

Reflections on my Amtrak peak-oil tour

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
28 November 2005

Culture Change Letter #115

After a going away party, on September 6 I took a train from Emeryville, California bound for Washington, DC. That was my base for five conferences, mostly in the Eastern U.S., where I had been hired to speak on peak oil and petrocollapse. Here's some of what I said, and what I learned during my odyssey:

Meeting interesting people, making new friends, and seeing wonderful places is a good life. Travel is second-nature to me, having visited dozens of countries mostly by sailboat back when environmental consciousness was not even in its infancy. (Today it's in its infancy, which explains how the fortunes of car manufacturers are allowed to be treated as a bigger news story than the crashing of ecosystems.)

Encountering so many Americans and making conversation in the dining car while the landscape rolls by allows one to take a reading on the national mood. It was clear to me that there is almost no support for the Iraq War, no matter what walk of life I ran into. The most support I found for the soldiers was that the stateside loved ones had a sense of quiet pride clouded by fear for the soldiers' safety. A rising number of citizens seems to grasp the foolhardiness of killing for oil far away as we consume our way to our uncertain greenhouse future.

Train travelers are a bit more aware of the absurdity of car domination, and generally would be more likely to be anti-Bush. But hardly anyone is embracing much of a lifestyle change. Few people in the U.S. seem to understand their own culture. After my ten weeks of travel around the country, I reaffirm that this lack of understanding and inaction includes my home town of Berkeley, California: environmental awareness and leftism and are only a bit more common here than in the rest of the nation.

Such insights might be as worthwhile as the other aspects of my ten-week trip. On many an occasion I enhanced my own enjoyment by getting a rise out of people when I answered their question "where do you live?" by responding, "I live on Amtrak." It is tolerable to criss-cross the continent on Amtrak if one brings along alternatives to the corporate food and water on the train. I also brought along a good, fat book, *Crossing the Rubicon*, by Michael Ruppert.

I had been pent up in Arcata, in redwood country, for years trying to assist my mother who was dispossessed of Lundberg Survey, the petroleum information firm. She was subsequently denied her freedom to live in her own home thanks to elder abuse and fraud. Now, after my presence there was unnecessary and the legal case was lost ("Money talks," opined the Humboldt County Court Investigator), I could finally live my fantasy of taking my message out on the road (or rails) with my guitar.

On this tour I exhibited and distributed the award-winning film "Our Synthetic Sea," about the shocking amount of plastics pollution in the Pacific Ocean. I play up the fact that plastics -- while being dangerous, non-biodegradable toxic petroleum -- represent a great opportunity to educate people about both needless consumption and the bigger picture of peak oil. The 22-minute film has an impact that can even distract from basic issues at peak oil conferences, but I figure it's vital to wake people up regarding any and all petroleum issues. Thanks mostly to the efforts of researcher Captain Charles Moore who stars in the film, you will soon see the first municipality in North America pass an ordinance for a fee on plastic bags at supermarket checkout counters.

In my previous focus of fighting road-construction and publishing the *Auto-Free Times*, our repeating facts such as one million animals slaughtered on U.S. roads daily did not change many people's behavior -- even among animal-rights activists. So it is with idealistic hope that the plastic plague and petrocollapse are able to hit home today, even though during and after our Alliance for a Paving Moratorium's decade of activism the disastrous and corrupt land-use and transportation patterns continued as if the Earth is limitless.

After a stay in DC highlighted by meeting Congressman Roscoe "Peak Oil" Bartlett and his staff, my first speech was Sept. 18 in Philadelphia at the "Beyond Oil" conference.

It turned out that I was really there to give two short talks on different panels, and I found myself in a mix of voices that did not all understand peak oil, let alone petrocollapse. One speaker, associated with the Nigerian movement to remember the executed activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, spoke on two panels and claimed that Iraqi oil is so plentiful on the market that the world's supply is not an issue. Uninformed viewpoints can get attention at peak oil conferences if the organizers are rather open to getting social-justice activists represented. It is easy for activists including some environmental leaders to imagine they fully understand oil and that oil is mainly just another issue threatening poor people.

