

SWIFT PRESS · 24 SEPTEMBER 2026

THE ENERGY TRAP

*Why the renewable energy transition can't work —
and what can*

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THE ARGUMENT IN SEVEN CHAPTERS · [THEENERGYTRAP.ORG](https://theenergytrap.org)

About this book

THERE AREN'T MANY threats in our lives that can kill large numbers of people, and most of them sound like Hollywood disaster movies: tsunamis, escaped viruses, asteroids, volcanoes. So it is surprising that one of the biggest threats we now face comes from an area of life we thought we'd thoroughly mastered. Our energy system, on which billions of lives literally depend, is being dismantled: with confidence, with public money and with almost no scrutiny.

Roughly half the world's population depend for life on food grown with fossil fuel-based fertilisers. There aren't any significant stockpiles of either food or fertiliser. So if we were to stop oil and gas production today, as some climate activists demand, then within a decade hundreds of millions of people would starve to death. Yet that is precisely the direction in which the energy policies of advanced industrial countries like the United Kingdom now point.

The effect, for those with eyes to see, is rather like looking out of the window of your aircraft and noticing someone methodically sawing through the wing.

You may not be fully aware yet of your dependence on the energy system and the significance of what is being done to you. That's understandable: until now, it has worked so well that you have never had to think about it. But that is also what makes it a trap. You cannot see it until you try to leave it, and by then the options have narrowed.

This book gives you the minimum set of facts you need, with references so you can check the claims yourself. You can read it in three cups of tea and half a packet of biscuits. When you're done, you'll understand more about energy than most of the people making energy policy.

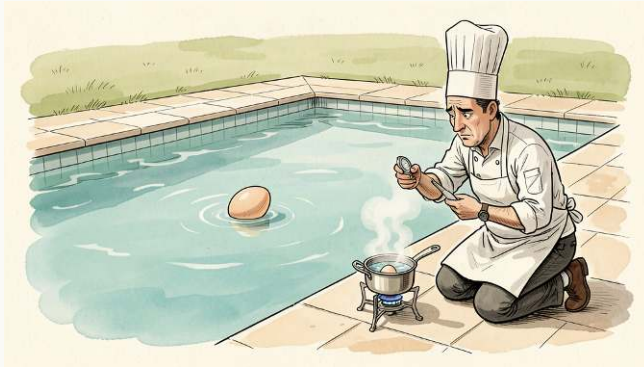


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The physics that demolishes energy policy

Or: why you can't boil an egg in a swimming pool



THERE IS FAR more heat energy in a swimming pool than in a pan of boiling water. You can boil an egg in the pan. You cannot boil an egg in the pool. Double the size of the pool and you still have a cold, raw egg.

This is not a riddle. It's the single most important concept in the energy debate, and almost nobody making energy policy understands it. The chapter sets out three physical measures that decide whether an energy source can sustain an industrial civilisation, and one distinction that most energy debates get wrong.

Every successful energy transition in history moved in the same direction on all three measures. The chapter shows which direction that was, what happened to the civilisations that moved the other way, and where the proposal to replace gas and nuclear with wind and solar sits on that record.

What civilisation actually eats

The chemistry that “electrify everything” ignores



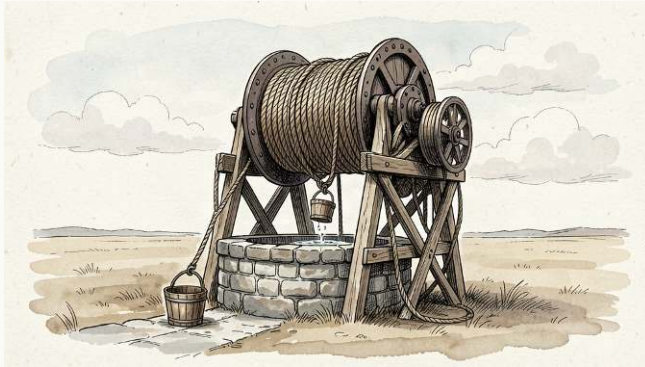
THERE IS A community of people who believe that humans can live on air and sunlight. They call themselves breatharians. They hold conferences, publish books and maintain a sincere conviction that the human body does not require food. Periodically, one of them dies.

"Electrify everything" is the breatharian diet of energy policy. Chapter 1 was the physics. This is the chemistry. And the chemistry is worse. The chapter looks at four materials that hold up almost everything you have ever stood in, crossed, ridden in or eaten, and at what each of them actually requires to exist.

The surprise is what the hydrocarbons are doing there. In each case they are more than a source of heat: the carbon and hydrogen atoms end up inside the product. The chapter explains why that turns a slogan into a fantasy, and why building the wind farms and solar arrays makes the dependency permanent rather than temporary.

