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Climate change

Should we seek to increase exploitation of fossil fuel resources in relatively remote and hard to reach areas such as the arctic and the deep sea bed?

Yes

Dr Steve Jones

“Commercial hydrocarbon exploration in Antarctica is prohibited by the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty. I support the Treaty because it recognizes the critical importance of effective regulation; the ban may be repealed only if a future treaty establishes a binding regulatory framework. Exploration is already underway on the fringes of the Arctic. I suggest that continued but rigorously monitored exploration for oil in the Arctic would be better for the environment than current practices in many oil-producing regions with lax or corrupt environmental regulation.

Anyone who has worked in the oil industry will tell you that environmental protection standards range enormously. Some countries have excellent standards and control while others have woeful environmental records. In parts of western Africa with corrupt government and poor regulation, the total volume of oil spilled every year during normal operations is comparable to the volume released following the Deepwater Horizon disaster. The hydrocarbon industry, just like the financial sector or any other industry, is driven by cold economics; it will aim to maximize profit if left unregulated but it will also respond to incentives. The choice of drilling location is far less important than the degree of regulation in controlling environmental impact.

When environmental protection groups and the media publicize negative side-effects of the oil industry, they perform an essential role in encouraging governments to regulate tightly. Other more beneficial side-effects are less widely publicized. For example, the oil industry routinely collects rock samples and subterranean maps that can be used to measure climate in the geological past. One period of past climate change that has been studied using this information is a rapid, extreme global warming event about 55 million years before humans evolved, during which Earth’s surface warmed by between 5 and 10˚C and then cooled back to normal. Some may find it ironic that the leading explanation for this ancient natural global warming crisis was discovered in geological information acquired by oil industry exploration in a deep-water, environmentally sensitive frontier bordering the Arctic.

Focus on oil industry regulation rather than exploration bans will lead to a natural transition to other energy sources. When oil remains only in remote and technically challenging locations, the cost of recovering it whilst also satisfying environmental protection regulations will begin to outweigh the profit. Other energy industries will then flourish. Each energy industry has its own side-effects on the environment, so although the oil industry will eventually fade, the need for environmental protection regulation will not.

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