocking timber sales for the dead trees?

Well... Who knows why people say things in the end. I just know there is one sharp pebble in my shoe that is screaming for me to stop: Why in the world would environmentalists be blocking the sales of useless trees? Why would anyone want to buy them? Undoubtedly, there are outcries among some about logging dead trees. These trees do fulfill a part of the natural cycle, regardless if that natural cycle is ten or more times larger than anything that has ever occurred before. The logging of these trees has been fast and furious. Much of the logging has been as a Forest Service sponsored control measure. The trees are cut then burned to kill the beetles and keep them from infesting other trees in the immediate vicinity. So fast and so widespread that for the last several years there has been a glut of timber on the market and lumber prices have plummeted. As a consequence, logging has declined sharply, not because of environmentalists, but because of market demand. There is a new demand though. Pelletized woodchip fuel is being advocated as a green alternative and the market is expanding rapidly. New power plants are being built across the country with this fuel as a primary source.

My friend also said that the beetle infestation had not made it over the continental divide into the Denver and Boulder areas yet. Remember that new mall over there where the old whathisname's house used to be where they chopped down that beautiful old tree? The sight is frightening in Georgetown, on the Denver side of the Continental Divide, where my friend said there was no beetle kill last year. I was only through there once last summer. My friend was through there half a dozen times. The tree in Georgetown it could have been as high as 60%. It has only been in the last few years that the mountain pine beetle has migrated to the East side of the Continental Divide.

Climate change is a little hard to see. The US Forest Service is adamant that the beetle kill in the US Rockies is a natural cyclic occurrence (which of course, it is). They do admit that this is the largest mountain pine beetle outbreak ever to occur in the US Rockies at 2 million acres and growing (in Colorado alone), and they do admit that all of the mature lodgepole pine forest in the US Rockies will likely be dead because of the outbreak (5 million acres out of the total of 22 million acres of Colorado forests) in the next three to five years. But they don't mention the 37 million acres of dead forests in British Columbia, five million in Alaska the extra million in Montana and another in Wyoming, the fact that this outbreak is ten times larger than any known previous outbreak, or the fact that the Canadian Forest Service places the primary blame for this unprecedented outbreak squarely on the shoulders of climate change. The US Forest Service also does not mention that the Colorado State Forest Service, or the Rocky Mountain Climate Organization (17 government agencies, 17 private businesses and 11 nonprofit organizations) also blames the outbreak primarily on climate change.

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