

HEAT FROM GEORGE MONBIOT

By
Hank Schachte

I have just this moment finished reading HEAT and though it is laudable and well worth reading it does make certain assumptions and overlooks important elephants lurking in important corners. I think it might be useful to review Mr. Monbiot's ideas from a more North American vantage, even a Saturna Island vantage, if you like, though I hope the following comments will not discourage interested readers from pursuing a subject increasingly vital to us all, wherever we live.

Assumption One: People will abandon their cars.

This may possibly wash in England where Mr. Monbiot is situated and from whose inhabitants' habits he mines his comments, though I doubt it, but it will never wash in North America, probably not even in cities. The place is just too big, too sparse in humanity even considering the east and west coast corridors, and too rich. He could more properly have devoted his time (and mine) to realistic proposals to limit the size and especially the power of private automobiles. No properly designed and lightened automobile of any size needs more than ninety horsepower from whatever source to power it at legal speed limits up hill and down. Smaller four passenger vehicles need about 60 horsepower and could actually get along on less. If you are driving anything with more power than that you are the problem. These cars are already out there. The Honda Insight has 60 horsepower, the Prius (gas portion) has 75. They are both a hoot to drive. And anyway, it will soon be that or nothing, which makes cars of this power not only the best choice but the only choice. Also, things are happening faster with batteries for all-electric vehicles, much faster, than with fuel cells or hydrogen (a joke). The new lithium manganese batteries are not explosive and are quite light and there are other lithium experiments such as lithium iron phosphate. All-electric is coming.

Assumption Two: Houses don't have to get smaller.

What ever happened to 'Think small' or 'Small is beautiful', the reaction to the first serious oil shortages? Mr. Monbiot, who lives in a typical leaky old English house (built when energy was abundant and cheap) with one spouse and one infant daughter, never once mentions the idea that perhaps people don't need all those thousands of square feet of indoor space. As Warburton Pike was fond of saying, on Saturna you could live under a tree. Go outside, for god's sake. If you're not cooking or doing deskwork or washing yourself or watching and reading at night, put a coat on and go do something in nature's refreshing seasonally heated and cooled environment. And while we are on the subject, buy

stock in Stanfield's. Longjohns would be practical all winter, even on the mild west coast, if people didn't overheat public buildings so outrageously. Well, at least you don't have to do that at home. Try 60° F or even less. Many mornings, even in winter, I don't bother to light a fire (though my woods absorbs more carbon dioxide than a fire would spew into the environment anyway – perhaps I should be selling carbon credits, the new papal dispensation, as Monbiot points out). Of course, I have an electric heater on my north wall which takes the chill off whenever the wind blows long enough to fully charge my batteries. In fact, I've even seen the sun do it on a long bright day with only two 64 watt panels. But then again, the cabin is 400 square feet in total, upstairs and down (which is more than roomy enough for one or even two) and I am not a heavy power feeder at the trough. Which brings us to

Assumption Three: People need this much energy.

This is a big elephant in another of Mr. Monbiot's overlooked corners. He doesn't really address the fact that radical reduction (he believes it must be 90 per cent) in carbon use can only be achieved by reducing our energy consumption by nearly that same amount. Too much attention is given throughout the book to minor ways to produce energy more efficiently and cleanly without hammering home the point that the amount of energy we use is obscenely more than what is strictly necessary and we could stop it tomorrow without breakthrough technologies. We are all about to find that out; I used to think it would be my grandchildren but now imagine it is my kids or even (gasp) myself!

When we on the hilltop decided to produce our own power, the first fact we had to digest was that certain things just cannot be done. Clothes dryers, electric cooking stoves, room heat, ordinary bulbs, are all taboo. Get used to it: Some things just cannot be done at all. Run a clothesline (rigged inside in winter). At the same time, Mr. Monbiot dismisses both solar and wind as micro-generating sources of local power. He knows not of what he speaks. That's all we have on the hill and it is more than enough to have a comfortable, carbon-free domicile, as I would be pleased to demonstrate if he would get his head out of the tables graphs and data collected by others and go find out from the people who actually do it. Which leads me to

Assumption Four: People will not fly more slowly.

Once again, he has got his facts wrong. Mr. Monbiot compares jets to airliners of the pre-jet era. Propellers are good in modern form to about 400 knots and consume a fraction of the fuel of jet airliners commonly flying about 500 knots. The air at 25,00 feet is about as good from the perspective of weather avoidance as at 35-40,000 feet and requires less power to climb to. And a straight line (or great circle route) is still the same length. When faced with the choice of not

travelling at all or travelling at four-fifths the speed, which would you take? As for small planes, for which I admit to having a fondness, modern streamlined composite aircraft offer the potential of 30 to 40 miles per gallon and the miles are typically one-and-a-half times greater over the ground than point to point. This equates to 58 mpg in US gallons (Dynamic WT9, for example) at 150 mph, although older aircraft (like mine) don't do nearly that well, I admit in the interest of full disclosure.

So in spite of a commendable intent and a fine sense of urgency, poor assumptions combined with incomplete information and really no practical experience in alternative power in the life of the author have rendered the book and all its effort problematic as a guide to the near future. But I have saved the worst for last.

Assumption Five: You must join a group (or groups).

What about just closing the door on rooms you're not using, turning down the heat, turning off the lights, wearing longjohns in winter, buying LED or, at least, compact fluorescent bulbs, that clothesline? What about fixing up your old bike or getting better footwear? Going to town when there is more than one thing needing doing there, and a myriad of things you could actually do, instead of joining committees and going to meetings in heated buildings (probably in your car). Mr. Monbiot has in fact done some of these things, like bulbs and bicycles, in his own life. But in the last chapter, under Things We Can Do, he just appends a list of organisations. Is that it? Is that the sum total of his collected wisdom? That's not action, that's more talk.

Consumption is up to us – not collectively, either. There's nothing to wait for. It starts now. As for the real things – small houses, small cars, less and slower travel – when they come be ready, it won't hurt more than a bit. You might even find sailing, hiking and other non-invasive pastimes are actually fun and the reduced guilt will surprise you. The alternative, as Monbiot did clearly get right, is total destruction.

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