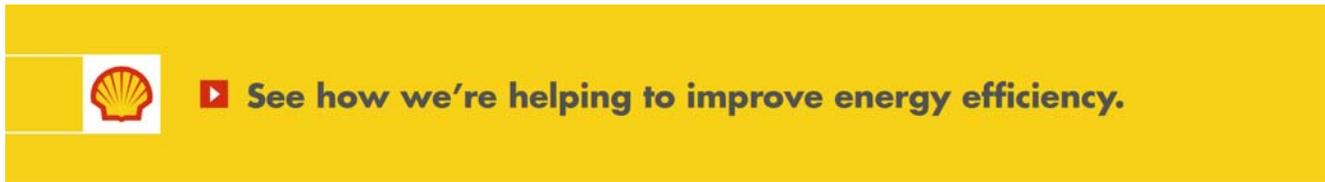


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Lessons from Japan: Energy Policy and Apocalyptic Dread



Posted by [Timothy F. Sutherland](#) of [Pace Global Energy Services](#) March 31, 2011

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The historic March 11 earthquake and tsunami in Japan, which cost untold number of lives and left hundreds of thousands of people homeless and mourning, was an object lesson on the unpredictable and often violent planet that we are fortunate enough to inhabit. The news media, however, quickly shifted their focus to coverage of the seemingly out-of-control situation at the crippled nuclear reactors and storage facilities at Tokyo Electric Power's Fukushima Daiichi power station.

Video footage of the damaged power station has been seamlessly intertwined with alarmist speculation about a catastrophe. The lesson of this narrative was painfully obvious to all. Energy industry and government had sold a "false bill of goods" on society: the short-term material comforts afforded by nuclear power were being purchased at the cost of a future holocaust.

Since no one can say with certainty that another Chernobyl (or something worse) is impossible, it now seems that nuclear power is back on the endangered species list. But is this the right outcome for the overall good of the planet and its inhabitants?

If this tune sounds familiar, there's a reason: it is the background theme of a host of energy/environment controversies and newsworthy events.

- Al Gore's apocalyptic vision on climate change energized a global campaign to rid the world of fossil fuels ASAP.
- Although the U.N.'s sixteenth climate change conference last fall in Cancun yielded only a commitment to study the problem further, the possibility of global disaster remains the impetus behind governmental crash programs to deploy carbon-free power generation technologies in Europe and here in the United States.

- The Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico became a morality play on industrial hubris and government ineptitude in the face of environmental catastrophe, eliciting passionate calls for an end to domestic oil development.
- Opponents of domestic natural gas development cite the scientifically unsustainable threat of poisoned regional water resources as reason enough to halt all drilling activity.
- Every coal-mining disaster prompts claims of irony that we are killing ourselves in order to kill ourselves.

The loss of life experienced by the Japanese is real. The economic and environmental cost of this disaster will have a ripple effect that will be measurable for a decade and in our memories for much longer. None of this should be minimized in any manner or for any purpose. However, assessing the reality of the tragedy and creating prudent corrective steps is what is required not creating irrational fears for the sake of the evening's Twitter Blast. Irrational fear and apocalyptic dread is a constant theme and instrument of social order for human civilization over the centuries, affixing itself to each generation's ever-changing sense of perceived threats and danger. It may be highly motivational, but it's a lousy basis for public policy, scientific inquiry and technological progress. The societal response to every technological failure cannot be limited to a search for the guilty and a draconian plan to assure that the most recent failure can never, ever, happen again. Every accident, every undesirable outcome, is an opportunity to learn what went wrong in order to identify and deploy the means by which to minimize and manage the risk of similar future incidents.

Eliminating nuclear power and fossil fuels from our list of future energy options will not make our world a safer, happier place. The social and technological systems on which we rely for sustenance, comfort and mobility will require some mix of fossil fuels and nuclear energy, along with more benign forms of low-carbon energy, for the foreseeable future. Abating greenhouse gasses is an ongoing task for this and future generations. We will need all our available tools and ingenuity to successfully negotiate this transition. The optimum form and course of this transition can now only dimly be perceived, despite confident claims to the contrary from all sides of the issue.

Public policy and government investment should focus on testing the boundaries of efficiency, scalability, safety and environmental impact for all energy options, whether fourth-generation nuclear power plant designs, improved photovoltaic conversion efficiency or a magic bug that turns waste products into gasoline. We must seek to understand our mistakes and failures, and apply that knowledge to improving both what is and what can be. The lesson of Fukushima Daiichi is that we must persist in trying to do better.



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1. josh
earth
March 31, 8:21 pm

We live within the sun's heliosphere, within the earth's magnetosphere, on a planet covered with hydrogen, with a molten core, orbited by a moon with enough gravitational pull to move the oceans back and forth every day. It would seem to be a astounding catastrophic failure of scientists and engineers that we do not have better energy options. One is left wondering about Enron style economic bottlenecks or contemplate this mind boggling failure. I'm glad that there are some technologists that offer the right kind of hope. <http://bigthink.com/ideas/31635> "Solar panels are coming down dramatically in cost per watt. And as a result of that, the total amount of solar energy is growing, not linearly, but exponentially. It's doubling every 2 years and has been for 20 years. And again, it's a very smooth curve. There's all these arguments, subsidies and political battles and companies going bankrupt, they're raising billions of dollars, but behind all that chaos is this very smooth progression."



2. Paul Seligman
Cardiff, Wales, UK
April 1, 3:37 pm

If you want to read a local view from the west of the North Atlantic, which also makes some universal points, please see my article on <http://www.cfhub.org.uk/2011/03/21/the-risks-to-cardiff-from-nuclear-power-generation/>



3. Gerry Clark
London
April 4, 5:51 am

What is needed is a fundamental discussion on sustainable sources of energy.

I found a really good quote: "The significant problems of our time cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them." <http://thewritefuture.typepad.com/the-write-future/2011/03/problems.html>

Up to all of us to share and discuss these issues extensively.

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