You. Will. Not. Be. Able. To. Get. Food. - report on trends

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The empire of cheap food is crumbling

You. Will. Not. Be. Able. To. Get. Food. Need this be spelled out any more plainly? It is time to consider that the stage has been set for petroleum-induced famine.

We have "innocently" accommodated rising population with greater and greater food production via technology and the profit motive. But now we have run out of room to grow, as biotechnology, for example, has severe limitations -- major ones being petroleum dependence and topsoil loss. The biggest wild card for our existence is climate change, as we see with floods and other extreme weather affecting our food supply.

We are headed for massive shortages of food and other essentials, mainly brought about by the depletion of geological fossil reserves of cheap energy and water. The situation is demonstrated regularly with easy arithmetic based on statistical indicators from the United Nations, Worldwatch Institute, World Resources Institute, Earth Policy Institute, and numerous governments. Usually the full force of the message is offset by predictions of huge rises in future human population growth that are simple extrapolations of historical trends.

No one can say with certainty that the worst effects of today's crisis will occur tomorrow or by any particular date. But it is irrational to assume there will only be gradual tightening of supplies until some solutions miraculously come to our aid. One ought to at least admit that one year ago few people thought we'd be going in the direction we're going in, this fast, today.

Three days is our average food supply around the modernized world, i.e., for cities and their supermarkets. Long-term food stocks have plummeted: "Cereal stocks that are at their lowest level in 30 years," according to Worldwatch institute in its most recent Vital Signs. This is exacerbated by increasingly weirder weather, compounded by the oil price/supply pressure on food. What can interfere with the three-day situation are truckers on strike (as in Europe), extended/repeated power outages, and the inability of the work force to commute to work.

I asked Chris Flavin, Worldwatch Institute president, about the escalating crisis that I assumed he was quite worried about. He told me on Wednesday,

"A lot will depend on the crop year and the weather. There is slack in the food supply system from meat consumption, for example. One steak's energy requirement is the same as one gallon of ethanol.
I see the glass half full and don't have an apocalyptic view.
We're seeing fuel economy improvements and other self-correcting mechanisms. There's $100 billion in renewable energy investment this year.
We needed this crisis to start changing toward conservation. The pendulum is swinging again, as it did in the 1970s.
We're not going off the end of the cliff on peak oil. Production declines will be gradual." I sent him my thoughts on the latter, with my thanks. I sure was surprised that he wasn't half as worried as I am. Maybe he does not see as much of a problem the fact that the nation's infrastructure is petroleum-based. He probably would not agree with me that the Earth is being murdered along with us human beings.

Zap! A global-warming heat wave kills many thousands in a U.S. city. Other cities take note, realizing their own cities are "like the one that got zapped last weekend." Between the water supply problems, energy overload for air conditioning, rising prices for food, water and gasoline, people try to escape the urban heat island effect. Too many consumers stocking up and trying to split town exacerbated the tragedy.

When cities run out of food, and people want to leave en masse, they will get stuck in traffic jams the way fleeing (potential) victims of Hurricane Rita did in 2005. Will survivors be the ones who had the fullest gas tanks? Will these survivors also require guns to obtain food outside the city, whether by hunting or sticking up some hapless or well-armed locals?

Culture Change's reports do not intend to add to hysteria. Indeed, if only there were no reason to be alarmed. But

looking at our collective situation, it is difficult to see how wrenching shortages are avoidable. The consequence of reactions to these shortages will not be pretty. Without facing this, and taking action to prevent it, our Ship of Fools is on a course to hit the rocks.

Whether you are relatively "set" -- with local food supply, not just money -- or you are living from paycheck to paycheck and thus depend on the trucks coming into the supermarket without a hitch, you will not be immune to some interruption or limitation on the food you have probably taken for granted. As petroleum is in fast-dwindling supply and is relied upon for mass producing our food, shipping it (on average 1,500 miles for North Americans), packaging it and preparing it, we are up against a petroleum-induced famine of our own making. What evil-doer will we blame instead of ourselves?

The good news is that creative ways to obtain wild food are alive and well. Acorns and insects, however, are frowned upon -- by the conventional consumer well fed for now. Is it time to stop cutting down oak trees? Poisoning snalis that are the escargot species? Wasting our nitrogen-rich urine by flushing it into our water supply instead of feeding it to fruit trees? Let us go over other options that we have:

Will we bring back the Victory Gardens through depaving and planting food in lawns? Until the food pops up for harvest, what will we eat -- cats and rats? None of these sudden strategies can feed millions of hungry people in cities that don't have pro-active leadership as yet. Yet, pedal power feeds millions in many a Chinese city surrounded by small farms. But every day the global economy plugs along, China is more fossil-fuel dependent, using far more coal than the U.S. and the U.K. combined.

Progress has been illusory in the last half century, but the period has been ballyhooed as amazing. "...the amount of grain produced per person grew from 285 kilograms in 1961 to a peak of 376 kilograms in 1986." Since then it has gone down to 350 kilograms. China's is 325 kilograms, the U.S. enjoys 1,230 kilograms, and in Zimbabwe -- which Richard Heinberg told me is a guide to U.S. society after petrocollapse -- is just 90 kilograms per capita. [Worldwatch, 2008] Can the most modern in the world really conserve the Earth suddenly?

There's no let-up on the horizon, but people fervently hope for relief, as sure as tomorrow's newspapers will be printed. As sure as the July 4th fireworks will be another display of our powerful continuity. Is this "Summer Driving Season" our last hurrah? Meanwhile, people are hurting in the pocket book, and are buying less stuff because of the oil price trend. So they look to blame someone, such as OPEC, the major oil companies, George Bush, take your pick. Some await Barack Obama to take over the White House and cleanse us of our woes, but even he says that community action is where it's at.

