

## ENVIRONMENT

Book Review

### **The petroleum party is over, but don't turn out the lights yet**

ANDREW NIKIFORUK

1447 words

14 May 2005

[The Globe and Mail](#)

D8

English

All material copyright Bell Globemedia Publishing Inc. or its licensors. All rights reserved.

The Long Emergency: Surviving the End of the Oil Age, Climate Change, and Other Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century

By James Howard Kunstler

Atlantic Monthly Press, 305 pages, \$31.95,

Silent Snow: The Slow Poisoning of the Arctic

By Marla Cone

Grove Press, 246 pages, \$33.50

Several months ago, two bright U.S. activists set tongues wagging with a testy essay called *The Death of Environmentalism*. The passionate missive accused environmentalists of digging themselves into special-interest holes where technical policy fixes ruled the day. It also blasted tree-huggers for completely blowing the climate-change debate by asking “not what we can do for non-environmental constituencies but what non-environmental constituencies can do for environmentalists.”

Enviros, in short, had failed to break out of their unique, university-educated ghettos with a hopeful message that engaged desperate housewives, let alone frantic soccer moms.

The essay hammered home many truths and may mark an important turning point for greens. But its most salient criticism concerns the movement's chronic inability to frame issues politically in language and values the average North American can understand. Take Kyoto, for instance. Enviros framed it as a greenhouse-gas problem requiring complicated formulas, carbon trading and one-tonne challenges. Yet the real issue, as many informed geologists know, is the stuff of headlines: the end of cheap fossil fuels, the conservation of a precious resource being burned willy-nilly.

Fortunately, James Howard Kunstler, the son of a diamond trader, gets the point. He represents a new wave in green thinking that is funny, irreverent and blunt. When university students recently asked him what might awaken North Americans to their perilous addiction to cheap oil, he answered, a “slap upside the head.” So, Kunstler is no Amory Lovins.

Most readers, however, will recognize Kunstler as the anti-urban sprawl guy and the witty author of *The Geography of Nowhere*, a book urban planners and developers still refuse to read. They probably won't read *The Long Emergency*, either. It's already giving cornucopians indigestion, and once again dishes the follies of suburbia ("the greatest misallocation of resources in world history"). It also reads like a puritanical Old Union tract on the consequences of bad decision-making. To his eternal credit, Kunstler doesn't predict the end of the world; he just doesn't think that Wal-Mart, monster homes or suburban high schools have much of a future.

Kunstler begins by announcing that the great petroleum party is over. The depletion of oil and natural gas resources on this continent has been well documented by many geologists and social critics, including Kenneth Deffeyes, **Julian Darley**, Walter Youngquist and Alfred Bartlett. But Kunstler adds some twists of his own. He notes that cheap oil largely built the U.S. empire and accounts for its bloodied police mission to Iraq. Affordable fossil fuels, in turn, invited China to export all those plastic gadgets that appear on Wal-Mart shelves, and it permitted Canada to give up its trains as well as any sense of urban discipline.

But depleted oil fields in Saudi Arabia and the North Sea are sending prices up. The fact that a quarter of the world's drilling rigs are now punching holes under lakes, subdivisions and parks in Western Canada signals that our favourite fuel is no longer a cheap date. "Let us recognize that we are moving into a new phase of history," Kunstler argues. "Let's be brave and wise about it, and prepare to move on."

But that's where the trouble begins. Addicts can't imagine the end of a high any more than market economists can imagine a bust. Nor will the proverbial alternatives, so blessed by enviros, actually provide much warmth or light. Make no mistake about it, we'll need every watt generated by wind farms, solar panels and biomass plants. We'll even need coal power and nuclear plants, too. But none is an energy source as portable or versatile as fossil fuels. As Kunstler says, "You can't fly airplanes on electric power from nuclear reactors." As for that fabled hydrogen economy, forget it. It's an energy hog, not an energy source. And the oil sands, the dirtiest and most unconventional of fossil fuels, will run out of natural gas, cash or water before they run out of oil.

Add to the problem of persistent high oil prices some inconveniences such as wacky weather, water shortages, the odd epidemic and interruptions in food supply. Thanks to pesticides, tractors and fertilizers, modern agriculture is pretty much a slave to fossil fuels. (If the average romaine salad head travels more than 2,500 miles to get to your table, just imagine how \$80-a-barrel oil will change what's on Caesar's plate.) So life could get complicated. Even globalism could be in big trouble. Disorder and discomfit could "could be the oil age's gift of entropy to future generations."

During the "long emergency," we will walk to work and probably heat our homes with wood, Kunstler says. Suburbia, home to half of the United States, will dry up. Big-box shopping will die off like dinosaurs. High-rises that can't be heated will be abandoned. Cities such as Houston, Atlanta, Orlando and Las Vegas will decline because they were

built for cars, not people. The “yuppie hyper suburbanites” of the West, with their mega cars and snazzy gear, will find their high-entropy way of life too extreme. “The 21st century will be much more about staying where you are than about going to other places,” Kunstler adds.

Fossil-fuel dealers in Calgary or Houston, of course, will hotly dispute Kunstler's vision, arguing that technology and markets will save the day. But the real truth is simply this: There is no Plan B other than drilling the hell out of every landscape, including wildlife reserves and the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains. If our myopic energy leaders, George Bush and Paul Martin, were heroin addicts, they would be running out of veins right now.

But a good plan and some hopeful leadership could postpone or change Kunstler's Road Warrior future. So too could an economic depression. And what if we truly valued fossil fuels for a change, and prioritized their uses, reserving natural gas, say, for home heating? Kunstler doesn't entertain the notion. Nor have Canada's gambling, dithering politicians. Yet the prospect of driving less, living locally and seeing “the standards of morality” replace “the cant of therapeutics” might actually be a relief from our current carbon fiesta.

The Long Emergency might also provide some respite for the Arctic by ending its damnable contamination with industrial chemicals. As many Canadians have long known, you can't dine on bear, whale, seal or Arctic char (some of the world's most nutritious foods) without ingesting unwanted condiments such as toxaphene, mercury and PCPs. Thanks to miracles of chemistry, these neurotoxins and gender shifters (all offspring of fossil fuels) have been hopping from the tropics to Arctic food chains and into the diets of northern peoples for decades. It is a classic case of trespass, a violation of property rights (both common and private) and in many respects a hardcore example of chemical warfare. But you won't find a lot of Canadian politicians incensed about it.

In *Silent Snow*, Marla Cone, a Los Angeles Times journalist, fleshes out this horrible and well-known story with all the dire competence we expect from journalistic doomsayers. Cone has none of the wit of Kunstler, and too much of the gravity of Rachel Carson. But she does a good job of highlighting the important work of Canadian scientists including Derek Muir, Andy Derocher and Eric Dewailly. These remarkable men discovered just how industrial pollutants transformed the Arctic's people and wildlife “into living, deep-freeze archives storing toxic memories of the industrial world's past and present,” and have been struggling with the consequences ever since. Should northerners avoid contaminated seal meat, or go the way of their southern cousins and dine on fast food? Most Inuk know the answer: a local diet carefully monitored for chemical shocks.

So is environmentalism dead? Nope. Probably no more so than fossil-fuel pollution. But it is evolving. And sooner or later, it will penetrate what Kunstler calls our “inattention, narcissism and almost unbelievably foolish complacency.” Well maybe. But it might take an emergency or two.

Contributing reviewer Andrew Nikiforuk is completing a book on biological invasions.

Illustration

Document GLOB000020050514e15e0000w