

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Stories of the Argo Merchant splash over every publication and news broadcast, and now another Liberian tanker, the Olympic Games, has dumped hundreds of thousands of gallons of oil into the Delaware River, a third is leaking its cargo of oil into Connecticut's Thames River at Groton, and a fourth is aground off Puerto Rico, all adding to the mess already in the Atlantic.

I'm not going to talk about it. I don't even want to think about it. I can't stand not knowing every detail but neither can I bear it when I learn them and contemplate the effects.

Instead of repeating what every other person is saying about oil spills, the ecological disaster, the environmental catastrophe, it's time to talk about the future.

It's time to look ahead positively to find alternate ways to heat and light buildings and power our industries.

It's time to take a stand, to make ourselves heard and felt, to be well-enough informed to influence what's happening to us and to our world. It is our world just as much as it's the world of the representatives in congress and just as much as it's the world of the people who run the oil companies.

If we don't act to influence the directions of our world, others will force upon us the kind of world they want, the kind of world that will benefit them and hurt us.

If we sit here with our hands over our ears, our eyes closed, our mouths taped shut, and tell ourselves that "someone out there cares, and will carry the burden and do something to help" we're asking for more of the same kind of trouble we've already got.

First, what is basically disastrous about oil spills?

Aside from the aesthetic destruction, the glop on beaches, the oil balls in the ocean, the dead and dying shore birds, and aside from the waste of millions of gallons of oil, there's a personal danger to every living thing on earth.

Oil is a carcinogen. When ingested, it induces cancer in animals. Cancer kills animals.

Oil reaching the ocean bottom will kill many billions of plankton; some will survive to be eaten by fish. Fish will be eaten by other fish. Some of those fish will be eaten by people. Some of those fish will be ground up and used for fertilizer. The carcinogenic substances are getting into the food chain that all living things on earth depend upon for on-going life.

There are alternatives to using oil for energy.

Burning coal is one; wind-powered generators is another; turning sunlight into useable energy is a third. Don't say it can't be done. It's being done.

Coal has been used for centuries and there are enough coal reserves in the United States to meet energy needs for another two hundred years.

Windmills are, even now, generating electricity at Woods Hole and on Block Island, R.I. People are already using sun-power.

Since even the oil companies concede the most practical of the alternatives is solar power, let's see what the oil companies say they think about it.

Right now, according to Exxon, an oil company that advertises widely that it is researching solar power possibilities, a solar heating system can cost anywhere from \$8,000 to \$20,000.

(I would be making a true statement if I were to tell you a car can cost anywhere from \$10,000 to \$50,000. That doesn't mean you have to spend that much to buy a car.)

At the present stage of development, Exxon says, a conventional heating system to back up the solar system would be a home-builder's wise investment. Such a back-up system, says Exxon, would run around \$2,600 for an average-sized house.

The back-up system, according to Exxon, is necessary because no one has yet perfected a way to store enough solar heat to carry through several cloudy days.

(The back-up system, of course, would not have to be an expensive oil-fired furnace; it could be that a wood- or coal-burning stove would adequately get you through a few cloudy days.)

To heat water for sinks, tubs and washers, solar systems cost about three times more than conventional systems. Exxon suggests such a system would be suitable only for high-energy-cost areas.

(If there's any place in the country that has higher energy costs than New England, I haven't heard about it.)

Other problems Exxon foresees should more of us start using solar heating are these: installers, maintenance people and distributors must be established and trained; financing

methods and warranties must be worked out; building codes must be adapted; and cities might have to deal with "sun rights" -- that is, what happens if your source of solar energy is cut by the construction of a tall building, throwing you into the shade?

(A competent plumber can install and maintain solar heating systems. The same people who distribute conventional heating systems can handle solar systems. Must the nation await legal decisions before this power is available to us? Since when do Americans wait for the courts before taking advantage of technology?)

Is it possible to convert sunlight directly into electricity? According to Exxon, solar cells are so expensive to make that solar electricity costs roughly fifty times as much as conventional electric power.

(Exxon doesn't predict in its advertisements what might happen to costs of solar cells if they were being mass-produced, of course; but the company does predict solar power will become a major source of energy during the next century. In fact, Exxon's ads hint that 'economical solar heating systems may be available within a few years.)

We need to analyze what's being fed to us with all the pretty words and four-color pictures, and we need to take a somewhat skeptical view of what Exxon is telling us.

While it's conceivable the company's engineers and advertising copywriters have together achieved a happy (for Exxon) balance of concern for the general public and its own best interests, it stands to reason the company's primary reason for spending millions of advertising dollars is to **sell oil**.

Developing oil wells and selling oil is Exxon's primary business.

Exxon isn't guilty of false advertising, necessarily; but neither can it be said that it's telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Advertising is, after all, a method of influencing people to believe what a company wants us to believe.

Exxon is not yet dedicated to the development of solar energy. It's still dedicated to the development of off-shore oil wells. Until all the oil has been wrung out of the earth, Exxon and other oil companies are going to keep on trying to sell oil, just as they've done in the past.

General Motors doesn't try to promote Ford or Chrysler; the railroads never recommended truck transportation or air freight; no oil company is yet ready to put itself out of business.

That's what solar power, once it gets off the ground, will do to the oil business.

[continued next week]