

Peak Coal

by Bretwood Higman, Erin McKittrick, Valisa Higman, David Coil

LAST MODIFIED: 12TH AUGUST 2019
CREATED: JAN. 19, 2018

Ground Truth Trekking

Copyright: Creative Commons Attribution

Table of Contents

1. Peak Coal and Climate Change



COAL OMEN? — A raven perches on top of a coal pile near the Seward docks. — Get Photo (/photos/coal-omen/)

Closely tied to the issue of coal resources and reserves (HowMuchCoal.html) is the idea of “peak coal” which is the analog to the well-studied and often debated “peak oil (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peak_oil)” concept. Peak coal is the point at which coal production reaches a maximum output and declines thereafter. Some recent studies suggest that global peak coal may occur within the next 25 years, or that we are

Copyright: Creative Commons Attribution

already there. For example scientists in California and Texas have calculated that peak coal will be reached in 2011 (http://www.greencarcongress.com/2010/08/peakcoal-20100802.html), The Energy Watch Group calculates (http://energywatchgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/EWG_Report_Coal_10-07-2007ms.pdf) global peak coal will occur in 2025, and the US National Academies suggests the possibility (http://www8.nationalacademies.org/onpinews/newsitem.aspx?RecordID=11977) of global peak coal occurring around 2030. It should be noted that the point at which peak coal is reached doesn't mean the end of coal production; it is merely the maximum level of production. Therefore coal mining (CoalMining.html) could continue for many years after peak production, as has been the case in Great Britain which reached maximum production almost 100 years ago but continues to produce a small amount of coal every year.

In the case of peak oil there are anticipated to be a variety of negative societal and economic impacts as demand continues to increase at the same time production falls. Opinions on the details range from "peak oil is a myth (http://www.prisonplanet.com/archives/peak_oil/index.htm)" to peak oil will result in the total and catastrophic collapse of civilization (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doomer).

However, the effects of peak coal may be much less dramatic. Oil fills a unique niche as a liquid transportation fuel, while coal is primarily used for energy production - for which there are

Copyright: Creative Commons Attribution

many more alternatives. Additionally, coal resources are so large that even though prices may go up as the difficulty of extraction increases, mining is unlikely to bottom out rapidly.

Peak Coal and Climate Change

How much coal we eventually burn plays strongly into predictions of climate change impacts. If the economically recoverable coal reserves (CoalTerminology.html) turn out to be large, and we choose to exploit a large portion of them, it will lead the world towards the more dramatic impacts in the spectrum of climate change scenarios (http://www.ipcc.ch/publications_and_data/publications_ipcc_fourth_assessment_report_wg1_report_the_physical_scienc However, if peak coal is near and the economically recoverable coal reserves turn out to be small, coal's potential to increase climate change may be much less important (http://rutledge.caltech.edu/).

Copyright: Creative Commons Attribution