

Is Alternative Energy Truly the Best Solution to Climate Catastrophe?

By [Don Fitz](#)

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Theme: [Oil and Energy](#)

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Environmentalists have known for decades that the “greenest” form of energy available is reduction of useless and harmful energy. Over 50 years ago, the first Earth Day embodied this with “Reduce; Reuse; Recycle.” Today, that seems to be replaced with the slogan “Recycle; Occasionally Reuse; and, Never Utter ‘Reduce.’” Even mentioning the word “reduce” can be met with complaints that “Reduction means ‘austerity,’” as if any type of collective self-control would plunge the world into depths of suffering.

Unquestioning enthusiasm for “alternative energy” (AltE) can open the door for endless consumerism. It avoids the real problem, which is uncontrolled economic growth.

Overproduction for what purpose?

Acceptance of consumerism hides the twin issues that AltE creates its own negative outcomes and that lowering the amount of harmful production could actually improve the quality of life. Simply decreasing the amount of toxic poisons required for overproduction would cut down on cancers, brain damage, birth defects and immune system disorders.

No one would suffer from the massive toxins that would be eliminated by halting the manufacture of military armaments or disallowing the design of electrical devices to fall apart. Very few would be inconvenienced by discontinuing lines of luxury items which only the rich can afford to purchase.

Food illustrates of how lowering production has nothing to do with worsening our lives. Relying on food produced by local communities instead of food controlled by international corporations would mean eliminating the processing of food until it loses most nutritional value. It would mean knowing many of the farmers who grow our food instead of transporting it over 2000 miles before it reaches those who eat it. It would cut out advertising hyper-sugarfied food to kids.

When I first began studying environmentalism over 30 years ago, I remember hearing that if a box of corn flakes costs \$1, then 1¢ went to the farmer and \$.99 went to the corporations responsible for processing the corn, packaging it, transporting the package and advertising it. Reduction does not mean “doing without” – it means getting rid of the excess.

Closely linked to food is health. My book on [Cuban Health Care: The Ongoing Revolution](#) points out that the island nation's life expectancy is longer and infant mortality lower than that in the US while it spends less than 10% per person of what the US does. Reducing energy devoted to health care does not mean less or worse care. It means getting rid of the gargantuan unnecessary and expensive components which currently engulf health care.

Electric vehicles (EVs) embody collective environmental amnesia. Once upon a time, not too many decades ago, people wrote of walkable/bikeable communities and some even put their dreams to the test. Let's not crush that dream. Since AltE has become so popular, the idea of redesigning urban space is being pushed aside so that every person can have at least one EV. Memory of environmental conservation has fallen into oblivion.

It may not be getting better all the time

Despite the hype about AltE, use of energy is expanding, not contracting. We are constantly told to buy the latest electronic gadget – and the time period between successive versions of gadgets gets shorter and shorter. AltE can exacerbate the energy crisis by distracting society from practicing conservation.

The Bitcoin Ponzi scheme reveals the expansion of energy in the service of uselessness. Jessica McKenzie describes [a coal-burning power plant in Dresden, NY](#). The plant was shut down because the local community had no use for its energy. But Bitcoin needs energy to compute its complex algorithms. So, like Dracula, the coal plant rose from the dead, transformed into a gas burning plant.

What, exactly, are politicians like Joe Biden, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and even Bernie Sanders doing to put the breaks on this expansion of FFs in programs like the Green New Deal (GND)? Not as much as you might think. As Noam Chomsky points out in his forward to Stan Cox' [The Green New Deal and Beyond](#), "... the GND does not challenge the fossil-fuel industry." Congressional proposals leave out the most critical part of reducing FFs – limiting the total quantity that can be produced. Instead, they rely on the false assumption that increasing AltE will somehow cause a decrease in FF use. Without a "cap" on FF production, AltE simply adds to the energy mix.

Are problems with AltE "minimal?"

Despite stated goals to end FF production by such-and-such a date, the high heat they generate is essential for producing (1) silicon wafers for solar panels, (2) concrete and steel used in construction of windmills and dams, and (3) plastic coverings for industrial windmill blades. Every type of AltE requires FFs. Supporters of AltE often say that it is so much smaller as to pale by comparison to direct use of FFs.

Claiming that the amount of FFs used by AltE is trivial ignores both the quantities actually being used now and, most importantly, the uncontrollable corporate urge toward infinite growth. Hydro-power (dams) is currently the greatest source of AltE and is in line to expand most rapidly. Ben Gordesky describes research showing that "Canadian large-scale hydro projects have an ongoing carbon footprint that is approximately [40% that of electricity generated by burning natural gas](#). These emissions do not include the carbon footprint of dam construction." This is not an insignificant amount of FFs used by dams, especially since hydro-power "is [expected to grow by at least 45% by 2040](#)."

