

Lake Simcoe Sessions Podcast

Episode 5: Changing Communities

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This episode features three speakers:

- Katie Biddie- Podcast Host and Outdoor Educator at LSRCA
- Sonia Sanita- Special Guest from York Region Public Health Division
- Asim Qasim- Special Guest from York Region Public Health Division

Katie Biddie 0:03

Hi and welcome to Lake Simcoe sessions, a podcast hosted by the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority. I'm your host Katie Biddie. Join me as I chat with the experts to learn all about how climate change is impacting us and our ecosystems right here in the Lake Simcoe region. Our goal is to discuss how we can all work together to build a resilient future for our watershed. This podcast is being recorded on the lands of the Williams treaties First Nations, we are committed to renewing our relationships with First Nations peoples and deeply appreciate their historic connection and unwavering care for this land and water. This podcast has been made possible thanks to the generous support from the RBC Foundation, and the Lake Simcoe Conservation Foundation. Hello, and welcome back to Lake Simcoe sessions. I'm your host Katie. And for today's episode, I'm going to be flipping the script a little bit. And I'll tell you what I mean by that. So far, each of the episodes, we've been talking about how climate change impacts nature or impacts the environment. So we talked a lot about how climate change impacts for us, or we talked about how Lake Simcoe is being changed by climate change. On today's episode, instead of just focusing on how climate change impacts nature, we're going to be talking about how climate change impacts us as people. And I think this is an important flipping of the script. Because I think too often when it comes to climate change, we categorize it as like an environmental issue. It's an environmental problem, like when we're making new policies about climate change, or environmental policies, or if we're teaching climate change in our classrooms. We're teaching it during the environmental science unit. And so it leaves us feeling like we are separate from climate change. You know, climate change is impacting nature. It's impacting our ecosystems, but it makes us feel slightly removed. And unfortunately, that's just not the case. So for today's episode, we're going to be exploring how climate change impacts human health and wellbeing. And I'm very excited to tell you that I've got some amazing special guests lined up for our interview today, we tapped on the shoulders of our partners at the York Region Public Health Division, and they provided me with two amazing people who are going to share more information about how climate change is posing new health risks, and also how we as people are so reliant on a clean and healthy environment. So

without further ado, I'm excited to introduce you to my two guests. For today's episode, Asim Qasim and Sonia Sanita. welcome Sonia and Asim to Lake Simcoe sessions. I'm so excited to have you both here. And I was hoping I'm gonna throw it over to you, Sonia to start. I was hoping you could tell us in the listeners a little bit about yourself and your role at your region. Sure, thank

Sonia Sanita 3:06

you, Katie for inviting us to be part of this podcast. We're very, very excited to be part of this initiative. So my name is Sonia Sunita. I'm a mother of two little ones, a public health practitioner and an educator. And like so many listeners out there life in the pandemic is a daily shuffle, juggling work, raising two young kids and trying to maintain some type of social life. So I just want to say to everyone, you're all doing great. I'm very passionate about educating communities on health and environment. And Katie, I commend you in your tremendous work in educating youth on the environment through outdoor education with LSRCA. And moving to what brings me here today, my role with public health is a healthy built environment specialist. I hold the bachelor degree from University of Toronto in education and a master of environmental studies. I've worked in many industries including consulting, land use planning, construction, fashion, real estate development, as well with school board supporting active school travel. All of those roles led me here today in working with York Region public health supporting healthy living, and my primary responsibilities implementing the York Region built environment and health action plan. My day to day is a lot of reading on things like research on the built environment and health and planning related documents, a lot of writing, like commenting on planning policies, preparing presentations and other literature, and attending meetings to build partnerships, mobilize groups and engage communities in addressing issues related to the built environment and health. And most recently, we've undertaken some academic partnerships. I'm partnered with York University and Queen's University on several Vision Zero Emerald safety related projects. So there's a lot of exciting and interesting work happening right now. Wow, that's

Katie Biddie 5:01

amazing Sonia it sounds, you've got a lot of experience in a few different industries there. That's, that's amazing. So you're gonna bring a wealth of knowledge to our podcast today. Next, I'll introduce the Asim. Would you like to share a little bit about your background and your role at your region?

