



Humanity Unbound: How Fossil Fuels Saved Humanity from Nature and Nature from Humanity (Policy Analysis 715) (Cato Policy Analysis)

Indur M. Goklany

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For most of its existence, mankind's wellbeing was dictated by disease, the elements and other natural factors, and the occasional conflict. Virtually everything it needed — food, fuel, clothing, medicine, transport, mechanical power — was the direct or indirect product of living nature. Good harvests reduced hunger, improved health, and increased life expectancy and population — until the next inevitable epidemic, crop failure, natural disaster, or conflict. These Malthusian checks ensured little or no sustained growth in population or well-being.

Then mankind began to develop technologies to augment or displace living nature's uncertain bounty. Gradually food supplies and nutrition improved and population, living standards, and human well-being advanced haltingly. The Industrial Revolution accelerated these trends. Mankind broke its Malthusian bonds. Growth became the norm. Population exploded, along with living standards and well-being.

Technologies dependent on cheap fossil fuels enabled these improving trends. Nothing can be made, transported, or used without energy, and fossil fuels provide 80 percent of mankind's energy and 60 percent of its food and clothing. Thus, absent fossil fuels, global cropland would have to increase by 150 percent to meet current food demand, but conversion of habitat to cropland is already the greatest threat to biodiversity. By lowering humanity's reliance on living nature, fossil fuels not only saved humanity from nature's whims, but nature from humanity's demands.

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