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There are many types of renewable energy, but understanding the differences can be complicated. Here, we clear up what they are, how they differ and why they’re so important.

Renewable energy simply refers to an energy source that doesn’t run out. Traditional energy sources, such as coal or oil, are non-renewable, meaning they are finite and we will one day use up the earth’s supply.

This is obviously an issue, as the entire infrastructure of our planet currently revolves around humans using vast quantities of these substances, which take thousands, or in some cases, millions of years to reproduce. Coal, natural gas and petroleum are formed from the buried remains of ancient sea plants and animals, which is why they’re often called fossil fuels.

Coal mining operations often leak rock, soil, and toxic chemicals into the earth and groundwater. Oil spills pollute our oceans, killing marine life and permanently damaging entire ecosystems. Our drinking water can also be polluted to the extent that there is a provable cause and effect between areas close to hydraulic fracturing sites and cases of cancer, birth defects and neurological damage.

Even before they’re used, extracted fossil fuels pollute our air, causing a wide array of issues for humans and wildlife. Indeed, some 17.6 million Americans are potentially exposed to toxic air pollution by living within a mile of oil and gas wells. Benzine, which causes childhood leukemia and blood disorders, and formaldehyde, which causes cancer, are just two of these toxins. Fracking, a growing industry in the US, is linked to several serious health problems.

Perhaps most alarming of all, the burning of fossil fuels is a lead cause of carbon emissions, which accelerates global warming (climate change). This occurs as carbon emissions trap heat in the atmosphere, leading to the warming of the climate -- with disastrous consequences.

Solar energy is energy from the sun. It can be converted into clean thermal and electrical energy that generates electricity, heating, and hot water. Currently, only around 3% of US electricity comes from solar energy. However, its potential is enormous -- panels covering roughly the size of Lake Michigan (around 22,000 square miles) could power the entire United States.

Generally speaking, the advantages of solar power vastly outweigh the disadvantages. For instance, solar power is a clean and cheap energy source that produces no toxic or polluting chemicals into the air. It is widely available (although we will come to this below) and even stimulates local economies and creates green employment.

When used effectively, it also doesn’t take up too much space. Compared to other types of renewable energy, it is suitable for use in cities and urban areas (panels can be put on top of buildings, for example).

Unfortunately, some places on earth are simply sunnier than others and, therefore, more viable as generators for solar energy. For example, California would have better access to solar power than Michigan. While the sun is a constant presence, unpredictable weather patterns can impact the strength and regularity of solar power.

Also, while prices are falling rapidly (and government subsidies are available), the high initial startup cost of solar panels acts as a disincentive for many households. However, many prominent voices in the field would argue strongly that real change will be possible once the financial burden and moral onus of transitioning to green energy are on the world’s governments rather than the individual.

Also known as wind power, this form of energy comes from wind generating mechanical power. Generators convert this mechanical power into electricity. The mechanical power can also be used more directly, such as for grinding grain or pumping water.

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