Peak-oil activist approach for the coming change in culture

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Culture Change Letter #229 - Peak oil is something to heed more today than ever, no matter where crude oil and gasoline prices go or what they may do to oil consumption. Peak-oil awareness has risen greatly in recent years, but this has not resulted in wide understanding of energy in our fast changing world of mounting crises and distractions.
Even among those knowledgeable about peak oil there is confusion about energy and oil, based on old assumptions. Kinds of peak-oil awareness can be based on levels of knowledge or worldviews -- some of which are seen as obsolete in the last several months: “Peak money” has passed, both from the private sector and government spending. Oil costs were a major factor leading up to the economy's meltdown marked by peak money.

The unpleasant truth of US society's waste and excess has been widely known since the 1960s, when the “Sixties Movement" meant lifestyle change more than mere politicking. Awareness of stifling consumerism and materialism spurred a rejection of "plastic society" as articulated by popular avant-garde artists. This era of awareness peaked around 1970. Energy and environment were not hot topics compared to the US war on the Indochinese. But some of us made note of the fact that the bombers and naval ships were all running on lots of oil. This was not considered a "news" item, when other issues and passions raged.

The consciousness of the late 1960s was inseparable from protesting and the quest for one's liberation. This tradition has endured to the present, when one can still meet young back-to-the-landers who cherish the Earth. They know oil and other materials are not something to waste or spew into the environment, and they feel painfully the equity issues in a world of greed. In a conscious fashion such non-consumers assure that polluters don’t get many of their dollars, and this impulse is a form of relocalization.

It makes no difference if such aware folk know about peak oil. For those in this group who have learned about peak oil, it has not changed their philosophy, ethics or lifestyle. What does change from such folks' peak-oil awareness is, in many cases, the intensity of focus on the timing of inevitable collapse of the industrial economy. It also sends people to develop manual skills including fluency with alternative energy.

The peak-oil movement is diverse, thus reflecting the population. So most peak oilists have no background in “living simply” or growing food. Even less common is the peak oilist who was an activist for social change. While peak oilists are often activists in the sense that they spread the word on oil, and may take up gardening or survivalism, activists are not the majority of peak-oil-aware folk. Nor are they usually hands-on food producers involved in the greater community. This is why Transition Town and Post Carbon affiliates, plus ASPO and its chapters, are important for peak-oil outreach to citizens, politicians and others.

When peak oilists lack an activist orientation or background, they are more likely to be stuck in conventional "plastic society" and to wish to retain their machines (suburban “toys” and commonplace gadgets). Not only does lifestyle change elude them, as they lack appreciation for the need for activist tactics for radical change, they may be unable to grasp the full meaning of peak oil. Then there are those who fully understand while cynically taking steps to benefit personally or squelch debate.

When peak oilists are inveterate energy users fond of the American Dream, and don’t recognize the full implications and opportunities posed by the peaking of global oil extraction, such folk face the future with total consternation. They lament the loss of energy-intensive affluence, and want to see the continuation of all the (including alleged) benefits of industrial society. They thus see technological solutions as ideal, and perhaps chant, "Maybe the net energy will get higher and government spending can be brought to bear!" This flies in the face of basic peak-oil reality when products' energy embeddedness of petroleum and the liquid-fuels issues are considered. And in keeping with the fact that the nation’s infrastructure is based on petroleum, lead-time to scale up is utterly lacking.

The average consumer is not willingly letting go of the artificial world wrought by technological society and the growth paradigm. Thus, as the economic collapse that we're starting to see is ushering in the Post-Industrial Age along with localism and eventually tribalism, the fear of change and the wish for a continuation of the status quo prevent us from using remaining abundant energy to manage an intelligent transition. Politics as well seem to dictate that the automotive industries and the military-industrial complex – besides the more unpopular Goliaths of oil and banking -- carry on much as before, regardless of cost. But we must all face the fact that the U.S. and its global reach relies on fast dwindling fuel in addition to exponential cash based on hyperconsumption.

There are additional reasons for peak oilists to assume the global corporate economy will keep chugging along. Apart from "progress" as a recent historical concept enjoying blind acceptance, wide understanding of the dynamics of price and supply is rare. Matt Simmons is one of the few voices in or out of the oil industry who gets the fact that panic-buying and hoarding are more significant for society's overall stability than how much crude oil may be forthcoming from estimated reserves. The bell-shaped curve of Hubbert's oil extraction's rise and fall is not going to end up symmetrical.

We are all in a new historic phase, looking at a depression caused in great part by extremely high oil prices in recent years. (In addition to the nominal price, subsidies were and are causing us to pay far more, indirectly, than the known price.) Now that overall collapse and extreme social unrest are probably upon us -- as indicated by ominous hints such as the recent Walmart stampede that killed a worker and the arrival of 40,000 people at a farm in Colorado to pick crop gleanings -- we can either view the world from an activist's heart-felt and intellectual discipline, or as worried, passive victims, or even as opportunistic aggressors.

We must distinguish between policy-reform activism and grassroots activism that fights for much greater social justice and against basic harm to the ecosystem. Grassroots activists may not all desire the deepest, fundamental social change, but in opposing bureaucratic or political obstacles to peace and environmental health, an awakening takes place that does away with one's innocence regarding the ability of the status quo to change. Beautifully simple, common-sense goals are sought by grassroots activism that resist being subverted by compromise -- although dreams are run over and often left behind when money calls.

A revolution in lifestyle change is overdue for modern humans. It is a challenge even for a grassroots activist to relate to, especially when peak oil is not known or understood. To recognize the need to meet the future in a proactive fashion -- to slash energy use now -- is to seize the opportunity to lessen the shock of losing the "cheap" energy and products that have filled and distorted our lives.

To live with as little petroleum and other non-renewable resources as possible right now is to embrace a new world of localized economics and a lower-tech set of practices and processes formerly termed Appropriate Technology. But if we instead hope for as little change as possible in the near future, we will probably bring on the worst consequences of recent decades’ energy gluttony. If we take seriously the possibility of a phase of massive disorder and depopulation from petrocollapse and climate extinction, we are better able to choose available options for survival and implement them while we can.

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(Note by ASPO-USA editor: Commentaries do not necessarily represent ASPO-USA’s positions; they are personal statements and observations by informed commentators. In fact, we sometimes disagree with significant points, as here, but let them run.)

This disclaimer is normal for ASPO-USA except for the second specially added sentence for this occasion. When asked why the sentence had to appear, the response was that there were stylistic objections; specific disagreements couldn't be identified. Regardless, the appearance of this article in ASPO-USA's Peak Oil Review is meaningful for the target audience: those in legislatures, particularly, who need to look at resource limits perhaps for the first time. This time, with this column, related ideas possibly more disturbing were presented for a conventional audience.

ASPO-USA's website is aspo-usa.com. The weekly Peak Oil Review and mid week updates on world events are extremely informative.

Energy Bulletin's website is energybulletin.net. The wealth of stories there daily on energy and peak oil, and related topics, is extraordinary.