Clearly, a half trillion dollar war on Iraq was not what our finances needed. If all that money had not been wasted, oil prices and food would be cheaper than they are. But what about the trickle-down of those corporations profiting off the war? Surely those billions for the contractors, and the fat salaries for those Americans so welcome in the Land Between Two Rivers, aided our economy. Or did they? The war profiteers and their friends in the corporate media expect everyone to buy capitalist theory. But wouldn't you rather have had the half trillion bucks go to more livable conditions in our towns, such as community gardens, extended hours for libraries, better pay for teachers, and preventive health care? Thought so.

Unfortunately, our socioeconomic problems are too deeply rooted in disastrous treatment of Mother Nature, for even radical changes in federal spending priorities to get us out of this. So, the big one is coming. Looking at the fundamentals of our society and how it has changed from The Great Depression of the 1930s, we are in for something much worse than those days when the family farms were intact. What is implied for the big one on the horizon, according to optimistic activists such as Joanna Macy and David Korten, is "the great turning." Doesn't sound too scary, so I hope they're right. They will be right, but they seem to skip the unpleasant bit about collapse.

The empire is crumbling, but first we must go through end-stages as the Romans and others had to: increasing debt, falling agricultural output, over-extended military, growing urban population without much productive purpose, etc. But we're the good guys! -- we call our empire's philosophy "Democracy," and we are so clever with science. Really, though, we've simply done better at distracting the populace and giving them the carrot more often than the stick, apparently. This translates to consumer freedom through more goods. The Big Gulp drink in disposable plastic -- who could ask for more? We have had none other than The Empire of Cheap Food. Cheap in the sense that cancer can be had at lower prices than previous generations had to pay. Also, subsidized petroleum (to this day as well) jacked up the food supply and the human numbers.

It's amazing how really intelligent people can be in dreamland over the possibility of positive change coming to the rescue. It's not just limited to the technofix. It's the general idea that people "are becoming more aware," or "there are more and more people getting into organic gardening, CSA's (Community Supported Agriculture), permaculture" and the

like.

To get an indication of which may be more valid -- (A) the trend for salvation as indicated by the growing phenomenon of gardening as noted by the New York Times last week, or (B) the inexorable, accelerating crunch of dwindling resources for too many people no matter how positive they may feel now -- let us consider the result of a test on the community level.

This was very recently done in a most aware and progressive place. The population is small but well educated, oriented to be sensitive to world affairs, affluent, and active for local improvements. Sustainability is a goal in the eyes of many.

Here's what was found from a survey of small and/or organic farms: no labor-help is needed at the beginning of the summer, nor for the whole summer long. Not even free help, volunteering. The farms' production are set and unchangeable, apparently. Too bad, when the amount of food imported from afar is about 95% of what is eaten. One would think that at a time of rising food prices and the awareness of the global energy picture, such as peak oil, and when climate change makes the growing of food far more chancy, there'd be a discernible interest in upping the output and adding to community involvement of local farming. But the fact that people are (1) not anticipating any more demand for local and organic food this year, compared to last year, and that (2) there is no apparent need to gear up for greater production, seems ominous. It seems to indicate that there needs to be a raving crisis to get people to change their habits and plans.

Meanwhile, with a 100-year flood on the Iowa corn fields -- where erosion on monocropped, depleted soil killed by petroleum pesticides and fertilizer and mechanical tilling -- we are in for a hell of a summer. Is your food secure? Are you gardening, saving seeds, and protecting precious land and water?

The food price increases have something to do with oil prices that have doubled in a year. And the oil prices have something to do with peak oil. And peak oil has something to do with wasting the Earth headlong into deprivation and ecological destruction. And it's about civilization as a runaway train. If you don't agree with the metaphor, just try getting off. Crash must come, and come it will, and soon. I hope I'm wrong that: You. Will. Not. Be. Able. To. Get. Food.

That would be our concern when the price of oil can skyrocket (which it is already doing) -- if we were prudent. The price of oil is far too low when there are still countless people driving cars unnecessarily. Apparently these drivers don't find global warming to be as a big deal as "the economy." Because it's money, and only money, that can change some people -- until they find they cannot eat their money.

Where I sit, the plants are crying out: It's near 100 degrees Fahrenheit two days in a row in bone-dry San Francisco. It's the wild deviations from the averages that are deadly to life.

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Further reading:

Pedal Power Produce is a prime means of coping with petrocollapse and the growing food crisis (we ain't seen nothin' yet):

culturechange.org/pedalpowerproduce.html

Royal Bank of Scotland issues global stock and credit crash alert By Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, International Business Editor June 19, 2008:

telegraph.co.uk

Mississippi region flood impact on food: "The Chicago Board of Trade corn prices traded at a record $8.07 a bushel. The floods will mean more food inflation, not only for U.S. consumers, but also for dozens of countries that buy American grain. The United States exports 54 percent of the world's corn..." from
"Midwest Farmland Flooding Boosts Worldwide Food Prices" by Nick Carey, Reuters, June 18, 2008:

truthout.org

"Banking on Gardening" by Marian Burros, June 11, 2008:

nytimes.com

Urban farm showcase, Pasadena, Calif.:
pathtofreedom.com

"Yes, We Will Have No Bananas" by Dan Koeppel, New York Times, June 18, 2008:

nytimes.com

Peak oil background from one of the experts, Congressman Roscoe Bartlett:

bartlett.house.gov/energyupdates

Worldwatch Institute's Vital Signs (newly updated online):

worldwatch.org

The End of Food by Paul Roberts, Houghton Mifflin (2008). More info at

usfoodpolicy.blogspot.com

"Severe Weather to Increase as Earth Warms" by Juliet Eilperin, Washington Post, June19, 2008:

truthout.org

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