

Imagining Climate Solutions

Larry Lohmann
for *Canadian Dimension*

Being a climate activist can be dangerous. The police may break up your demonstrations with truncheons and horses. The government may start spying on you for daring to call into question the need for another coal-fired power plant. You may even be branded an eco-terrorist.

But the biggest danger for climate activists, especially in industrialized countries, is something less predictable – their own imagination.

Imagination is a wonderful thing. People use it all the time – accountants as well as painters, politicians as well as astronomers. Whatever the field, you can find people making striking breakthroughs and demonstrating unexpected artistry. Environmental activism is no exception. Activists are constantly exercising ingenuity and making inspired leaps – whether in understanding politics, formulating strategy, or communicating with friends and enemies.

But if people's limitless capacity to create new and beautiful things can be used for good, it can also be used in ways that are scarier than a dinosaur. It all depends on whether you are persuaded to expend your imagination on sterile fantasies or fertile futures. It's easy to go either way. You can use as much imagination pursuing genetic engineering and nuclear waste disposal as you can exploring permaculture and renewable energy.

Worse, it's not always easy to distinguish the different uses of imagination. Sometimes it's only in retrospect, after somebody takes you by the shoulders and forces you to step back from your pet creative project, that you realize you may have been wasting your ingenuity on something that's making you into the "useful idiot" of large corporations or oppressive governments.

Imagining Cap and Trade

Take the cap and trade schemes that, at the behest of economists, traders, politicians, financiers and Washington NGOs, have become the main official response to climate change at the UN, in Europe, and perhaps shortly in the US and Canada.

These schemes are formidable feats of imagination. Economists, traders and policy wonks have spent years figuring out brilliant ways of recasting the climate problem to try to make it into something that markets can handle.

The appeal for environmental activists is understandable. Cap and trade promises that, instead of racking our brains to find ways of changing industrialized societies' ways of life so that fossil fuels stay in the ground, we can merely set emissions targets, divide up a limited number of saleable rights to pollute, and let the market sort out the rest. Industry will select the cheapest ways of making emissions cuts and meanwhile give entrepreneurs incentives to find low-carbon ways of preserving the ways of life to which the world's rich have grown accustomed.

In this landscaped Eden of economic theory, everything suddenly becomes very simple. Market actors wander from tree to tree picking the “low-hanging fruit” of incremental carbon savings, telling themselves that they are building up strength so that one day they can put up a ladder and harvest the great bulk of juicy fruit that hangs out of reach and would make the mining of fossil fuels unnecessary. One young economist-poet, Tim Harford of the *Financial Times*, opines that effective political action on climate change is nothing more than a matter of rejigging prices so that we can all make smarter consumer choices. “There are around 10 billion products in a modern economy,” Harford tells us. “The problem of reducing carbon dioxide emissions is ‘simply’ the problem of reducing carbon dioxide emissions from a cappuccino, 10 billion times over.”

It’s tempting to go on indefinitely painting in the details of this idyllic scene, adding a fluffy cloud here, a harp-playing cherub there. There is nothing of the “dismal science” about this creative exercise: the possibilities are endless. Is there a problem with the way cap and trade allows governments to hand out huge numbers of pollution rights free of charge to the heaviest polluters, leading to emissions increases? Clever policy wonks step in with proposals to auction them off instead and reduce their number drastically (which politicians promptly ignore). Does our inability to predict the future price of carbon scupper incentives for structural change or – horror of horrors – create risks for business? Financial wizards offer their inspired hedging services (the overwhelming bulk of carbon trades now take place in the world of forwards, futures, options and swaps). Will the dominance of Wall Street in cap and trade make price volatility and uncertainty even worse and the incentives for structural change even weaker? Creative environmentalists can be relied on to chime in with proposals to fix it all by tinkering with regulation.

All in all, the abstract idea of a carbon market is just too entrancing a stimulus to the imagination for many green intellectuals in industrialized societies to leave alone. For those in the game, it rapidly becomes difficult to imagine that there might be any better way of coming to grips with global warming than offering your services to Merrill Lynch’s carbon desk or joining up with EcoSecurities. What could the alternative to cap and trade possibly be?

