



THE OSPREY

Volume 41 Number 1

January-March 2017

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things.

Such is the trouble with energy conservation. Aimed at reducing toxic consumption of the planet's finite stored-energy resources, society rams the scope to target what it believes is far more valuable: the dollar.

Anyone who has ever championed responsible action in the face of cheap alternatives knows how difficult stewardship is to appraise. One must forever show the financial benefits of a healthy environment to the public, otherwise pollution prevention and resource protection lags. Solar panels are not installed until they are proven to reduce monthly expenses. Fuel-efficient cars are not favored until a gallon of gas gets expensive.

We have been taught to ask, "What is the return on investment?" While emotional satisfaction can be a part of that return (a ride in a gas-guzzling sports car might be just plain fun), it is an individual's combined experience, awareness, and self-interest that calculates that "return." We cannot expect someone who has never had an interest in songbirds to emotionally understand the true value of healthy bird habitat.

Plus, America's environmental awareness is in a constant state of flux, depending upon the crisis of the day. When Gallup, a research and analysis organization, conducted its annual environment poll of 2016, 56% of respondents felt priority should be given to the environment over the economy (37%) when the two conflict. But that majority response has waived back and forth over the last decade. Pollsters also concluded that 73% of those surveyed want the country to focus on building alternative energy rather than oil and gas. They determined that both Republicans and Democrats are now favoring this change. In the end, when it's decision time, at all levels of income and political interest, priority is driven by finance. No matter the ecological need or want, it's price that justifies change.

Even so, no one can make an informed decision in the absence of accurate data. With ruinous consequence, American consumers are shielded from the true expense of fossil fuels and their large-scale industrialized counterparts. Under the watch of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, the seller calculates the price and profit with the perils of consumption intentionally hidden from view. Like cigarette manufacturers, it's a common and tired tactic of the energy industry to disassociate the pain of its product from its pleasure. Thus, when the consumer opens the monthly bill—uneducated in matters of the planet—he or she has no idea how artificially low the real price is.

Why Save Energy When Prices are Low?

Ruth Heil

Money. It presents tremendous challenges. Obvious is the struggle to obtain a sufficient amount to survive, and maybe you dare to dream of collecting enough to thrive. But often overlooked is a subtle, less-intentional, never-ending societal obligation to measure every thing we have and every thing we do with a yardstick of dollars and cents.

"Not even a collapsing world looks dark to a man who is about to make his fortune."

-E.B. White, 1944

Money dictates our status in society. It determines the value of our possessions, actions, and sometimes even our relationships. And when it comes to engagement in environmental conservation, we become willingly persistent or perversely wasteful as a result of the price of

Mining, drilling, large-scale wind farms, and mirrored thermal solar fields come with outrageous social costs (pollution, injustice, habitat loss, species annihilation, militarized protection), yet these costs are left off the balance sheet. The maneuver has come to be described as “privatizing profits and socializing costs.”

Also, theoretically, conservation goes against the cellular makeup of the human body. As a living organism, a person is designed to grow and thrive. In his book, *The Conundrum: How Scientific Innovation, Increased Efficiency, and Good Intentions Can Make Our Energy and Climate Problems Worse*, author David Owen exposes a related paradox. He points to what he calls the Prius rebound effect. Able to squeeze more miles out of a gallon of gasoline, the Prius driver can worry less about miles driven and thus can drive farther. More miles driven means increased need for road maintenance and more highways for traffic relief.



But what is the return? Photo by Nicholas A Tonelli CC-BY-2.0.

Owen maintains that this cycle can only be broken with rigorous analysis of our everyday decisions—beyond that of immediate financial cost—so that we can begin to understand the true impact of those decisions.

More and more conservationists have addressed this relentless need to speak in financial terms by translating ecological value into hard finance through reports such as the 2014 *Lehigh Valley Return on Environment*. (www.lvpc.org/return-on-environment.html). Because cost of living is an

important component, each of these valuation studies is limited to its geographic region. The numbers cannot yet be applied to the return on saving the globe.

Although a common perception, money itself is not evil. In the right hands, it can be used to achieve great things. However, it cannot measure the importance of life. Willingly persistent conservation or waywardly wasteful consumption happens because of either an acceptance or denial of the fact that nature requires our partnership in order that life survives. That partnership can neither be replaced nor purchased with money.

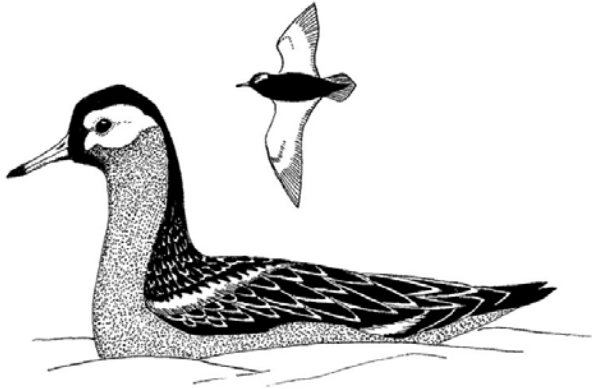
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Red Phalarope, by Dr. George C. West

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