
# A bit of optimism in the air today

Posted by Heading Out on February 14, 2006 - 1:02am
Topic: Alternative energy
Tags: solar power, the power of the sun [list all tags]

In the post on Professor Deffeyes latest statement I quoted his comment that ""solar cells are not the only shimmering dreams." Which, when taken with the following statement that "Methane hydrates, oil shale and the Yucca Mountain radioactive waste depository would be better better off forgotten" suggests that he holds little hope for any of these technologies. This is, I believe a mistake. Not too long ago the Engineer suggested that I write away for the free copy of "The Power of the Sun", a one-hour free DVD on recent developments in solar energy, hosted by Nobel Laureates Walter Kohn and Alan Heeger, and produced by Professor Kohn (who is at UC Santa Barbara, which is why I heard of it). It is the one with the camel carrying a solar panel that powers the refrigeration for vaccines being carried across the African desert. I highly recommend it.

Not only does it show the considerable progress that solar power has made in the past decade, but also illustrates the commitment that both individuals and governments are making to this technology. No it is not going to solve all the problems that we have with the coming of depletion, but this was a very easy video to watch and gave me some confidence that solar is likely to make a larger contribution, and faster, than I had anticipated. (It also explains how they work, so that even I could understand it).

Today's BBC story shows the level that can now be reached, as a family in the outback of Australia now get virtually all their power from sun and wind.

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> The "something" they are in control of sits on the roof above our heads; a swathe of solar panels, book-ended by two small wind turbines on six- metre (yard) poles.
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> "All our power is run by solar and wind energy," says Lynn, "and we're learning how to manage that and how it works in our house."
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> "You do learn to manage just how much power you're using in the house," adds Chris. "You probably can't turn on an electric jug and a toaster at the same time.

The IEA is not confident that solar will make that much of a contribution

> Yet according to International Energy Agency forecasts, renewables (once again excluding large-scale hydro) will make up only 6% of the world's energy economy in 2030, with solar cells contributing a small fraction.

> It is an improvement on today's 2%, but hardly a ringing endorsement of their potential.

I am somewhat more optimistic.

I am reading Mark Jaccard's new book "Sustainable Fossil Fuels", about which I will have more to say when I am finished, but for now one of his statements has relevance.

> When I first visited China in 1990, I was told that almost 200 million people had no electricity. By the time of my visit in 2000, the estimate had dropped to below 100 million, and by 2004 the International Energy Agency dropped the estimate to 20 million.

And I come back to the image of the panels on the camel, and the new advances in thin film panels that, although now very expensive, will come down in price as demand and production increase. There are very many places in the world where a little electric power is going to make a lot of difference. And those changes, which may ease the burden a little from biofuels in the poorest countries, give me a little hope.

And having just watched the Chinese skaters recover from a punishing fall to take silver in the Olympics, I go to bed a little more optimistic tonight.