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Review

Beyond Oil: The view from Hubbert's Peak

By Kenneth S. Deffeyes

[Hill and Wang](#); ISBN 0-8090-2956-1

202 Pages, Hardcover \$24.00 USD\$33.50 CAN

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The supply of oil in the ground is not infinite. Someday, annual world crude oil production has to reach a peak and start to decline. It is my opinion that the peak will occur in late 2005 or in the first few months of 2006. I nominate Thanksgiving Day, November 24, 2005, as World Oil Peak Day. There is a reason for selecting Thanksgiving. We can pause and give thanks for the years from 1901 to 2005 when abundant oil and natural gas fueled enormous changes in our society. At the same time, we have to face up to reality: World oil production is going to decline, slowly at first and then more rapidly. — Kenneth S. Deffeyes, *Beyond Oil*, p. 1.

June 25, 2005—Kenneth S. Deffeyes is a professor emeritus of geology at Princeton University and one of the geologists who has been warning us for years about Peak Oil. *Beyond Oil* is the follow-up to his book *Hubbert's Peak: The impending world oil shortage*, which was published in 2001.

As a young geologist, Deffeyes actually worked with M. King Hubbert of Hubbert's Peak fame at the Shell lab in Houston. Deffeyes' interest in oil supply began in 1958 and his own analysis of Hubbert's numbers inspired him to leave the oil industry for academia well prior to his scheduled industry retirement in 2000.

Beyond Oil is a slim volume packed with many facts, pictures and charts describing important matters such as: the conditions under which nature makes oil and natural gas, and methods of exploring and drilling for oil and gas. (These things are especially good to know if you find yourself at a cocktail party or political rally with one of those wishful thinkers who claim there's lots more oil down by the mantle of the earth).

Reading the book gave me the impression that its author, a self-described native Oklahoman, part Choctaw, second-generation oilman who remembers the Dustbowl (Great Depression, 1934), is definitely not ready to give up on the industrial way of life. But he clearly recognizes that we are facing permanent decline in the production of the oil and gas that made 20th Century industrialism possible. And he is cognizant of the commercial, environmental and political problems of non-renewable fossil fuels.

In *Beyond Oil*, Deffeyes describes in some detail the shortcomings of previous attempts and current plans to get energy from other geologic sources such as coal, tar sands, oil shale, and uranium. For example, Deffeyes writes:

...the environmental problems with increased coal burning are not easily solved. Research efforts to solve coal's sulfur, carbon dioxide, and other environmental problems go back more than twenty years. We cannot pretend that coal's problems will be solved in a year or two by a crash research program.

Heavy-oil extraction is a major consumer of energy.

...oil from oil shale [is] a high-sulfur, less-than-premium crude oil.

From a public relations standpoint, it would be preferable to discuss nuclear power plants without ever raising the unpleasant subject of nuclear weapons. However, to get a clear overall perspective, we regretfully have to discuss bombs as well as generating electricity. The two histories, the two technologies, and the need to bring both under control are heavily intertwined.

Deffeyes' affable personality, well demonstrated in [video interviews](#), is reflected in his writing style, making *Beyond Oil* one of the more enjoyable and easily read books on the impending global world oil shortage that has come out in recent years. But don't be fooled. Behind the affability is serious science and a warning best summed up on page 33: "The first time the price swings downward, cornucopians will chant in unison that there was no Hubbert Peak. Don't listen."

Cornucopians are people, primarily economists, who think that there is still plenty of oil to go around; all we need is more investment and higher technology to find and get it.

As I was reading *Beyond Oil*, the price of the near-month light, sweet, crude futures contract, which is the price that makes the news all the time, did get down to about \$47/barrel. I did not hear the cornucopians chant that there was no Hubbert Peak. But then again, I wasn't listening. Sure enough, on Friday, June 17, 2005, the day I wrote this review, the market closed for the week at \$58.47, a record high.

Kéllia Ramares is the producer of an audio documentary called "Peak Oil." Information on it can be found at her website: [Radio Internet Story Exchange](#).