

The World Does Not Need More Fossil Fuel, or Alternative Energy Sources to Replace It

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There is a lot of discussion in the news, and a lot of concern by world governments, on the subject of how to ensure continued access to a high level of oil. There is much less talk, however, about how fast the world's fossil fuel reserves are exhausting. It is generally agreed by geological engineers that global petroleum reserves – both existing and the new ones to be discovered – will be exhausted by the year 2050, and that coal will last a few centuries longer. In other words, the petroleum age, which nominally began in 1950, will last about 100 years.

Since the industrial world runs on oil and uses oil to produce virtually everything in it, the end of the petroleum age will make a tremendous difference to civilized life on planet Earth. The large human population that has been made possible by oil will disappear, and human society will by and large return to a primitive lifestyle (that is, if it avoids extinction from a greenhouse-gas death of the biosphere, global war, plague, or some other catastrophe brought on by global industrialization).

Oil is so important to industrialized society that it will go to any lengths to acquire it and use it. The US, for example, is on the verge of going to war in Iraq to ensure access to the large reserves there. What is remarkable, however, is that no matter what steps are taken today to discover and develop oil fields, it will all be gone in a few decades. The nations of today should be using the world's windfall of fossil fuel to prepare for a better world after fossil fuel is gone, but instead they are racing to see who can consume the most at the fastest rate (i.e., who can have the largest economy and the highest per-capita income). It is, quite frankly, amazing that the world leaders of today spend all of their energy trying to ensure uninterrupted access to oil, when it will all be gone anyway in just a few decades.

The rush of the world's nations to use all of the world's oil supply as fast as possible is causing terrible things to happen to the biosphere. Global industrialization, which is made possible by fossil fuel, is causing the "sixth extinction" on planet Earth – the loss of an estimated 30,000 species per year. If global industrialization continues for the full term of the petroleum age, it may cause a greenhouse-gas death of the biosphere and extinction of man. It has already caused a great loss of biodiversity. The substantial changes that it is making to the biosphere are producing permanent changes in the balance of nature. Global industrialization is making massive and irreversible changes to the ecological environment in which man evolved, and on which he depends for his continued survival and happiness.

One cannot help but wonder at why mankind is obsessed with using up the global oil supply as fast as possible, when this is destroying the planet, not just for the rest of nature, but for all the millions of future human generations to come (or that might have come). It is almost as if God has placed blinders on the human race – lowered a veil of unconcern over our intellects and emotions. This phenomenon has been noted before, and has been referred to as "discounting in time and space."

In any event, that is not the main point of this article. While there is much discussion and expenditure of energy on the subject of finding and developing and using oil, there is also much discussion on the topic of alternative energy sources, such as nuclear fission, nuclear fusion, and solar energy (including all uses of the current flux of solar energy, such as hydroelectric and biomass, not just solar heating and solar electric). In my book, *Can America Survive?*, I made the point that these other sources of energy cannot replace the energy of fossil fuels, for a number of reasons. I will not go into those reasons here. The point is that, relatively soon, mankind is going to be restricted to living on the budget of the current solar energy flux. And the salient consequence of this is that the current-solar-energy budget can support at most only a few hundred million human beings. When fossil fuels are gone, the global human population will drop from over six billion to far less than one billion.

But even this is not the point. Even if mankind *could* find a source of energy to replace fossil fuel, it would be a fatal error to do so. Mankind is currently using an estimated 40 per cent of the world's biologically useful supply of solar energy, and is using many times that amount of energy in the form of fossil fuel. And it is that high level of energy use that is the problem. Mankind is using so much energy (current solar energy plus the stored energy of fossil fuel) that it is destroying the biosphere. For human beings to survive, and for the biosphere to survive in a condition similar to that in which mankind evolved, it is necessary for mankind's use of energy to drop dramatically. In other words, if an energy source (e.g., nuclear fusion) *could* be found to replace fossil fuels, the demise of the planet would be assured. The biosphere cannot continue with the present high rate of energy use. That high rate of energy use is causing mass species extinction, and is destroying the biosphere. The survival of mankind and the biosphere is totally dependent on mankind's reducing the level of energy utilization back to that level at which the biosphere and mankind evolved.

So what is to be done? All of the industrial nations are seeking to consume fossil fuels as rapidly as possible, and they are also eagerly and urgently seeking alternative energy sources, despite the fact that this high level of energy use is destroying life on the planet. I have two points. First, as I argued in *Can America Survive?*, it is very unlikely that mankind will find any energy source to replace the energy of fossil fuels. Second, even if it did, to continue to use energy at the current rate would continue the mass species extinction and destroy the biosphere. Such a discovery (although not likely in my view) would sound the death knell for the planet and seal its doom.

Mankind evolved on a planet and in a Garden-of-Eden biosphere that lives on the current solar energy flux. It cannot survive in its current state at a higher energy use level. And that is the point to this article. The biosphere cannot tolerate the continued high use of fossil fuel, and continue as it was. We do not need more fossil fuel. We do not need a replacement to fossil fuels when they are gone. We need to stop using fossil fuel at the current high rate. And all fossil fuel that is used should be used solely for the purpose of preparing the world for the post-industrial age, when mankind and the biosphere return to living on the current solar energy flux.

As I have argued many times before, there is essentially only one decision facing mankind at the present time, and that decision concerns the future state of the biosphere and man's place in it. The alternatives – the state of the planet in a few more decades – are essentially three: (1) A catastrophic collapse of the biosphere caused by industrial pollution (e.g., greenhouse-gas global warming), with the possible or even likely

extinction of many or most large plant and animal species, including mankind; (2) A seriously damaged biosphere, devoid of all other large animal species, but with mankind still extant; and (3) Essentially the same Garden-of-Eden paradise in which mankind and the other species of the present world evolved, with mankind and the many other large animal species still in it. It seems obvious that no one would select the first alternative (death of the planet), although that is exactly where mankind is currently headed. With respect to the latter two alternatives, it is incredible that the current generation of human beings would sentence all of the millions of future generations of human beings to life on a planet devoid of other large animal species, yet that is exactly what is happening. It is hard to believe that the human species has no leaders who wish for the biosphere to continue in essentially the same condition to which it evolved when mankind made its appearance, and have the power to bring this about. The planet does not have to die. The planet was once a marvelous, wonderful place to live. It can be so again, for millions of years to come. Mankind has the power to make this happen. All it takes is the will. The fate, the destiny, of planet Earth is in our hands. Who will speak for Gaia?