



We can also draw on historical experience regarding denial...

Posted by [Prof. Goose](#) on July 28, 2005 - 11:27am

Parts one and two of this series can be found [here \(1\)](#) and [here \(2\)](#).

We can also draw on historical experience to anticipate which denial defenses we will adopt when, as will surely happen, we are confronted by our grandchildren demanding to know why we did so little when we knew so much.

We can expect to see denial of knowledge ('I didn't know'), denial of our agency ('I didn't do it'), denial of personal power ('I couldn't do anything', 'no one else did anything'), and blaming of others ('it was the people with the big cars, the Americans, the corporations'). Since Americans are already increasingly reviled around the world, our consumption and resources would seem to be the first target of more sensible regimes to remove or downgrade, would it not?

For activists everywhere, it would appear crucial that an understanding of denial informs campaign strategy. As Cohen says, 'the distinctions [between different forms of denial] may be irrelevant to the hapless victim, but they do make a difference to educational or political attempts to overcome bystander passivity.'

Most importantly, one conclusion from all of this is that denial cannot simply be countered with information. Indeed, there is plentiful historical evidence that increased information may even intensify the denial. The significance of this cannot be over emphasized.

How many times have I thought about how the peak oil community consists of living relics of Enlightenment faith in the power of knowledge: 'If only people knew, they would act.'

To this end we dedicate most of their resources to the production of reports or the placement of articles and opinions in the media. As a strategy, so far, it is not working. Opinion polls do not reveal a high level of awareness of "peak oil" itself, but people do know there's a problem with foreign dependence. There are virtually no signs of any change in behavior. Indeed there are plentiful signs of reactive denial in the demands for cheaper fuel and alternate forms of energy.

A second conclusion is that the lack of visible public response is part of the self-justifying loop that creates the passive bystander effect. 'Surely,' people reason, 'if it really is that serious, someone would be doing something.' I see little evidence that anyone in wider society is paying any attention, though that may be changing. Are we going to be like the global warming movement, where we have vastly greater information with scarcely any more public action? The bystander loop has only tightened.

People will never spontaneously take action themselves unless they receive social support and the validation of others. Governments in turn will continue to procrastinate until sufficient numbers of people demand a response. To avert further problems will require a degree of social consensus and collective determination normally only seen in war time, and that will require mobilization

For all these reasons, the creation of a large and vocal peak oil movement must be an immediate and overarching campaign objective. People will not accept the reality of the problem unless they see that others are engaging in activities that reflect its seriousness. This means they need to be confronted by emotionally charged activities: debate, protest, and meaningful, visible alternatives.

Simply asking people to change their lightbulbs, plant a tree, or send in a donation, however desirable in themselves, will not build a social movement. These activities alone, although valuable, will persuade few to a different form of action that will be viewed, after a while, as irrational...everyone else is doing it, why can't I?

Anyone concerned about this issue faces a unique historical opportunity to break the cycle of denial, and join the handful of people who have already decided to stop being passive bystanders. The last century was marked by self-deception and mass denial.

There is no need for the 21st Century to follow suit.

(NB: this post is adapted and paraphrased (and in some places downright appropriated) from an article by George Marshall in the Ecologist. It originally contained a very interesting take integrating Cohen and a topic similar in many ways to peak oil: global warming (the original post can be found [here](#))).

I adapted and modified Marshall's excellent review of Cohen's book to the peak oil scenario. I have read Cohen's book a couple of times and this review is quite on point in many places, hence my approach. Any differences between the author's original post and mine are purely my doing.)

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