

Acid Raindrops are Falling on Our Heads

Acid rain has been one of the top environment issues for a decade.

Much of eastern Canada is vulnerable to acid-rain damage, and more than 80 per cent of Canadians live in areas of high acidic fallout. The corrosive bombardment of rain, snow, sleet, dry particles and gases has already damaged 100 000 of 700 000 lakes and threatens another 300 000. Scientists believe that about 14 000 lakes are already biologically dead.

Acid rain and related air pollutants are killing forests in growing areas of eastern Canada. Trees, particularly the maples, are dying in a broad band from Ottawa to the Gaspé Peninsula in eastern Quebec. The maple leaf, the national symbol, is being eaten away by pollution in other areas too, such as southern Ontario, the country's industrial heartland.

The same air pollutants that attack the fish and the trees are threatening human health. Medical studies have shown that when levels of smog containing sulphates, sulphuric acid droplets and ozone rise, so do hospital admissions.

Toxic Materials in the South

Toxic chemicals in the drinking water supply and food chain are another big worry for Canadians. They are causing death and deformities in some wildlife species, and there is concern about what they will do to humans over the long term.

In some cases, hazardous chemicals escape in major accidents. A 1988 fire at a Montreal-area warehouse containing polychlorinated biphenyls forced the evacuation of over 3 300 people for three weeks.



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Most often, chemicals escape in a steady if less spectacular stream. They are in industrial and municipal sewer pipes, seeping from old dumps, and some are deliberately sprayed as pesticides.

Most chemicals eventually end up in water, the universal solvent. As a result even the Great Lakes, which contain one-fifth of the world's fresh-water supply, have become contaminated from decades of pollution. In some parts of the Great Lakes basin, near chemical industries, people have demanded that governments intervene to pipe in cleaner drinking water from less polluted areas.

The chemicals flow with the currents. Downstream from the Great Lakes, in the St.

Lawrence River estuary, beluga whales are so laden with toxins that they can be considered floating hazardous waste sites.

And Now, in the North

In the Arctic, the problem is toxic fallout from industrial areas thousands of kilometres away. The chemicals build up in the fat of wild animals eaten by people, and no one knows what long-term health effects this pollution will have on northerners.

Throughout eastern Canada, extensive acid-rain damage to materials, historic buildings and monuments has been widely documented.

There is, as yet, no evidence of a serious acid-rain problem in western Canada.



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