

Ethical cobalt

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One of the big problems with the electric

car revolution is the problem over sourcing cobalt. (The other increasing one is people tripping over battery charging leads on the pavement which seems to be in the news at the moment.) The problem is at the moment cobalt is required in all lithium batteries. It makes up part of the cathode and stabilises it during recharging. The problem is most of the worlds cobalt is not ethical cobalt. Its mined mainly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), an oxymoron of a title if ever there was one and much of it is mined by greater than 150,000 artisanal miners. This quaint term means to you and me people mining informally (many of them children) who disappear down shafts dug in the ground. These are very unsafe and the miners are paid very little money. Before anyone decides this is just a problem with electric car batteries – its not cobalt is in all lithion batteries (so phones laptops etc). So what to do? There a number of solutions. The first is tighten the law in the DRC. The government is doing so but the country is large chaotic and corrupt. The second is ethical sourcing, this is also happening. There are some large mines there run by multinationals and you hope the conditions there are better at least. The next solution is to use less. Here Mr Musk weighs in saying he will eliminate the metal in the next generation of his cars. This is said to be a tall order but he has reduced the quantities to 4.5kg car from 11Kg/car (these figures are extraordinary). A whole heap of companies are working or have reduced lithion battery technologies or different chemistries all together. The final solution is recycle as much as possible which is always going to be better than ripping new stuff out of the ground. But we have a long way to go until ethical cobalt. Neil

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