

The Real Impact of America's Oil Crisis

Written by 3K Admin

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By Laura Fitzpatrick

Esoteric climate-science warnings about America's oil dependence can make even the most well-meaning of eyes glaze over. Amanda Little, author of *Power Trip: From Oil Wells to Solar Cells* ♦ *Our Ride to the Renewable Future*, took a different approach. She traveled from an offshore oil rig to the halls of the Pentagon, from NASCAR racetracks to the office of a pricey plastic surgeon in order to tell a more human side of the energy story. TIME talked to Little about how fossil fuels saturate our lives and why taking personal responsibility is the key to pulling out of this mess.

You point out that despite increasing awareness of our dependence on oil, energy still feels like a distant, impersonal issue to a lot of us. Why do you think that is?

The media measures America's energy crisis in terms of megawatts and barrels of oil and pounds of carbon dioxide. This cold, abstract, technical problem is so emotionally immediate in our lives, and we don't tend to recognize that ♦ it's almost too obvious. I spent 10 years or so reporting on energy and the environment: criticizing, analyzing, examining our failure to act on a federal level. And then I began to realize that on a personal level, I was implicated in these problems far more than I ever realized. I took this tour around my office to look at how many fossil-fuel by-products were cluttering my life. It was pretty much everything: what I was wearing, my desk, my keyboard, my cell phone, my corn muffin, my veggie burger, my magazines. Everything in my midst was oil-derived.

That's a pretty overwhelming list. If it's so hard to make a dent in your carbon footprint, is there a risk that people will just throw up their hands?

I was worried that the results of my adventure into the heart of the energy crisis would be despair and defeat. In fact, I ended up feeling overwhelmingly optimistic. We figured out 7 trillion different applications for natural gas and petroleum. If we could do that, then we can certainly figure out a way to undo the problem. It was ingenuity that got us into this mess and it's ingenuity that will get us out of it.

What's the best messaging strategy for advocates looking to wean Americans off oil?

There's this idea that energy industries or traditional fossil-fuel industries are the villains and the eco-crusaders or these new clean-energy innovators are the heroes. In fact, when we take a look at the extraordinary achievements of the supposedly villainous industries, we find that they are the source of so many of our freedoms, so much of our power. And many of those industries are now becoming the source of a lot of the alternatives that will replace them. This shrill, preachy, bad-guy, good-guy stuff really misses the point. Energy made us great long before it made us vulnerable. Clearly there have been severe unintended consequences. We have an obligation to hold ourselves accountable, and there is a certain humility that comes with that.

(See pictures of new ways to save energy.)

Let's talk about some of the biggest energy users. You cite some pretty staggering numbers about the amount of oil that it takes today to power a war.

The best one is that an F-16 burns more fuel in an hour than the average American family uses in an entire year. And each gallon of fuel costs many more times the cost of fuel at your local gas station, given the cost of transporting [it]. It may end up costing \$100 or more per gallon. When you think about the fact that every day in Iraq something like 1.5 million gallons of fuel are delivered by truck convoy to U.S. forces, it's a staggering investment of human and financial resources.

(See TIME's special report on the environment.)

And yet it sounds like the military is making big efforts to go green.

They are. It was an amazing experience meeting these visionaries in the Pentagon who are trying to put green innovation at the top of the priority list. It's a very tricky transition. They made it very clear: our priorities are

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safety and victory. So anything that could compromise that isn't going to happen. But they are doing some real interesting innovation. For instance, something like half of the barracks in Iraq are now using this superinsulated kind of tent that's using a fraction of the energy that the uninsulated tents were using. That cuts down on the amount of fuel that they need to deliver to power the diesel generators that were powering the air-conditioners in these barrack units. That, then, cuts down on the number of truck convoys that have to be schlepping fuel across these very dangerous back roads of Iraq. More efficient energy use translates into human lives saved.
(Read about the greening of the Pentagon.)
♦</p><p align="justify">Overall, what would you say are the top three things we can do to reduce our dependence on oil?
I feel a tremendous amount of optimism about a shift toward electric cars. We need to rebuild the [electricity] grid, number one. We need to cap carbon dioxide emissions and put a price on them. And number three, we need to make better batteries and parts. Better batteries will usher in the dawn of the electric-car era. </p><p align="justify">I also think we have to change our lifestyles. It's true ♦ I think it was a Gandhi quote ♦ that the world has the resources to meet the needs of humanity, not the greed of humanity. I find it to be an amazing statistic that, per capita, each of us [Americans] uses about 35% to 40% more oil a day than the average European, and almost 50% more than the average person in Japan. We have an appetite that is absolutely breathtaking. That's something we have to be aware of. </p><p align="justify">Source: http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1929858,00.html?artId=1929858?contentType=article?chn=sciHealth</p>