# Survivalism: for Peak Oilers and Ecotopians Too?

Contributed by Jerry Erwin, Portland Peak Oil
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As a peak oiler myself since 2002, I have often wondered why most of the prominent peak oil authors and activists dismiss the survivalist movement.

It seems that many of the peak oil heavyweights, including Richard Heinberg and Dmitry Orlov, in particular, despite their own ingenious contributions to analyzing our current predicament, seem to blithely dismiss survivalism. They apparently do not understand the basic technical constructs of survivalism, such as the military skill sets, weapons, and organization that go into survivalism.
They also do not seem to understand the technical aspects of long-term food storage (i.e. oxygen absorbers, desiccants, dry ice, etc.), or the emphasis that survivalism also places on organic gardening and food preservation.

Survivalism derives its origins from several sources: Government-sponsored civil defense, threats of nuclear warfare, religious beliefs, writers warning of social or economic collapse, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction, and climate change.

During the 1970s, modern survivalism, as we understand it, was pioneered by various individuals: newsletter writer Kurt Saxon (who may have invented the term survivalism), and the combat shooting instructor Mel Tappan, the author of several books. The main threat being prepared for during the 1970s and 1980s was that of nuclear war.

The practice of survivalism seemed to wane around the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall. However, during the 1990s under Clinton's presidency, a small fringe of ultra-right wing people did begin forming militias, which seemed to associate itself with survivalism. These people, mostly religious fundamentalists, had a fear of a one-world government and UN occupation of the US (this may have been due to UN troops training at the US Army's Joint Readiness Training Centers, with their vehicles and equipment seen being transported by rail and flatbed semis).

During the late 1990s however, there was a more mainstream following of survivalism, particularly among technical professionals, due to the perceived threat of a Year 2000 computer crash. Many of these survivalists had established retreats in rural areas, with a deep larder (i.e., long-term food storage), complete with perimeter security and military-grade weapons. This was in preparation for wandering looters and hostile refugees, looking for food and other supplies. There were also fears of FEMA exercising Executive Orders that would allow them to confiscate personal property for redistribution, along with the use of vehicles, etc (this actually took place in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina).

Currently, people having learned about peak oil, particularly from documentaries such as The End of Suburbia and various books written on the subject, have swelled the ranks of people within the survivalism/preparedness movement. Jim Rawles, the modern patron saint of survivalism, has acknowledged this himself. Rawles runs Survivalblog.com, the number one internet site on survivalism/preparedness.

There are many misconceptions between peak oilers and survivalism. The following are the main two:

Claim: Peak Oilers believe in community, and survivalists don't.

This is false. It also depends on what you physically have around you for a "community." For instance, if you already live in an intentional community, an Eco-village, or similar type of urban or rural environment, then you are set, regarding

community (assuming you can survive an outside armed threat, which has already manifested itself by “the bad guys” within Survivalist chartrooms, message boards, etc). This would also include neighborhoods with like-minded, progressive-thinking individuals.

If however, you live in suburbia, where all your neighbors are trapped within the dominant culture, never heard of Peak Oil or any other collapse theory and get all their news from the major corporate networks, these neighbors could be your worst nightmare. As several posts to Survivalblog.com have indicated, based on actual occurrences of power outages, etc., these neighbors borrowed things without giving them back, or before the fact, had admitted, “Now I know where to come if (fill in the blank) happens…” However, these same people offer nothing in return to the prepared individual, or the rest of the neighborhood, for that matter. This attitude seems particularly pervasive in upper middle-class, suburban communities.

Granted, an individual who practices survivalism could try to organize his or her community, but depending on the mindsets of the neighbors, this could be difficult to impossible. Having a feel for my own neighborhood, I have concluded with the latter, except for possibly the family directly across the street. Based on the characteristics and behavior of our own neighborhood association, my own wife and I have concluded that we should maintain an extremely low profile. Otherwise the other neighbors will expect me to protect them, or for us to feed them.

