

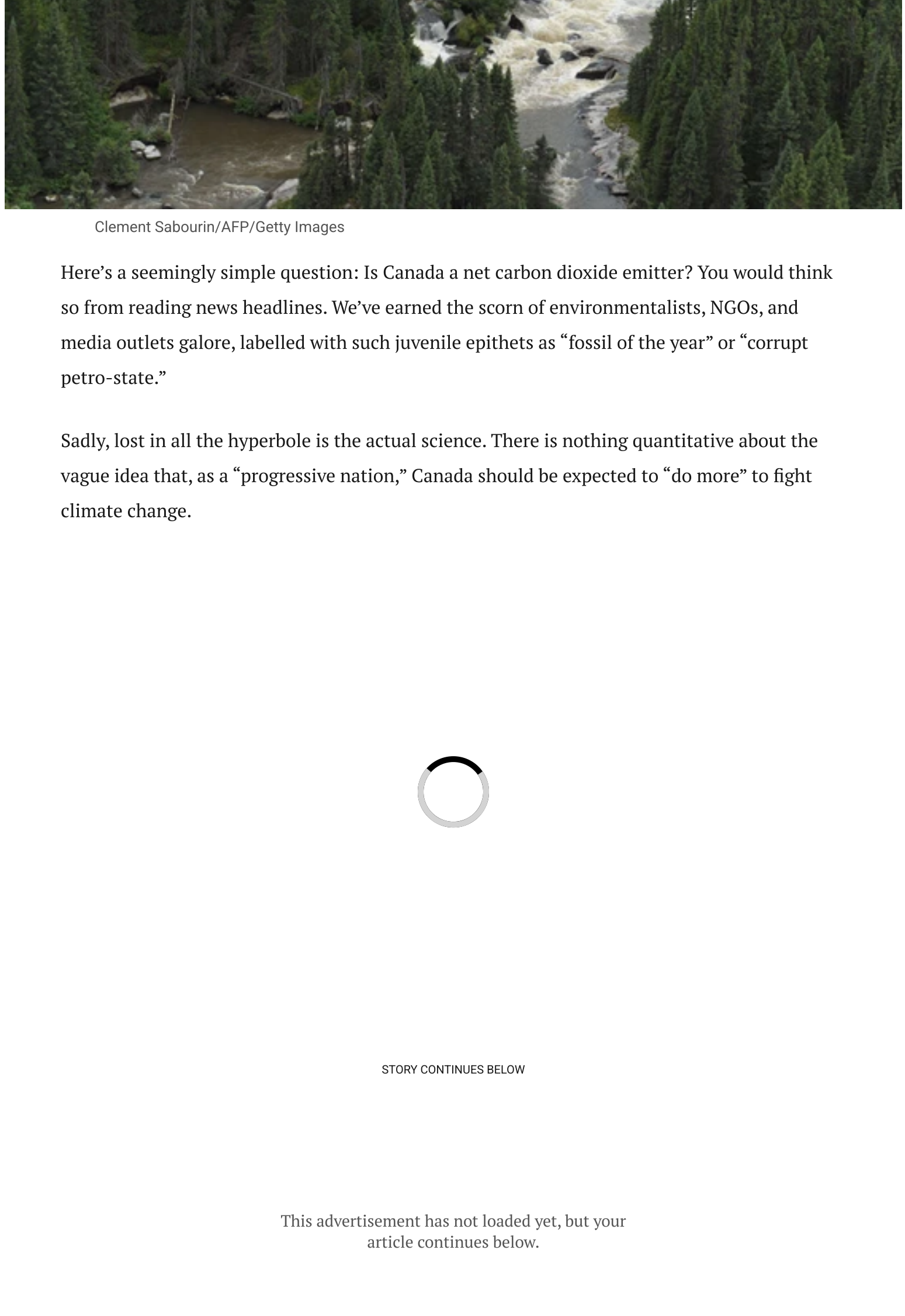
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Canada may already be carbon neutral, so why are we keeping it a secret?

