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Review of Green Illusions: The Dirty Secrets of Clean Energy and the Future of Environmentalism by Ozzie Zehner

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As we grapple with climate change and pollution, resource scarcity and rising prices, it’s clear we need to make difficult choices about our energy consumption. In the opinion of many, the solution begins and ends with increased investment in renewable energy systems, an investment that will help us cut back on emissions and lower prices—while creating economic opportunity here at home. Ozzie Zehner doesn’t share that opinion. His critique of modern American environmentalism in Green Illusions maintains that many of us could be wrong.

Zehner begins by addressing the seductive nature of renewable energy systems, dissecting popularly circulated solutions, and arguing that we are nowhere close to finding a technology capable of moving us past the fossil-fuel-intensive lifestyle we’ve chosen. From solar panels to wind farms, biofuels to clean coal, he shows that each “solution” isn’t a solution at all. In fact, each is part of the problem.

His deconstruction of the industry helps to make sense of our affinity for renewable energy. He points to popular media and mainstream environmentalism as culprits busy selling the renewable energy ideal to an unversed public while ignoring numerous options that could be far more effective in confronting climate change. He points out that alternative energy production expands energy supplies, placing downward pressure on prices, which spurs demand, entrenches energy-intensive modes of living, and finally brings us right back to where we started—high demand and so-called insufficient supply.

It takes some time to get there, but Zehner eventually begins to spell out a series of options that help us look at energy in a brand new way. He touches on energy-efficient lighting, walkable communities, and suburban sprawl. He offers practical solutions readily available to average homeowners seeking to minimize energy use in their day-to-day lives. He then points to some of the many causes of our energy-intensive lifestyle that aren’t often discussed. Examples include commercials aimed at children, corporate influence trumping citizen representation, measurements of the nation’s health in dollars rather than well being, and media concerned with advertising over insight.

Green Illusions commendably illustrates the importance of energy to our everyday lives. Almost every decision we make—from where we live to where we work, to what we eat and how we seek entertainment—provides an opportunity to choose between an energy-intensive lifestyle and one more mindful of consequences.

Zehner is right to suggest that this problem won’t necessarily be solved by the same productivist mentality that got us here in the first place. But it’s fair to argue that he uses this opportunity to dismiss renewable technologies far too quickly. The need to change the way we think about energy doesn’t alter the fact that we need at least some energy, both now and in the future. And where will that energy come from? Should we give up on renewable resources simply because they won’t by themselves solve our energy problems?

It’s true we can focus on saving energy, or on better policies that will conserve energy, but we can’t pretend that we can quit consumption cold turkey. Our energy has to come from somewhere. Zehner comes dangerously close to implying that as long as we boost efficiency and create policies that lead to less energy use and more conservation, the coal-intensive status quo is acceptable.

But continually burning coal to meet our energy needs is not acceptable. The conversation cannot be about replacing conventional resources wholesale; it needs to be about diversification and moving away from those that are most harmful. We may minimize our need for electricity, but we aren’t going to eliminate it entirely. Though they may not be perfect, renewable energy technologies will play an important role in providing our minimum energy needs. They can be improved upon, but they can’t be dismissed.

In the end, Green Illusions asks more questions than it answers, which is a good thing. It’s imperative that we spend more time considering the energy issues that really matter, not those being foisted upon us through mainstream media and other
facets of popular culture. As a nation, we have hard decisions before us. We need to find actual, tangible solutions that will make a real difference. Our path begins with critical thinking and informed choices. This book helps us get started.

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