

A better future: We must try to get there from here

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Jackson Hole News & Guide

Flick on the switch of the light nearest you now.

Where did the power come from? Yes, it sounds like a question only a third grader could revel in, but really, how did the juice get to your home or office, from where did it come, and how was it generated?

Along with the modern wonder of electricity that makes the good life in Jackson Hole sensationally cushy, add in the clean water you can drink from the tap and a flush toilet instead of a pioneer bedpan or backyard latrine.

Little amenities we wouldn't want to be without. What, then, would make any of us 300 million Americans think that any of the 1.3 billion Chinese, many of them without, would want anything less?

Climate change is coming faster and when one adds in the feedback loops of thawing Arctic, the increasing releases of methane gas from the permafrost, and other human factors, there isn't a lot of time to choose between two possible futures.

As China aspires to power up, consuming huge amounts of electricity to feed its cities at the expense of rural folk in the hinterlands, are Americans willing to power down their consumption and meet the Chinese somewhere in the middle?

Or will we head toward our demise out of a naive sense of isolation or self pride?

The trend line for power generation needs in the US and China are on an upward path as steep as any route to the summit to the Grand Teton.

Increasingly, energy needs are expected to be met with coal—with, or without, a radical societal shift to more solar, wind, biofuel, hydro and yes, even nuclear.

Coal generates more than half of the electricity used in the U.S. and electricity consumption is expected to grow by 50 percent. Between now and the year 2025, 281,000 megawatts will need to be generated to meet demand and replace obsolete coal-fired plants. It's jaw dropping but fractional compared to the ramp up in China.

The Jackson Hole Center for Global Affairs, which has started a dialogue between coal-rich Wyoming and Shanxi, its counterpart in China, sees the writing on the wall, along with unlikely allies like General Electric, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and others.

We must pass through the coal bottleneck to reach the future but we can also approach it as paradox.

With technology and the business community coming together with government, more energy produced by coal can be generated more efficiently through coal gasification known as IGCC and still result in a net decrease in carbon dioxide emissions reaching the atmosphere.

At a time when the Bush Administration has been rocked back by events in the world, addressing climate change, by placing the transformation of how energy is produced at the top of its environmental agenda, could be a public relations coup that would reverberate around the world.

A bit of already positive news is that Lower Valley Power and its 20,000 customers in Wyoming and Idaho are serviced by one of the greenest regional electrical co-ops. But residents of Jackson Hole are not insulated in Shangri-la from the rest of the world.

If there is ever going to be a revolution with alternative energy as both a national security initiative and the boldest effort ever to spare Earth from the harshest social and ecological effects of climate change, it must necessarily begin with coal.

The Jackson Hole Center of Global Affairs has created a buzz around the promise of coal-gasification that has reached the ear of key policy makers in Washington, D.C. and Beijing.

While government must promulgate a mixture of lifestyle modifying regulations and incentives for industry to do what's right with coal gasification plants, consumers must back up the actions not merely with a willingness to pay a little more but all of us need to vote with our wallets in the choices we make.

The bright minds behind IGCC-----Republican, Democrat, Communist, Capitalist, in the U.S. and China-----know that the cradle of this effort didn't start in just any place. As a valley of clean air and sharper views, Jackson Hole, when set in repose, serves as a horizon of what's achievable when people over time strive for a common good built on a foundation of environmental health.