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Why 'Keep It In The Ground' Is Not Necessarily Green

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OPINION

Capital Flows , CONTRIBUTOR

Guest commentary curated by Forbes Opinion. Avik Roy, Opinion Editor. [FULL BIO](#)

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GUEST POST WRITTEN BY

Scott Tinker

Dr. Tinker is the director of the Bureau of Economic Geology at The University of Texas at Austin.



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Environmental activists, including one wearing a polar bear costume, protest the Obama administration's plans to allow new fossil fuel drilling on public lands and oceans, during a demonstration held by the 'Keep it in the Ground' coalition in front of the White House in Washington, DC, September 15, 2015. (SAUL LOEB/AFP/Getty Images)

Passionate voices in environmental, political and even academic spheres have

recommended elimination of 85% of global energy by keeping oil, natural gas and coal in the ground, thus cutting back on greenhouse gas emissions. This, they argue, is for the welfare of the global climate and of the impoverished who, they claim, will be hurt most by the impacts of climate change.

These activists suggest that fossil fuels can be replaced relatively easily with intermittent, low-density sources of energy such as wind and solar, as well as with massive production of chemical batteries in hundreds of new “gigafactories.” They have persuaded politicians to introduce “keep it in the ground” legislation, influenced regulators to subsidize renewable energy where renewable resources are poor, and helped to polarize the public.

The “keep it in the ground” mantra is misleading at best. At worst, the economic intervention that requires proliferation of “green” energy can actually hurt human development and endanger the environment. Access to secure energy — affordable, available, reliable and sustainable — is what underpins healthy economies, lifts underdeveloped nations from poverty and allows for investment in environmental sustainability. Lack of access to secure energy does the opposite, often forcing human migration from stagnant, impoverished nations.

One unified energy prescription for the entire world does not exist. Energy resources, including wind and sun, vary by geopolitical, geographic and geologic region. Energy regulation, policy and investment are also inconsistent across economies, and energy infrastructure varies from robust to nonexistent. Solar and wind represent a growing sector but still supply only about 2% of global energy demand.

In terms of fossil fuels, oil for transportation and coal for electricity generation have energized modern economies and positively impacted human health. Advances in oil and gas drilling and completion technology, improved environmental practices and more-modern regulatory policies have revitalized the industry in North America, making production from unconventional reservoirs, such as the shale basins in Pennsylvania, Ohio, North Dakota and Texas, mostly economic. As similar innovations are applied globally, natural gas could substitute for coal in power generation — reducing CO₂ emissions substantially, as it has in the United States. This approach should be applauded by anyone wanting to reduce global CO₂ emissions.

But nothing is perfect. Increased natural gas production means increased methane leaks. Studies show that natural gas leaks are not systemic, but instead mostly located at the wellhead or major valves that can be identified and fixed. That's a good thing for the atmosphere and for the producer. Surprisingly, [according to the Environmental Protection Agency](#), 40% of anthropogenic methane emissions come from fossil fuels. The remaining percentage comes from fermentation, landfills, agriculture, biomass and wastewater.

Alternatives to oil — such as natural gas, biofuels and fuel cells, coal, nuclear, wind and solar — are evolving. But again, nothing is perfect. In addition to the substantial land needed to install wind turbines and solar panels, the steel, copper, chemicals and rare-earth elements needed to manufacture turbines, panels, transmission lines and batteries require a massive amount of new mining and equally massive landfill disposal.

The ideology being thrust on the public that some energy is good and other



A promotional advertisement for the Ford Escape. At the top, a map of Texas is shown with a blue circle containing the number '1' and the Ford logo, indicating it is the '#1 Ford' in Texas. A red play button icon is in the top right corner. Below this, a red Ford Escape SUV is shown driving on a road with a city skyline in the background. The text 'TAHOMA GRAN OPERA' is partially visible. A blue button with white text says 'OBTÉN OFERTA'. Below that, '2017 ESCAPE' is written. At the bottom, the financing offer is listed: '0% APR for 72 Months', 'Ford Credit Financing', 'Plus \$1,000', 'Bonus Cash', and 'Plus \$1,000'.

TAHOMA GRAN OPERA

OBTÉN OFERTA

2017 ESCAPE

0% APR for 72 Months
Ford Credit Financing
Plus \$1,000
Bonus Cash
Plus \$1,000



energy is bad is cunning. But in reality, keeping 85% of the world's energy in the ground would jeopardize economic development and hurt environmental-sustainability investments. Mitigation and adaptation to a warming planet will require a lot of energy — *all energy*. Oil and natural gas — and in places even coal — play a vital role out of the ground as part of a secure energy mix for the foreseeable future.

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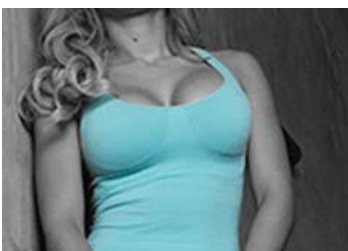
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