

Chapter 1: The Secret History of Fossil Fuels — Outline

Alex Epstein

Claims by thought-leading environmental scientists that fossil fuels need to be radically restricted to prevent environmental catastrophe have a disastrous track record.

You must make a lot of money

When I told a Greenpeace worker that I think humanity should use more fossil fuels, not less, she assumed that somebody must be paying me a lot of money to express such an immoral and unscientific opinion.

While I'm shopping for lunch at a farmer's market a Greenpeace representative asks me if I want to help end our addiction to fossil fuels.

I respond that I study energy for a living and that I think humanity needs to use more fossil fuels in the coming decades, not less.

I anticipate that she'll respond with one of the three standard cited environmental costs of using fossil fuels, giving me an opportunity to share a different assessment of their magnitude and offsetting benefits.

Or, I anticipate, she'll respond with the argument that fossil fuels are replaceable by solar and wind, giving me an opportunity to share a different assessment of their prospects.

But my stated position is so obviously immoral that she doesn't think to argue with me, just to comment that I must have been paid off a lot to take it.

The moral case against fossil fuels

We have been told that fossil fuel energy has been proven by environmental scientists to be causing environmental catastrophe—and therefore should be rapidly restricted and replaced with “green energy.”

Even though this isn't true I understand why she thinks it given that our use of fossil fuels is portrayed as a planet-destroying “addiction”—a short-range, unsustainable, destructive habit.

Most of the energy we use comes from burning fossil fuels: coal, oil, or natural gas.

But, we are told, environmental scientists have demonstrated that this practice is destroying the environment we depend on, especially a livable climate.

The popularly advocated solution, often attributed to “the scientists,” is to rapidly restrict fossil fuel use in favor of “renewable” solar, wind, and sometimes biomass energy.

Both the claim that fossil fuels are causing a catastrophic problem and that replacement with renewables is the solution are echoed throughout the culture by scientifically prestigious organizations and rarely publicly challenged—affirming their seeming scientific character.

The major opponents of the catastrophe narrative and/or restrictive policies are people and organizations not thought of as scientifically prestigious—“deniers” and “delayers” motivated by ideology or money.

While the Greenpeace representative understandably put me in the category of paid shill, the actual origin of my position was my independent research on the little-discussed track record of catastrophic predictions about fossil fuels and the environmental scientists who make them.

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Deja vu

What we are not told is that this essential narrative has existed for many decades and was already supposed to have come true if we did not “listen to the scientists” and radically reduce fossil fuel use decades ago.

One of the valuable methods I have learned as a philosopher is to look at the track record of ideas and individuals, particularly ones that make confident, extreme predictions about the future—since they are often very wrong but always in high demand from various interest groups.

When I started studying energy seriously in 2007, I started reading the history of different ideas in the field and found that thought-leading environmental scientists have been predicting imminent environmental doom from fossil fuels for over 30 years.

For example, many of today’s thought-leading environmental scientists predicted decades ago that fossil fuel use would soon lead to catastrophic depletion of fossil fuels and other “nonrenewable” resources—as well as a catastrophically polluted environment.

While predictions by leading environmental scientists and scientific organizations of imminent climate catastrophe and mass death are often portrayed as the latest science, they have in fact been made by many of the same organizations of people for well over 30 years.

These catastrophists also have a track record of endorsing, in the name of science, rapid restrictions on fossil fuels in favor of “renewables.”

Given that societies around the world failed to “listen to the scientists” and instead doubled their use of fossil fuels over the last 40 years, recent history serves as a controlled experiment for testing the predictive abilities and policy wisdom of the environmental scientists we are told to rely on.

More fossil fuels, more flourishing

Not only did mass catastrophe fail to materialize when we doubled fossil fuel use, life got much better overall in large part because of unique benefits of fossil fuels that environmental thought leaders neglected to consider.

Since the 1970s governments failed to “listen to the scientists” and pass significant restrictions on fossil fuels, which should have led to mass death from resource depletion, pollution, and global warming.

Instead, this doubling of fossil fuel use correlates with a massive overall improvement of human flourishing, especially in the developing world, as measured by life expectancy, income, and many other indicators.

This is not a coincidental correlation, as there is a clear causal relationship between increased access to fossil fuel energy, industrial productivity, and material flourishing.

A major reason environmental thought leaders failed to anticipate this enormous net benefit is that they did not analyze the full context of fossil fuels’ capacity to impact human flourishing, just the negative context.

It’s important to look not just at the net impact of fossil fuels compared to predictions but also its specifically environmental impacts compared to predictions, so we can see to what extent environmental thought leaders got those right.

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More fossil fuels, better environment

Not only did life get better, it got better environmentally as the neglected environmental benefits of developing abundant fossil fuel energy far outweighed the wildly overestimated harms.

The prediction by environmental thought leaders that we would run out of nonrenewable fossil fuels and other resources was not only exaggerated, but the opposite of the truth: the amount of available fossil fuel resources has increased despite 40 years of unprecedented use.

The thought leaders got this wrong because they only looked at the costs of humanity's consumption of resources but not the benefits of humanity's ability to create new resources out of once-useless raw materials.

The prediction by environmental thought leaders that we would cause escalating, catastrophic pollution came false as humanity devised cleaner ways to use fossil fuels and ways to use fossil fuel energy to neutralize the hazards of our natural environment.

The thought leaders got this wrong because they only looked at the negative context of fossil fuels' capacity to impact our environment, not the full context.

The prediction by environmental thought leaders that we would cause runaway, catastrophic global warming came false as CO₂ emissions erratically correlated with weak warming while abundant energy from fossil fuels actually helped us make the naturally dangerous climate far safer.

Again, the thought leaders were wrong because they only looked at the negative context of fossil fuels' capacity to impact climate livability, not the full context.

The peril of “listening to the scientists”

If we had uncritically followed the catastrophic predictions and radical policy prescriptions of thought-leading environmental scientists in the past, as we are urged to do today, billions of people would be experiencing shorter lives with greater suffering.

Today it is considered the height of responsibility to “listen to the scientists” on fossil fuels—which means to accept the statements of environmental scientists and organizations that the media find most interesting, which tend to be the most extreme.

As the past illustrates, thought-leading scientists and organizations are capable of dramatically overestimating their own expertise and making major thinking errors in their particular field.

Further, they are encouraged to and capable of using their scientific status to endorse policy prescriptions that in no way follow from their specialization—such as the wildly popular and insane opposition of nuclear power by scientists who express concerns about CO₂.

If we had “listened to the scientists” in this way in the past, billions of people would be experiencing shorter lives with far more suffering.

At the same time, we cannot possibly make the right decisions going forward without access to specialists in science and in other fields relevant to evaluating fossil fuels.

What we need is a new way of thinking about energy, one that leverages the legitimate expertise of specialists while protecting ourselves against their bad methods, exaggeration, and overstepping.