The Oil Drum: Europe
DISCUSSIONS ABOUT ENERGY AND OUR FUTURE

Unique Times -- and the Future

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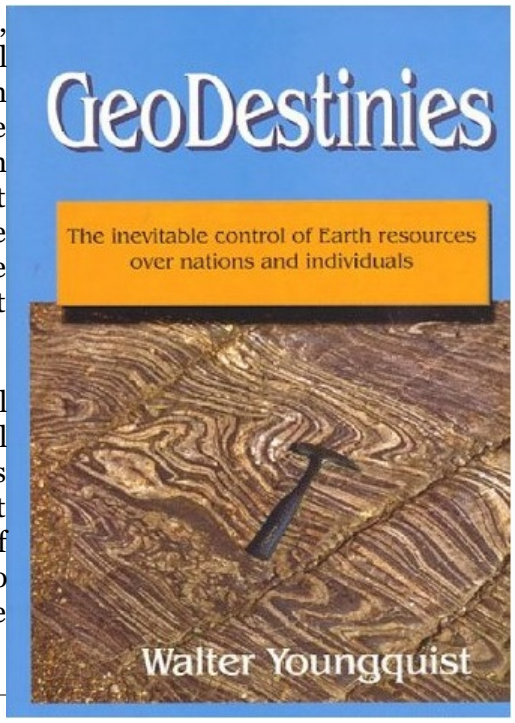

This is a guest contribution by **Dr Walter Youngquist**, best known for **GeoDestinies**, his classic text on global resources and their depletion that was first published in 1997. I had the good fortune to meet Dr Youngquist at the ASPO conference in Houston two years ago and since then we have shared regular correspondence. Dr Youngquist (now aged 88) is updating GeoDestinies and last week he sent me this piece, seeking opinion. I always find his prose to be eloquent, simple, often understated and as a result very powerful.

I asked if we could publish this short piece on The Oil Drum and he kindly agreed. Many readers of The Oil Drum might feel that they already know much of what is written here, but you need to stop and ask how it is that we know what we know? When the new edition of GeoDestinies is published I'd warmly recommend this to Oil Drum readers as a well referenced, well written source spanning energy, soils, water, metals and population.

Unique Times -- and the future

In various contexts throughout this volume *[GeoDestinies]* it is pointed out that we now live in unique times, unlike any in the past, and unlike what any will be in the future. Yet many people in developed countries do not realize the unique years we have had since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. This fact, as a framework to understand the present and what lies ahead cannot be overemphasized.

We have developed technology by which we have exploited the Earth's resources to a degree never before seen and which, in the case of non-renewable resources – fossil fuels, and metals as well as nonmetals, can never be repeated. We have drawn both from the past, and also mortgaged the next few centuries at least by degrading the vital renewable resources of soil and freshwater, which are not renewable within the span of several lifetimes. This is in contrast to many centuries of history when, lacking technology of today, things changed very slowly.

All this has resulted in a seismic difference in prospects for future generations. We, in these industrial centuries, and those seeking now to industrialize, have left very little for those who will exist for the duration of the presumably million years of life of a typical mammalian species. We have done all this for enjoying (for some of us) a brief degree of

affluence beyond anything ever before seen, and almost certainly will not happen again. Think about it as you drive your car to the supermarket with myriad varieties of food from far and near, or to the shops at the mall, on asphalt-paved roads in a vehicle most of which are powered by fossil fuel directly or indirectly.

The future of less will arrive for citizens of industrial and developing countries by small increments of change, but which, in retrospect will combine to be seen as a century of profound changes to a degree of rapidity and consequence as never before. We now live moment by moment, only moderately aware of these incremental changes. It is unlikely, although not impossible, that there will be catastrophic changes in lifestyles and economies. But slowly and inevitably the related problems of resource depletion and population growth will become increasingly apparent. We have the opportunity in various ways to modify the impact of these events, but so far there is little evidence this is being done. The industrial world and its political framework seems committed to the road of increased consumption and more people to consume, for that is what keeps the game going – for the moment, but is unsustainable very far into the future.

Walter Youngquist, November 2009