

Earth Hour: A Tipping Point?

By Wayne Visser

Did you participate in Earth Hour - switching off your lights from 8.30-9.30 pm on 28 March? If you did, you were one of "hundreds of millions" who joined WWF's campaign to "Vote Earth". But did it make a difference, or was it just a feel-good piece of "green spin"?

What is Earth Hour?

Earth Hour began in Sydney in 2007, when 2.2 million homes and businesses switched off their lights for one hour. In 2008 the message had grown into a global sustainability movement, with 50 million people switching off their lights. Global landmarks such as the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, Rome's Colosseum, the Sydney Opera House and the Coca Cola billboard in Times Square all stood in darkness.

In 2009, hundreds of millions of people - from over 4,080 cities and towns across 88 countries - joined in, according to WWF. In the UK, famous landmarks like Big Ben, Buckingham Palace, Tower Bridge, the Millennium Stadium, Stormont and Edinburgh Castle all switched off to support the event. Around the world, iconic landmarks, like the Great Pyramid of Giza, the Eiffel Tower and even Las Vegas all joined in "the big switch-off".

What was the Impact?

I expect an official WWF analysis will emerge, but according to news reports, the Philippines saved 611 MWh of power during Earth Hour, involving 15 million Filipinos in 650 major cities. This placed them ahead of the rest of the world, with Greece placed second with 484 cities and towns participating, followed by Australia with 309. In South Africa, 100,000 people switched off 4.7 million 60 watt lightbulbs, saving 400 MWh. The best-performing city was, apparently, Christchurch in New Zealand, which reported a 13% decline in energy consumption.

Impressive statistics and quite fun to play with. For example, Pulse Energy reports that "if the actions taken for one hour of energy savings tonight [in Vancouver] were repeated for an entire year, enough energy would be saved to make six round trips on the SkyTrain between Vancouver and Paris. On the other hand, in Calgary in Canada, electricity use went up 3.6% during Earth Hour (they blame the weather). I also saw comments like, "Surely candle-power is much less energy efficient than fossil fuels?" (it is). But getting too caught up in the thermodynamics or the numbers, I think, entirely misses the point.

My 10 Reasons Why

Sceptics are well justified in shouting 'green spin!' After all, everyone went straight back to their normal fossil-fuel guzzling ways after the hour was up. And yet, I remain a

total fan of Earth Hour. Here are my "10 Reasons Why":

1. Politics - The mass public demonstration of support for action on climate change gives the world's politicians space to maneuver in making the difficult transition to a low-carbon economy.
2. Focus - Earth Hour is not focused on 28 March, but on building pressure on the world's governments when they meet in Copenhagen in December 2009 to work out a Post-Kyoto deal.
3. Governance - In the face of significant corporate lobbying, civil society's ability to mobilise "hundreds of millions" acts as a vital counter-balance in national and international governance.
4. Awareness - The widespread media coverage of the event means that it is not just "preaching to the converted", but raising broad public awareness of the seriousness of climate change.
5. Downshifting - Going "back to basics", even for just an hour, is a great reminder of what is important in life, without the distractions of all of modernity's electricity-gizmos (TVs, computers, etc.).
6. Empathy - It also gave people pause to think about the billions in the world who have no electricity. Hence, finding a sustainable energy solution needs to be linked to poverty reduction.
7. Community - All around the world, communities and families were drawn together behind a common cause, as so often happens voluntary events.
8. Action - The fact that Earth Hour required action - i.e. switching off lights and other appliances - sends an important psychological message that we need to go beyond talking.
9. Hope - Showing that we can make a difference, and that tackling our energy crisis is possible provides a critical antidote to feelings of hopelessness and disempowerment in the face of climate change.
10. Tipping Point - Earth Hour plays a crucial role in edging us towards a tipping point of public concern and political action on climate change, after which we will see the rapid transformation we need.

Conclusion

My feeling is that Earth Hour is not a once off, but rather the start of a tidal change. In much the same way that Earth Day, which Greenpeace started on 22 April 1970, played an important part in building momentum for the environmental movement, I believe Earth Hour will play a crucial role in fueling the post-carbon movement.

P.S. Switch!

For those with poetic leanings, you may wish to read the poem I wrote by candlelight during Earth Hour (which one Facebook friend called "an incorrigibly romantic way to spend Earth Hour"). It is called Switch!

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