

ECONEWS

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Promoting the Vision of a Sustainable Vancouver Island

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A WORLD WITHOUT OIL

\$1.40 a litre - \$2.80 in Europe – \$4 a gallon in the US - and everyone has an opinion about it. Some are philosophical, but many are angry, wanting to blame someone. How can this be, they ask? Someone has to be ripping us off.

For all our lives, we have lived with the easy availability of oil, rarely pausing to think what it is. How can this clear liquid cause metal weighing over 400 tons to fly? How can a single litre enable a car to go 10 kilometres – or a Prius to go 17 km, a Smart Car 20 km?

After a million years when our only heat came from burning firewood, what magic has enabled this to happen to *our* generation? For surely, as a result, we are the wealthiest, most privileged, and laziest generation that has ever lived – thanks to this strange liquid, and its sisters, gas and coal. I have a friend in Kelowna whose neighbour's 15 year old daughter calls her dad to pick her up even if she is 400 metres from home.

It is only because of this strange liquid, too, that fishermen can strip so many fish from the oceans that they are being taken over by jellyfish and slime. Only because of fossil fuels that we can consume so much *stuff*.

Their presence is a one-time gift from the far distant past, energy from the Sun that was absorbed by ancient trees, ferns, and animals and then crushed, heated, and fossilized, waiting for the time when humans would have enough know-how to use it.

In as far as we depend on this ancient energy, we are technologically immature. We are like a child who loves feeding at its mama's breasts, and does not want the trouble of feeding itself. Our whining about the price of gas fits the metaphor perfectly – "Don't stop! It's not fair! I want some more!"

The paradox of the sky-rocketing prices is that they are not being caused by scarcity but by financial speculators who have seized on the fear of scarcity

as a sure fire way to make some money. If it were not for the speculators, oil might still be \$80 a barrel, not \$130

Where does all the money go? A slice goes to the speculators, 29 year olds in shirt-sleeves who simply want to make as much as they can. The rest goes to oil companies as undiluted profit which their owners can use to buy luxury yachts and golf-course condos, and possibly to hide in offshore bank accounts. Yes, be angry – it seems like a justifiable response. If only it *was* being collected as a carbon tax that could be used to reduce other taxes and speed up the rate of weaning.



So let's be rational for a moment. How much oil is left, and how close are we to weaning ourselves off it?

We are about halfway through the world's conventional oil supply of around two trillion barrels. There are about a thousand billion barrels left, which is a lot – except that we are burning 32 billion barrels a year, which means – at this rate - it will all be gone in 31 years. There's a lot more non-conventional oil, such as Alberta's tar-sands, but they're only producing 1 million of the 86 million barrels we burn each day, so while it may make some people very rich, it's too little to make a useful difference.

The truth is that the speculators are doing us an enormous favour: they are giving us an artificial advance warning of what's coming – which is that the warm, lazy days of feeding at Mama's

Earth's fossil-fuelled breasts are almost over. From here on out, we have a very stark choice: either use our intelligence to design a post-carbon world – and quickly – or keep on whining as our civilization collapses around us, sans cars, sans trucks, sans farms, sans everything. (Shakespeare, *As You Don't Like It*, 2008).

OK – maybe Plan B is preferable. For transport, as well as legs, we can use bicycles, and electric buses, cars, and high speed trains, powered by ocean, wind, solar, and geothermal power. For longer distances, until we develop rapid-recharge batteries, we can use plug-in hybrid electric vehicles, using liquid fuel from bio-wastes and hydrogen. For moving goods on land, we can use electric trucks and railways. For shipping, we can use solar, wind and wave powered vessels which are on the drawing board, but no further yet. For flying... well, forget flying.

The challenge is not the technology – we already know how to do most of this. The challenge is the urgency – how *quickly* can we do it?

The same urgency is being pressed on us by the ever more worrying warnings about global warming: *just do it*, top climate scientists like James Hansen are urging. *Quickly*.

There is no time for delay. We need to embrace the adventure, and pour huge investments into cycling, transit, electric railways, and zero-carbon homes. We need to require that all new vehicles sold in BC are zero emissions by 2020. We need to require that all farming become organic, also by 2020. We need to do as Sweden is doing, and wean ourselves off our dependence on oil by 2020. Even if only for purely financial reasons, we must do it.

So put aside the whines and worries, and get behind what's really needed – a world without oil.

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