

Another Conspiracy Theory – Pennsylvania Coal Fires

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- *From:* alan@xx (Alan)
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<http://itotd.com/articles/346/>

Heat under the street

There are a bunch of little facts that I sort of half-learned in elementary school, and have had a hard time remembering ever since. I remember the terms ?dromedary? and ?bactrian,? for example, but that crucial bit of information about which camel has one hump and which has two just didn?t stick. The same thing goes for names of cloud types?cirrus, cumulus, nimbus?I know the names but I forget which is which. And then there?s coal. I vividly recall learning about anthracite, bituminous, and lignite coal as a child in Pennsylvania, a state legendary for its coal production. But which type had which properties? It?s all a blur now. Since I did not pursue an education or profession in which this knowledge was needed, my brain apparently decided to delete those records to make space for really important information, such as Star Trek trivia.

I do remember, though, that when I was quite young my father took me to a coal mine that offered tours to the public. I thought it was absolutely the coolest thing ever. Getting to ride in that train down into the dark tunnels, seeing all that amazing machinery, and imagining the life of a miner was exciting and mysterious. I?ve always had a fondness for caverns and tunnels?maybe that?s where it all started.

As an adult living in California, I rarely think about coal mines. I do, however, think about wildfires and forest fires, especially in the dry months of late summer. Everyone understands that these things just happen?due sometimes to natural causes, sometimes human causes (accidental or intentional). And when they occur, vast firefighting resources are unleashed to contain the fires in order to minimize the risk to homes and businesses. After all, they pose an imminent threat, plain for all to see (and smell). Of course they have to be stopped.

I learned recently that Pennsylvania has the distinction of being home to the largest number of underground coal fires in the United States. And further, that some of these fires have been burning continuously for upwards of 40 years; that they?ve decimated entire towns; that they vent an unimaginable amount of carbon dioxide and other gases into the already overburdened atmosphere; and that, for the most part, very little is being done about them. All these facts astonish

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and disturb me, but none more than the very possibility of the fires? existence.
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