



It Used To Be a Caterpillar

No — not a children’s book for an urban environmentalist. A grown-up [book published just yesterday for anyone interested in urban environmentalism, by the University of Vermont’s Austin Troy](#). Here’s the blurb from the publisher (Yale):

As global demand for energy grows and prices rise, a city’s energy consumption becomes increasingly tied to its economic viability, warns the author of *The Very Hungry City*. Austin Troy, a seasoned expert in urban environmental management, explains for general readers how a city with a high “urban energy metabolism”—that is, a city that needs large amounts of energy in order to function—will be at a competitive disadvantage in the future. He explores why cities have different energy metabolisms and discusses an array of innovative approaches to the problems of expensive energy consumption.

Troy looks at dozens of cities and suburbs in Europe and the United States—from Los Angeles to Copenhagen, Denver to the Swedish urban redevelopment project Hammarby Sjöstad—to understand the diverse factors that affect their energy use: behavior, climate, water supply, building quality, transportation, and others. He then assesses some of the most imaginative solutions that cities have proposed, among them green building, energy-efficient neighborhoods, symbiotic infrastructure, congestion pricing, transit-oriented development, and water conservation. To conclude, the author addresses planning and policy approaches that can bring about change and transform the best ideas into real solutions.

Of particular interest is Troy’s argument that energy-hungry cities will be at “a competitive disadvantage.” It’s not quite clear what that means: does it mean that such cities will not be able to attract and foster employers because of high energy costs? Possibly, but it’s not necessarily true that high energy costs vary as much between cities as between firms: do consumers in San Francisco pay rates much different from here in Los Angeles? Perhaps Troy is focused on energy costs such as transportation, and that could indeed affect firm costs; on the other hand, more spread-out cities might have lower housing costs because of a greater land area. Moreover, while energy-intensive firms might go to lower costs cities, it might not make much difference to low-energy intensive firms. And all of this begs the question as to how to really reduce a city’s energy footprint.

In any event, I fully expect Troy to deal with these and related issues in thoughtful and incisive ways; I've known him (although not well) for a couple of decades and have always found him to be insightful. [You can order the book here](#). Together with recent works by [Ed Glaeser](#), [David Owen](#), [Joan Fitzgerald](#), and of course our own [Matt Kahn](#), the field of local energy policy is burgeoning and of great importance.

And in the meantime, while you are waiting for Troy's book, you can check out the original:

[youtube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpISHA8Fs4w>]