



Carbo Cult

by Nikhil Desai

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I. Introduction

Nikhil Desai writes: "a new cult – No Carbo(n) promised that if only these people gave up their carbon emitting ways, they will prove their devotion to the new cult. Climate change will be averted and they will not have to migrate to the white people's lands."

Nikhil Desai is the Energy Security contributor for the NAPSNet Weekly report.

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II. Policy Forum by Nikhil Desai

Carbo Cult

I should've called it the No-Carbo Cult, because I am speaking of the cult of anti-CO₂ (Carb-o) activists. They remind me of the one of the Cargo Cults in some Pacific Islands I had an opportunity to live in for some time. That group believed in the return of a "John Frum," in Prince Phillip's divinity, and that someday the natives will get material wealth coming via ships.

While there, I also met some anti-CO₂ activists, believers in the coming end of the world otherwise known as climate change, promising to bring good things to the islanders. Of course, all of it was to come via cargo – ships or air. Renewable energy, and experts on renewable energy, in particular.

The logic was simple. Climate change will raise sea levels and threaten these islands, at least their low-lying areas. Everybody in the world now had a new god, a new cult – No Carbo(n). It promised that if only these people gave up their carbon emitting ways, they will prove their devotion to the new cult. Climate change will be averted and they will not have to migrate to the white people's lands.

There was an ample economic case a priori – in countries that imported oil products at upwards of \$0.7-1.0/liter at the main port, and then being sold at close to \$3 per liter in remote islands. But the renewable energy equipment and experts also had to be imported, and it wasn't clear that ships and

aircraft across these islands would run on renewable energy, or that people could cook their food on renewable energy.

Of course, there was local biomass, which they could use amply, but that wasn't the object of the No-Carbo Cult. Besides, biomass cooking practices produced smoke and other toxic emissions, which too didn't concern the No-Carbo Cult, because, its proponents argued, biomass was "renewable". Just how the CO₂ molecules absorbed by a growing tree anywhere can be separated by their origin – this little piggy came from coal, this little piggy from gas, this little from making charcoal and this one from burning charcoal – was not clear to me or anybody.

It seemed to me that the No-Carbo Cult was effectively telling these islanders – "Look, a tsunami is coming. We are going to build a bridge. We will pick you up from here and take you to, look there in the distance, the island with high mountain."

Usual promises of a religion. Salvation. Looking up to the Shining City upon the hill. Selling it to the poor brings fame and money readily given by the rich followers. The priests issue the sermons, and the missionaries go out and spread the word. Even if they were selling bridges to nowhere.

How did it come to this? In a way, I think selling the Brooklyn Bridge had become so tiresome. Snake oil also had reached market saturation. And of course, the traditional religions had mostly lost its market share.

The modern, popular Western environmentalist movement had its origins in the elitist nature conservation movement. It rightly took the long-term and all-encompassing view of the earth that ancient religions had prescribed. Then after the Second World War, it took on the challenge of cleaning the rivers, air basins, coastal areas, and expanded the conservation activities as well. This program ran from the 1950s and on to 1990s, culminating in major regulatory reforms to improve environmental performance of the energy and other industries. Some of it also correlated with occupational health and environmental health thrusts.

In the US, the field was clear for starting up new political business line. The old problems – conservation, air/water pollution, overuse of water and other limited resources – were not gone, of course. Some had been outsourced to other countries (like intelligence gathering from terror suspects, dirty work is better done abroad). And raising money or claiming fame for the old problems was getting difficult. After all, as nuclear plant construction slowed to a trickle or a stop, the environmental movement didn't have much to appeal to the pockets of the well-to-do, already enjoying cleaner air and water.

The new movement had to be secular – for mass appeal – but at the same time invoke religion – since some of the deep pockets and thick Rolodexes belonged to deeply religious people.

Hence the No-Carbo Cult. What it promises is so long-term, it has to stress that the calamity is already here, because we are all sinners today and are suffering because of the sins. It treats every molecule of CO₂ as a weapon of mass destruction, but only selectively – a very small fraction of the CO₂ that goes up in the atmosphere.

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