



Money Talks

Posted by [Glenn](#) on December 9, 2007 - 11:00am in [The Oil Drum: Local](#)

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Another guest post from Hans Noeldner.

Somewhere along the way, we-the-people seem to have reached a consensus that when it comes to allocating natural resources, money should do the talking. In fact many true believers contend money is the only legitimate communicator.

“How much oil should I be able to burn? Every barrel I can afford.”

“How big a house – how many houses – should I be able to buy? Just as many as I can afford.”

“How much CO₂ should I be able to emit? Not one damned molecule less than I can afford.”

“And if I want to burn and buy and emit more, then acquiring more money naturally gives me the right to do so.”

If our economy fails to charge us the “true cost” of denying future generations the fossil energy they might need to feed themselves 50 years hence; if our economy suffocates vast swathes of bio-productive land beneath highways and parking lots for our Happy Motoring convenience, if our economy fails to extract “flood money” from us to recompense millions of coastal dwellers for the loss of their ancestral homelands beneath rising oceans; well...perhaps the solution is to internalize those costs somehow.

Tellingly, the specific methods politicians might use to sneak such price-boosting tariffs past hyper-vigilant business interests and an unsupportive consuming public are seldom explained. But in any case it is deemed essential that we remember the distribution of natural resources is not – and cannot be – a “moral” issue.

We do not challenge Billy Fourwheeler to find ways to amuse himself that require no fossil fuel. We do not warn Mr. Manor that monuments to covetousness make us worse rather than better human beings. We do not broach carbon footprints when family members or friends return from their flight to Park City to play on world-class ski slopes.

If the unenlightened masses are to wake up, then prices must serve as alarm clocks. As despite the fact that major gasoline price increases (from less than \$2 a few years ago to more than \$3 today) have failed to put any appreciable dent in our consumption, again and again we are reassured that, “When gas prices go up, (other) people will conserve.”

It would be an understatement to say that our plutocratic caste is particularly fond of the fiscally-based resource entitlements program. Millionaires and billionaires overwhelmingly prefer a system of governance which represents dollars rather than souls, and quite naturally \$10 gas and \$4000 airline tickets won't crimp the style of any self-respecting Washington insider or Fortune 500 CEO (in fact chauffeured motoring and flying might become pleasant again without the

rabble clogging highways, airports, and flight paths).

When confronted by the abject failures of the market system to distribute Earth's finite bounties to the most needy, or to restrain present consumption so some essential resources are left for future generations, the "money talks" faithful often counter with the bizarre contention that burning up Nature's one-time gifts as fast as possible may be the best way to deal with them – a kind of wild-west "bring it on" bravado. True believers do not trouble themselves with niggling trifles like entropy; they harbor unshakeable faith that a scarcity of resource "x" will inevitably spur The Market to develop an even better substitute in the form of "y".

If pressed on the central matter of usable energy, the economic cornucopians will usually point to the transitions from wood to coal and thence oil and natural gas as incontrovertible proof that the process can continue ad infinitum. But despite billions spent on research into petroleum alternatives over many decades, we have uncovered no evidence that any practical "new" form of energy will ever approach the abundance and convenience of petroleum.

Oil once offered a rate of energy-return-on-energy-invested exceeding 100-to-1. Now we lavish billions on subsidies for corn ethanol which yields at best 1.7 units of alcohol energy for every unit of invested natural gas, diesel, and coal. Now we rip off whole mountaintops to expose seams of low-quality coal, and claw even more savage scars into Earth's living skin to extract the dilute tar sands of Alberta, in the process burning about one unit of high quality natural gas to produce two or three units of low-quality crude.

The combination of our economic paradigm with our willful ignorance of finite realities is a curse upon future generations. Treacherous slopes lie beyond the extraction peaks for all of our major energy resources, but we-the-people have not begun to assemble the ropes and belays we will need to descend them securely rather than tumbling into catastrophe. And so long as we remain silent and allow money to do the talking, we never will.



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