

Green Illusions: The Dirty Secrets of Clean Energy and the Future of Environmentalism

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Have we been tricked by renewable energy?



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[Green Illusions: The Dirty Secrets of Clean Energy and the Future of Environmentalism](#) by Ozzie Zehner (2012) offers a critical view of reality that is a necessary read for anyone who identifies as an environmentalist. In three parts, the book explores green technologies, the societal hype around their implementation, and

finally, a holistic approach to (the future of) environmentalism.

This review provides an overview of each part with an expansion of the final portion as it offers a myriad of solutions to various issues, e.g., women's rights, consumption culture, and energy efficiency.

First, Part I: Seductive Futures reviews the major types of green technologies — with amusing chapter titles such as “Solar Cells and Other Fairy Tales” and “The Hydrogen Zombie” — and their (false) promises of producing clean energy. Each chapter ends with the harsh realization that we (developed countries) do not have an energy production crisis; we have an energy consumption crisis.

Next, in Part II Zehner details the “Alternative-Energy Fetish” and how green technologies are popularized through media and corporations. In this sense, green consumption and green consumerism are “in” while critically assessing our consumption patterns and responsibility (both personal and corporate) do not receive equal attention. For example, Zehner details how one company spent more money marketing themselves as “green” than dollars spent on the actual green technologies (p. 160). **It is still consumerism, just in another form.** Nonetheless, Zehner offers the “first steps” in addressing such consumption patterns by introducing the rebound effect, which, in this case, equates to the fact that increasing energy efficiency makes energy services cheaper, resulting in greater energy consumption. Indeed, the solution lies in restructuring sociocultural frames wherein energy consumption decreases.

In the last portion of the book — Part III: The Future of

Environmentalism — Zehner addresses several key topics to provide a holistic approach to environmentalism in five chapters: Women’s Rights, Improving Consumption, The Architecture of Community, Efficiency Culture, and Asking Questions. The former four chapters are presented as “solutions” and conclude with “first steps” that are relatively inexpensive, feasible measures that could be implemented to create a more socially just and energy-stable world. Although the information presented prior to each of the “first steps” is crucial for understanding the rationale behind the actions, this review will highlight a few recommendations for potential readers rather than provide background information into each broad solution chapter.

In Women’s Rights, Zehner delivers an overview of global population issues and segues into the importance of women’s rights as a (little-traveled) path for environmentalists by detailing the environmental impacts of overpopulation. Three “first steps” are offered:

- (1) Approaching Population Concerns of Poor Regions (p. 214),**
- (2) Approaching Women’s Welfare in America (p. 216), and**
- (3) Addressing Complex Population Challenges (p. 220).**

For example, Zehner explains how child marriage affects about 8 million girls worldwide, spanning about 60 countries. Marriage at a young age typically results in high fertility rates, low quality of life, and poverty. A solution put forth is for the United States to (1) fulfill its commitment to the International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act (passed in 2012) and (2) leverage its economic

trading power to foster support for such rights internationally. Environmentalists (individually or collectively) can pressure their representatives to act.

Regarding *Approaching Women's Welfare in America*, Zehner explores how and why incidences of teenage pregnancy are higher in the United States than in any other industrialized country, although rates of sexual activity are similar. Zehner suggests that unplanned pregnancies, especially in teenagers, should be a key topic for environmental activists. This solution explores the carbon legacy of children born in the United States compared to other countries, and how the push for "green" technologies has left behind social welfare of young women who often suffer from life-long disadvantages from early child-rearing (e.g., lower educational attainment, mental health problems, and limited economic activity). By pursuing a significant decrease in child marriage and unintended (teenage) pregnancies as an environmental solution, **Zehner encourages readers to look holistically at environmental issues in tandem with global quality of life issues.**

The next chapter, *Improving Consumption*, provides 10 "first steps": Enable Downshifting (p. 244), Promote Volunteering (p. 246), Eliminate Advertising to Kids (p. 246), Social Enterprises for Youth (p. 250), Shift Taxes from Income to Consumption (p. 251), Smart Packaging (p. 252), Introduce Junk Mail Choice (p. 253), Ditch the GDP (p. 253), Shift from Military Investment to Real Energy Security (p. 256) and Vegetarianism (p. 258). While many of these approaches are clearly related to the environment, i.e., Smart Packaging and Vegetarianism, eliminating advertising to

kids is an innovative approach to improving consumption (and reducing consumption culture). Zehner describes this as “one of the most important steps” we can take to “interrupt material consumption” — and it is “beneficial to almost everyone” (p. 246). Zehner details the history and the negative effects of advertising to children as found by the American Psychology Association (e.g., materialistic values, parental conflict, misperceptions of healthy eating habits, etc.). Environmentalists alongside child welfare advocates can take several actions: legislate an outright ban on advertising marketed towards children (as accomplished in many other countries), require corporations to disclose information on marketing/advertising research techniques (which may include “spying” on children), and/or enact a tax on advertising whereby proceeds support noncommercial media for children. Improving Consumption provides solutions for the individual and collective by working to tackle consumption issues at the source.