The depleting oil inheritance

Why time is running out faster than most realise



NOT ALL OIL is equal. A barrel of Saudi crude, a barrel from the Canadian oil sands and a barrel from a US shale well all appear in the reserves statistics as oil. They are not the same resource, and the difference between them decides how much time is left.

Peak oil was predicted repeatedly, and the predictions appeared to fail. Production kept rising. The chapter explains what the early writers were actually predicting, why they were right, and what the shale boom that seemed to disprove them was built on. Think of a row of spinning plates on sticks, each plate an oil field, and ask how many new ones must be started to keep the same number in the air.

Oil is the bridge fuel that builds the new energy system while keeping us alive. The chapter's finding is that the bridge is shorter than anyone in authority admits.

The Renewables Paradox

Why wind and solar can't replace the fossil fuel system they depend on



WHAT SUSTAINS CIVILISATION is the energy left over after the energy system has fed itself. This chapter is about that leftover, and what happens to it when the source is wind and solar.

Every energy source consumes energy: to mine the ore, build the infrastructure, deliver the output. For most of the fossil fuel era nobody had to think about the ratio, because it was so favourable. The chapter shows why the ratio is a curve with a cliff in it rather than a straight line, and why the figures usually quoted for wind and solar measure the device rather than the system needed to make the device useful. Adding the parts left out moves the answer a long way.

It then traces a single turbine's supply chain backwards, link by link, and follows what happens when the whole system wears out and has to be built again. The result is what the chapter calls the Renewables Paradox.

The Escape Hatches

Three reasons are given for optimism. None of them work.



BY NOW YOU may be looking for a way out. Enthusiasts of the renewable transition commonly offer three: efficiency, hydrogen and decoupling. Each sounds plausible. Each is popular with policymakers because it lets them avoid the energy cliff. And these are the last three reasons anyone has for believing the transition can work.

The efficiency case runs into an observation an economist made in 1865 about Britain's steam engines, one that has held ever since. The hydrogen case runs into the properties of the smallest molecule in nature, and a round trip that loses most of what goes in. The decoupling case, the claim that an economy can grow while its energy use shrinks, runs into a shipping container from Shenzhen.

The chapter takes each in turn and tests it against the record. None of them survives.

Energy and Your Money

Why the financial crisis will arrive before the energy one



A TEN-POUND NOTE does not contain value. It is a promise that somewhere in the economy someone will burn energy to turn raw materials into something you want: a loaf of bread, a hospital visit, an hour of heating. Money is the token. Energy is the thing.

That's literal, not figurative, and modern economics doesn't see it that way. Its models treat energy as one commodity among many, to be substituted when scarce. The chapter follows what happens when the money supply grows while the energy supply contracts, and why the renewable transition's financing plan, spoken or not, amounts to printing it.

Then it turns to your pension, your house and every asset you own, and asks what each of them is actually a claim on. The chapter's conclusion is that the financial crisis arrives before the energy one.

Forging a New Realism

The energy trap, and what it will take to escape it



YOU NOW KNOW the argument. The question has changed from what is wrong to what we do now. But first, understand the trap.

The fossil inheritance is depleting, and the strategy being pursued is drawing down the very surplus that would be needed to build whatever comes next. Like all traps, this one is hidden. The wind farms go up, the subsidies flow, the targets are announced, and everything looks like progress. The chapter names the only energy source that sits above fossil fuels on every measure established in Chapter 1, explains why it was defeated by politics rather than physics, and sets a simple test that any energy investment must pass. Some familiar ones fail it.

Even so, a gap of decades can't be avoided. The chapter ends with a seven-point blueprint for a managed descent rather than an unmanaged collapse, and with the reason this is a book about hope.

The book

You have just read the argument in outline. The book carries the evidence, the sources and the working that seven short chapters cannot.

The Energy Trap: Why the Renewable Energy Transition Can't Work — And What Can was published by Swift Press on 24 September 2026. It runs to 144 pages.

The best book on energy you will ever read. Superbly written, thrillingly argued and utterly terrifying.

MATT RIDLEY, AUTHOR OF *THE RATIONAL OPTIMIST*

A magnificently clear and concise layout of what is humanity's number one problem. This mercifully brief book is the corrective.

JAMES HOWARD KUNSTLER, AUTHOR OF *THE LONG EMERGENCY*

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In the United Kingdom: amazon.co.uk/dp/1800757352

Elsewhere, and for other editions: theenergytrap.org

From any bookshop, quote the ISBN: 978-1800757356.