"Escape from Suburbia" film: escape from reality?

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
30 October 2007

Culture Change Letter #170

Editor's note:
An open letter can make for the best reading on occasion. The following email is self explanatory. It was shared with the "Escape from Suburbia" filmmaker with the stated intention to share it (with his response) with Culture Change readers. The reason any of this is important is that the director's first film, "The End of Suburbia," broke ground and woke up untold thousands of people to the reality of peak oil.

From his one-sentence noncommittal response to me, I might have said anything at all; he had apparently written us off long ago. So there's no telling what his best thoughts might really be after receiving critical input from someone he was supposedly working with. His odd reaction makes for a greater justification for my giving a thumbs down on a new and sincere documentary, even though it took much time and expense in the making. It has some great footage, but society's predicament over peak oil and climate chaos is such that the highest standards of journalism, science and art must be applied -- the hour is indeed getting late, if we are to get it right.

A documentary posing as comprehensive that is off the mark can be okay for a subject matter that does not pertain to our very survival. If an analysis or message is attempted and distributed that is less than on-target and misleading -- regarding the most urgent global crisis -- then the attempt had best not be done at all, when we are practically out of time to mitigate the twin runaway freight trains of petrocollapse and climate disaster.

Seeing the film is still worthwhile for the possibly rare coverage of the South Central Community Farm that thrived in Los Angeles until bulldozed by developers who apparently control city government.
I broke the story nationally with a column in From The Wilderness in February 2006. I had just spoken and performed eco-songs at the 14 acre complex of family urban-garden plots. It was devastating that this oasis of local, non-capitalistic food production was destroyed with little outcry or
lessons learned by the larger "community." - JL

To: Gregory Greene

From: Jan Lundberg

Subject: EFS

Dear Greg,

As you must have anticipated, Escape From Suburbia was a personal disappointment to me. Because it was not well received by others here in the San Francisco peak oil community as well, for various reasons, and I can pass some advice and criticism along to help the cause for raising awareness on peak oil, I give you this reaction.

I believe EFS is a good film to broaden public awareness. But the movie could have been so much better, and still can be easily improved without additional footage. Up to about the two-thirds point in the duration of the film I said to myself, "This is a good film." But it loses its focus (pardon the pun) and is much too long, to the point of being grueling (for some of us).

I feel sort of deceived into promoting EFS when you could have told me that my work and that of my collaborators was disrespected in your film, and that we'd thus be surprised by the movie. But I have objective concerns about EFS that do intertwine my personal involvement with conferences and the whole issue of peak oil and our future survival as a species.

One would think that a film trying to be responsible about this topic would provide resources in a fair fashion for people wanting to know more. You might considering adding among the credits at the end and on the DVD box "www.petrocollapse.org," because if one listens to the sound files there for all the speeches of our NYC Petrocollapse Conference, which your film dismisses and misrepresents, one gets not only a very different idea of that successful conference, but also much useful information and contacts (mentioned below).

In contrast, your well-featured Local Solutions conference in New York six months after our Oct. 2005 conference was, while useful and informative, wasteful with high costs, had a smaller audience, and was an extremely embittering conference and post-event experience for co-organizers (excluding the proprietor and main star of EFS), according to

reports. This long conference added little to what had been said at the NYC Petrocollapse Conference. It would have been helpful for the audience of EFS to see who spoke at both conferences. At Local Solutions, a speaker promoting Christianity took up half of a full time-allotment I shared with him. (Our juxtaposition may have been haphazard, and he was not an energy expert.) Despite your disservice to our Petrocollapse Conference (co-organized with great energy and capability by Jenna Orkin who played beautiful Brahms music on piano as our finale), and to our ongoing work as activists warning of petrocollapse, the record shows that we were not and are not just doom and gloomers. We featured the Bronx project More Gardens, the biting humor of Jim Kunstler, and the tempered optimism of John Darnell who represented the Congressional office of Roscoe Bartlett. The only misstep at that first Petrocollapse Conference was Michael Ruppert's alarmist predictions that did not pan out. But he did pack ‘em in, and we remain grateful for Mike’s assistance and sincerity.

With all the footage you had of the violin virtuoso Richard Heinberg concertizing with me at the Yellow Springs peak oil conference in Sept. 2005, it was a little strange that we were depicted for a couple of seconds without our music, and unidentified. The techno-music overlay was ironic to anyone aware of our nature-praising, acoustic songs.

