

Upon entering the University of Wisconsin- Madison, I discovered that there was a heavy emphasis placed on identity. This manifested itself immediately during an “Our Wisconsin” seminar that all freshmen attended through UW housing. During this event, we shared different information regarding our identities and the nuances within, and we reflected about how our own identities shaped our perspectives, relationships with others, and even our creative capabilities in the workplace. I saw right away that identity is an important part of empathy and social relationships, but I failed to see that identity can be a part of the natural science world, especially pertaining to energy. When Nora Bateson preached that the best way to start looking at an energy system is “to start with identity,” that powerful stuck with me.

As a member of Helios, a sustainability organization on campus, I am excited to be a part of an LED retrofit project because it has so much potential to reduce the carbon footprint of our largest dining hall. I am part of the Helios research team, and I will continue to contact community members involved in the project and look for ways to efficiently and feasibly implement the project. This is a large part of my own identity, and I shape my thinking with a strong emphasis that everyday processes have a huge effect on natural systems, and humans play such a large role in those outcomes. This leads me to the view that as a human race, we should have a passion for maintaining a clean, functional environment for the future because it simply makes sense to try to support a world where we can be healthy and have a productive supply of resources. This logic could conclude that it is likely that we would soon convert to more renewable energy. However, this is influenced by my identities as a student, a midwesterner, a young person, a liberal, a member of a sustainability organization, an eager planner, a person hoping to one day become a parent, and an optimist.

Smil does not share this opinion, nor does he share many of these identities. He has a much more pessimistic prediction for humanity and our lack of vigorously developing energy production and consumption practices. One logical argument he cites to support this less than picturesque predicted outcome is the fact that even as of even in 2018, after society has been exposed to years of transparent environmental predictions about dire and immediate impacts of climate change, we still have done little to increase the scale of our renewable energy. Several organizations have proven that the process is not only possible, but also beneficial. Still, the trend has not caught on. Smil reminds us of the point that coal, oil, and natural gas still supply 90% of the world's backbone energy. I think that one reason he uses this information to come to his conclusions is that he holds the identity of someone older than me. I use this reasoning with caution, because I know many adults in the Baby Boomer generation or older that share my beliefs. It is impossible to analyze the aggregate opinion differences by age using only my personal social interactions since the group of people I interact with is undoubtedly a biased representative sample of the larger population. Smil also holds the identity shaped by his upbringing. He grew up in a somewhat isolated town in the mountains and spent his childhood days chopping wood, likely leaving him very grounded in nature. Although I cannot speak for his personal psychology, I think this might lead him to believe that he is more in touch with nature, and thus the environment, than others. This could lead him to underestimate human empathy for protecting the environment. In a transition to a sustainable energy system, I think it is a very healthy approach to treat an optimist opinion (or more extreme) as an upper bound for societal capability, and Smil's approach as a lower bound. From here, the problem of creating a societal approach that would work for our current world becomes much more definable and attainable .