

**MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
STUDY GUIDE**

Blind Spot

Peak Oil & the Coming Global Crisis

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NOTE TO EDUCATORS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage and manage the information presented in this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content – and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them – the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we’ve structured the guide so that you have the option of focusing in depth on one section of the video at a time. We’ve also set it up to help you stay close to the video’s main line of argument as it unfolds.

Key Points provide a concise and comprehensive summary of each section of the video. They are designed to make it easier for you and your students to recall the details of the video during class discussions, and as a reference point for students as they work on assignments.

Questions for Discussion & Writing encourage students to reflect critically on the video during class discussions, and serve to guide their written reactions before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (i.e. as prompts for “free-writing” or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind).

Assignments encourage students to engage the video in more depth – by conducting research, working on individual and group projects, putting together presentations, and composing formal essays. These assignments are designed to challenge students to show command of the material presented in the video, to think critically and independently about this material from a number of different perspectives, and to develop and defend their own point of view on the issues at stake.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

In this haunting portrait of America's oil-fueled excesses, director Adolfo Doring explores the inextricable link between the energy we use, the way we run our economy, and the multiplying threats that now confront the environmental health and stability of our planet. Taking as its starting point the inevitable energy depletion scenario known as "Peak Oil," the film surveys a wide range of the latest intellectual, political, and scientific thought to make the case that by whatever measure of greed, wishful thinking, neglect, or ignorance, we now find ourselves at a disturbing crossroads: we can continue to burn fossil fuels and witness the collapse of our ecology, or we can choose not to and witness the collapse of our economy. Refusing to whitewash this reality, *Blind Spot* issues a call to action, urging us to face up to the perilous situation we now find ourselves in so that we might begin to envision a realistic, if inconvenient, way out.

PRE-VIEWING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. What are the benefits and/or negative repercussions of using petroleum as our main source of energy? What other energy options are there? How do these other options compare to petroleum?
2. Gasoline prices have risen to over four dollars per gallon in some parts of the U.S. How much are you willing to spend on gasoline? What would you consider to be too expensive? Would you be able to maintain your current lifestyle without petroleum? What life changes would you have to make?
3. Think about the progress America has made since colonial times. What are some of the most salient, and pivotal, examples of America's political, economic, and ecological development as a country, and what role do you think energy resources played in all of this?
4. What is America's economic system? How does it function? How does consumerism factor into it? How about advertising? Petroleum? What economic role do you play in this system?
5. What are some of the inherent problems with a constantly expanding population? In what ways could these problems be addressed?

KEY POINTS

Peak Oil

- Since the beginning of human existence, human beings have extracted food energy from the environment and put that energy back into the environment in the form of muscle power.
- Over the years, humans have enhanced their ability to extract energy from the environment through the use of fire, agriculture, animals, and fossil fuels.
- Today, virtually all work is done by fuel-fed machinery. A single gallon of gasoline provides roughly the same amount of energy as six to eight weeks of human labor.
- Over the past 25 years, world oil production has exceeded new oil discoveries. This shortage of oil reserves will eventually lead to “peak oil,” the irreversible decline of oil production.
- Oil prices are on the rise, and they will continue to rise as we go past the peak.

Food and Fuel

- Since the United States uses an incredible amount of energy to farm and transport food, the emerging energy crisis will also become a food crisis.
- Biofuels made from soybeans and corn, such as biodiesel and ethanol, take more energy to produce than they provide.
- There are 3.7 billion malnourished people in the world – the largest number in world history.
- A century ago, half of Americans were farmers. Today, that number is under 1%.
- During every decade from 1830 to 1970, average real wages in the U.S. rose. Since the 1980s, partly due to rising energy costs, average real wages have fallen.
- The average food item travels 1,500 miles from where it is produced to where it is eaten.

Historical Perspective

- Two hundred years ago, with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the human population rose from fewer than one billion to more than six-and-a-half billion.
- Oil has existed beneath the surface of the earth for approximately 150 million years, and humans have used most of it during a span of just 200 years.
- Humans have made tremendous progress in both politics and economics but have failed to view that progress in ecological terms.
- Continuing increases in the global population, combined with rising levels of consumption, are ecologically unsustainable.
- To deal with sustainability problems in the past, failed ancient societies developed increasingly complex and unsustainable institutions. They would expand their military, increase government control, and tax their citizens heavily. Today, the U.S. has the most complex structure of problem-solving institutions that humanity has ever developed.