F. Larry Martin: A conservative estimate of Canada's existing carbon-absorption capacity indicates we could already be absorbing 20 to 30% more CO2 than we emit

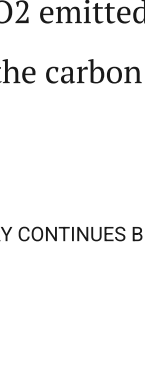
By [Special to Financial Post](#)
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Here's a seemingly simple question: Is Canada a net carbon dioxide emitter? You would think so from reading news headlines. We've earned the scorn of environmentalists, NGOs, and media outlets galore, labelled with such juvenile epithets as "fossil of the year" or "corrupt petro-state."

Sadly, lost in all the hyperbole is the actual science. There is nothing quantitative about the vague idea that, as a "progressive nation," Canada should be expected to "do more" to fight climate change.



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But therein lies the rub; Canada is poised to immediately do more to combat climate change than almost every other country in the world. How, you ask? Well, by doing more of the same. If that sounds ludicrous, let me explain.

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Most Canadians would agree that our response to climate change needs to be scientifically sound, environmentally sustainable and financially realistic, as well as global, comprehensive, and holistic. Right now, our approach is none of those things; the public discourse is driven by a myopic, ideological obsession with carbon emissions alone. What else is there, you ask?

The answer comes from the most recent report (2014) of the Global Carbon Project, which states that global human-induced CO2 emissions were 36 billion tonnes. Of that, 36 per cent stayed in the atmosphere, 27 per cent was absorbed by water, and 37 per cent was absorbed by land.

That's right — absorbed by land! Not all CO2 emitted by people stays in the atmosphere. Much of it returns to the earth, mainly through the carbon absorption and sequestration power of plants, soil, and trees.

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A conservative estimate of Canada's existing carbon-absorption capacity, based on land area and the global carbon-absorption average, indicates that Canada could already be absorbing 20 to 30 per cent more CO2 than we emit. Using the same calculation, the "Big Four" polluters of China, the U.S., the European Union, and India, which together are responsible for a whopping 60 per cent of global CO2 emissions, release 10 times more CO2 than their combined land area absorbs. Canada doesn't seem very dirty now, do we?

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So when was the last time you heard a Canadian political leader, let alone the media, talk about our carbon-absorption capacity? Probably never, because we are currently ignoring that side of the equation, for a couple reasons.

First, there is insufficient political will. The government's top experts need a mandate to pursue in-depth measurement of CO2 absorption. Recently, Canada's federal and provincial auditors general announced a joint audit of the country's carbon emissions. But what credible audit would examine only half a balance sheet? There's no reason why they shouldn't audit our absorption capacity, too.

How much CO2 did our forests and land absorb? Do some trees and topographies perform better than others? In short, what is Canada's carbon balance?

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Second, it's contrary to the interests of urbanized, overpopulated, deforested places in Europe, Asia & the Middle East to allow vast, sparsely populated, forested countries like Canada to set the climate change agenda. It doesn't help them whatsoever for Canada to claim our fair share of the world's carbon absorption capacity, and emerge as one of the planet's climate leaders.

If Europe and our other traditional "Western Allies" won't acknowledge the free ride that we are providing them by protecting our forests and thus subsidizing their emissions, it's time for Canada to find climate allies who understand us and share our needs. It's time for some Green Realpolitik.

We should seek out new alliances with other large, forested countries, starting with Russia, Brazil, Democratic Republic of Congo, Argentina, Indonesia, and Peru. These countries, and many others, will all benefit from a new approach that rewards carbon absorption, and would bring diverse cultural voices and political interests together around this important climate issue.

Many people in these countries have to choose between their forests and their livelihoods, as they scramble to survive the day. Some of them still clear-cut or burn their forests for the sake of agriculture or industry. But what if they no longer had to choose between planet and profit?

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Imagine the kind of eco-friendly economy that DRC Congo, Peru, or any other forested country could build by generating carbon credits to sell to Dubai, Singapore, or Luxembourg. Countries on the receiving end of cap-and-trade credits could build entire green economies around conservation, not consumption. Financial pressure to deforest would subside, replaced with incentives to manage our forests and preserve their attendant ecosystems. As a bonus, Canada and its new, green allies could label all our exports as "proudly carbon neutral."

