

Prize or Curse?

By Paul Epstein and Chidi Achebe

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IT IS HARD THESE DAYS TO THINK ABOUT OIL. Images of blackened birds, hostages on oil rigs, and war are not pleasant. But since so many of the world's ills stem from drilling this "Black Gold," a review of its multifarious impacts helps narrow in on solutions that could change our course.

In Buzzards Bay, 14,700 gallons lie subject to shifting winds in an oil slick, tarnishing inlets, egrets, shellfish, and loons. On Nigeria's offshore rigs, 97 hostages are being held, crowning decades of conflict over oil.

Once called "The Prize" by Daniel Yergin in 1991, oil has become "the curse."

In November the spill from the Prestige - carrying twice the oil as the Exxon Valdez - stained the rugged Atlantic coast of Galicia, Spain, affecting more than 100,000 porpoises, puffins, gannets, and kittiwakes. It has damaged fisheries, livelihoods, and tourism. In Africa's most populous nation, sludge sickens communities as slicks bathe Niger River banks. From extraction to combustion, oil is hazardous to our health - and to our security.

The increasing use of oil, as well as coal and natural gas - all fossil fuels - has come at an enormous price. An "oiligarchy" controls an expanding empire, and its entrails and discharges defile our air and land and water. More drilling threatens our national parks and wildlife refuges.

In Nigeria, Ecuador, and Venezuela, oil has widened economic divides and the wealth generated engenders conflicts worldwide. Supply lines - internationally and via our national grid - are vulnerable to political instabilities.

Nigeria has suffered profoundly from political unrest fueled by oil and from reprisals in which thousands have been killed. The corruption spawned by oil casts a vast net of social pain that has not abated with the transition to democracy.

Venezuela is in turmoil, with oil the trophy. Angola, rich in oil, diamonds, and gold, has just ended a 30-year war, leaving physical devastation across the land. The war in Afghanistan was brewing for years before 9/11 - to secure a pipeline from the newest megafind of oil along the Caspian Sea. The list, including the Iraq war and its uncertain aftermath, goes on.

Meanwhile, deep in the Ecuadorean forest, discharges from 333 wells despoil Indian homelands and contaminate the head waters of the Amazon. In the Gulf of Mexico, fish nibbling near drilling sites get their fill of mercury and pass it on to birds, marine mammals, and humans who eat them. Refining emits benzene, which causes cancer, and burning pollutes the air and water with mercury, particles, and smog and causes acid rain.

Climate change - a threat the oil companies could not have foreseen - is the "de-icing" on the cake as glaciers and polar caps crack and retreat.

We are rapidly approaching a critical climatic and social threshold, and we must find a substitute for this finite resource. As "The Prize" foretold, oil has become the central actor in the modern world, and an unstable climate and disease threaten humans and wildlife and the very forests and coral habitat we all depend upon.

We need a new energy policy - and urgently. We can double our efficiency - as is done in most of Europe and Japan - with hybrid cars, "green buildings," and "transport oriented growth." Alternative energy sources like solar panels already light homes, clinics, and schools in developing nations, power computers and small businesses, cook and refrigerate food, and purify and pump water for consumption and agriculture. As clean water grows dearer, solar energy can turn sea water into fresh supplies.

In the past century, huge subsidies assisted oil and facilitated networks of highways and airports. Switching to clean energy sources will require a lot of creativity and a lot more collaboration than the world has seen to date. But the potential costs of neglect are unthinkable, and the proper incentives

can create a new clean engine for the global economy and propel us into a much healthier future.

Dr. Paul R. Epstein is associate director of the Center for Health and the Global Environment at Harvard Medical School. Dr. Chidi Achebe, a Nigerian physician, works in Boston and studies at the Harvard School of Public Health.