

I have become a sun-worshiper. Not that I like laying around the beach much. My ageing body-in-the-mirror tells me “Better out of sight and out of mind.”

Rather I am inspired by the fact that I can put the sun to work for me.

The federal and provincial governments recently offered home-owners energy retro-fit rebates. I took a course in solar water heater installation from a local Jack-of-all-trades-man named Gaetan, invested in a kit from Dave at Maier Hardware, hired a plumber to help me install it, and it’s been humming along for about 4 years now. The purr of the tiny motor that pumps the food-grade, non-toxic glycol from the solar panels on the roof to the heat exchanger in the basement is barely audible, and maintenance is minimal. The glycol has to be changed once every 3 years, and the supplier has been extremely helpful with this 1-hour task. The system comes with an electronic monitoring device that helps me track usage, and both monetary savings and CO2 reductions.

My installer suggested that with just two of us living in the house, here in Thunder Bay, savings would be about 10% of my total energy footprint, and much more for a family of four. The savings depend on how much sun you get, and I just happen to live in the sunniest city in Eastern Canada.

This system provides my wife and I with most of the hot water we need for about 8-9 months of the year. It could have been more had we installed the solar panels at a steeper angle so that they shed the snow better, and caught more of the sun’s energy in its low winter trajectory. (Currently mulling over that change.) We do have natural gas as a backup, a necessary water-heating source for the coldest winter months.

Between rebates, tax incentives and sweat equity, the final cost of the \$8 000 system plus installation was just shy of \$4000.

Sadly, the federal and provincial governments have ceased offering those incentives, and are concentrating on solar Feed In Tariff (F.I.T) programs.

On another sunny note, our spring-summer-fall camp is off-grid, and a 140-watt,12-volt solar Photovoltaic (PV) system has given us electric lights, simple electronics like radio, and the ability to recharge phones etc, for about 20 years now. In that twenty years we have replaced a set of four deep-cycle batteries once, and the solar panels keep kickin out the juice.

Total expenses over that time add up to about \$2000, or about 100 a year, and the fact that we can generate our own electricity without pumping out greenhouse gases is inspiring. We no longer need to worry about open-flame light sources from candles, propane or coal-oil lanterns, and the system is pollution-free. And there is no hydro bill each month. (Hydro is pretty pricy in the rural areas I’m told.)

We could add a solar water pump, but we have a swimming hole, a wood-fired sauna, and our household needs are just a few buckets of water a day from the river or from Eco-

Superior's handy rain barrel on the deck. As we get older, that investment will be more tempting.

Out to the camp garden, which has taken a lickin' this year... groundhogs! Who knew they could climb a seven-foot fence? I waved the white flag this year, but next year they'll be looking at a solar-powered electric fence, available for about \$200.

A system capable of supplying typical household needs at my camp, such as heating elements and hot water would cost upwards of \$50 000, I'm told. But who needs it. It's summer time, and the living is easy. We do have a propane cookstove, a second-hand, \$75 investment that we've been using for about 30 years. It heats up a kettle of water in no time flat, and the cabin stays cool.

Bottom line... I'm sold on solar. As a senior, I am reluctant to invest megabucks in a roof-mounted PV system on my residence, as the payback period may long outlast me. However, the systems I have invested in are paying dividends, both mental and monetary.