Asim Qasim 5:17

Sure. Absolutely. Thanks, Katie. And thanks for having us here today. I think it's great to have this conversation on such an important topic. So I currently work within public health as well. So with a different team in Sanya, my team focuses more on the healthy environments kind of topic areas. So we generally covered things like air quality. But another big topic of focus these days is climate change, I think really fitting for the discussion today. And in terms of some of the things we've kind of worked on already. So we've also completed a climate change and health

vulnerability assessment. And as part of that tree, we're just kind of following up with another study, or some work that's funded by Health Canada to try to fill some of those knowledge gaps that we found with our vulnerability assessment. So point being we're been very active on the front of climate change. And you know, it's definitely a priority topic area for us. So thank you for having us.

Katie Biddie 6:05

Yeah, I'm so thrilled. And I'm glad you brought up the vulnerability assessment, because that's kind of what I wanted to kick off our interview with here. I was curious if you could tell us a little bit about some of the health risks that are posed by climate change both in the present and you know, what we're expecting to see in the future.

Asim Qasim 6:24

For sure, and I love how you frame that in the present, because I think that's become so much more this year, after we've all the stories were heard about, you know, BC and Alberta as well as in other countries around the world with flooding events. So I think we're getting a new appreciation for how climate change is not really just an issue of the future, but an issue of today. And I think people are really understanding that more to kind of get back in terms of what we covered in our vulnerability assessment and where it's really the linkage to help. So first off, I'll just say that, you know, in terms of climate change what we're expecting here within your region, and I think this will be similar for most of like the Lake Simcoe region is that we're definitely going to see there's strong evidence that we're going to see a lot more extreme heat events. And that's kind of concerning when you see what's happened in BC, but that, and even in the summer, and last summer, we've had some unprecedented, unprecedented heat events, which were lasting more than a week. So we are seeing kind of those changes currently today. And we're expecting to see more of that. The other kind of impacts we're going to be seeing is we're going to see more heavy rainfall events that can contribute potentially to flooding, and other extreme other events, too. These are all kind of things we're kind of projecting. So how does this all connect with health. So of course, with extreme heat can result in heatstroke and heat illnesses. And that was a big thing that we saw with the BC example recently. But even with that, there's the other key term of this is cascading effects. So even with from an extreme heat events that can lead to other different impacts. So for example, in BC, as a result of the heat dome effect that they kind of experienced, there was also flooding events because of melting glaciers, there was also air quality events, because sometimes when you have that really hot kind of stagnant air condition, it kind of contributes to producing smog. Also the drier conditions that kind of result from it to kind of contribute to drought, which in turn resulted in a lot of the wildfires we've been seeing not only in BC, but also in Ontario. So all those things are kind of a result of just even some of those weather parameters. So just shows you how complex it can be. But in addition to extreme heat, there's also other things that we need to be mindful of. So for example, vector borne disease is another key topic area. And there's a lot of research showing how the habitat for ticks, for example, are expanding across Canada. And if you look at even the trend in your region, it started only at a little fraction of

your region, years back maybe 10 years ago. But if you look at the map today, in terms of the kind of the risk area, it's pretty much all of your region, and it's expanding even further and further north. And that's just because the weather is becoming much more favorable for ticks to be able to live and survive in Canada, which usually wasn't the case, many years prior. So we are seeing changes there. And you know, quite honestly, there's so many other impacts to that we're also seeing those can relate to water impacts food impacts. So yeah, there's there's really so many topics that we're looking at. I just kind of pointed to a few of the examples there.

Katie Biddie 9:08

Yeah, that's, that's so helpful. And I appreciate how you said cascading effects. Right. So that's really like, what's happening with climate change is our our climate is everything, right? And so even though it might, you know, we might just be warming up a few degrees, that affects so many different parts of our communities and like you're bringing forward to our health, right. And then yeah, when it comes to ticks, it's so interesting, because like when I was a kid, growing up in this region, I don't remember ever having to do tick checks or anything after I spent some time outside. But that's a new reality that we're facing, right? anytime that you really go outside. It's important to do a tick check when you come inside to just help prevent Lyme disease, right?

