

It's Too Easy Being Green

Living high on the Prius Fallacy: Pretending that more "benign" consumption is good for the environment

BY DAVID OWEN

A FAVORITE TRICK of people who consider themselves friends of the environment is reframing luxury consumption preferences as gifts to humanity. A new car, a solar-powered swimming-pool heater, a 200-mile-an-hour train that makes intercity travel more pleasant and less expensive, better-tasting tomatoes—these are the sacrifices we're prepared to make for the future of the planet.

Our capacity for self-deception can be breathtaking. In 2010, a forward-thinking friend of mine took me for a ride in a Ford Fusion, a gas-electric hybrid that gets more miles per gallon than comparable cars with conventional engines. His dashboard fuel gauge filled with images of intertwining green foliage, a symbolic representation of the environmental benefits we were apparently dispensing from the tailpipe as we aimlessly drove around.

I felt a twinge of idiotic virtue while in that car, as I also do when I leave an especially large pile of cans, bottles and newspapers at the end of my driveway for the recycling truck. Like many concerned Americans, I'm susceptible to the Prius Fallacy: a belief that switching to an ostensibly more benign form of consumption turns consumption itself into a boon for the environment.

If only all big problems could be tackled with product substitution. We're consumers at heart, and our response to difficulties of all kinds usu-

ally involves consumption in one form or another. My car's a problem? Tell me what to drive instead. Wrong water heater? I'll switch. Kitchen counters not green? I'll replace them. The challenge arises when consumption itself is at issue. The world faces a long list of environmental challenges, yet most so-called solutions are either irrelevant or make the real problems worse. That's the conundrum facing anyone who yearns for "sustainability."

Energy efficiency—which has been called "the fifth fuel"—is especially problematic. In 2010, I flew from New York to Melbourne, Australia. My plane consumed a lot of energy and had a big carbon footprint; in fact, my proportional share of the jet fuel burned during my round trip was greater than the total amount of energy that the average resident of the Earth uses, for all purposes, in a year.

But the environmental problem with modern flying isn't that our airplanes are wasteful; it is that we have made flying so efficient that the main impediment to traveling 10,000 miles isn't the cost but the unpleasantness of spending a whole day watching movies and sleeping in a cushioned seat.

When people talk about reducing the energy and carbon impact of air travel, they almost always focus on improving the design of engines, wings and fuselages, or on using computer systems to shorten flight paths and eliminate delays. By this point, though, the total potential gain in any of those areas is small. Today's passenger jets are al-

ready something like 75% more fuel efficient than the jets of the early 1960s, and the physics of flying imposes a low ceiling on further advances.

The main effect of additional engineering improvements will be the same as for all such improvements in the past: to make travel easier, cheaper, more convenient and more attractive—thus encouraging us to do more of it.

A new car and better-tasting tomatoes: These are the sacrifices we're prepared to make for the future of the planet.

That's a good thing for those of us who love to play golf on other continents, but it doesn't move the world closer to resolving a long list of energy, climate and environmental challenges. In fact, it pushes the solutions further away.

Even if you think that climate change is a left-wing crock, this ought to be a matter of gnawing concern. Global energy use is growing faster than population. It's expected to double by midcentury, and most of the growth will be in fossil fuels. Disasters like the BP oil spill attract world-wide attention, but the main environmental, economic and geopolitical challenge with petroleum isn't the oil that goes into the ocean; it is the oil we continue to

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use exactly as we intend.

Many people assume that we'll conquer our addiction through technological innovation. But engineering breakthroughs not only enable machines to do more work with less fuel; they also make it possible to manufacture new and desirable products, swelling our contentment as consumers and further increasing our dependence.

Many supposedly green strategies pose a similar conundrum. Consider locavorism—the idea that it's irresponsible to eat food that was produced more than a short distance from where it's eaten. But shipping is almost always a trivial contributor to the environmental impact of eating.

Much more ecologically meaningful is what we eat, how it was grown, how much irrigation it required, what was sprayed on it and how it was prepared. Locavorism is appealing because it feels enlightened but entails no actual sacrifice. A colleague of mine produces her own eggs by raising chickens in her backyard. But she also drives individual hens to the veterinarian, giving her breakfasts an impressively huge carbon footprint.

Even when we act with what we believe to be the best of intentions, our efforts are often at cross-purposes with our goals. Increasing the efficiency of lighting encourages us to illuminate more. Relieving traffic congestion reduces the appeal of public transit and fuels the growth of suburban sprawl. A robust market for ethanol exacerbates global hunger by diverting cropland

from the production of food.

We may believe that we care about the world's deepening environmental challenges and are merely waiting for scientists, environmentalists, politicians and others to come to their senses and implement effective solutions. But we already know more than enough, and we have for a long time. We just don't like the answers.

Flying from New York to Melbourne in 1958, on a propeller plane, consumed more energy per person than my 2010 flight did, but it was "greener" nevertheless. It required stops in San Francisco, Hawaii, Canton Island, Fiji and Sydney, and it cost each coach passenger something like a quarter of that year's U.S. median family income, each way.

If comparably slow and costly flights were the only travel option available today, I and almost all of my fellow passengers would certainly have stayed home: a gain for the environment, though a loss for the global economy. The only unambiguously effective method of reducing the long-term carbon and energy cost of air travel is to fly less—a behavioral change, not a technological one.

But where's the fun in going nowhere?

Mr. Owen is the author of "The Conundrum: How Scientific Innovation, Increased Efficiency, and Good Intentions Can Make Our Energy and Climate Problems Worse," from which this piece is adapted.