



Fall 2002

**Energy, the Environment, and Public Opinion, by Eric R.A.N. Smith**

Tim DeYoung

**Recommended Citation**

Tim DeYoung, *Energy, the Environment, and Public Opinion, by Eric R.A.N. Smith*, 42 Nat. Resources J. 981 (2002).

Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol42/iss4/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Natural Resources Journal by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [amywinter@unm.edu](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu), [lsloane@salud.unm.edu](mailto:lsloane@salud.unm.edu), [sarahrk@unm.edu](mailto:sarahrk@unm.edu).

consequences of reliance on groundwater as schemes that would make Rube Goldberg proud. Although his research is perhaps not rigorous, his message is forcefully conveyed.

At points, Glennon perhaps gets too caught up in the fervor of his mission. For example, he explains interstate water problems as the inevitable result of the greed of each state to hoard and use as much water as possible. Surely, the metaphor he uses, there is no honor among thieves, can't adequately capture the complex institutional and legal constructs of interstate water allocation, let alone the complex motivational forces of human behavior. Perhaps in recognition of his tendency to rely on polemics instead of analysis, Glennon spends the last two chapters trying to define the problems theoretically, primarily as an example of the tragedy of the commons. Interestingly, Glennon, who is often stereotyped as an environmentalist, finds hope in the use of markets. Regardless of location, he notes that groundwater is seen as a commodity but is highly undervalued. Using the example of the Australian lobster industry, he advocates the issuance of licenses for existing uses only. New uses are prohibited except to the extent that licenses are reallocated via market transactions. Applied to groundwater, new uses similarly could be prohibited but market mechanisms could be implemented to allow for reallocation. Hopefully, Glennon and others will develop these ideas more fully in future work.

Although Professor Glennon has some difficulty deciding whether his mission is to rally the troops, educate the public, or conduct public policy analysis, this is an important book. Like Mark Reisner's *Cadillac Desert*, the book provides an interesting and alarming exposé about how existing policies, programs, and uncertain scientific knowledge can be used to produce substantial profits, limited public benefits, and devastating environmental costs.

Tim DeYoung, PhD, JD  
Shareholder in Natural Resources Division  
Modrall Law Firm  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

*Energy, the Environment, and Public Opinion.* By Eric R.A.N. Smith. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002. Pp. 264. \$72.00 cloth; \$26.95 paper.

In *Energy, the Environment, and Public Opinion*, Eric R.A.N. Smith looks at the fragile interplay between energy policy, the environment, and public opinion. He explores this interplay by looking at the history of energy development and policy in the United States and tries to explain that history by using various types of public opinion studies.

Smith's historical outline of energy policy and public awareness is the strength of this book. It lays the groundwork for predictions that he makes about how the public will respond to an uncertain energy future. Initially, Smith surveys the history of energy issues in the United States from Abraham Gesner's invention of a distilling process for kerosene to the oil boom in Santa Barbara in 1896 and through World War II to the present dependence on foreign oil sources. He uses these historical examples to show that the public's perception of environmental issues can shape public opinion. Smith notes two key events that changed public opinion on environmental issues. The first was the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*; the second was the 1969 oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara. *Silent Spring* spurred the public's demand for the government to set stricter environmental standards, with the goal of a cleaner, healthier environment. The Santa Barbara oil spill gave the public its first view of a devastating oil spill. As a result of this media blitz and growing environmental consciousness, President Nixon was forced to pass sweeping pieces of environmental legislation such as the National Environmental Protection Act and the Clean Air Act.

Despite America's growing awareness of environmental problems, Smith asserts that the country still faces a public that was uneducated about a growing dependence on foreign oil and gives examples of events that went virtually unnoticed by the American public, events such as Egyptian dictator Gamal Nassar's closure of the Suez Canal in 1956 to protest western domination of Arab nations. After the Six-Day War with Israel, Nassar again responded with an oil embargo. But, these events had little impact on the American consumer, primarily because the government was able to stabilize the price of gas by imposing strict import quotas or by increasing domestic oil production. The American public did not feel the impact of these events at the pump and continued to be oblivious to this growing dependence and the possibility that their energy security was more vulnerable than they imagined. Smith implies that Americans adhere to a "not in my back yard" mentality that allows them to ignore problems such as the fragility of their energy security until they are impacted directly.