Asim Qasim 9:51

Absolutely. And if you don't mind me adding another point, actually, yeah, I forgot to mention this. But the other kind of key thing that we found that the vulnerability said is not everybody is going to be impacted equally. And I think that's the other key theme. So, you know, people that might be coming from lower income backgrounds or you know, may have language barriers or maybe elderly, you know, everybody has kind of their own vulnerabilities. So like, for example, people that might be a bit older, are a bit more, have a bit more difficulty kind of withstanding the heat, for example. So we're also expecting that not all populations will have the same impact as well. So I think that's the other kind of key message. Absolutely. Yeah.

Katie Biddie 10:29

I, I'm glad you brought that up, right. Because it is something to consider, especially when we talk about climate change. There's the element of climate justice. And, you know, considering how climate change is going to impact the most vulnerable people in our communities. Even I've experienced in the past year, for the first time here in Barrie, where I live, I noticed that we could even see the smoke from some of the fires happening up north. And so it's really becoming quite apparent that, like you said, we're experiencing climate change right now.

Asim Qasim 11:02

Yeah, for sure. And we've also had a few events relating to that, where we've also had some adverse air quality events this summer. And that related to those wildfire events happening in Northern Ontario. So yeah, for sure.

Katie Biddie 11:14

Interesting. For my next question that I think I'm going to throw it over to Sonia. Because at the beginning, when you were introducing yourself, you mentioned you work in something called the built environment. And Sonia, I was wondering if you could tell us what that means what the built environment is.

Sonia Sanita 11:29

So the built environment includes the physical environment where we live, work, learn and play. It's made up of homes, buildings, parks, streets, and supporting infrastructure, which includes transportation, transit, water and energy systems and green infrastructure. And we know that changes to our physical world can lead to better or worse personal health. And chronic diseases, including cancer, cardiovascular diseases, and diabetes have become leading health threats. And we're faced with the challenge of chronic diseases, which require the planning and design of more complete communities. And this is this is what we're essentially working on every day. And complete communities can reduce chronic diseases in a way that they'll create better conditions and more opportunities that support people to increase physical activity by walking, cycling and using public transit hopefully every day, if not as much as possible, since denser, more walkable neighborhoods with services and amenities very close by allows people to more easily incorporate physical activity into their lives. And when we talk about a healthy built environment, it includes a series of features like an environment that supports a variety of connected and mixed land uses, including residential employment, recreation and retail all close by. It supports protection of the natural environment, land, air and water quality. It also reduces exposure to air pollution and environmental contaminants certainly supports climate resilient communities, prevents injuries and promote safety. And a healthy built environment really builds opportunities for physical activity into our daily lives and increases access to healthy local choices. And an important note is that it supports opportunities to thrive regardless of one's age, gender, income level, ethnicity, or any other social and economic reason. So just back to that, customizing things to vulnerable populations is a key component to having healthy vironment as well. And it also provides a variety of transportation options like transit, connected and safe walking, cycling and wheeling routes.

Katie Biddie 13:50

I look forward to the future, right, where we have more and more of these opportunities for people to use active transportation. I've just in the past few years really started relying more on my bike personally to get around for like groceries or even to go get a coffee in the morning. And honestly, I love it so much, I feel better, right? Like I feel when I've gone for a bike to get a coffee and I feel better than if I were to drive. And so it gives me a lot of hope for our future as we start to develop communities and cities and towns that have more of this infrastructure that makes active transport more available.

Sonia Sanita 14:26

The pandemic has increased the usage and demand for active travel routes and green spaces as well. And we've seen an increase in people using more bicycles, walking more and using green spaces to get around and to use these spaces while to exercise plane just to find peace. And the increase in his usage has really intensified the need to prioritize the expansion of active prevalence and the expansion of public green spaces to enhance physical and mental health

Katie Biddie 15:02

Yeah, it's like it's a win win. Because in our region, the biggest player when it comes to greenhouse gas emissions is transportation, right? It's driving cars and trucks and all that. So it not only will building more of this infrastructure where people can bike and walk and take public transit, not only will it make us healthier and happier to enjoy these ways of getting around it, also, like you're saying is going to really decrease our greenhouse gas emissions and mitigate climate change.

