Petrocollapse: your basic wake-up call plus caveat

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Dear Culture Change readers,

This essay may be familiar thinking, but it is intended to serve as an introduction for "the mainstream." Please consider passing this along to websites and other publications. Thank you,

- JL

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The public has been plainly informed, perhaps better than ever: a permanent energy crisis looms. The Earth has given up almost all the easily available oil, placing us in the position of suddenly lacking the materials to continue unsustainable growth. The implications are too enormous for the corporate media or our "leaders" to disclose, so, for short-term considerations, happy-talk and other distractions serve to forestall preparation and mitigation for our imminent, historic transition.

Peak oil extraction is estimated to be upon us, with natural gas soon to follow, indicating a free fall to an uncertain minimum-energy universal lifestyle. Anyone who really believes that some alternative form of energy will ride in like a knight in shining armor to save us is sadly misinformed. The only deviation from our free-fall fate might be that we get sidetracked by some related crisis even more lethal involving climate or nuclear war.

But we can say we are facing petrocollapse, and it has been ratified by the mainstream media (e.g., New York Times; see Culture Change Letter #124)) and even the President. When we realize global oil discoveries peaked over 40 years ago, and we use more than four barrels of oil for every one discovered, we can see the writing on the wall. And how can we expect to maintain or expand upon 84 million barrels a day of oil use, when the vaunted tar sands of Alberta may only provide an eventual maximum of five million barrels a day? This would be at huge investment cost over several years, with devastating effects on the environment and public health that have already begun.

George W. Bush has told us what's happening, between the lines. All one must do to see the whole reality is to critically consider his non-solution to oil addiction – biofuels – and we are left with nothing but fast-disappearing oil. Peak oil is another name for petrocollapse, if we acknowledge the Hirsch Report for the U.S. Dept. of Energy 13 months ago: we blew the two-decade minimum lead time to change the infrastructure away from petroleum. The government knows that peak oil has "sneaked up" on us, and that the nationwide Katrina will have to hit relatively soon.

Proceeding with fingers firmly crossed, now we can focus on issues such as the hoped-for technofix, and the implications of a hemorrhaging of the economy. With the outlook of a successful culture change, there’s a silver lining in losing or abandoning both high-energy living and working for excessive material things to possess and poison our world.

Unfortunately, the funded environmental movement has been bought off to the degree it mainly promotes technosolutions while calling for band-aid reforms of a failing system.

The reason events are about to move fast regarding all petroleum supply is that the market will turn a potential geological-based peak oil scenario to a virtual cut off of supply. Extraction cannot keep going at some slowly reduced rate, mostly because the refining and marketing sectors cannot operate under negative-growth conditions very long. Enter petrocollapse and the unraveling of the global growth economy. Chaos and futile attempts at social control will only delay the time we all get together and resume growing food locally and meeting our other needs from our bioregions.

No more fruit from Chile or techno-toys from China. As we increase petroleum dependence and enjoy lower-labor-cost goods from afar, we lose local self-sufficiency. The reduced self-reliance in the U.S. includes the areas of manufacturing, processes, and hand-crafts. For example: an old-school shoemaker and observer of globalism's ravages informed me recently that there is not one leather tannery left in the U.S. So, the next economic downturn and the non-possibility of another petro-fueled boom means no recovery of the present economy. We can look forward to a replacement: bioregional political entities coping with their own degraded environments. One of the plus-side aspects owes itself to an horrific culling of starving consumers: lower population size will utilize land and other resources more equitably and calmly.

With any research the average person can discover that apart from petroleum, no form of energy on hand substitutes adequately for petroleum when we consider the uses and convenience of oil and natural gas. Rather than trot out all the evidence for peak extraction of petroleum, let us see how desperate the game has become: import liquified natural gas at the cost of safety and states' rights; seize oil-rich nations such as Iraq and reap the whirlwind, and ignore warnings on the climate's unraveling at the hands of energy pollution.

What is the average person in petroleum-addicted U.S.A. supposed to do? Addressing this is the thrust of Culture Change and a growing number of groups focusing on Peak Oil, petrocollapse, sustainable living, and community activism. Our first step is to obtain understanding by informing ourselves and others of the ecological and energy reality that the commercial media try to conceal with their relentless message of consuming and propaganda of fear they pass along from the government. The agenda of the entire financial system is growth and spending (into debt), so it can be said we have no effective leadership; indeed, those who mislead us are enemies of a positive future.

The next step is taking action such as creating a garden and arranging cooperative relationships to emancipate ourselves from the isolating, disempowering effects of the corporate economy. It's not too soon to revive bartering and sharing, and creating local projects to utilize local resources. To do this we'll be operating amongst ourselves with more intimacy and greater respect. I don't believe a feudal society will replace what we have today, but no doubt some will attempt it as they cling to the past techniques of a civilization that has passed.

It is the hope of this petroleum market analyst and long-time environmental activist that the issue of petrocollapse can be grasped soon by the majority of citizens. The caveat is that technology, authoritarian government and the "free market" will not "save us" from wrenching changes; in fact, these forces caused the problems and are out of control. Knowing where we are going, where we want to go, while looking forward to liberating ourselves from oppressive socioeconomic forces, will allow us to create the kind of society that puts the climate and our real interests first.

In "Warming transforms Bering Sea ecosystem," the Los Angeles Times reported a few days ago that "the Arctic climate of the northern Bering Sea is in full retreat, yielding to the sub-Arctic system of the south."

Billions of people add up: they’re hostage to a mutant culture that’s run increasingly amok for thousands of years, and they can’t help but distort their fast-fading natural garden. We are all at the end of the past. The barbarians are at the gates. It’s time to get off our asses. It’s not too late to revere the Earth and defend it.

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Oregon / AMTRAK – March 14, 2006
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May 6th is the date for the DC Petrocollapse Conference. Location: All Souls Unitarian fellowship hall. Speakers include Richard Heinberg, author of "The Party's Over" and "Powerdown", and Jan Lundberg. For more information send an email to Complete information will be on our www.petrocollapse.org website.

Support Culture Change and the DC Petrocollapse Conference by donating online (secure via PayPal) at

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Further reading:

"Warming transforms Bering Sea ecosystem" (Los Angeles Times)

http://www.registerguard.com/news/2006/03/10/a9.int.beringsea.0310.p1.php

High illness rate near oilsands worrisome, says Alberta health official - CBC News:

http://www.cbc.ca/story/canada/national/2006/03/10/oilsands-chipewyan060310.html

Peaking of World Oil Production: Impacts, Mitigation and Risk Management, Robert L. Hirsch, SAIC:

http://www.projectcensored.org/newsflash/the_hirsch_report.pdf

Robert Hirsch's "Shaping the peak of world oil production" from World Oil, Oct. 2005:

http://www.worldoil.com/magazine/MAGAZINE_DETAIL.asp?ART_ID=2696&MONTH_YEAR=Oct-2005