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"Peak oil" becomes burning issue



This Chinese oil rig is helping the Asian nation meet its enormous energy needs (Reuters)

Swiss scientists say politicians and the public should have a greater awareness of "peak oil" – the moment when the world's maximum crude oil output is reached.

Researchers at Basel University warn that although climate change is grabbing more headlines than the possible exhaustion of fossil fuels, a conflict is brewing over crude oil.

"The question is not for how long we will have crude oil reserves, but for how long output can grow," warned Daniele Ganser, a historian and peace researcher at Basel University, who says the significance and explosive nature of the issue is underestimated by politicians and the public.

No one can agree on when exactly the moment of "peak oil" will be – some experts say 2010, others say 2020 or 2030 – but it is a serious problem as crude oil output has grown for decades and positively boomed with the industrialisation of the emerging nations.

An end to the spiral is not in sight and once the global peak is reached, a further increase is simply not possible.

"Conflict over crude oil will increase in proportion with its scarcity – the global economy is facing a recession," said Ganser.

"We are running to the oil limit without thinking. It's as if we planned to climb the Matterhorn to get to the summit at midnight, leaving it much too late to descend."

Low visibility

Ganser says the issue of peak oil is barely a topic in public debate because it is not immediately visible.

"If oil supplies run low, they are imported," he said. "That also goes for the oil-producing countries that have already reached the peak."

A switch to gas or coal is not a solution, according to Ganser. "These energy sources are also finite and will one day reach their maximum output. It would therefore be wrong for Switzerland to turn to gas power plants."

Ganser points out that as early as 1978 Switzerland had defined the containment of crude oil dependency and the promotion of renewable energy types and efficiency as goals in its energy concept.

"Resource conflicts"

Wolfgang Sachs, a sociologist at the Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy, is also calling for a reduction in energy consumption.

"It is a stroke of luck that climate chaos and the issue of peak oil have hit the global agenda at virtually the same time," he says, explaining that peak oil and the climbing price of oil have a direct effect on every business's finances.

"That means that people in the northern countries, which won't be affected by the climate chaos until later, will take the problem seriously."

Sachs says an economic development that is based on fossil fuels as a source of energy is a "large security risk".

"The fact that oil is finite is a destabilising factor," he said. "Before we reach the ecological limits of what we can bear, we will reach the social ones."

He describes ethnic and social conflicts such as those in Nigeria as "precursors of resource conflicts".

Like Ganser, Sachs sees a way out of the crisis in renewable energies, new and efficient technologies and in a drastic reduction of energy consumption.

"Cars with a top speed of 100km/h would be absolutely adequate," he said.

swissinfo, Andreas Keiser

OIL HISTORY

Between 1850, when crude oil started being supplied and 1950, the daily global consumption rose to six million barrels. In 2000 the daily global consumption was 85 million barrels.

French oil company Total has estimated the maximum possible daily global production to be 100 million barrels a day. Experts believe this limit will be reached between 2010 and 2030.

The world's biggest oil producers are Saudi Arabia, Russia, the United States, Iran, Mexico and China.

KEY FACTS

- In 2004, Switzerland imported 12.66 million tons of crude oil.
- Heating oil accounting for a quarter of all energy use that year, while fuel for vehicles was nearly a third.
- Total energy use can be divided into three roughly equal parts: households, transport and industry-services.
- Crude oil makes up 57% of Switzerland's energy sources, followed by hydroelectric (14%), gas (12%) and atomic energy (10%).

LINKS

- Peak Oil - Basel University (German) (<http://histsem.unibas.ch/peak-oil/>)
- Wolfgang Sachs (http://www.wupperinst.org/en/contact/cont/index.html?&kontakt_id=53&bid=113)
- Daniele Ganser (<http://www.danieleganser.ch/e/biographie/index.htm>)
- Swiss Energy Office (<http://www.bfe.admin.ch/index.html?lang=en>)

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