Smith points out that the American public did not become acutely aware of this growing dependence on foreign oil until 1973 when a series of events resulted in the first oil crisis. At that time, Egypt launched a surprise attack on Israel. When Egypt saw that the United States was supporting Israel, it began the process of shutting down the pumps in America through an embargo declared with the other OPEC nations. The price of gas at home increased dramatically and the American public began to look at energy policy for the first time. Smith

uses this series of events to emphasize that the public has little interest in energy issues until it is directly impacted.

During this period of awakening public awareness, Americans had also become enamored with the panacea offered by the growing nuclear power industry, which promised clean energy too cheap to measure. Even the Sierra Club supported the nuclear industry in its infancy until the potential problems became apparent. Smith emphasizes that nuclear power was wildly popular before the accident at Three Mile Island but has never regained that level of popularity. With this illustration, Smith shows that the public opinion of energy issues is not completely dependent on economic factors; it is also hindered by the complexity of political and environmental issues. Smith uses history to illustrate how the public tends to disregard the environmental impact of energy choices because of this limited awareness of these issues.

One way that Smith explains the implications of these historical events is through the use of empirical studies such as polls testing the public's knowledge and opinions on energy issues. Despite the inclusion of these studies, *Energy, the Environment, and Public Opinion* suffers from the fact that much of the data leads to contradictory or ambiguous conclusions. Smith's common sense assertions seem to hold more weight than the focused information elicited in the studies he cites. In the first chapter, the author describes what he calls an "energy crisis cycle" that he asserts is repeated in all energy crises. In this cycle, as demand for energy rises, prices rise, industry is criticized for profiting, the public believes criticisms of the industry, and politicians respond with subsidies or price controls that may actually increase consumption in the midst of a crisis. In response to this cycle, industry may even request a decrease in environmental regulations to further decrease prices. This general overview of how the cycle of public opinion fluctuates is clearer than the three chapters of empirical data that try to explain it. The ambiguous data implies that public opinion does not fit so neatly into energy policy.

Smith's book tries to strike a balance between these statistical analyses and a more intuitive analysis of evolving public opinion. One of the problems that appears from the use of these empirical studies is that the author has a hard time reconciling the ambiguity of these studies with the clear conclusions he is able to draw from simply looking at the choices that the American public has made within the historical context. This book is well reasoned and well written but is top-heavy with technical information that does not necessarily elucidate the premise of the message.

*Energy, the Environment, and Public Opinion* raises many questions that Smith is unable to answer. Some of these questions arise out of the ambiguity of the data and some arise from the fact that the world is a different place than it was when this book was published. Smith wrote it

before the attack on the World Trade Center and this event alone could be a catalyst to energy policy changes that could not be predicted by looking at how the public has reacted in the past. Smith implies that public opinion in regard to energy policy hinges substantially on how prices impact individuals. Will security concerns that the American public has never had before spur the public to demand changes that are different from the ones that they have chosen on economic, environmental, or political bases?

In the final chapter of this book, Smith makes some predictions that may or may not hold true in light of recent events. He predicts that the American public will continue to demand cheap and stable energy prices and, if prices rise too rapidly, the public will demand some sort of relief from the government. This seems to be the unending maxim of our society that even the events of 9/11 can't change. He also predicts that the public will not respond to the coming crises with well informed and carefully reasoned policy choices such as a demand for alternative wind and solar energy sources. It is difficult to argue with this prediction when we are not even able to mandate higher gas mileage standards for automobiles. Smith also implies that we will turn to the possibilities of expanded offshore drilling and the opening of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge when energy markets tighten. During the present administration, we have already seen a clear push in this direction. Smith predicts that by the middle of this century the energy choice that we make will likely come down to a choice of coal or nuclear power. With the rising security concerns, will an increase in the use of nuclear energy be more unlikely? Will a growing public awareness of the dangers of global warming steer us away from a push for coal?

You and I are busy setting the energy policy that will determine what kind of environment we have in the future. The current policy reflects our addiction to inexpensive energy. Our sense of entitlement to a life of energy excess produces the environmental degradation that we are now experiencing. This could be the conclusion of Smith's book. But Smith is more measured in his writing than I am in my reading of this sometimes discouraging analysis of the interaction between energy production, public opinion, and public policy. *Energy, the Environment, and Public Opinion* is an intriguing book that raises more questions than it answers. But, in asking those questions, this book encourages us to look at past mistakes and make new informed choices that will create a better world.

Bruce Clotworthy  
J.D. Candidate, University of New Mexico