The Economics of Consumerism

- The U.S. has just 4.5% of the world's population yet accounts for more than 30% of the world's total private consumption.
- As the U.S. falls deeper and deeper into debt, other countries loan money to the U.S. so that we can keep buying what they're producing.
- The modern advertising industry spends two billion dollars a year to convince Americans that buying and consuming are fundamental to a happy and normal lifestyle.
- Television shows and movies create artificial environments, disconnected from reality, that shape our values and attitudes about life, and consumption.
- Human beings are creatures of habit so it's hard to change behavior on a mass scale.

Ecological Collapse

- Humans are pressing against the limits of the Earth's renewable and nonrenewable resources, including the water supply and the forests.
- With rising concerns over global climate change, we have to change how we use energy, the rate that we use it, and the fuels that we use for it.
- The oil and automobile companies contributed \$186 million to federal campaigns, and for every dollar spent, they received \$1,000 in tax breaks and other subsidies in return.
- For many people, it's hard to accept that money doesn't equate to happiness, that infinite growth isn't possible on a finite planet, and that we're essentially killing the Earth.
- Population expansion is one of the worst environmental problems. The more people there are, the less impact people's changes will have.

Homo Colossus

- Our institutional frameworks are founded on the myth that there's an endless supply of fossil fuel energy.
- We need to make changes at the individual level because we can't assume politicians in Washington, often swayed by special interest groups, will enact policies in our long-term interest.
- When Linnaeus classified the human species, he named it "Homo sapiens," meaning "man the wise." Now that we have fuel-fed machines, our impact is no longer wise; it's colossal.
- There has never been a time when so many civilizations around the world have linked up through resource exchange in a globalized free trade system. In the short-term, it can offer amazing economic growth, but in the long-term, it makes us incredibly vulnerable to shortfalls in those resources and to political instability within the borders of our trading partners.

POST-VIEWING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. Why does the United States need oil? What industries rely heavily on it? What could potentially happen if the world supply of oil was cut off from the U.S.?
2. Why do you think farmers account for less than 1% of the American workforce? How could that number have declined so drastically over the past century?
3. What is meant by “real wages”? How has this index fluctuated over time? What connection does the film make between the state of wages over time and problems related to consumption, debt, and ecological sustainability?
4. Did you know that Americans make up only 4.5% of the world population? What are your initial thoughts on this statistic? Was it more or less than you thought? How about the levels of consumption in America relative to this population figure? How do you feel about the fact that the U.S. does 30% of the world’s private consumption? How do you explain this?
5. Americans aren’t genetically predisposed to being the world’s greatest consumers. How do you think the modern advertising industry and the popular media convince us that consumption is fundamental to human happiness and a normal lifestyle?
6. How can we, as a country, reverse the inconvenient truth that global economic growth is depleting the world’s natural resources? Is it as simple as convincing everyone to stop shopping? Wouldn’t this raise a whole other set of problems by crashing the economy and costing waves of job losses among people who own and work in stores, and countless jobs beyond? What kinds of solutions do you see to these kinds of huge, seemingly mind-boggling problems? What solutions does the film seem to point to? And beyond changes at the systemic and institutional level, what do you think you can do *personally* to effect positive social change?

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Find a list of petroleum products on the Internet. Keep track of all the petroleum products you use on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis.
2. Write a research paper on the history of oil and its importance to the United States. For information on the future of what Michael Klare, defense correspondent of *The Nation* magazine, calls “Tough Oil,” listen to him on the following National Public Radio show: http://mefwordpress.s3.amazonaws.com/MichaelKlare_ToughOil.zip
3. Choose any ancient civilization. Write a research paper comparing and contrasting the institutional frameworks of that civilization to our own, with special focus on the importance of the military, the size of the government, and how each fits with the film’s analysis of how problem-solving institutions, more generally, relate to issues of sustainability.
4. Over the course of one week, keep a media journal in which you record your observations about the television commercials, shows, and movies you watch. After a brief synopsis of each, describe the messages, values, and attitudes you think these media narratives endorse, and how they relate to the American Dream and “the American way of life”?
5. Visit <http://myfootprint.org> and take the ecological footprint quiz. Then write a paper summarizing how you did, what you learned, and how you think you might be able to reduce your impact on the planet.