Survivalists also have their own communities; nationwide on the internet, and in local areas, where survivalism is an accepted norm, such as in Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, etc. To the people in these areas, “survivalism” is simply a newer word describing the self-sufficiency practiced in these areas for generations. Many of these people routinely barter between their rural households, and in many ways, already live the “Post Peak Oil” lifestyle. "I'd say that survivalism is indeed a celebration of community," Rawles asserts. "It is the embodiment of America's traditional can-do spirit of self-reliance that settled the frontier." [editor’s note: it was already settled, although significantly depopulated by European diseases.]

Claim: Survivalists will only add to the problem, once the problems start.

This is another misconception, and has been clearly stated by several peak oilers, particularly Richard Heinberg, author of the masterpiece The Party’s Over: War, Oil, and the fate of Industrial Societies.

First off, in terms of a “fast crash” (as compared to a “slow crash”, similar to what we are witnessing the beginning stages of, currently), survivalists are people who have already prepared for their own civil defense considerations, and will therefore not seek to burden the authorities, FEMA, Red Cross, etc.

Second, the more theologically motivated practitioners of survivalism have specifically set themselves up, in order to dispense charity, or to “give until it hurts”, to quote Jim Rawles, himself a fundamentalist Christian. This is also a concern for many other survivalists, as they see people reduced to refugees, who have children among them. In the event of a fast crash, we could witness heart-rending hardships among refugees, the likes of which have not been seen since the American Civil War.

From a scene in his prophetic Patriots: Surviving the Coming Collapse (the current ‘bible’ of the survivalist movement, an instruction manual dressed as fiction), a passing group of refugees with children is ambushed by the main characters from concealed spider holes, without any shots being fired (roughly one year into the collapse). After going through a number of security procedures, they determine that this group is indeed peaceful. The refugees are then given an entire five gallon storage bucket of grain, in addition to peanut butter, potatoes, onions, ammunition for their weapons, etc. They were also given the warning that if they came back, they would not get anything, and that if they moved on their retreat, they would “get cut down like sheep”.

However, in all honesty, some survivalists will not be in a position to dispense charity, especially if their suburban home is their retreat, or they happen to live near a high-traffic area for refugees, etc.

Conclusion:

The bottom line here is this: The Peak Oil movement has got to acknowledge that people under the circumstances of a fast crash are not necessarily going to be nice. Personally, I have met many other professional people around the country, who flatly admit, “I’m not worried about anything. Besides, if anything happens I’ve got a gun, so I’ll have food”. In addition, based on the message traffic on the internet previously mentioned, there are already people with their own plans to ‘go shopping,’ so to speak, at the expense of pre-announced, unarmed ecotopian communities, as one discussion board post has already stated. As someone who was forced to live in California’s foster care system during a previous period of fossil fuel scarcity (late 1970s), I am reminded that people will resort to whatever means to economically (or physically) survive, especially if that means exploiting the weaker members in that society.

Octavia Butler seemed to understand this. In 1993, her brilliant, fictional masterpiece, Parable of the Sower, was published. It takes place in the year 2025, in an oil-depleted and climate-changed world. After traveling north on Interstate-5 within a sea of refugees from the Los Angeles area, the main characters settle into their own eco-village, complete with perimeter security, to include obstacles, as well as posted and roving armed security.

Being unarmed, and simply trusting everyone around you, when they happen to be struggling with their own survival, is not necessarily a good idea. Even in a slow crash, we will experience more crime in the form of break-ins, robberies, assaults, murders, etc. As Dmitry Orlov himself has stated in one interview conducted earlier this year, there were many people who simply disappeared during the societal decline following the collapse of the Soviet Union, who were likely murdered. These deaths were “hardly ever investigated, much less solved” (Orlov).

Further Reading:

Butler, Octavia. Parable of the Sower. 1993.

