



Earth Hour: No Thanks

Ross McKittrick

I was recently asked by a journalist for my thoughts on the importance of Earth Hour. Here is my response, edited slightly for readers outside this area.

I abhor Earth Hour. Abundant, cheap electricity has been the greatest source of human liberation in the 20th century. Every material social advance in the 20th century depended on the proliferation of inexpensive and reliable electricity. Giving women the freedom to work outside the home depended on the availability of electrical appliances that free up time from domestic chores. Getting children out of menial labour and into schools depended on the same thing, as well as the ability to provide safe indoor lighting for reading. Development and provision of modern health care without electricity is absolutely impossible. The expansion of our food supply, and the promotion of hygiene and nutrition, depended on being able to irrigate fields, cook and refrigerate foods, and have a steady indoor supply of hot water. Many of the world's poor suffer brutal environmental conditions in their own homes because of the necessity of cooking over indoor fires that burn twigs and dung. This causes local deforestation and the proliferation of smoke- and parasite-related lung diseases. Anyone who wants to see local conditions improve in the third world should realize the importance of access to cheap electricity from fossil-fuel based power generating stations. That's how we developed.

The whole mentality around Earth Hour demonizes electricity. I cannot do that, instead I celebrate it and all that it has provided for humanity. Earth Hour celebrates ignorance, poverty and backwardness. By repudiating the greatest engine of liberation it is nothing more than an hour devoted to anti-humanism. It invites people to become sanctimonious do-gooders by turning off trivial appliances for a trivial amount of time, in service of some ill-understood abstract concept of "the Earth," all the while hypocritically retaining the real benefits of electricity. People who want to do without electricity in service of some symbolic solidarity with nature should shut off their fridge, stove, microwave, computer, water heater, lights, TV and all other appliances for a month, not an hour. And pop down to the cardiac unit at the hospital and shut the power off there too.

I don't want to go back to nature. Haiti just went back to nature. For humans, living in "Nature" meant a short life span marked by violence, disease and ignorance. People who work to end poverty and disease are fighting against nature. I hope they leave their lights on.

Here in Ontario, through the use of pollution control technology and advanced engineering, our air quality has dramatically improved since the 1960s despite the expansion of industry and the power supply. If, after all this, we are going to take the view that the remaining air emissions outweigh all the benefits of electricity, and that we ought to be shamed into sitting in darkness for an hour, like naughty children who have been caught doing something bad, then we are setting up unspoiled nature as an absolute, transcendent ideal that obliterates all other ethical and humane obligations. No thanks. I like visiting nature but I don't want to live there, and I refuse to accept the idea that civilization is something to be ashamed of.

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