Counting on Mother Nature - and on Frisco's politicos

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
31 January 2008

Culture Change Letter #177

by Jan Lundberg

Hi People,

I'm concluding my redwood-countryside vacation, and had a thought to share after contemplating the plentiful snow in these coastal redwoods. It was something I'd never seen in all my years here.

Realizing some of the significance of this rare event, I thought, "It would be nice to be able to count on Mother Earth to do her thing with rain, sun, and the rest, in a fashion that maintains a delicate, sometimes violent balance that's self-correcting and evolving."

But we cannot count on Mother Nature as easily anymore -- even in an appreciative fashion -- when we have thrown her off course. Now we helplessly ask of her a tall order: to restore balance, or at least, "Pretty please Mother Nature, Father Sky, whomever, don't let things get quite as bad as we seem to be making them." Instead of being fairly reliable, our true master or mistress is shaping up as a relentless avenger.

"Indeed it's sad, love can't be had, what we're livin' for is bad, when property and misery break our hearts in half. Natural living's old hat, watch your nature going fast, idolatry, technology tempts that wealth can last."

The previous paragraph was from an as yet obscure song, in case you wondered. I came up to my old redwood stomping ground to take in nature and make music, but I admit a heck of a lot of time has been spent on writing emails for the campaign to ban plastics. Trying to find the best thing to do day to day is sometimes hard, and I wish I did not have to worry about it. Here's a debate for you: can one's reading tons of text compare to the power of a single song? Well, where are those songs? Corporate media consolidation and censorship of radical music is at its height. Let's put that thought on hold and turn to what may be the story of the hour and of our lives: petrocollapse and climate chaos.

Counting on Frisco's politicos

If the U.S. does not keep sucking from the rest of the world the desired petroleum, metals, food, labor, lives, and blood -- okay, that's not all the country does; it has it's good points too -- the U.S. as we know it dies. M. King Hubbert indicated as much in his thinking and writings; the basis of his main realizations was the proof of peaking U.S. oil extraction in 1970 that he had accurately forecast.

The sucking will cease, and it could be really soon -- whether it is called peak oil or financial meltdown is immaterial. From "Running On Empty," the San Francisco Bay Guardian's top feature story this week, we can discern that the basic threat to the food supply is something we collectively pretend not to worry about.

"'There is no way that San Francisco is going to feed itself in the short term... 'Food is going to be a gigantic issue.' (Jeanne Rosenmeier, chair of San Francisco's Peak Oil Preparedness Task Force)

"In a larger sense, it already is. This past December the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations urged governments to take immediate steps to mitigate 'dramatic food price increases' worldwide. Meanwhile, a recent cover story in the New York Times ('A New, Global Quandary: Costly Fuel Means Costly Calories,' 1/19/08) cited 'food riots' in more than half a dozen countries and asserted, 'Soaring fuel prices have altered the equation for growing food and transporting it around the world.'"

Is not food shortage and uncertainty a matter of not being able to count on Mother Nature as well as we used to? We have seen how "advances" in technology backfired and aided, at best, rises in populations that are temporary. Prior to the white man, the peaceful northern California natives had to cultivate only one crop (by choice): tobacco.

The Bay Guardian's homepage asks, "Has peak oil arrived -- and how will SF survive a postpetroleum world?" Indeed, the latter is an open question that must assume major change in population size and daily living. How can the City of San Francisco -- the U.S.A.'s famous Peak Oil City, cope with "petro collapse" (as the article quotes me) by activating a Peak Oil Preparedness Task Force? The article is comprehensive and balanced. It ends with, "'The era of cheap oil is over,' Lundberg says. 'Period.'" What I recall actually saying is a bit different: cheap energy (rather than cheap oil) is over with.

One day oil may be hard to give away if (or when) humanity has successfully left the dominant culture behind and proceeds to a truly post-petroleum world supported by low-tech, local-based simple living. Oil still in the ground may be extracted and used by someone or some group well into the future in minor amounts, but the petroleum infrastructure will have ceased. Who will really care what the price of oil is, if it is only a specialty item? Another question is how a complex refinery can operate forever. Putting on my oil-industry analyst hat, I can question the assumption that a diminished oil industry can keep going in a world where economic growth is history.

As for San Francisco and its uncertain future facing petrocollapse, our Task Force is considering -- beyond holding public meetings and advising the Board of Supervisors -- just how to inform the City's departments that they must be sure to adhere to the peak oil resolution and avoid perpetuating petroleum dependence. So far, the City has taken the lead in the Western Hemisphere to take historic action to do something about peak oil and other aspects of petroleum: ban plastic bags. More action is pending to deal with the plastic disaster and petroleum in general. For those of you in other parts of the U.S. and the world, what can your own community do to face the future?

- JL, February 1, 2008

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"Running on empty: The San Francisco Peak Oil Preparedness Task Force explores life after fossil fuels — an era that may be coming sooner than most people think" - BY CHARLES RUSSO, January 30, 2008

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