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The Many Faces of Oil

The other day my friends and I took a lovely nature hike along the Atlantic sea wall. We saw a majestic Blue Heron and Cormorants diving for food. We also stopped to speak with a woman on the beach who happened to be a marine biologist doing research on fish in the area for her Masters degree. Further along the trail I looked out to see a beautiful expanse of water – the Bay of Fundy. I imagined what it would be like if I were looking out to a sea of oily slick covering the ocean, the rocks, the beach, and the birds...

Though I have been trying to avoid watching any news about the British Petroleum oil spill in the Gulf, I can't seem to shake the idea in my head. When I arrived home that evening, I started searching the Internet for articles and updates. One site I found was a Facebook group urging boycotts of the company, mainly focusing on gas stations in the U.S. Though some people responded with "don't hurt the small-business owner", others responses focused on a much larger picture – the human obsession with oil.

Unfortunately, many of us think that our reliance on oil is all about our driving habits, but this is only part of the issue. Not to say that driving less or choosing vehicles with higher fuel-efficiency is not important, but our obsession with oil goes far beyond that. In fact, there are over 6000 products made from petroleum. According to Ranken Energy Corporation, one 42-gallon barrel of oil creates 19.4 gallons of gasoline, the rest (over half) is used to make things like detergents, pens, toothpaste, perfumes, curtains, soap, deodorant, umbrellas, fertilizers, tires, clothes, shaving cream, bandages, paint, lipstick, shampoo, nail polish, hand lotion, vitamin capsules and thousands more like products. Of course, it is also used in the making of some life-altering products such as heart valves, hearing aids, dentures, life jackets and artificial limbs.

With a list of over 6000 items, many of them used everyday by people around the globe, is it conceivable that we will ever reduce our dependence on oil? It does seem to be a farfetched prospect to think that we will ever be completely independent of oil in our lifetime, but I do believe with today's technology and collective commitment to saving our environment that we can indeed reduce our dependence to a more sustainable level.

So why opt out on oil? From the destruction and disturbance of eco-systems, to the enormous amounts of water used in drilling, and the pollution caused by excavation and left behind in tailing ponds, the extraction of oil and other fossil fuels has been, and continues to be, extremely damaging to vast areas of our environment. All of that happens even without any offshore oil spills. And disturbingly, since coverage of the BP oil spill began we are finding out about numerous similar spills that have gone unreported in the media.

Now the question is, where to start? There are many ideas the Green Matters columnists have shared over the past few years regarding other environmental concerns that also have a bearing on our excessive use of petroleum products. We have talked about cosmetics, farming practices, plastics, cleaning products, personal care products, and in general, "stuff". When buying products such as clothing, personal care products or cleaning products, it is best to go with natural and organic fibers and ingredients. But don't just trust the labels; look for eco-logos from

organizations who certify environmental standards such as such as Green Seal and Certified Organic and Environmental Choice. Also, think about the process used in making and delivering the product, such as the amount of water used, type of energy, air pollution, packaging and transportation to destinations around the globe.

I always ask myself the question “do I really need this”? I find it keeps me from buying a lot of “stuff” and a lot of “stuff” is generally made from petroleum – remember, over 6000 products apart from fuel! Inevitably we have to start by making a choice within ourselves to change our ideas, motivations and habits. In so far as changing our driving habits, we are already well underway. The past week has seen an exciting development in Fredericton; the anticipated extreme traffic congestion on the Westmorland Street Bridge as a result of the Princess Margaret Bridge closure has not materialized. Trail use is up, park & go sites are full, bridge car commutes are down! You’re in the groove Fredericton, keep at it!

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