

What Tree Are You Barking Up?

By Darin Barry

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Here in our beautiful foothill communities within Nevada County, we have great numbers of dedicated, hard working activists. We definitely have a disproportionate number compared to other communities that I've lived in across the nation. It's a good thing. It makes me proud to live here and to be from here. We are lucky to have so many good-hearted, impassioned people working with such dedication on their chosen causes as well as so many independent organizations working to further them.

The causes are many. There are those of us working hard to bring an end to war sponsored by the United States, global warming, social injustice, pollution, wildlife extinction, environmental atrocities, the corporate takeover of America and many, many more issues worthy of our attention. Where does one start to focus if he or she strives to impart change on all of the aforementioned issues and what might be the single common denominator that is the driving force blocking positive change effecting all those issues?

When this question of the common denominator was posed to a group of my peers recently, one of them referring to a retro-Saturday Night Live Character, "Church Lady" answered with another question, "Could it be SANTAN?" "No Dick Cheney actually *is* flesh and blood and couldn't possibly be in all those places at once." I answered. But in reality, my friend wasn't too far off.



Big Oil. The money, power and corruption coming from Big Oil companies is unparalleled by any other single lobby or government, for that matter, in our times. It has blocked environmental protections and worked hard to overturn existing environmental legislation. It has blocked research, development and implementation of alternative, clean and abundant fuels. It regularly invests heavily in our representatives to further it's own interests. It has held the Citizens of California hostage when it brought on and cashed in on the western power crisis as a result of energy deregulation big oil pressured our California lawmakers to green light. It wasn't enough for Big Oil to profit to the tune of



Figure 1 "Here we have a serious problem: America is addicted to oil, which is often imported from unstable parts of the world," the former oil executive said.

about two million dollars a day during the "experiment" with deregulation, it also made damn sure that

California would have a governor friendly to their interests before anyone could figure out that big oil was really behind the black outs and outrageously high

electricity costs. (See this CBS News story <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/06/01/eveningnews/main620626.shtml>)

Big oil companies now have ties to major television news network in America, as revealed in the media watchdog flier, Censored Alert: ABC is tied to Texaco, NBC to British Petroleum, Time Warner to Mobil Oil. And now the oil industry is entrenched as America's No. 1 player with President Bush and Vice President Cheney, two oil men (one failed, one successful) in command. Bush has received the largest campaign contributions from big oil companies that any other President in history. It is, without argument, one of the biggest profiteers and players in the extraordinarily lucrative business of war and has been since World War II.

Taking a careful look at all of our varied efforts we activists put forth within our own backyard here in Nevada County, I'm hard pressed to find one where big oil isn't the single greatest inhibiting force or at the very least a supporting villain in. Consider the following points:

- **WAR:** In August 2002, Dick Cheney told the Veterans of Foreign Wars why Saddam has to be removed: "Armed with these weapons of terror and a seat at the top of 10% of the world's oil reserves, Saddam Hussein could then be expected to seek domination of the entire Middle East, take control of a great portion of the world's energy supplies..." Cheney (whose former company, Halliburton, received a Pentagon contract to assess Iraq's oil fields after the war) clearly doesn't think that oil is irrelevant. The Bush Administration has said that the war is all about weapons that no one can find, or democracy by force. Protestors and people around the world think it has a lot to do with what everyone already knows Iraq has – oil.
- **Global Warming:** Oil and gas account for just over one third of all global greenhouse gas emissions. Oil companies in an attempt to "Greenwash" their operations have gone so far as to publicly admit their role in global warming and one even signed onto promoting the Kyoto project, however the actions of these companies speaks for itself: One Shell Renewables representative at a recent conference admitted that despite Shell's perceived leadership role in renewables, the ratio of investment in renewables to oil & gas by his company is roughly 100 to 1 annually. The extraction rate has pressed on towards a record setting goal of a seven percent increase this year for some companies.
- **Environment:** **Every link** in the chain of oil production, from exploration through consumption, **generates profound damage** to local communities and their environment.



- **Human Rights:** There is an alarming record of human rights abuses by governments and corporations associated with fossil fuel operations, resulting in forced relocation, and the brutal and sometimes deadly suppression of critics.
- **Debt and Poverty:** **Increasing oil production leads to increasing debt.** There is a strong and positive relationship between oil production and debt burdens. The more oil a country produces, regardless of oil's share of the country's total economy, the more debt it tends to generate.

Further reading expounding these points can be found at www.priceofoil.org. When we really understand and become aware of the role big oil has in many of the problems we face today; it's money, power and influence on our lawmakers, the blocking of research, the gross human rights violations associated with oil, and associated problems that go on ad nauseam, it's clear that many of our focuses seem to be akin to putting the cart in front of the horse. For instance, I was pretty sure the governments of places like Burma and Nigeria were the solely to blame for the gross human rights violations there, when it turns out, big oil is really the underlying cause of much of it. Environmental protection efforts can't really be sealed while the efforts of big oil companies are working hard to undermine or unravel any work myself and others put into an environmental effort.

Figure 2 Ill-fated otter swimming in oil spill.

I believe the most important actions and efforts I can devote my time to are the single cause of separating oil and state. We need to get our congressmen, our senators and legislators out of big oil's pockets if they are ever going to be champions for our causes. Locally, John Doolittle has taken \$123,025 from the oil and gas industry since 1990. Surprisingly, Diane Feinstein has taken \$147,000 from the oil and gas industry since 1990, and \$32,000 for the 2006 elections so far. Even Barbara Boxer has received big oil contributions. How can Feinstein and Boxer and other representatives simultaneously vow to defend the environment when they have checks coming in from big oil?

Fighting big oil is a cause that supersedes all others in urgency and importance when the grand perspective of it is considered. Whatever tree you may be barking up, please consider the bigger enemy hiding elsewhere. I urge you to take up the call for action however you can.