Rawles, James, Wesley. Patriots: Surviving the Coming Collapse. Expanded Edition. Arbogast Publishing. 2006.

Survivalblog: The Daily Web log for Prepared Individuals Living in Uncertain Times. survivalblog.com

Survivalistboards.com: Endure, Adapt, Overcome. survivalistboards.com

Wikipedia. “Survivalism”. wikipedia.com

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Comments from Culture Change's editorial circle:

No arguments that we can’t count on people being nice in a crisis.

Human beings are basically lazy.

They want things to remain as they are.

It takes a great deal to ‘force’ a person to change, even a little.

That said, what we see brewing is just that, a major push.

For us all to become survivalists, grab our case of Jack Daniels and shoot at anything that moves is not a very good idea either.

Survival for complex organisms means cooperation and innovation.

I would suggest that the survivalists doctrine balance self defense with innovation and cooperation.

Self defense involves the lower fight-flight brain.

Cooperation and innovation engages the higher brain centers.

Jerry,

I thought your article was excellent.  When you state that people who are prepared won't be turning to the Red Cross, etc., you might also mention that grocery store shelves will be emptied within one day (thanks to just-in-time shipping and lack of inventory), so those who are prepared will leave more food out there for those who haven't prepared.  It depresses me when every anniversary of the 1906 earthquake people are polled about whether they have 3 days of food on hand (as if that were enough!) and something like half say they don't.

I was going to raise peak oil awareness in my neighborhood until I discovered that I was treated like some crazy old hippie when I even tested the waters with talking about ecology,  limits to growth, etc.  I don't trust my neighbors, who are middle and upper middle class, not to beg initially, and eventually steal whatever I've stored up if it becomes known that I have food supplies (and even I have only enough for 3 months given that my relatives and dearest friends will be coming over and I don't have the heart to turn them away).

So to work around that, my next project will probably be trying to set up classes in whole grain milling and baking, how to store grains, etc, so that more people will have food stored at home.

Jerry,

I really agree with the points you make in your essay. I think that a lot of peak-oilers extend their political or religious/spiritual differences with stereotypical survivalists so far that they discount or overlook ideas in common as well as the need for common-sense community defense.

In many of the possible scenarios, thousands of desperate people may either be fleeing (or trying to flee) their uninhabitable cities and towns or scouring them for food and supplies for their families. How can there not be a possibility for violence? And has Jan has pointed out, if the military and police can't run their machines, they may not be a major factor in an extreme collapse scenario, either as benevolent protectors or feudal enforcers. So many will be on their own.

Even here on _____ Island some of us are only half joking when we talk about forming an _____ Militia and Navy, though my main imagining is more along the lines of a 10-year-old child begging for food for a starving family. Or many similar cases. That's why I agree with the statement that the basic unit of survival is the community rather than the individual or the family.

I enjoyed reading Rawles's Patriots, esp having always enjoyed reading war novels and histories, post-apocalyptic sci-fi, etc, though hope that it won't be crucial to have such a well-oiled military operation (complete with blast-proof doors, a 24x7 OP, claymores, fully automatic HK91s, and sophisticated electronic communications), not that I'd turn down a few gifts. And I don't think he quite got the ending right in that things go more or less back to normal energy-wise, albeit with a right-sized federal government. I think we (or our descendants) will eventually end up more in the direction of S.M. Stirling's Dies the Fire (though barring fancy EMFs unleashed by wary extraterrestrials, black powder rifles ought to work!).

I liked an essay that I saw by Charles Hugh Smith on http://www.oftwominds.com/blogjun08/survival6-08.html, in which he said: "the best protection isn't owning 30 guns; it's having 30 people who care about you. Since those 30 have other people who care about them, you actually have 300 people who are looking out for each other, including you." I hope that some of those 300 have effective weapons, too.

It's so tempting to be a true believer that I think as the stress levels rise, many of us will find it even harder than usual to accept complexity and contradictions among our companions and communities.