

Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

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Preventing Future Oil Disasters

Dear EcoGirl: My heart is breaking watching the Gulf oil gusher. How can we help prevent such disasters in the future? *Signed, Weeping*

Dear Weeping: You're not alone in your response. Many of us are horrified at the unfolding Gulf devastation, and hope to never see anything like it again. Unfortunately, though, our demand for oil is pushing drilling into riskier regions, so we'll likely see increasing eco-calamities until we solve the underlying problems.

Certainly, the remedies start with holding BP accountable for its actions and improving drilling regulation. However, we also need to recognize that petroleum is inherently harmful to people and ecosystems throughout its life cycle.

And, since we all use petroleum in our lives and our society, we have a responsibility to help stop the damage.

But what can we do? My column last month offered tips for reducing our largest *direct* use of oil, passenger cars. (See www.patriciadines.info/EcoGirl3j.html.)

This month, I'll explore how we can reduce our *indirect* oil use, and help steer our culture in a wiser direction.

Reducing Our Indirect Oil Impacts

Most consumer products require notable amounts of oil for their production, transport, and disposal. Here are some important ways to trim those impacts:

1) Prioritize local, natural, and durable products. Buying *local* reduces the fuel needed to transport goods; choosing *natural* avoids petroleum products, including plastics and petrochemicals; and getting *durable* items avoids disposables and better uses each product's eco-costs.

2) Buy less, reuse, and recycle to cut our total oil consumption, get full benefit from the oil we do use, and lighten

our net burden on the earth. (More about this is at www.storyofstuff.com.)

Encouraging Wiser Policies

In addition to individual action, we need to insist that our leaders constructively address the escalating eco-collapses that put all our lives at risk. Our current shared frustration can motivate us to make the vitally-needed large-scale changes, but only if we act quickly, intelligently, and in large enough numbers.

Many government actions are being suggested; here are three essential ones:

1) Rapidly ramp up renewable energy sources, while significantly cutting total energy usage to meet that smaller supply. The luxury of the oil age is ending, because of pollution and supply constraints. But we can minimize the pain of hitting these limits by proactively transitioning to wiser ways. We have the technology and community interest; we just need the commitment to change.

Note: This means solar and wind power, not "clean" coal (which isn't) or nuclear (which is too costly and hazardous).

2) Shift government subsidies from fossil fuels to clean energy. The U.S. oil and gas industry receives between \$15 and \$35 billion a year in taxpayer subsidies, according to Greenpeace. This helps keep oil prices artificially low, tilting our individual decisions towards self-harm. But, instead of funding our own demise, we can invest in our well-being, by adjusting what we reward.

3) Implement a cap-and-dividend program, so that the marketplace reflects the real costs of fossil fuels and we each have the funds to adapt. This approach makes much more sense than the easily-manipulated complexities of cap-and-trade. (See www.capanddividend.org.)

Learning the Key Lessons

To help nurture our cultural shift, I suggest we also receive and pass along these core lessons from this experience:

1) The environment is vital to our everyday survival, and when it's harmed, the ripples often travel far.

2) The expected eco-crises can happen suddenly and irreversibly; they won't necessarily be gradual or fixable.

3) Disaster prevention is cheaper, easier, and more effective than cleanup.

4) We'll all be living with the result of our collective eco-choices.

If we can integrate these insights into our everyday culture, perhaps this painful event can be the wake-up call our country finally hears. But if we keep delaying action, we'll increasingly feel as the Gulf folks do — desperate, hopeless, and angry about the lives and income lost because of our own foolish actions.

The real bottom line is that we can (and must) meet humanity's needs without disabling nature's precious life-giving ecosystems. We each can help create that better world by what we do today.

For more information and actions, see www.patriciadines.info/EcoGirl3k.html.

Ask EcoGirl is written by Patricia Dines, Author of The Organic Guides, and Editor and Lead Writer for The Next STEP newsletter. Email your questions about going green to <EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info> for possible inclusion in future columns. Also see "Ask EcoGirl" on Facebook! And contact EcoGirl for information about carrying this syndicated column in your periodical.

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