Wilderness and Energy: The Battle Against Domination

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The Battle Against Domination

by David Johns

The defeat of the most recent efforts to despoil the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge recalled to mind a striking map published a few years back by the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative. Depicting “linear disturbances,” this map looked like the steel grid-work of some giant, misshapen cage. There were the roads and rail lines common to North America, but also seismic exploration lines, oil and gas pipelines, and access corridors cut through the wilderness throughout the region—far north of the railroads and regularly traveled highways. It’s not news that energy extraction is a threat to protecting the wild. But to see it only in those terms is to miss something much greater: it is energy that fuels, literally, the transformation and degradation of the Earth.

Half a globe away from the Yellowstone, in the mountains and deserts of southwest Asia, troops of a dozen countries fight a war whose roots lie in the quest for the control of oil. Human life and the natural world sustain enormous “collateral damage” as a direct result of this latest in a series of skirmishes, covert operations, terrorist incidents, and low-intensity wars (for the victims of course it’s all terrorism). One of the circumstances that makes this war popular, indeed possible for the United States and other western countries is that it can be fought with little loss of life for western combatants and civilians. Nixon’s Vietnamization of another war three decades ago made it clear that Americans would tolerate loss of life elsewhere as long as the body bags stopped coming home. With machines that run on oil, and with oil-fed factories that make the machines, the U.S. and similar societies can fight a capital-intensive war, insulating themselves from human casualties. Those without access to the machinery must fight with their bodies, or turn the machines against their owners.

These are not the only costs of some societies’ dependence on huge amounts of energy. Aberrant weather, a sea of SUVs choking the streets and polluting the air, civil liberties under assault by would-be leaders seeking to guarantee oil supplies, and conservationists’ great efforts to prevent drilling in many regions are also results.

In the face of these costs why is it so difficult to wean ourselves from this terrible addiction? Is it simply myopia? A love affair with motorized toys and air conditioning? Because
ruling elites have direct economic interests in the oil economy and the ability to limit serious consideration of other options? Do we unconsciously know that so much of the bread and circus that distracts us from our growing alienation and declining freedom and quality of life depends on energy? Or is it that John Peet was right when he wrote that underlying the human economy, measured by the abstraction of money, is what it's all about? It's calories we eat, calories that make and fuel our machines.

If these were the only obstacles to kicking the energy habit, they would be formidable enough. But they do not explain the depth of the problem. To protect the wild, to develop truly sustainable economic and political systems, conservationists need to understand how fundamentally the dependence on energy is woven into the fabric of civilization. It is true that the first significant energy subsidy that humans captured—fire—predated the emergence of human hierarchies. But with human efforts to systematically control Nature (including the capture of energy subsidies) something very important changed: we adopted forms of social organization and technology that at heart involve the control of some humans by others. Once this inequality and hierarchy exists, its maintenance and enhancement becomes a distinct social goal: it remains interwoven with the control of Nature but becomes a separate motive force. Central to both is the control of energy, of caloric subsidies.

The extraction of energy beyond that necessary for biological maintenance and reproduction of a reasonable human population* is itself an act of domination and control. It entails reshaping ecosystems and disrupting vital processes. The forms change over time: from exploiting the labor of domestic animals and the calories stored in plants, to slaves and waters wheels, tenant farmers and factory workers, to petroleum and nuclear-generated electricity. The energy extracted is the precondition for the domination and control of Nature in other realms (such as the conversion of whole ecosystems to pavement or factory farms) and the control of people by vast hierarchies, including their armed servants. Who can forget the image of police standing before the Nike store in Seattle during 1999's antiglobalization protests?

Those at the top of the human hierarchy know that hanging on to their position requires that they directly control the institutions that “produce” and manage energy. They do not want to see the energy they control decreased, dispersed, and localized. It is not a coincidence that the words “energy” and “power” can be used almost interchangeably.

Those societies that have harnessed relatively greater energy subsidies have pushed aside, conquered, absorbed, or destroyed societies that have used less energy or used it less effectively. Hunting and gathering cultures—societies with the lowest subsidies and the most ecologically friendly form of human social organization—have disappeared except in “peripheral” areas of the globe. The first world dominates the third world in part because the former has harnessed energy in greater amounts, and has sustained that advantage over time. Like a cancer that has reached the stage where it tricks its host into providing it with a blood supply by disguising its nature as a tumor and parasite, energy subsidies give the power to dominate, as surely as getting the subsidies in the first place is an act of domination.

Thus, confronting the problems associated with human energy extraction and use is not just about unplugging from consumption, but unplugging from domination. Energy is at the heart of political and economic power—no one wants to weaken their relative position; indeed, every inclination is to seek advantage. Like disarmament, dismantling energy-based domination is a global problem. No one wants to go first. Elites have often compromised—to a point—with other groups in society and even elites in other societies, when it comes to dividing the pie. But they seldom agree to share power—that is, decision-making—without a fight. 

David Johns teaches political science at Portland State University and serves on the Wildlands Project board of directors.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING SUGGESTIONS


* A reasonable human population is one that does not degrade the capacity of Earth's systems to sustain all species in natural patterns of abundance and distribution, and to maintain fully functional ecological and evolutionary processes.