

Coal

A Source for the Twenty-First Century?

Excerpt from *Powering Our Future: An Energy Sourcebook for Sustainable Living*. The text was modified to fit the website.

Coal, abundant and cheap, provides a seemingly endless flow of electricity into homes and businesses throughout the world. Coal combustion powers our televisions, lights, and toaster ovens. While millions of people enjoy the luxury of cheap power, most individuals are unaware of the hidden costs inextricably connected to this cheap energy source. Burning coal poisons our ecosystems, our water reserves, our atmosphere, and our bodies. For our own welfare, it is crucial that we understand the inevitable costs that come with burning coal and either be willing to pay the price or seek new alternatives that better suit our values and needs. While economic progress and fulfilling global energy needs are worthy and necessary endeavors, we must not lose sight of our inherent human rights to health and well-being.

Today, coal plays a crucial role in industry and electricity production, and it will continue to be important well into the future. However, for coal to find a viable place in the twenty-first century, it must be held up to twenty-first century environmental standards. In the past few decades, the coal industry has made tremendous strides in advancing coal technologies, making it cleaner burning and less harmful to the environment and humanity. However, most coal-burning plants in operation today were built decades ago, and few nations hold the coal industry to the high environmental standards that the industry is capable of. As we shift into a more sustainable energy future, it is essential that we raise the emission standards for coal plants, while diversifying our energy mix with cleaner, renewable energy sources. Today, coal mining and burning continues to be a hazardous enterprise. We are all not only benefactors of this enterprise when we flip our light switches on, but accomplices and victims to the dangers posed by using coal as a primary source of energy.

Moving forward in the twenty-first century, humanity's greatest need is to implement the best of our Clean Coal Technologies, significantly increase our pollution standards for all energy industries, and tax energy in accordance with the true costs inflicted upon the public through environmental and health degradation. Inevitably, if energy sources were priced to reflect their true cost, companies would virtually stop burning coal, because it would be prohibitively expensive. The fact that these costs are not paid by the coal industry and consumers does not mean that they are not paid, but rather they are externalized by the company, shifting the burden to other parts of society. We pay these costs in the form of taxes, the depletion and degradation of natural resources, the deterioration of our health and the associated healthcare costs. Let us remember that a standard of living is largely the art of acquiring. A high quality of life is an art of living healthily and vibrantly. A driving desire for wealth and prestige has caused many global societies to confuse these. While they can both be gained simultaneously when developed consciously and effectively, we cannot experience a high quality of life until we understand and pay the full price of our energy sources - including coal.