

Limits to Renewables

I don't think your answer to Richard Firn's comment ["From Readers," May/June] responded to what he was saying—that renewable energy resources of any kind still only offer limited niche opportunities. When used to supply a growing energy demand they'll have continually multiplying environmental impacts. To learn from our mistakes we need to carefully avoid denial. We really should be making a positive effort to expose and understand our mistakes. That same error, after all, is the one made in the general economic model that got us here, treating the Earth as an unbounded resource rather than the great niche opportunity we started with.

You can see how the environmental movement made that mistake most clearly in studying why 20 years of organizing and well-funded governmental and industry research failed to ask if using ethanol would set off a world food price war and riots. That growing conflict between land uses is still just beginning to unfold, unfortunately, and we should take heed. The problem is that no one asked the question, what will our growing use of land for fuel run into? People tend to not plan for what they don't see, and barge ahead, responding to crises later. If we

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Are we looking through the holes in our reasoning?

don't learn to do better than that and think things through, we're not going to make it. We should be using our own mistakes to point to a new way of thinking about the Earth, not try to cover our tracks in the usual way.

The penalty for not doing it is higher than ever now, but there's also a fantastic other reward. Finding how to stop being blind is also a chance to learn how to see. We're not just missing our big mistakes, but lots else. Looking through the holes in our reasoning may be our one best chance to begin to see what else they may have been hiding from us. I find your logical error to be in concluding that "stopping climate change will require...a portfolio of energy technologies to avoid unsustainable use of just one or two..." The mistake is that it offers a "portfolio" of finite resources to supply ever-growing quantities of energy. The word "portfolio" obscures where the total is to come from. The certainty is that, used for growth, all renewable energy sources become growing nonrenewable new land uses. It looks like we goofed in the exact same way the people whose mistakes we are trying to correct did, and seeing that may be really good news.

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