We use cookies to ensure that we deliver the best user experience of our website. If you would like to, you can change your cookie settings at any time. Continue

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?

No

Dr Dan van der Horst

The world is running low on ‘easy’ oil and gas. Encouraged by growing world demand and climbing energy prices, the oil companies are looking to shift the resource frontier once again; into more pristine environments like the polar regions and the deep sea bed, into the use of dirtier fuels such as tar sands and shale oil, and into the use of more destructive and experimental extraction technologies such as the controversial fracturing for shale gas (see the recent ‘Gasland’ documentary). The history of fossil fuel extraction has taught us that after many health and safety and environmental incidents, rich countries slowly manage to curtail domestic pollution through the development of environmental technologies and enforced regulation to apply these. However, allowing oil exploration at the frontier does not only create new pollution, it provides temporary respite for the 20th century 'easy oil' model. There are three reasons why we need a transition away from this model rather than providing life support for it.

Firstly, fossil fuels are a savings account which has been built up by the earth’s ecosystems over the last 100 million years, and this model is trying to run it down in 150 years. We are now in the greatest financial depression since the 1930s because our banks have been pushing 'easy credit'. Our plundering of nature’s savings account is equally dumb and short-sighted. We should learn to live within our means, using much more of the current account of renewable energy.

Secondly, the extraction, processing and burning of fossil fuels results in huge environmental externalities (global warming, noise pollution, particulates, light pollution etc), creating problems to other people now and to future generations. Clinging on to our 'right' to drive, is claiming our right to pollute, and to borrow from our children without even asking.

Thirdly, the global rich (including the vast majority of people in the UK) are using fossil fuels over and above the rate that brings them greater wellbeing. Since the 1970s our GDP and our use of energy services in the UK have continued to grow but measures of our wellbeing have flat-lined. What’s the point of consuming more when it doesn’t make you happier? The global obesity epidemic is a case in point; we over-consume and it’s not just unfair for others, it’s simply bad for us.

We are now at a point in time when we can look back and see the short-term gains, the negative side-effects and long-term unsustainability of the 20th century 'easy oil' model. To carry on business-as-usual, would amount to criminal negligence. We need something that is as radical and as brave as the Arab revolution; we need to transform ourselves from passive consumers to active citizens in order to break out of a model which was perhaps acceptable in the past but is now fundamentally compromised and is desperately trying to cling on to power.

We may not have the full script for a more sustainable future, but we do have full knowledge of the bad script we need to get rid off. We can only spend a pound once, and in stead of putting it into the dirty and temporary techno-fix of arctic oil drilling, we should put it into the cleanest and most enduring techno-fix we know; renewables. Learning to live on our current account also requires behavioural change. It requires bravery. Yet the end of ‘easy’ oil (and of ‘trust us it’s safe’ nuclear for that matter) demonstrates that the opposite of bravery is foolishness.

© University of Birmingham 2014