Next, *The Architecture of Community*, offers nine “first steps” at (re)configuring socio-spatial arrangement(s) that reduce energy consumption and provide social benefits: From Cars to Cafés (p. 288), Car Sharing (p. 289), Congestion Pricing (p. 290), Traffic Calming (p. 292), Prioritize Bicycle Roadways (p. 294), Bicycling for Youth (p. 295), Bicycle Insurance (p. 297), Reform Zoning (p. 297), and Retrofitting Suburbia (p. 298). To illustrate one example: Traffic calming is a method to slow traffic and encourage pedestrian, bicycling, and other forms of nonmotorized transportation. Speed bumps are the traditional technique; however, according to Zehner, they promote alternating between accelerating and stopping, which in turn creates more greenhouse gas emissions, smog, and other forms of pollution than driving at a

constant (slow) speed. Other techniques require cars to drive slower and be more alert, e.g., outcroppings (planter beds/boxes place in or near the roadway to require cars to slow down) or diversions (interruptions of contiguous, lengthy urban streets with parklets that force cars to turn but allow pedestrians and the like access through). Reimagining the role of the car in urban streets is a first step in (re)creating the architecture of community.

Finally, Efficiency Culture concludes with seven “first steps” that acknowledge that less energy, not necessarily green energy, equates to cleaner energy. They are:

- Carefully Shift to Energy (Not Carbon) Taxes (p. 323),
- Strengthen Building Efficiency Standards (p. 324),
- Rediscover Passive Solar (p. 324),
- Cogeneration Systems (p. 327),
- Monetary Reform and Decoupling (p. 327),
- Voting Reform (p. 328), and
- Create a Department of Efficiency (p. 328).

While creating a culture of (energy) efficiency requires collective action, there are still some ways in which an individual can generate household-scale solutions. Regarding the latter, Zehner reminds readers to rediscover passive solar as opposed to active solar and its downfalls (discussed in the previous part, Alternative-Energy Fetish). Indeed, trees are an “underappreciated passive-solar mechanism” as a home’s carbon footprint may be reduced up to one-third just by planting a shade tree on its west side (p. 325). Two examples of large-scale societal changes that may seem counterintuitive are the (1) shift to energy (not carbon) taxes and (2) creation of a new department of government.

First, the development of a carbon tax has been readily pushed as a solution to curb greenhouse gas emissions. However, according to Zehner, taxing only carbon would allow the “side effects” of “nuclear and alternative-energy production to continue unabated” and the shift of carbon polluters to locations without a carbon tax (p. 323). Second, Zehner bemoans the general public’s misperception of the U.S. Department of Energy. Indeed, this department’s budget is structured to not heavily influence civilian energy; its largest expenditure is weaponry. Zehner explains that an actual department of energy should focus on efficiency rather than production and would look much different if indeed that were the objective.

Alas, such a cultural shift cannot happen overnight nor in a vacuum, but coupled with social objectives, Zehner proposes we, as a society, will see through the **greenwashed technologies** and marketing strategies because, in the end, “entrusting alternative-energy technologies with solving environmental challenges, which at their root are social, economic, and political, produces numerous snags” (p. 331). Zehner concludes his prose by Asking Questions. In this final chapter, he compares the present environmentalist to the future environmentalist in Table 1 (p. 332). The palpable differences are the future environmentalists being more low-tech (i.e., efficiency over new technologies like wind turbines) and focused on social issues like universal health care, social enterprise, and citizen governance. Zehner urges the mainstream environmentalists to “throw down the green energy pop-poms and pull out the bifocals” (p. 340) to see that the (1) technical character of alternative, green technologies greatly limits citizen involvement because most people do not know how to

use/implement them and (2) prioritization of such technologies as an environmental solution promotes the notions of “productivism and growth that directly conflict with the stated goals of environmentalists themselves” (p. 332).

In sum, *Green Illusions* illustrates just that, the illusion, the deception, the false reality that the future will be saved solely by reinventing the way we *produce* energy. Readers looking to understand (a) the current situation of energy production and consumption and (b) real solutions for change on various scales and various sectors will appreciate Zehner’s thorough, critical, yet positive work in *Green Illusions*.