

Our Driving Habits Destroy Habitats ... and are threatening our kids' health, too

By Maryanne Pope

According to the World Wildlife Fund, by 2050, polar bears are likely to be extinct in Canada's southern Hudson Bay region – and our driving habits may be partially to blame.

Seemingly harmless driving practices, such as unnecessary idling (idling produces *more* emissions per minute than driving), cause increased carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions. These gases become trapped in the Earth's atmosphere and are a major cause of global warming.

Early springs impact ice-dependent bears

“In large part due to climatic warming, sea ice in the polar basin has been declining at a rate of about 9% per decade (an area roughly about the size of Alaska) for the last few decades,” says Dr. Ian Stirling, Senior Research Scientist with the Canadian Wildlife Service.

“In Western Hudson Bay, the breakup is now about 3 weeks earlier on average than it was only 30 years ago. As a result, in this region the bears are able to feed less at the most important time of year (late spring – early summer) when freshly weaned seal pups are most abundant.”

Could idling less make a difference?

Transportation is the single largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in Canada, accounting for 30% of Canada's total CO₂ emissions. The family car contributes about half that amount.

On average, Canadian motorists idle their vehicles five to ten minutes per day. A recent study suggests that in the peak of winter, Canadians idle their vehicles for a combined total of 75 million minutes per day – equivalent to one vehicle idling for 144 years.

What can Alberta drivers do?

Calgary has the highest transportation-generated CO₂ emissions of all Canadian cities. If drivers of Alberta's 2.3 million registered vehicles were able to reduce idling by five minutes per day, the province's greenhouse gas emissions would be cut by 302,000 tonnes a year. That translates to a savings of 125 million litres of fuel, worth roughly \$87 million.

Polar bears aren't the only victims

Air pollution caused by other tailpipe emissions is considerable – 75% of air pollution in B.C.'s Lower Mainland, for example, comes from vehicles – and it can make people more susceptible to respiratory diseases such as asthma, the most common chronic respiratory disease of children. According to the BC Lung Association, childhood asthma has *quadrupled* in the past two decades and is now the number-one reason for hospital admissions among Canadian children.

And yet parents are unwittingly contributing to air pollution – a Toronto-based study revealed that 35–45% of parents idle their vehicles while waiting to pick up their children from school! Traffic areas around schools often show significantly higher pollution levels outside *and* inside their buildings.

Seven simple ways you can help

- 1) Reduce warm-up idling (approximately 30 seconds if above -15°C; a few minutes more if colder)
- 2) Turn your engine off if parked for more than 10 seconds (except in traffic)
- 3) Avoid using a remote car starter
- 4) Avoid using drive-throughs
- 5) Watch Al Gore's documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth"
- 6) Display a 'Our Driving Habits Destroy Habitats' vehicle decal to help educate other motorists
- 7) Spread the word to family and friends

Maryanne Pope, writer and CEO of Pink Gazelle Productions Inc, is executive producer of the upcoming "Face the Future" series of environmental public service announcements. Get your 'Our Driving Habits Destroy Habitats' vehicle decal at <http://www.pinkgazelle.com/paypal.php>. All proceeds go toward PSA production costs.