

Watt's Happening? #278

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Here Comes the Sun

a new book by Bill McKibben



*In our difficult and dangerous world, there is one big thing that is going right:
the amazing rise of solar energy!*

“**And in true Hollywood fashion,** our liberation and our destruction are arriving at precisely the same time, offering us a remarkable choice. Everything is going wrong, except this one big thing. Our species, at what feels like a very dark moment, can take a giant leap into the light. Of the sun.”

So ends the introduction of Bill McKibben's latest book, *Here Comes the Sun: a last chance for the climate and a fresh chance for civilization*.

You may remember McKibben for his first rather depressing book *The End of Nature* generally considered one of the first important books sounding the climate change alarm. I know I will never forget it, and it inspired me to take the matter very seriously indeed.

But his newest effort is much more positive. The “one big thing” that is going right? The amazing, unexpected, precipitous rise of solar power.

(Note: wind power is also a form of solar power, because wind is caused by the uneven heating of the earth's surface by the sun.)

THE MAGIC LINE

Sometime in the early 2020's we passed the magic line where producing energy from the sun dropped below the cost of fossil fuels.

“That's not yet common knowledge – we still think of photovoltaic panels and wind turbines as ‘alternative energy,’ as if they were the Whole Foods of power, nice but pricey. In fact – and more so with each passing month – they are the Costco of energy, inexpensive and available in bulk.”

And going up quickly! In 2024, 92.5 percent of all new electricity brought online globally came from renewables. In early 2025, fossil fuels were producing less than half of US electricity, a first.

In 2024, a gigawatt's (GW) worth of solar panels (Site C dam produces about a GW) were going up every 24 hours. This year, China is putting up 3 GW of solar (three Site C dams equivalent) EVERY DAY!

NO DEBATE

We are no longer debating if we should go 100% renewables or not. Around the world we are now racing to see who gets there first.

China is leading of course, and “well on it’s way to being the earth’s first ‘electro-state’; something like half of all clean energy has been installed within its borders.”

But India and much of Asia are also rushing ahead, and Australia and most of Europe are accelerating their already wide-spread adoption of solar. (I must add that Canada is in some kind of limbo, struggling with the energy transition ... and rapidly being left behind.)

A DESPERATE RACE

So this is all good news, but is it fast enough? “We are in a desperate race; ... scientists have told us that to stay on anything like a survivable path we must cut greenhouse gas emissions in half before the decade is out.”

The last three years have been the hottest ever recorded, and may be the hottest in human history and possibly, according to paleoclimatologists, the hottest in the last 125,000 years.

We are changing the climate

dramatically, and carbon dioxide is the cause. The atmospheric jet stream is shifting and, as the poles warm, the great ocean currents that bring warmth from the equator to the north are faltering.

“It’s hard
to imagine
someone
declaring a
war to get
more sunlight”

Bill McKibben

ENERGY DEMOCRACY AT LAST

The list of climate problems is long, but McKibben sees the coming years a shift not in just how we produce energy, but in how we treat each other too.

“Relying on energy sources that are abundant instead of scarce – the sun and the wind each day produce thousands of times as

much energy as we could ever use – could even reconfigure our ideas of competition and conquest. Unlike oil and gas, sun and wind can’t be hoarded...and for a species that has become almost fatally disconnected from the natural world, the sun offers a way back into a relationship with reality.”

“We have the chance to join in a great global project, providing affordable energy to every human community even as we stave off our greatest threat. It could prove a unifying mission for a divided world ... This quest involves bringing our star down to earth to make that earth work – what could be more quintessentially human?”

CAN WE AFFORD IT?

He also answers some key questions. Can we afford it? Can the poor world afford it? Is there enough stuff? And do we have enough land? Yep to all of them!

But McKibben is not overly optimistic. We have a dangerous and difficult road ahead. But it is the only road left, and we are boldly striding down it to what could be a much better world: a world powered by the limitless eternal light of the sun.

Thanks Bill, for all you do!