Changing the Subject

But in the end somebody has to break the spell. Somebody has to change the subject. Probably you could go on forever adding imaginative touches to the theory of cap and trade to try to convince yourself that some day it could succeed. But eventually it has to be admitted that it won’t. Imagine if today’s English-speaking poets were all still stuck in the 17th century, continuing to churn out pastoral verse about happy orchard harvests, pipe-playing shepherds, and virtuous maids with belts of straw and ivy buds. Eventually somebody would have to give them a shake to make them look around and see it was time to move on.

When thinking about practical approaches to the climate crisis, one of the best ways of dragging the imagination back to reality is to look at the Albertan Tar Sands. If allowed to continue, Tar Sands exploitation would not only add hugely to the carbon burden of the atmosphere (it produces three to five times as much carbon dioxide as conventional oil) but also tip the world into a new era of immensely destructive exploitation of

unconventional oil in the cause of maintaining a fossil fuel-oriented infrastructure that everyone knows must be phased out as soon as possible.

The Tar Sands mining sites are no orchard. As Clayton Thomas-Muller of the Indigenous Environmental Network points out, they are nightmarish landscapes more like something out of the Martian mining scenes in *Total Recall*. But for anyone serious about climate change, stopping the Tar Sands must be one of the first “low-hanging fruits” of climate change action to be picked worldwide.

Is that what cap and trade would do? Revealingly, no: cap and trade is designed to leave projects like the Tar Sands exactly as they are for the time being, in favour of making small adjustments in the “carbon footprint” of a cappuccino. For cap and trade, stopping the Tar Sands is not a “low-hanging fruit”: not a priority.

The situation is similar in Europe, where government officials use cap and trade to justify plans for more fossil-fuelled power plants. “If we don’t build these plants,” they say, “then under cap and trade some other country will be able to. Anyway, we can always offset the destruction, if we need to, by setting up wind farms or saving forests somewhere else.” In California, too, activists’ attempts to stop new fossil-fired generation are being thwarted by cap and trade plans.

The Chemical Imagination of REDD

Another example of environmentalists’ imaginations being trapped in the wrong groove is REDD – reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (see Tom Goldtooth’s article, this issue).

REDD advocates use plenty of imagination when thinking about chemistry. There are too many carbon dioxide molecules in the atmosphere, REDD proponents tell us, and 20 per cent of them come not from smokestacks and car exhausts but from deforestation. Since all these molecules are chemically the same, they conclude, why don’t we concentrate our climate efforts on saving trees first, since to do so should be cheaper than stopping carbon dioxide coming out of smokestacks and car exhausts? They can then go on indefinitely correlating facts about chemical fluxes between leaves or forest soils and the atmosphere, tallying atoms, staking out protected areas and tabulating costs per interaction.

But as soon as someone changes the subject from chemistry to climate history and forest history, the limitations of this way of imagining things become painfully obvious. The idea that REDD advocates have based their creative flights on – that all carbon molecules are climatically the same – has led them in exactly the wrong direction.

In climate history, the carbon from fossil fuel burning is not the same as the carbon from forest destruction. Once fossil carbon comes out of the ground, it doesn’t go back. Eventually it accumulates unsustainably in the oceans and the air. Carbon dioxide molecules that come out of trees are different. They are already part of the carbon pool that circulates endlessly above ground and do not add to it. In the end they may even go back into new trees. To curb global warming, the priority must always be to stop the flow of fossil carbon out of the ground, not to try to maximize the space for it above ground.

REDD's focus on the chemistry of carbon, moreover, tends naturally to suggest to its advocates a need to secure control of the carbon molecules in trees – through money, state power or international law. If REDD proponents are unable to imagine what the pursuit of that control might mean politically, they will be led inexorably into alliances with repressive forestry departments, rich conservationists, mining and logging companies, Wall Street traders and others eager for forest domination – all of whom are likely to promote plans that would drive farmers and indigenous peoples out of forests or cut off their relationship with them.

Ironically, that is bad news not only for people but also for the climate. In the end it is only those who live in and around forests who will be able to save them.