



WHY YOU SHOULD LOVE FOSSIL FUEL

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Every year on Earth Day, we're supposed to reflect on all the ways we've made the planet worse. But what if we try something different? What if we reflect on all the ways we've made the planet better?

Try this thought experiment:

Imagine that we transported someone from three hundred years ago, at the very start of the Industrial Revolution, to today's world. What would he think about our environment? Without question, his reaction would be one of disbelief; not that we had destroyed his pristine, natural world, but that such a clean, healthy environment was possible.

"The air is so clean," our time traveler might say. "Where I come from, we're breathing in smoke all day from the fire we need to burn in our furnaces and stoves."

"And the water. Everywhere I go, the water tastes so fresh, and it's all safe to drink. On my farm, we get our water from a brook we share with animals, and my kids are always getting sick."

"And then the weather. I mean, the weather isn't that much different, but you're so much safer in it; you can move a knob and make it cool when it's hot, and warm when it's cold."

"And what happened to all the disease? In my time, we had insects everywhere giving us disease – my neighbor's son died of malaria – and you don't seem to have any of that here. What's your secret?"

I'd tell him that the secret was energy, specifically energy derived from fossil fuels – oil, coal and natural gas. These fuels power machines that allow us to transform our naturally hazardous environment into a far healthier environment. Most of the natural world is too hot or too cold, has too much rainfall or not enough. Then there's bacteria-filled water, disease carrying insects, tornadoes, earthquakes and tsunamis, to name just few of nature's other unpleasant features.

As our time traveler noted, 300 years ago human beings spent a lot of time breathing polluted air from indoor fires. As unhealthy as it was, it was worth the warmth. But we've been able to conquer all these environmental hazards. We've drained swamps, reclaimed land, cleared forests, built roads, constructed glass and steel skyscrapers. We've irrigated deserts, developed fertilizers and pesticides, linked oceans – all of it in humanity's incredibly successful effort to create a safer, cleaner, more habitable world. And we did most of this using machines running on cheap, plentiful, reliable energy from fossil fuels.

To be sure, using that energy has carried risks and created negative by-products. But thanks to technology, we get better and better at minimizing and neutralizing those risks. Los Angeles was once smog city. Now its air is cleaner than it's been in decades. London's Thames River was once clogged with sewage; now it's clean.

So, if you want to live in an environment that is safe, healthy, and clean, highly-industrialized countries are the place to be. Where previous generations faced the risk of disease from simply drinking water, which was often contaminated, we have clean water – thanks to man-made reservoirs, treatment plants, underground pipes, and indoor plumbing. Where previous generations walked streets contaminated by large quantities of human and animal waste, we can conveniently and safely dispose of it thanks to sewer systems and the waste management industry. Where previous generations faced large-scale death whenever there was a severe freeze or heat wave, we can live in a comfortable climate year-round, thanks to insulated homes and modern, high-energy heating and air-conditioning. And the list of such life-improving positives goes on.

Thanks to industrial agriculture and transportation, we have grocery stores full of healthy food year-round. Thanks to modern transportation, we have unprecedented access to the rich cultural experiences and natural beauty that the world has to offer. Many of the benefits of today's environment are reflected in life-expectancy and population statistics: the average person lives longer, in better health, than ever before.

In sum, human beings have made the Earth a far, far better place to live for ourselves. Yet even though life is better than ever, we are wracked with guilt over our industrial development. We hear endlessly that our “footprint” – meaning our impact on nature – is too big, and that we must “go green” by making a smaller one. We are made to feel bad for the impact that we have on land, on water, on plants, on animals. But mastering nature is precisely how human beings survive and flourish.

It's time to stop thinking about how to save the planet from human beings and resume thinking about how to improve the planet for human beings.

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