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Wild Heritage

By Todd Tanner

My friend Tim Linehan once told me a story about the unluckiest man in Montana. It seems that a fellow was driving his truck near the little town of Libby when he lost control and went off the road into a wooded ravine. It took the poor guy a couple of hours to get free of his rig and pull himself up the almost-vertical side of the canyon. Then, when he finally crawled out on the road, all beat to hell and covered in leaves and twigs, a hunter mistook him for a bear and shot him in the leg.

Talk about your bad days . . .

A few weeks ago I was down in Jackson Hole, Wyoming for a “Responsible Energy Development Symposium.” That’s a pretty fancy name for a bunch of sportsmen doing their best to protect the places they hunt and fish from industrialized oil and gas development.

The conference was organized by Trout Unlimited, the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, and the National Wildlife Federation under the Sportsmen For Responsible

Our country’s addiction to fossil fuels is killing us, our wildlife and our oceans. We simply must find new, cleaner energy technologies.



ART CARTER

Energy Development banner (www.sportsmen4responsibleenergy.org)

The meeting proceeded along fairly predictable lines. We heard about all the special places that

were getting chewed up by massive and unprecedented energy development, and how the sage grouse and mule deer and elk and trout were taking it on the chin, and how, when push came to shove, the

federal government was bending over backwards to make the energy companies happy, but didn’t seem to care all that much about hunters and anglers.

We’ve seen this before, of course. Sportsmen ask the BLM and the Forest Service to protect our wildlife and develop a balanced “multiple use” land management agenda. The politicians in Washington promise that they’ll take good care of us. Then they turn around and open more land to drilling and allow more roads, rigs and pipelines to impact critical wildlife habitat. In the words of the inimitable Steven Tyler, “It’s the same

old story; same old song and dance . . .”

To make matters even worse, it looks like we’ll be dealing with sky-high oil and gas prices for

the foreseeable future. Extreme prices, of course, will put even more pressure on wildlife.

So there's the first part of our story. The Feds and the energy companies seem happy to drive us off the metaphorical cliff. Now who's going to come along and shoot us?

Well, as much as it pains me to tell you this, it looks like we'll probably shoot ourselves. Only this time we're aiming a little higher than our leg.

Whatever your opinion on global warming, there's another major problem associated with fossil fuels. We know that when we burn gasoline (or coal, or diesel fuel, or home heating oil, or natural gas or jet fuel), we put carbon dioxide into the air. It's an inevitable byproduct of combustion.

We also know that our oceans are absorbing a tremendous amount of this CO₂. In fact, the National Oceanic and

Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) estimates that oceans have soaked up more than 500 billion tons of CO₂ – almost a third of the carbon dioxide we've created so far.

Unfortunately, all of our anthropogenic CO₂ is changing the water's chemistry. When you mix carbon dioxide with seawater, you produce something called carbonic acid. This carbonic acid has made our oceans 30 percent more acidic than they were at the start of the industrial age. If the trend continues, we may see a 150 percent increase in acidity by the end of this century.

Even worse, the Seattle Times recently reported that scientists are finding acidic, or "corrosive," seawater on the continental shelf a full hundred years earlier than they expected.

I spoke with oceanographer Richard Feely of the NOAA's Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory Carbon Dioxide Program and he was blunt in his assessment. He told me that the low acid, high PH ocean water our planet has enjoyed for the last 25 to 30 million years is changing. Our oceans are becoming acidic enough to damage coral reefs and dissolve the protective shells of plankton, pteropods and other calcifying organisms. There's also laboratory evidence that acidic seawater kills juvenile fish and fish eggs.

Dr. Feely, whose recent scientific paper, Evidence for Upwelling of Corrosive "Acidified" Water onto the Continental Shelf, documents the phenomena all the way from northern Mexico to central Canada. Dr. Feely described the situation as "astonishing and disturbing." He also said "the decisions we make over the next generation will affect our ocean ecosystems for millions of years."

Think about that for a second. We are literally changing the

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chemistry of our oceans. We're making our seawater more and more acidic. We're playing Russian Roulette with everything from salmon to striped bass. And yet we're not even talking about the impacts to the resource, or about the long-term ramifications for sportsmen. It's hard to believe.

So let's take a moment and tie this whole column together. On the front end, hunters and fishermen are constantly losing out to the roads, pipelines and drilling rigs of energy exploration. We're turning prime wildlife habitat into industrial zones and trading our mule deer and sage grouse for the right to spend \$4 (or more) on a gallon of gasoline.

On the back end, our addiction to oil and coal is radically altering the chemistry of our oceans. If we keep dumping CO2 into the atmosphere, we may, in the words of Senator Olympia Snowe (R-Maine), see "drastic, worldwide impacts in our oceans, from species migration and coral bleaching to widespread extinctions."

Which leaves us right in the middle of a burning bridge.

I have to be honest. I don't have all the answers. I'm not sure anyone does. But Jim Range, chairman of the board at the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, is absolutely right when he says we have to focus on "a blend of conservation and new, cleaner energy technologies," and when he points out that "we must all stand shoulder-to-shoulder and coordinate our movement if we are to win this battle. Nothing less than our future as sportsmen is hanging in the balance."

Here's the truth of it. If we're going to have any kind of a world fifty years from now – if we want our kids to hunt elk, mule deer and sage grouse, or fish for steelhead and stripers – then we'd better start breaking our addiction to fossil fuels. It's killing us. ☹

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