

The Argument in Favour of Wood Heating

21 April 2007 John Gulland

Almost 3.2 million Canadian households burn wood in fireplaces, stoves and furnaces. This number represents 26 percent of all households. In Ontario, the popularity of wood burning is well below the national average, with only 21 percent, or about 940,000 households burning wood. Still, millions of Ontarians and millions more people across Canada build wood fires for heat and enjoyment each winter. By any measure, wood is an important residential energy resource, especially in rural areas.

But judged by coverage in the mainstream media, wood heating is virtually nonexistent. Politicians don't debate its merits or plan for its strategic use. In a world of touch-screen convenience, pocket-sized computers, and automatic climate-controlled environments, wood heating is in every way rough, basic and steadfastly hands-on. People who heat with wood seem out of step with the modern world swirling around them. Have wood burners and those who labour to supply them with fuel slipped through a crack in the cozy consensus of modernity? Or are they onto something meaningful that has been missed by the mainstream?

The producers and consumers of fuelwood are engaged in an activity that reduces net greenhouse gas emissions while others merely fret about global warming. The fuelwood fraternity use a renewable energy resource, taking pressure off dwindling supplies of ever-pricier and scarce fossil fuels. Buyers of fuelwood create jobs close to home and strengthen their local communities. They know more about the cause-and-effect relationships of energy production and consumption than the economists who promote tar sands development. The story of wood heating early in the twenty-first century is about average families making decisions based on how they see their future unfolding.

Heating with wood is about a lot more than home heating. It is a tangible expression of self-reliance, of the courage to buck the trends and to resist the appeal of sedentary, push-button convenience. Heating with wood reinforces links to the land and is a willing submission to the cycle of the seasons. It provides stability and security in a turbulent world.

To its owner, the woodlot is a living community in constant evolution, while to the urban observer it may be seen as a museum in which the removal of a tree exhibit renders it diminished. The woodlot owner watches its quality improve over the years, even as it yields products and creates employment. The owner's household earns part of its income by being a fuel supplier to the neighbours. It is a gentle way to produce energy compared to open pit uranium mines and nuclear reactors.

Fuelwood is the ultimate populist energy resource, the most easily accessed and affordable of all renewable energies. The major environmental impact of

wood heating is visible for all to see in the form of smoke emissions, making everyone who uses it instantly accountable for their actions. The families that heat with wood and those that supply them with fuel do so privately, without fanfare or acknowledgement. It seems they wouldn't want it any other way. Heating with wood is its own reward.

John Gulland is an Ottawa Valley-based energy consultant and one of the main driving forces behind the Wood Heat Organization, a non-commercial service in support of responsible home heating with wood. For more information see the Wood Heat website at www.woodheat.org.