



Flames of fury: the far reach of the wildfire catastrophe of 2023

by Eden Torres

As I walked outside that morning, I looked up at the sky. I saw a smoky mist in the air. The smell of fire clogged my nose.

It was a day in June 2023, in the second half of my sophomore year at The High School in the Community in New Haven. I walked to my bus stop, noticing the odd color of the sky. It was tinted yellow.

The smoke from the Canadian wildfires had put New Haven in the yellow zone on air quality maps, just on the edge of the healthier green zone. I carried on through my morning talking about the news with my friend group, shocked by the fact that the Canadian wildfire were affecting New Haven this way. The fires were burning more than 2,000 miles north of New Haven, but they're contaminating the air people and wildlife depend on across much of North America. It was hard to believe.

That year, Canada had seen a record 59,000 square miles of flames, forcing one out of every 200 Canadians to evacuate their homes and sending smoke across North America. According to a study conducted by the World Weather Attribution Group, human-caused climate change intensified some fires, making them more dangerous due to higher air temperatures and winds. The study revealed that climate change is generating more frequent and larger and more severe fires in Canada.

This past summer, Western Canada saw more wildfires as a result of warm weather and drought. With over 120 wildfires raging across the country, including “zombie fires,” Alberta



Eden Torres, one of six winners of Connecticut Sea Grant's diverse youth scholarship, stands next to a human skeleton model in the biology classroom of the High School in the Community. Photo: Judy Benson.

Eden Torres is a senior at the High School in the Community in New Haven. She wanted to share her story about how climate change negatively impacted her because the smoke from the Canadian wildfires spread quickly to New Haven and was soon forgotten. This is a personal experience she shared with many others who had to quarantine inside their homes to avoid getting sick or having breathing problems.

was employing night vision helicopters and intended to hire additional firefighters. Canada was bracing for yet another possibly devastating wildfire season. Witnessing the effects of the 2023 Canadian wildfires in New Haven was one of the most impactful manifestations of climate change in my life. It literally made me sick.

This event changed my understanding of climate change because I realized we humans need to do better for our environment. The burning of fossil fuels increases the amount of heat trapped in the Earth's atmosphere. As the NASA Science website states, when heat cannot escape from Earth's atmosphere, it changes the Earth's climate too quickly for plants, animals and people to adapt. Humans need to use renewable energy and stop the use of fossil fuels.

Because of the air quality alerts, I had to cancel my plans with my friend group to go to the mall after school. But I understood that it was for a serious reason. One boy tried to tell us the fires were deliberately set, but I knew that was incorrect. Experts cited in media reports said the main causes are excessive heat and dry conditions that allowed sparks from lightning, discarded cigarettes and other unknown sources to ignite rapidly in large fires.

By the middle of the day, the air quality was worsening, moving from greenish yellow in the morning to all yellow



View from Groton of the New London skyline in a haze of smoke from the Canadian wildfires in June 2023. Photo: Dana Jensen / The Day

now. At lunchtime, my friends and I were all alerted by teachers and the principal that we should not go outside due to the harsh air quality.

Curious, my friends and I looked out the cafeteria windows at lunchtime. The sky had turned a vivid yellow, and we became a bit nervous about walking home, especially since the teachers and principal emphasized that we should go straight home after school.

We were nervous because not only did the sky look worrisome, but we were also alerted that if we did walk outside, we could have trouble breathing due to the toxic air conditions.

At 2:10, it was time for dismissal from school. As I walked outside, the fumes weren't as strong as they were in the morning, but they were still impossible to miss. I waited inside the building like usual until the school bus came for me and my other friend group, Jessica and David. The three of us agreed that, since we don't smell strong fumes outside and the air quality map showed we were still in the yellow zone and we all lived near each other, we would just go to the park. As we got off the bus together, I alerted my mom to what I was planning to do after school. I told her that it would just be a quick hangout. We'd get off at the bus stop closest to the park instead of the one closest to our houses.

My mom was skeptical, but she trusted me to make the right decision for myself.

"All right, just be careful," she said.

So I did just that. As my friends and I walked to the park near our houses, David and I started becoming skeptical. We wanted to hang out with each

Smoke billows from the wildfires in Alberta, Canada, in 2023. Photo courtesy of the Government of Alberta



other, but we were worried about the possibility that something bad could happen. Despite this doubt, we tried to ignore it and carry on with our plans.

