
SMOG, SKIN AND SETTLING IN

It's all too easy to take for granted the everyday amenities that life in Canada has to offer. Some might say that drinkable (not to mention delicious, pure and *clean*) tap water, abundant trees and adequate (nay, exceptional) sanitation regulations are *boring*. I would challenge those who lack appreciation of these luxuries to consider the world outside of our home and native land of milk and honey maple. Instead, consider places where the air is polluted with hazy smog, and the water coming out of the tap is dirtier than the water Canadians use to flush toilets.

It was a persisting irritation around my lips that ultimately led to my reflection on the natural environment of my homeland, and how growing up amidst such comforts has left me spoiled (and apparently with delicate skin). Within the first few days of arriving in Manila, I noticed that my lips were becoming itchy and swollen. I initially chalked this up to the dry air on our flights and continued applying lip balm in effort to soothe my lips and heal them back to their normal state. Over the next week or so, my lips continued to burn, and I continued to find sweet (if only temporary) relief in moisturizing lip balm.



A water-treating facility near my apartment. Thankfully, water proved not to be the root of my issue – this would've made life in QC quite difficult (and expensive).

It didn't take long for me to figure out that the dry airplane air was not to blame for my swollen and chapped lips. For weeks my lips would go back and forth between slightly itchy and chapped, to swollen and broken and painful – but my lips never fully healed. I turned to Google to find an answer to my problem, but found only vague information that suggested it might be an allergic reaction. The condition of my lips did not seem to worsen based on what food I ate (although eating orange or pineapple became an agonizing process – attempting to get the sweet fruit into my mouth without the acidic juices touching my broken lips still hasn't gotten any easier). Through process of elimination, I reasoned that it was not what I ate that was causing this reaction.

Besides food, the only things that came into contact with my lips were water and air. It seemed possible to me that water could be the culprit in this situation – either the treated water I drank, or the non-treated water with which I bathed. Despite

the fact that I had been exposed to both treated and non-treated water while living in Thailand last year – with no rash or negative outcomes, I tried using store-bought, Coca-Cola manufactured, distilled drinking water to wash my face, and to drink. The rash did not improve based on what type of water it came into contact with.

This left only one suspect in the mystery of my lip reaction – the most unavoidable, inescapable element: air. Some extensive Googling further convinced me of this, as I learned more and more about the potential effects of air pollution on one’s health (and

heavily debated purchasing a surgeon’s mask). This seemed plausible, considering my daily walk to work and the medley of pollutants I encounter along the way – the cigarette smoke, cloudy black jeepney exhaust fumes, and garbage and sewage (ok, the last two may not necessarily have an incredible impact on the air quality, but nonetheless they’re equally – if not more – unpleasant to inhale).

I realized that the sheer population density and traffic made the air quality worse than what I was used to. Having spent most of my time back home living outside of major urban centers, “worse” really didn’t mean much. In global terms, I wondered, what was the air quality like *really*?

To answer this question, I turned again to my best and oldest ally, Google. A quick search brought up news articles, studies and rankings, all of which agreed that the air quality in Metro Manila was bad to the point of being dangerous.¹ Throughout the news articles, there were numerous mentions of air quality monitoring systems either in the works or in place throughout the area. Trying to actually see the data obtained by these monitoring systems brought me to broken links, error messages, and “daily” figures that hadn’t been updated in over a year.

One Friday afternoon, my fellow intern, Beth and I were returning from a conference in a different part of town. When we got back home, we stepped out of the taxi and both commented on how thick the smog was that afternoon. That evening, I made several trips back and forth along the boulevard. When I woke up Saturday morning, my lips had hit their peak of pain and itching.



Line ups at the MRT station to head towards Manila. Everyone has somewhere to be, and with a population this dense it’s really no wonder there are so many vehicles and so much traffic.

¹ Macas, Trish (June 23, 2015). *Metro Manila air quality even worse this year – data* (GMA News).

A few days later, I once again tried to find data on the air quality levels in the city. Although several websites exist that say they monitor the daily air pollution levels across Metro Manila, I could not find any recent data about Quezon City or surrounding cities. The closest of the few cities in the Metro Manila area I found whose data was updated regularly was Pasay, a city about 15 kilometers from Quezon City. While scrolling through the pollution levels from the past week, I saw a spike in the levels recorded on Friday, where the level of pollution dipped into the “very dangerous” red zone.

From what I’ve seen, there is a lack of data for Quezon City. I cannot say for sure that its air quality would’ve mirrored the “very dangerous” levels in Pasay that Friday afternoon. Nonetheless, I think it’s reasonable to believe that a day of very dangerous air pollution levels could have had a role in causing a very bad day for my lips.

Text and photos by Danielle Leblanc-Cyr



Jeepneys, cars, motorcycles, busses – typical traffic in Cubao.