Estimates are that “Solar and wind have a carbon footprint of [4% to 8% of natural gas](#).” For the sake of simpler arithmetic, let’s say that hydro, wind and solar average 12.5% of the carbon footprint of FFs (even though is it probably much higher). Then, let’s say that healthy capitalism grows at least 3% annually, which means a doubling in size every 25 years. If AltE requires 12.5% of the equivalent FFs now, then,

- in 25 years it will require what is twice that, or 25% of current FF use;
- at 50 years, it again doubles (to four times its current size), requiring 50% of current FF use; and,
- at 75 years, the economy doubles (to eight times its current size), reaching 100% of current use.

To put it bluntly, reliance on AltE in no way eliminates FF usage – in only 75 years economic growth would return us to current FF levels.

But would we have to wait 75 years to see current levels of FF restored? For some parts of the economy, the answer is definitely “No.” As Stan Cox documents, “... the [huge increase in mines, smelters, factories and transportation](#) required for this transition [to EVs] would continue heightened CO2 levels long before any emission savings would be realized.”

It might be possible theoretically to concentrate energy to reach the extremely high temperatures necessary for production of wind turbines and silicon wafers for solar arrays. Relying on Cox’ calculations, expanding infrastructure to reach 100% AltE by 2030 “... would require a 33-fold increase in industrial expansion, far more than has ever been achieved anywhere and would result in complete ecological devastation. One little fact regarding this quantity of build-up is that 100% RE would require [more land space than used for all food production and living areas](#) in the 48 contiguous states.”

Time for despair?

Is it time to throw up our hands in despair that the only route to preserve humanity is a return to hunter/gatherer existence? Not really. Focusing on local, community-based energy can create sufficient production for human needs.



Child Labor in the Democratic Republic of Congo. (Source: Don Fitz)

Many underestimate the ability of low tech devices. When in high school during the 1960s, my science project was a solar oven that could cook via medium heat. When I returned from college a few years later, my mom intimated that my dad, an engineer, thought that a solar reflector device could not possibly generate much heat. So, one morning he used it as a greenhouse for his vegetable seedlings. When he returned later that day, the plants were fried.

Solar power does not require high-tech based on massive arrays. Few techniques are more powerful at reducing energy than a passive house design or use of passive solar for existing homes. It is even possible to run a [website via low tech solar](#) without destroying farmland for gargantuan solar arrays.

The story of wind power is somewhat different. Kris De Decker edits [Low-Tech Magazine](#) which spans a variety of ways to heat, cool and provide energy. An outstanding article covers the sharp contrast between [ancient wind mills vs. modern industrial wind turbines](#):

“For more than two thousand years, windmills were built from recyclable or reusable materials: wood, stone, brick, canvas, metal... It’s only since the arrival of plastic composite blades in the 1980s that wind power has become the source of a toxic waste product that ends up in landfills. New wood production technology and design makes it possible to build larger wind turbines almost entirely out of wood again... This would make the manufacturing of wind turbines largely independent of fossil fuels and mined materials.”

A global effort

The corporate obsession with expanding production infects every aspect of exploring, mining, transporting, using and disposing of energy infrastructure. For decades, this has been painfully obvious for FFs and nuclear power. The opposition now rippling through AltE is increasingly clear.

Just a very few examples of those challenging FFs includes [Ogoni opposition](#) to pumping oil out of Nigeria’s ground, clashes over pipelines at [Standing Rock](#), rebutting [Modi’s plan to open 41 coal plants in India](#) and rejection of [fracking in Pennsylvania](#). Dangers of nuclear power are reflected in [demonstrations in Tokyo](#) to remind us of Fukushima Daiichi and struggles by “Solidarity Action for the 21 Villages” [in Faléa, Mali](#) against uranium mining for French nukes. The new outbreak of conflicts over AltE is unfolding via disapproval of massive solar arrays in [Klickitat County, WA](#); the fight against [industrial wind turbine projects](#) by the Broome Tioga Green Party, reactions by the Lenca people to the planned [Agua Zarca dam in Honduras](#); efforts to stop Lithium Americas’ open-pit mine at [Thacker Pass](#); and, widespread disapproval of child laborers dying in [Democratic Republic of Congo](#) cobalt mines.

In case you did not notice, the two key words common to all of these efforts is “Stop it!” A better life for all begins with rejecting limitless economic growth by developing technologies that minimize mining, processing, over-producing goods with short durations, and transporting products over long distances. Instead, we must develop locally-based products that have the least harmful effects.

One of the main problems with tunnel visioning on AltE is that how that approach accepts and perpetuates the ideology of greed, which insists that everyone in the US (and, of

course, the world) must adopt the consumerist life-style of the upper middle class.

People believe in preserving what they hold sacred. For most of us, these include sacred places and beings, the inorganic world, creatures that sleep in water or on land, and human Life. Corporate profits should not be included among the things we hold sacred.

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This article first appeared on [Green Social Thought](#).

Don Fitz (fitzdon@aol.com) is on the Editorial Board of [Green Social Thought](#) where a version of this article first appeared. He was the 2016 candidate of the Missouri Green Party for Governor. His book on [Cuban Health Care: The Ongoing Revolution](#) has been available since June 2020.

Featured image: Water Protectors Occupy Work Sites and Lock Down to Line 3 Enbridge Pipeline. Thanks to Unicorn Riot. (Source: Don Fitz)

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