From Status Quo to New World Order: The Less Us and Japan's Resilient Energy Future

By 3p Guest Author | April 28th, 2011 0 Comments

By Rick Bunch

What did the BP Oil spill change for Americans? Very little. What can the spill teach us about how to recover from the disaster in Japan? More than you might think.

It has been almost exactly a year since the Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion and resulting massive oil spill from a BP well into the Gulf of Mexico. The spill had the potential to cause a major shift in the way Americans produce and consume fossil fuels – in the wake of the disaster, President Obama ordered a moratorium on off-shore drilling, and millions rallied in support of a clean up effort. But, as research studying the cultural effects of the spill by Erb Institute Director and Professor Andrew J. Hoffman shows, the conversation – and media coverage – soon turned to the economic impact of the disaster, and largely ignored the environmental impact.

Of course, the two are inextricable – loss of coastal habitat due to an environmental disaster is also the loss of livelihoods to the people who fish, lead tours and otherwise make their living on the Gulf Coast. But the way the story was framed, within the context of a global economic recession and continued conflict in the other Gulf, downplayed the environmental devastation. A year later, the moratorium has been relaxed and American fossil fuel consumption habits and attitudes seem largely unchanged.

So as the world anxiously watches Japan face what was one of the biggest nuclear accidents in history, we again have the opportunity to rethink the way we – as a global community – extract, generate, distribute and use energy. As it begins the slow process of recovery from both natural and manmade disasters, Japan has the potential to embrace both its resiliency as a people and its capacity for a resilient energy future.

Regardless of how one feels about the environmental and social consequences of fossil fuel and nuclear energy production and use, the lesson we can all draw from Deepwater Horizon and Fukushima Daichi is that we need

much more resilient energy systems. It turns out that increased use of alternative and renewable energy coincides closely with heightened resilience – a goal we can all agree on.

On the path of resilience

Professor Hoffman's research, which is detailed in a paper co-authored with P. Devereaux Jennings at the University of Alberta, Canada forthcoming in ***Journal of Management Inquiry***, compares the response to the BP spill with other environmental disasters, such as the Santa Barbara disaster of 1969, which saw millions of gallons of crude oil dumped into the Pacific and ocean beaches, catalyzing a public policy shift away from offshore oil production in California that has continued today.

In contrast, their research shows, the wake of the BP oil spill has brought a return to the status quo – in fact, it has been an enormous step backwards. The economic impact of the disaster was real, but because it was framed mostly in terms of dollars and cents, Americans lost sight of the very real environmental devastation wrought by fossil fuel production and use around the world. The disaster in the Gulf of Mexico provided an opportunity for genuine change in how we source and use oil, but we didn't take that opportunity.

What is happening in Japan might fall somewhere in between the two: the manmade nuclear disaster, touched off by a natural one, might not cause a worldwide moratorium on the development and use of nuclear energy. But it just might be a catalyst for change toward a more resilient energy infrastructure.

What is "resilient energy"?

A resilient energy infrastructure is, in a nutshell, the opposite of what most communities and countries have now. In the US, for example, our current system relies on distant sources of fuel (oil, gas, nuclear and coal), centralized energy generation and an aging grid that transports energy from production or transformation sites to consumers. Any of those three stages of energy production is interruptible by natural disasters, political and economic conditions, conflict and more; not to mention the environmental and social consequences when the system is working "smoothly." Conversations about solar, wind, geothermal and other "alternative" energy sources generally focus on how to adapt these fuels to the current infrastructure.

A more resilient model – one which would not be as vulnerable to large-scale disasters, interruptions and price shocks — would be both more diverse and more dispersed. First, it would involve a more diverse mix of fuel types, including much larger proportions of alternative sources. Second, it would mean a system that relies less on centralized energy generation and a big grid, and more on smaller clusters of energy production and consumption that closely match the way residents and businesses in any given region use energy.

Getting to resilience

The energy bill proposed by President Obama this January is an important first step. By calling for the US to get 80 percent of its energy from renewable sources by 2035, it signals a clear shift toward a clean – and more resilient – energy future. By tying clean energy to national security and economic strength, the proposal makes it clear that fossil fuels will not bring us closer to those goals in the long run.A diversified approach, backed by policy makers and scientists alike, is what can make us truly resilient to natural and man-made disasters now and long into the future.

About the author

Rick Bunch, managing director of **The Erb Institute for Global Sustainable Enterprise at the University of Michigan**, is a leading expert on development of business education and research programs around issues of sustainability and corporate social responsibility.

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Through May, 2008, at the Business and Society Program at The Aspen Institute, Bunch launched a new program for education and research on business-and-society topics in Chinese business schools.

From 2003 to 2005, Bunch was executive director of the Bainbridge Graduate Institute, near Seattle, Washington. Founded in 2002, BGI's mission is to be the leading values-driven business and management school that prepares individuals to transform the world of work and to help create sustainable, socially just economies and healthy environments.

From 1996 to 2003, Bunch served as director of business education at the World Resources Institute (WRI). He produced training conferences for business school faculty and program staff in North and Latin America and China. He also oversaw the development and publication of business-school curriculum, and developed and co-authored the Beyond Grey Pinstripes MBA program rankings.

Prior to joining WRI, he was executive director of the Washington Public Interest Research Group (WashPIRG), a grassroots environmental and consumer protection research and advocacy organization based in Seattle.

Bunch holds an MBA and environmental management certificate from the University of Washington and a bachelor's degree in political science from Yale University.

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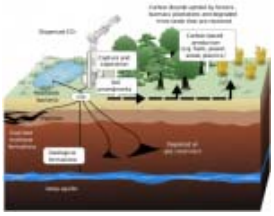

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