

Transcript of the Environmental Overview

South America and elsewhere are undoubtedly fuelling public resistance to the proliferation of nuclear power stations, and this situation is unlikely to ease in the near future.

There is a global tendency to regard cheap clean energy technologies as a significant answer to humanity's environmental problems. In reality, few of them will be reduced by the discovery of cheap clean energy; many will be exacerbated, because it's not only about the nature of the energy we use but also about our unrestrained use of it. Whatever the source of our energy, we don't consume it in isolation; its consumption necessarily involves the consumption of other materials; in manufacture, in construction, in travel etc and is accompanied by other ecologically harmful human activity; generation of wastes, habitat disturbance, urban sprawl. Hence, in many ways, energy consumption can be seen as an indicator of the environmental pressure we exert and the size of our ecological footprint.

Finding cheaper, cleaner fossil fuel alternatives will not address our environmental woes. By all means we should continue the search for such sources but that search must be accompanied by management of our addiction to energy generally, and a lot more wisdom regarding how we deploy it.

Before moving on from the subject of depleting fossil fuels, it has to be pointed out that energy is not the only commodity we derive from this source. The list of substances and materials provided directly and as by-products from oil and gas processing alone is a very comprehensive one. Plastics and many unique specialist materials, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, pesticides, bitumen and, perhaps not the least of all, fertilisers, represent a range of commodities whose loss from our daily lives will be felt perhaps even more acutely than the loss of energy. Fossil fuel-based fertilisers and pesticides especially are critical to our food production. The recent re-direction of these substances to the production of bio-fuels generates a paradox of priorities, a conflict of commercial and humanitarian interests that we have yet to resolve.

Minerals and Other Finite Resources

The subjects of 'peak-oil' and the finite nature of our fossil energy reserves currently hold the lion's share of attention and tend to overshadow the supply situation relevant to other finite resources that are also critical to our daily lives.