Imagine, too, the possibilities for indigenous people all over the world to leverage their traditional role as protectors of the environment into a feasible economic opportunity. We are constantly looking for ways to bridge gaps between modern society and native cultures, so why not empower indigenous people to take on a leadership role as stewards of the world's precious forests?

Canada must successfully lobby for a world market on carbon-offset credits, where CO2 absorption is part of the equation. The potential impact is huge. Based on the aforementioned estimates of our absorption capacity, and a conservative CO2 price of \$40/tonne, Canada stands to gain \$10 billion per year. Think about it; we might currently be giving away \$10 billion to the rest of the world, including the Big Four polluters, every year, for free.

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\$10 billion dollars in our coffers could go a long way toward balancing the budget, investing in sustainable energy, providing social programs, incentivizing innovation, renewing infrastructure, and generally improving Canada's fortunes. So when Prime Minister Trudeau meets with provincial, territorial, and indigenous leaders, he owes it to Canadians to put this issue on the agenda. The only thing we're really asking is for our leaders to consider the entire carbon cycle, from emission to absorption, in order to get the "balance sheet" right. Then, and only then, can our best minds get to work on making a climate plan that is fair for all Canadians, and that reflects our true contribution to the world's climate solution.

It would be nice to end on that hopeful note, but the realistic future looks rather bleak. The prime minister thus far seems content to position himself as a goodwill ambassador to the UN and Europe, not someone who will go toe to toe with them to defend Canadian interests. Meanwhile, our other leaders are falling victim to their own political ideologies. Rachel Notley wants to kick Albertans while they're down with a new tax, Manitoba's Greg Selinger thinks he can magically reverse flooding via taxation, and Ontario's recent climate initiative is a case study in the myopic, emissions-only approach to cap-and-trade. Quebec mayors like Montreal's Coderre blindly oppose the Energy East pipeline, forsaking the memory of those who died in Lac Mégantic due to the dangers of transporting oil by train.

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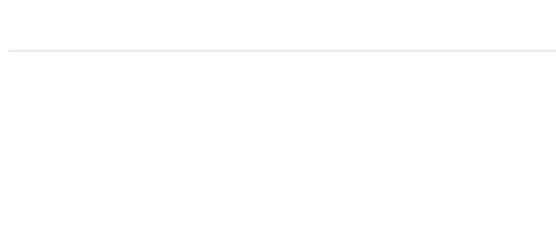
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Taxing Canadians to try to make planet Earth greener is futile policy based on a half-blind approach that only considers emissions from our resources, not absorption from our land and forests. Unless we change that perspective, the inevitable result is a drag on our economy with job casualties, increased costs, and lost business opportunities, ultimately weakening Canada's ability to compete on the international stage. And for what do we sell out our future? To let the Big Four polluters off the hook? To be popular with delegates in Copenhagen or Paris?

By taking credit for absorption, we win. By negotiating a robust cap-and-trade deal between credits, we win. By working with countries that share our interests, we win. By getting the credit we deserve, and ensuring that the planet's real polluters pay their fair share, we win. So, the question is, why do we let our leaders set Canada up to fail?

With a simple mandate from government to factor in the entire carbon cycle, our best scientific minds can get to work assembling the evidence to create an appropriate, progressive climate policy for Canada.

F. Larry Martin served as deputy minister to the premier of Saskatchewan, and assistant deputy minister of rural development and intergovernmental affairs in Manitoba. He is retired and lives in Canmore, Alta.



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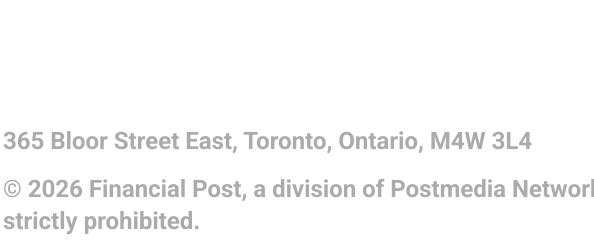
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