



Alternative and renewable energy sources

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greenhouse gas, any gas that has the property of absorbing infrared radiation ...

Learn how turning toward cleaner energy sources means factoring in economic and energy needs alongside environmental ones.

If you want to be eco-friendly, you should be driving an electric car. Right?

Unfortunately, it is not as simple as that. While electric cars do not pollute the air around them like a combustion engine does, they do need to be charged, leading to questions such as what energy source the electricity is coming from and whether that energy source is clean.

The overall evaluation of an energy source is based not only on how clean it is; it also has to be reliable, accessible, and affordable. Not all of these factors can be categorized neatly. For example, petroleum tends to be relatively affordable in the United States, but that is in part because the government subsidizes fossil fuel industries. Similarly, while wind energy tends to be relatively expensive, its cost has been steadily declining for years as its use increases.

To evaluate the options available, understanding fundamental facts about what types of energy are available and what trade-offs each presents is helpful.

There are three main categories of energy sources: fossil fuel, alternative, and renewable. Renewable is sometimes, but not always, included under alternative.

Fossil fuels formed over millions of years ago as dead plants and animals were subjected to extreme heat and pressure in the earth's crust. This natural process converted bones and other organic matter into carbon-rich substances that, when burned, generate energy. There are three main fossil fuels.

Fossil fuels are often called dirty energy sources because using them comes at a high--and often irreversible--cost to the environment. Carbon emissions, or the amount of carbon dioxide these fuels release into the atmosphere, add up over generations and cannot be taken back. Moreover, there is only a finite amount of these resources on earth.

Forms of energy not derived from fossil fuels include both renewable and alternative energy, terms that are sometimes used interchangeably but do not mean the same thing. Alternative energy broadly refers to any energy that is not extracted from a fossil fuel, but not necessarily only from a renewable source. For example, nuclear power generation most commonly uses uranium, an abundant but not technically renewable fuel.



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Renewable energy, on the other hand, includes sources such as sun and wind that occur naturally and continuously.

There are five main renewable and alternative fuels.

Renewable and alternative energy sources are often categorized as clean energy because they produce significantly less carbon emissions compared to fossil fuels. But they are not without an environmental footprint.

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