The myth of herd immunity



By Nate Smelle

On my way to town the other morning I noticed there was a haziness unlike the usual humidity lingering in the air at this time of year. Disregarding my observation of abnormality, I turned on the radio and tuned into the morning news.

Soon after tuning in, I heard the broadcaster announce that there was an air quality warning in effect for North Hastings, as well as the entire "listening area." Leaning in to hear the rest of his report, he explained that the reason we were experiencing poor air quality - despite the fact we live among the forested highlands of North Hastings - was because there were 151 wildland fires burning in Ontario. With 138 fires burning in the northwestern part of the province, and another 13 in the northeast region, once again Ontario is on fire.

The real story, however, as usual, was hidden in the numbers. For example, the report indicated that so far this year there have been 902 wildfires; and, that the 10-year average number of wildfires per year in Ontario is 520. Rubbing salt into the wound, was the fact that more than 520,000 hectares of forests and wildlands had already been destroyed this year - more than triple the annual average of 153,000 hectares. The broadcaster went on to inform the public that more than 3,000 people had been evacuated from northern Ontario First Nations due to the wildfires.

Doing my best to interpret the story these numbers were telling, I started breaking down the numbers into terms I could understand. Living on a piece of land approximately 29 acres in size over the better part of the past 15 years, I have come to appreciate the value of an acre of space. By spending time on this land, I have also come to appreciate that I am not the only animal who values the life-inspiring gifts it has to offer.

The monarch butterflies and caterpillars enjoy the abundance of milkweed plants. The white-tailed deer and the elk recognize the shelter and food provided by the forests and fields with their presence. The barred owls make the canopy their home and the tall grass their feeding grounds.

Thinking of how many species share this land with me, I was reminded of information shared with me by a fellow naturalist while we were helping to organize a BioBlitz in Niagara a few years back. While we compiled the data, marking down each species observed over the 24-hour period, he told me how through his research he had learned that up to one billion living organisms could exist within a single cubic metre of soil.

Crunching the numbers in another way, I discovered that in a single acre there are nearly 4,047 square metres; and, that one hectare is composed of 10,000 square metres. This means that the amount of wildland already destroyed - more than 5.2-billion square metres - is no longer prime habitat to the countless number of species it previously harboured.

Depressed by the thought of how devastating these wildfires have been on our dwindling biodiversity, I popped in an old mixed CD to forget about the world on fire. The first song, "Blowing in the Wind," by Bob Dylan took my mind right back to the thickening haziness in the air and its origins.

As we have all found out during the COVID-19 pandemic, we are part of a global community interconnected by the air, water, and soil. The impact of our species' actions are felt by all of us. It doesn't matter how much we deny this connectedness; when we ignore it, we feel it in the form of a reduced quality of life.

In the same manner as the people, the woodland caribou, and all the inhabitants of northwestern Ontario are not immune to the wildfires, our species is not immune to the consequences of our lack of concern for the environment. Our time to stop the exploitation and depletion of our home's resources is running out. Our inaction on the climate crisis, and the war on nature we have been waging since the dawn of so-called ?modern civilization? must end now. Otherwise, as the iconic Canadian author, environmentalist, and veteran, Farley Mowat once wrote, ?Inaction will cause a man to sink into the slough of despond and vanish without a trace.?