

Basking in the Sun

In a small village in northern Arizona, in the United States, there is a community of Hopi Indians who live without conventional electric power. All of their needs are met by the sun, as it has been for thousands of years. “Living off the grid,” as it is called, provides these Native Americans with autonomy from the U.S. power corporations. It creates an alternative to the electrical power lines that would disrupt the peaceful atmosphere and balance of a life marked by tradition and ceremony.

These Hopis are self-sufficient—they do not need energy from conventional sources, but rely instead on the sun. More than 300 of them have solar energy systems on their houses, which provide all the electricity they need. The most basic system involves a set of solar panels to collect the sunlight, batteries to store the energy from the panels for later use, and devices that convert the stored energy into power so that electrical appliances, such as ovens, lamps, and radios, can be used.

Up-front costs are high, up to \$10,000 for a residential system, but once purchased, there are no other costs. The system is set up for life. There are never electric bills to pay, not to mention the savings in environmental costs; there is no pollution from this source of energy, unlike from gas or electrical generators, and there is no depletion of natural resources because solar power is completely renewable. Using solar energy in a typical home each year is the conservation equivalent of not driving a car 4,000 miles (6,400 kilometers).

The Hopi people believe that everything in the world is connected, and they live with the utmost respect for the natural environment. Important decisions are made with future generations in mind, and energy choices are no exception. Solar energy systems allow customers to maintain some of their traditional ways of life while reaping the benefits of modern technology and not polluting the environment.

Solar power is also providing the Hopis with much-needed jobs. On an Indian reservation, work is scarce, and the demand of hundreds of residents for solar energy is creating jobs for many people, installing the systems and educating people about their use.

The Hopi people traditionally make much of the sun’s role in the seasons and in the growth of crops. Using solar power, they say, is one more way that the sun provides for their way of life.