

# 'Earth Hour' won't change the world

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By Bjorn Lomborg

Copenhagen's central square hardly competes with New York's Times Square for glitz, but it is prime commercial space in my home of Denmark. Now there's a new advertiser among the neon signs: a brightly lit billboard exhorts everyone to participate in "Earth Hour," the 60 minutes on Saturday night in which the whole world is urged to dim the lights to cut greenhouse emissions.

There is a certain irony in renting brightly lit advertising space to exhort us to save electricity for one hour — but this is apparently lost on the organizers. Dimming the lights is promoted online as a "vote for mother Earth" that will reveal "the impact we have on the environment." Actually, the only real result will be to make it harder to see. The environmental effect of the past three annual lights-out hours has been negligible. If everyone in the world participated in this year's Earth Hour, the result would be the same as turning off China's carbon emissions for roughly 45 seconds.

When we switch off the electricity, many of us turn to candlelight. This seems natural and environmentally friendly, but unfortunately candles are almost 100 times less efficient than incandescent light bulbs, and more than 300 times less efficient than fluorescent lights. Using one candle for each extinguished bulb cancels the CO2

reduction; two candles emit more CO2.

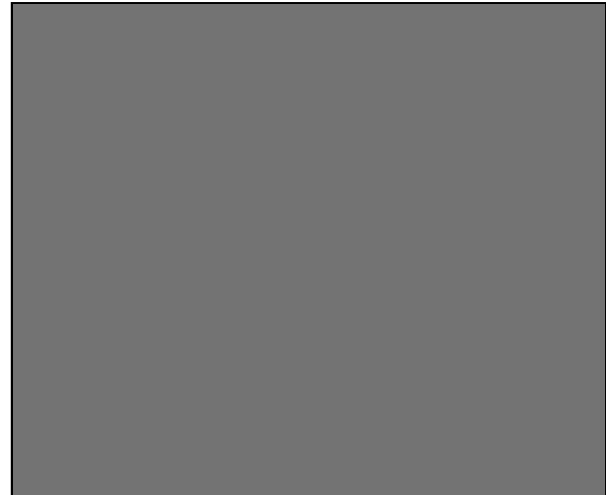
Millions of well-intentioned people will take part in Earth Hour. I commend the efforts by organizers to encourage participants to continue engaging in environmentally friendly choices such as recycling or saving energy after the hour has actually ended. But I fear that the campaign is symptomatic of an environmental movement that has become too focused on hollow, feel-good actions that at best only inch us in the right direction.

In a bid to cut carbon emissions, the environmental movement has pushed for "green" alternative energy to be used around the world. Many countries now provide financial support to solar panels and wind turbines. But this technology is still inefficient, so the environmental results are negligible.

## Solar subsidies

Germany is a good example. Despite being a fairly cloudy country, it has led the world in solar panel subsidies, spending \$75 billion p

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utting inefficient, uncompetitive solar technology on rooftops. This delivers a trivial 0.1% of Germany's total energy supply, and will postpone the effects of global warming by just seven hours in 2100. With the financial crisis, Germany and others have to rein in lavish subsidies. It is easy to forget that while sunlight is renewable, subsidies certainly aren't.

Similarly, many environmentalists enthusiastically endorsed government financial support for biofuel as a silver bullet to cut carbon emissions. The subsidies are now massive and entrenched, and one-sixth of the world's corn supply is burned just to help fuel America's cars, contributing to the highest-ever food prices and increasing starvation.

As other countries race to create more food, forests are being razed for agriculture, causing more emissions than will be saved from biofuels over the next hundred years.

It's easy to feel as if we're helping the planet if we have a government-funded solar panel on the roof, or fill our car with fuel from a tank adorned with green slogans — but the reality is that we're doing no such thing.

### **'Feel good' policies**

It is time to look to a smarter solution to global warming that would do more than just make us feel good about ourselves. We will not make a sustainable shift away from dependence on fossil fuels so long as the alternatives remain so expensive. Solar panels are still about 10 times more costly than fossil fuels in terms of cost per unit of energy output. That's the reason only well-heeled Westerners (being paid significant subsidies by their governments) can afford

to install them.

Consider how this would change if our innovation made solar cells or other green energy technology cheaper than fossil fuels. Everyone would shift to the cheaper and cleaner alternatives, including the world's developing nations, who cannot afford to engage in today's hollow, "feel good" policies.

Much more investment in research and development is needed to bring about game-changing breakthroughs for alternative-energy technologies — something in the order of 0.2% of global gross domestic product, or \$100 billion annually.

The harsh reality is that the shift away from fossil fuels will not be easy. Reducing carbon emissions is a lot more difficult than dimming the lights for an hour. It requires genuine willpower and investment. Instead of just dimming our lights, we need to get much brighter about solving global warming.

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*Bjorn Lomborg is the subject of the film COOL IT, out on DVD March 29. He is also the author of The Skeptical Environmentalist and Cool It, and director of the Copenhagen Consensus Center at Copenhagen Business School.*

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