

There is no Planet B

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I have often wondered what is occurring in the minds of executives of corporations that provide petroleum, coal, and natural gas to industries that use these fuels to generate power or to individual consumers to drive vehicles. Anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions are changing Earth's climate more rapidly than the early predictive models indicated. The 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill is just one of many indications that humankind is in an increasingly precarious position on Earth (e.g., Cairns 2010). Continuing unsustainable practices will make the planet uninhabitable, and yet corporate executives have no escape plan – no Planet B.

What about escape to another planet? Earning large amounts of money may not be the best qualification for serving on a spaceship with limited space, but one factor is far worse. For humans to exist in the universe and be safe, they would have to be the most technologically advanced creatures (Vaidya 2010), which is not likely since the universe is 12-14 billion years old and the solar system is only 4.5 billion years old (http://map.gsfc.nasa.gov/universe/uni_age.html).

Another very important speculative factor is whether intelligent life exists elsewhere in the universe. Since the universe was formed with one “big bang,” the natural laws of physics, chemistry, and biology are probably similar throughout the universe. Darwin's law of natural selection is pivotal in most, perhaps all, biological processes on Earth. How well, then, could humans compete with species that have evolved for a much longer period of time? Would humans be treated as lower forms of life as they have treated some species when colonizing other parts of Earth? Such questions should cause humankind to reconsider its relationship with other life forms on its home planet.

An additional consideration is whether the profit motive justifies taking risks such as the one British Petroleum took in 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico. Drilling for small amounts of oil at a great depth in water one mile deep is a high risk operation. Consequently, a huge fishery and a large recreational shoreline have been damaged for, as yet, an unknown period. Many people have lost their livelihoods, and property values may never recover in that area. Had the money, which must be spent just to clean up this mess, been spent on non-fossil fuel energy sources (e.g., wind, solar), the risks of runaway climate change would have been reduced, damage to wildlife would have been minimal, and people whose livelihoods depended on the Gulf fishery and recreational areas would still have job security. Even so, considering the magnitude of the catastrophe, public outrage has been minimal.

The news media covering the Gulf catastrophe have focused mainly on the failed attempts to stem the flow and human interest stories instead of the complex, multidimensional energy issue that the spill is. What were the benefits if this oil could only be obtained at high risk? Why were the governmental oversight agencies so lax? Why engage in a high risk energy venture when lower risk alternative energy sources were readily available?

Deciphering what goes on in the minds of executives who are harming the biosphere for profit is impossible. Are they so focused on their primary goal – profit – that all else is a hazy background? Do they think that environmental laws are an unnecessary obstacle to making money? Can they possibly believe the biosphere will continue to provide services and regenerate economically essential resources regardless of treatment? Do they believe that global climate change is a myth and scientists are conspirators guilty of perjury? Perhaps they believe nothing ecologically catastrophic will happen in their lifetime. Perhaps humankind is not the rational, intelligent species it thinks it is if humans are banking on a possible Planet B.

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References

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