

Unspoken Rules

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There is an unspoken rule in modern times that interferes with every discussion of solar energy. The rule is to not count any energy that is traditional, not count age old methods that support life, however well they work. As one can back sight a shadow and find the sun, back site our energy experts, whether from a University, a foundation, or a think tank, they all scrupulously obey the unwritten rule. Ignore tradition, ignore nature. Invent an idol: GNP.

Look what is left out in all modern energy censuses. The food we eat, the light through windows, foot traffic, bike miles, clothes lines; all of Nature. We have been enchanted by machinery. A spell leaves us bewildered. Alien pressures have us forget our own interest. Our lives are a dance of deference to the machines and the banks that finance them. The unspoken rule demands progress and progress is abandoning traditional ways to employ new products. Before long we may give up climbing into bed, a forklift will place us between the sheets. There are endless examples.

We have a natural curiosity and enthusiasm for new technology, but in our times natural enthusiasm is not sufficient. The system does not trust the individual will spend enough money on the right things. Policies and tax laws are needed. With their guidance we lean forward, toward the machine, the synthetic, the artificial, so far forward we are hardly upright. We do not notice such things as our intermittent sidewalks waiting for repair beside our cars' carefully tended streets. This blindness is central to questions about solar energy.

We are being driven like so many cattle into new pastures by legislation, tax breaks, incentives and endless ads and articles in the press and on TV. New ideas, materials, machines, medicine, could enrich all of us if we had time to choose how to mix old with new. Why, when we need to conserve energy, are clotheslines outlawed and at the same time expensive photovoltaic panels given huge subsidies? One kWh of electricity can evaporate three pints of water or lift the water 150 miles straight up. Why waste electricity to dry things; let clothes lines do that.

Let us choose for ourselves. We don't need a master plan contrived by a foundation contrived by a presidential commission or UN commission to sort out what to do, where to go, how to live. We need to stop subsidizing fossil fuels. Let their prices rise. Higher prices slow consumption. To give up regular Coca-Cola, we needn't subsidize diet coke; to slow gasoline consumption we needn't subsidize ethanol.

We must use prices and the market place. We cannot sort out energy matters by subsidies, especially not when all of them obey an unwritten rule that "progress" is good and tradition is better forgotten.

Times are changing. The machine has finally had to stop and think. Accustomed to endless growth, now it hears about CO₂, that it will soon run short of fuel and loose its grip on mankind. The machines and their backers are accustomed to being deferred to, and the rest of us go along with the unwritten rule. If we must have solar energy, by the unwritten rule it will not be the many traditional uses, fossil fuel shouldered out of the way. Progress will continue; solar energy won't be the old ways; it will be on a new level, more machines however uneconomical.