Lake Simcoe Watershed Resident 15:34

Now, more than ever, we're seeing and feeling the effects of climate change as the lakes and go watershed resident, I'm thankful for the generous support of the RBC foundation to help us each learn a little bit more about how we can take actions against climate change. Starting right here at home.

Katie Biddie 15:53

You mentioned, you know, with the pandemic that more people were using active transport. But I also noticed that a lot more people were using greenspaces. And so I was hoping we could talk a little bit about the importance of greening our communities and spending time outdoors and in green spaces.

Sonia Sanita 16:09

So green spaces can significantly benefit children's physical, mental, physical and social development. And these benefits begin from infancy and extend all the way into adulthood. spaces like parks, playgrounds, and trails promote physical and mental health throughout one's lifetime, by offering places for play relaxation, to communicate and interact with other people, a place for exercise and activity where there is reduce exposure to air and noise pollution. And green spaces are hugely important for providing places to enjoy an increased quality of life. You know, I know for myself, we go out walking as a family as much as possible, it gives us an opportunity to talk to our neighbors to kick a soccer ball, to have a picnic to do some yoga or meditate or whatever we feel like doing on a particular day. So they're just really important to overall quality of life. And green spaces that are well connected really provide a low cost and accessible way to support access to essential services, to work to school, medical care, food and social support. And greener environments impact health directly by offering spaces to exercise, which helps maintain healthy body weight and reducing the incidence of chronic illnesses that were touched on earlier in our chat. And, you know, this ultimately decreases healthcare costs

related with those illnesses. So it's a win for everyone. And just one other point, green spaces provide shade, which can decrease heat stress. And this can reduce the incidence and impact of heat related illnesses. So, you know, aside from being aesthetically pleasing, and beautifully, provides so many functions for human beings, and, you know, really, it's, it's our connection to, to the ecosystem, and to, you know, the opportunity for us to connect with with nature as well is huge for our mental Yeah.

Katie Biddie 18:10

And I sort of just connecting that back to what Sam was telling us about, you know, increased into the incidence with ticks, you know, that can be seem like it's frightening, like people might think, oh, I don't want to go outside, or I don't want to go to a spring green space because of the new risk posed by ticks. But like, you're saying, you know, the all the benefits that come from spending time outside and being active in nature, in some ways, they sort of outweigh it. And there are things we can do, right, like, you can do a tick check when you're done spending time in nature. And, and that's an easy way to help prevent Lyme disease. So it is really kind of like a win, win win in all situations.

Asim Qasim 18:50

Absolutely. And I definitely agree with Sonia, she's raised some really great points there. You know, I think kind of bringing it back to climate change as well. You know, the two key terms they always bring are adaptation, which is us being more ready for those future impacts of climate change we're going to see, and then mitigation, which is like offsetting those carbon emissions. And you know, green spaces are valuable from both perspective. So I think it's really such an important tool when we think about how we're going to be, you know, more prepared for climate change and address climate change. And yeah, I'm glad that you flagged the issue like the ticks, because, you know, sometimes maybe you might think of those kind of potential harm, so to speak, but I think you can get around them. And it's more, it's just being more important than just being educated about it, and know what you can do to kind of address it.

Katie Biddie 19:32

Yeah. And I mean, all this is so interesting to me, because so I work in conservation and in environmentalism. And so, the climate change conversation is usually focused around how to protect nature. We're always talking about like, you know, protecting species at risk and protecting forests in different habitats. But when it comes to climate change, at the end of the day, we don't just need to mitigate climate change to save the environment. We also need to mitigate climate change. To help save ourselves right and prevent some of these, these potential risks from getting worse. So it's so interesting to have this conversation today with you both about public health. Is there any final thing on your resume that you wanted to leave our listeners with? Before we wrap up today? First and foremost, if you can get

Sonia Sanita 20:18

outside, of course, do a tick check. After you get outside, definitely, if you're able to, you know, take transit, walk, carpool wheel or cycle as often as you can, and get involved in your community and have a say about your community. If you're able to learn more about your municipalities Official Plan, and talk to your neighbors voice your community needs to local decision makers. And if anyone wants to learn a bit more about your region, Public Health's built environment and health work, more information can be found on our web page. And we'll include the link to that in the show notes for this podcast.

