

## Michaels: The top Kelowna story isn't glamorous

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If you're the type of person who likes to read lists, now is your time to tune-in.

Year end brings out the list-I-ness—due to listlessness—of every news organization on the planet.

Filling space summarizing the year that was, however redundant it may seem, is actually somewhat useful for those of us with a short-term memory.

There are reminders of crimes that will be detailed in courts in the months to come and proposed projects that may never see the light of day. Or, better yet, those that will.

And as was the case this year, there were even stories that may shape into something that could forever change our landscape, which is the story that is sticking with me.

Right now, as the clouds sit heavily around the white roads and hills, it's hard to imagine drought discussions ever coming to the fore, but they were a continual theme in the last year's news coverage.

In part because a four-year punishing drought south of the border made us realize yet again that it is a small world after all. Californian orchards, vineyards and trees withered as water reservoirs were bled dry. Heading north through Washington, streams and rivers evaporated, threatening fish stocks in B.C.

Then there were the fires. Under dry conditions helped flames skip across the western states, burning 10 million acres.

Then the fires skipped borders, showing no regard for national boundaries.

In B.C. alone, government statistics indicate 693,980 acres burned.

But the damage wasn't left on the ground.

Smoke from those fires blackened Okanagan skies, prompting air quality warnings the likes of which Beijing residents are more familiar with.

By August, the provincial government issued a level 4 drought announcement.

It's a benign title for shortages that mean the area is extremely dry and further declines in stream, lake and aquifer levels could lead to water shortages and affect people, industry such as agriculture, wildlife and fish stocks. It wasn't reduced to a level 3 drought until the end of September.

In short, it was a pretty unpleasant year for the natural world and, what stood out the most, was the strangely laissez faire attitude we took to these changes. There were still reports of area residents watering their driveways. A drive through most neighbourhoods indicated that the obsession with keeping a green lawn is well intact.

It's likely because we have what the water people like to call "a myth of abundance."

People see a 140-kilometre-long lake and they just assume it will always be there for them. Worse yet, there's the various levels of governments slow response to dealing with the issue.

In early July, the provincial government declared a Level 3 drought rating in the Okanagan, but it wasn't until the first week of August that the city of Kelowna enacted residential watering restrictions.

Stepping in line with the rest of the province, the city implemented odd/even day watering restricts for the first time since 2010. It's slow considering this region uses 25 per cent of its water on residential use.

Then there's the provincial government's historic lack of action dealing with the hodgepodge of 100 or so water providers in the Okanagan.

Depending on their history and geography, they tap into groundwater, surface streams and Okanagan Lake and apply restrictions without any uniformity.

Considering that we're heading into an El Nino year, and little precipitation is expected in the months ahead, I suspect that the stories of 2015 will have more resonance in 2016.

It's likely that list makers in government already coming up with ideas about how to deal with those changes.

Let's hope they do, anyway.