EFS has much good content, and touching on the issue of feeding urban overpopulations is helpful, but there is much to get across in terms of necessary skills and approaches for post-peak oil survival. Many folks believe that culture change is the approach needed, unless they prefer to cling to the technofix-attempt to prop up consumption and overpopulation. The film What a Way to Go - Life at the End of Empire raises the many issues and challenges posed by peak oil as well as climate change. The film's general solution of getting together in community in boats, figuratively if not literally, is uplifting. We gave that film a strongly enthusiastic review in culturechange.org, and it was not because my work was well presented. In fact, I don't appear whatsoever, nor am I mentioned. The film is 25% longer than yours, but is deeply instructive and heads in a real direction one senses well before the end. There's a climax of sorts that urges people to learn more and take action, but realism prevailed so as to refrain from implying that small farming is going to replace suburbia and deliver us from, yes, petrcocollapse.

Your omissions of exciting solutions for suburbia and escaping it could have been been avoided if you had talked with some well-known activists: Mark Lakeman, of the City Repair Project in Portland, Ore.; Albert Bates, Ecovillage Training Center, author of The Post-Petroleum Survival Guide and Cookbook; Richard Register, aka The Depaving Guru, founder of Urban Ecology and currently heading Ecocity Builders, and myself. A quick look at culturechange.org would have informed you of Pedal Power Produce, depaving, Sail Transport Network, car-free living, Food Not Lawns, community organizing and do-it-yourselfism, fasting for health and preparing for future hardship; fighting the plastic plague as a way to raise awareness on petroleum; the Pledge for Climate Protection, and, lastly, as an all-too original approach, collapsing the dominant paradigm of the global corporate economy via localism and bioregional self-sufficiency and self-rule. These topics were explored at the NYC Petrocollapse Conference and at our DC Petrocollapse Conference in May of 2006. We featured an expanded concert with poetry, as well.

Perhaps you felt the prospect of die-off had to be submerged, so my work was brought up only in negative terms about our conference. Not just die-off but population size is missing from EFS as an issue. As an oil-industry analyst, I've shared my views on supply and price dynamics for petroleum and alternatives for decades, but some media players and nonprofit activists feel -- for political reasons and to cater to supporters of the mainstream corporate economy -- I should not be invited to speak at certain energy conferences (or in films such as yours and the narrowly framed, pro-technofix and ASPO-USA-boosting "Energy Crossroads" DVD), because of my views and frankness perhaps. So it's ironic that the mainstream CBS Radio Network, for example, saw fit to carry an interview with me on Sept. 21 of this year.

For our showing of EFS in San Francisco on Oct. 11, I brought quite a few

well-informed folks together to see it, with high hopes due to your fine work on The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil. I had not previewed EFS. By the time it was over, no one had any enthusiasm to share the movie further or purchase it. Even my emailed suggestions of taking up a collection for the film-makers was bypassed. Please don't get angry at the messenger; instead, please consider cutting some time off of EFS and see if you can ultimately sell more copies by word of mouth as you and Barry Silverthorne did so successfully with End of Suburbia.

I regret having to spend time on a letter such as this to rock our friendship, and to take time away from depaving or writing a song about it, but I told our group I would write a review. I asked for their comments to include, but no one had anything to send me. Despite my lack of wholehearted endorsement for EFS in its present form, I ask you to give me any response on any or all of the above points. Some of us hope you are open to cutting several minutes off your film in order to improve it -- I know it's "in the bag," but you can always put out a revised edition or "director's cut" or "activists' cut" (what a first!). In lieu of a traditional review, I would like to use this letter and your response as something for us to post for our readers. Who knows, you might sell some DVDs, as might the makers of What a Way to Go and Energy Crossroads.

Best wishes,

Jan

[editor's note: With further reflection, I would modify my statement that the movie is a good one for beginners; I would be more precautionary and rather say it is fairly good. Mr. Greene's response to the Oct. 20 email above was a single sentence in the email below, sent to me one week later. - JL]

dear jan,

thanks so much for your comments.

best regards,

gregory greene

writer | director

The END of SUBURBIA

ESCAPE From SUBURBIA

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Editor's last word: Two years after our Petrocollapse Conference in Manhattan, I only now have hit upon an explanation for Mr. Greene's last-second decision not to sit down with the speakers for dinner; perhaps a hatchet job on our conference was intended then.

Taking into account the good effort of "The End of Suburbia," one can ignore the attachment to the word "suburbia" in the second film's title. But both films fall short of clarity and vision when the focus is on suburbia -- implying that inner cities and more density, a la New Urbanism, are sustainable for our huge populations. "Escape from Suburbia" graduates, in its content, from faith in the urban environment to emotionally embracing small farming. Culture Change will soon publish a new research piece that will shed light on how many people can be supported in the U.S. and Canada by non-petroleum agriculture. - JL

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"DC Petrocollapse Conference / L.A.'s "Havana farm" threatened," by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change Letter #122:

culturechange.org