Asim Qasim 20:55

Thanks, Sonia. And I could add to that as well, in that, you know, we have some great resources on our webpage about the work we've done on climate change. And that includes our vulnerability assessment. But it also includes things that you can do. And I think that's an important message, which I think Sani was also getting at are the things we can do today. And there's lots of things we can do to be more prepared for some of those impacts. So for example, some things are just as simple as being more aware of the weather. And so one of those great tools that's been created by Health Canada, is an air quality Health Index, for example. And that's one of the important tools that we've been using. And in fact, that's was one of the ones that got triggered when we were just talking earlier about that wildfire events and how they're impacting your quality locally, even to this part of Ontario. So So those kind of prompts are available, or those kind of alert systems are available, which is great. And then there's a lot of information, we have also on our webpage about how you can be more prepared when it comes to issues like ticks or for extreme heat, and air quality. So there's a lot of things if we kind of educate ourselves, well, it'll help us be more resilient and help further also adapt and mitigate against climate change.

Katie Biddie 22:01

Like you're saying, There is so much information and there's so much we can do. And that's something that leaves me really hopeful when it comes to climate change is just the the information and and the solutions and how amazing the solutions to climate change are, at least me really inspired. So I just wanted to say thank you so much for joining me. It's been an absolute pleasure talking to you both today. And I look forward to continuing our collaboration in the future because public health and environmental ism and conservation, they kind of go hand in hand. So thank you for being here, and we'll talk to you soon. Welcome back. And thanks for tuning into my conversation with a sim insomnia today. It was so interesting to hear about how the public health sector is starting to manage the new risks posed by climate change, all the while planning for a future that has a healthier, built up environment for people. Now my challenge for you today has to do with reaping the benefits that nature and green space provide for people. Sanyo was teaching us a lot about that in our conversation earlier and how important it is for people to spend time being active and outdoors. So I challenge you to go outside, spend some time in nature and reflect on how that makes you feel. Maybe before you go outside, reflect on your emotions, right? Are you feeling happy? Sad? Are you stressed? Are you are you feeling anxious about something and also reflect on how you feel in your body? So

do you notice that your your jaw is clenched or your shoulders tight? Make some of those self reflections and then go outside for your walk in nature. When you're done, return back to those reflections and see if anything's changed. Do you feel different? Has your mood improved or have you unclench that jaw that you were holding? So that's my challenge for you today is to go treat yourself to a break from our busy lives. And really just take a moment to enjoy the beautiful natural green spaces that are available to us here in the Lake Simcoe region. And that brings us to the end of our first ever Podcast Series Lake Simcoe sessions. I really hope that these climate conversations have left you feeling inspired to take action against climate change, or even just inspired to continue learning more about climate change. Please don't forget to subscribe to our podcast because if you subscribe, you'll automatically be notified if new episodes of Lake Simcoe sessions are released in the future. I would also absolutely love to hear what you thought of the podcast and hear maybe what you learned along the way. So please reach out to me. My email is Education at LSRCA dot o n.ca. And I'll put that email in the show notes below. And yeah, just reach out to me. Let me know what you think. Let me know if you have any ideas or questions that you would love to hear answered on future episodes of our podcast. Thanks for tuning in and don't forget to get outdoors and spend some time enjoying the beauty of nature in the Lake Simcoe region.

Thanks for joining me and tuning into this episode of Lake Simcoe sessions. Let us know what you think by using the hashtag climate connection on social media or tagging us at LSRCA on Twitter. Make sure to like and subscribe the podcast or visit our website at LSRCA to see all of our podcast episodes. LSRCA is committed to providing an accessible experience for all so transcripts of each podcast episode will be posted on our website. Special thanks to the RBC Foundation whose financial support has helped to make this podcast possible.

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