As we walked, we talked about how we were feeling. Thirty minutes passed, and I texted my mom to tell her that I was still outside. But I was still worried. She responded that I needed to be home at 4 p.m.

At 3 p.m. we got to the park. We started having fun and strolling around. David and I started playing in the sprinklers while Jessica was doing dances she learned on TikTok that she had practiced in her room. Soon we were all dancing to a Spanish song playing on one of our phones. Then we all decided to sit on the swings. As we started swinging, we saw the sky becoming darker but also cloudy. We knew it was going to rain outside after checking the weather app, but we decided to stay outside and bask in the view of Dover Beach visible when the swings reached their peak height. We swung for 10 minutes, then I stopped because something felt off.

I had a sudden headache. David was feeling a bit ill too, but we tried to ignore it. We thought we would be back home soon enough. Will a couple more minutes hurt?

Jessica's phone rang, and David and I stayed quiet while she talked. After Jessica ended the call, she told us that her brother would be getting out of middle school and she needed to pick him up. David and I were willing to go along, since we wanted to go home by this time because it was 3:50. We also didn't want to worry our moms, and our headaches were getting worse.

David and I told Jessica that we would be heading home after we picked her brother up from school. We didn't want her to walk by herself to get her brother. David and I live near each other, so we could go home safely together, but we were worried about her safety since it is a dangerous area we all live in. We all wanted to stay close to each other anyway. We started walking to the middle school. We talked about how much fun we had and were eager to

see the TikTok videos we made with Jess. Then a ringtone disturbed our conversation. My mom was calling me.

"Eden, are you in the house?" she asked, sounding worried.

"No, not yet." I answered.

I could tell she was mad because it was now 3:55.

"Me and my friends are at Jessica's little brother's school to pick him up," I told her.

"Eden, have you seen the air quality?" my mother asked in a raised voice.

"Yeah, in the middle of lunch, it was in the yellow zone," I replied.

"Now look at it again," my mom said. "It's been updated."

I looked and saw that New Haven was now pushing into the orange-to-red zone, "unhealthy for all populations." I now understood why I had this worsening headache.

By then, we had reached middle school, and I told my mom I would head right home. I told my friends about what I just discovered and that we needed to go home ASAP. Jessica speed-walked into the middle school.

As David and I waited, we both started to feel nauseous. Our headaches worsened.

Soon, Jessica came out of the school with her brother. David and I were happy to see them. We walked away from the school towards Jessica and her brother's house and said our goodbyes. David walked me home, and while we walked, I gave him suggestions on how to alleviate his headache. I told David to lay down, drink lots of water, and take pain medicine. When we arrived at my house, he gave me a heartwarming hug and told me to be safe.

I walked up the two flights of stairs to my house and went to my room, immediately undressing and doing my daily nighttime routine. As I wrapped up my hair, I called my mom.

She immediately asked me, "Are you in the house?"

"Yes, Mommy, I'm fine. I'm now in the house."

"Yeah, I see your boldness for being out there," she said. "But the air quality was in the red zone."

"I'm still so shocked to hear that," I said. "It's crazy."

"Yeah, it's sad how our environment has changed," my mom said. "But after this meet-up with your friends, you're going nowhere else. You need to wait for the air quality to get better."

"Ok, yeah, I understand," I said. "After this, I'm going nowhere else. I got a mean headache."

"See, this is why I tell y'all to listen to me," she said, as I rolled my eyes.

"Always, but yeah, my head feels like it's pounding."

"Did you take any Tylenol or ibuprofen?" my mom asked.

"Oh, okay, but I will talk to you later," I said. "Also, yes, I did take Tylenol. I'm about to call David and see if he got home safely."

Once I knew he was safe, I fell asleep. Two hours later, I woke up with a woozy feeling. I stared at the ceiling for a few minutes before getting out of bed and starting my chores.

As I reflect on that day, I realize that the events highlight the importance of living sustainably and supporting climate change legislation, focusing on the impact of our actions on future generations. My experience of how the smoke from Canadian wildfires affected my city, New Haven, and my life—including my social life and my health—deepened my understanding of climate change. The continued burning of fossil fuels is disrupting the climate for the entire Earth for decades and even centuries in the future.