Another panelist, a green economist, bemoaned the possibility of post-peak oil prices going down enough so as to revive demand and thus warm the globe further. Hazel Henderson's famous quote, "Economics is a form of brain damage," applies more than ever today. Listen up economists: peak oil and geology are not subject to later revision based on theory of demand and supply!

There in Philadelphia, as in all my talks and interviews, I pointed out that my former firm predicted the Second Oil Shock in 1979 based on our data revealing a 9% shortfall of gasoline for March of that year. Most significantly, the 1970s oil crises were in a context of rising global oil extraction and a much smaller population of humans and cars. Our present contrasting circumstances prompt one to ponder what the imminent gap between supply and demand will do to a world economy based only on growth. And, no matter the hype or promise of alternative energies and materials, they are not ready and cannot be gotten ready on a meaningful scale in time to avoid petrocollapse.

Even Amtrak, the most energy-efficient and least polluting mode of motorized transport in the U.S., with a huge existing system, cannot be easily expanded rapidly. It's tracks are already limited by freight-train priority. There is little possibility of renewable-energy powered engines in the near future.

Leaving behind new friends, Quakers and other kind folks whom I tried to enthuse with the good tidings of post-collapse sustainable culture, I rode the rails to Cincinnati, the nearest stop to Yellow Springs, Ohio where the Second U.S. Conference on Peak Oil and Community Solutions Conference was being held Sept. 23-25. Partly because of the longer time for the whole event, speeches could allow for full presentation of ideas. The star of the conference, who provided three presentations, was author Richard Heinberg. His PowerPoint presentation on peak oil is always first-rate, and his violin playing is excellent too – we performed Have a Global Warming Day and other ditties I wrote, with scant rehearsal.

I was happy with my speech, even if I had to really reach to give the audience of 350 some good news: advocating activism to bring about local-based economies, I brought up the pepperspray torture trial having ended in the favor of the protesters in the redwoods (Culture Change Letter #94). One of my readers from New Zealand had approached me the night before and said, "We don't have an energy crisis, we have a culture crisis." So I trotted this out for the audience in giving my good news/bad news analysis of petrocollapse and what may ensue as a revival of community for a sustainable culture.

My analysis was largely confirmed by the new film shown at this conference, called "The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil." This excellent documentary, filmed by Greg Greene ("The End of Suburbia"), was produced by the Yellow Springs conference organizers (Community Service, Inc.) and was kindly lent to us for the Petrocollapse Conference in New York. The film was recently shown at ASPO-USA (Association for the Study of Peak Oil and Gas) in Denver last month, by Megan Quinn of Yellow Springs.

I next traveled to Colorado's western slope where the High County Citizen Alliance has its annual Sustainable Communities Symposium in the Gunnison Valley. The scenic highlight is the village of Crested Butte at 9,000 feet. Unlike some at the Yellow Springs peak oil conference who believe they can survive petrocollapse by doing small farming as a community near large population centers, Gunnison Valley residents really question surviving a suddenly energy-poor world where economics as we know it has gone out the window. Instead of a big population center nearby, offering the prospect of many migrating, hungry former consumers, Gunnison Valley has extreme cold along with more extreme cold every winter. Numerous people pointed out to me that the Indians never tried to live year round in the high country. Wherever one is when petrocollapse hits, every place will have its strengths and drawbacks: climate, remoteness, population size, citizens' awareness and knowledge, energy sources, etc.

The highlight of visiting Colorado was hearing my co-speaker Wes Jackson of The Land Institute. A legendary and visionary agriculturalist who understands energy inputs and the need to do things very differently from today's conventions, he paid me the ultimate compliment after my ad-lib talk: "I could take my next hour speaking by just saying Amen, Amen." He proceeded to blow everybody's mind with his amazing lecture.

The hospitality and charm of the locals in Gunnison Valley, as with Philadelphia and Yellow Springs, was endearing to me and made me consider carefully such places as to viability for living through petrocollapse. In the case of such places as Philly, the SF Bay area and New York, they are to be appreciated prior to their energy/resources termination – in other words, enjoy them before people start yelling "Sal si puedes!" (Get out if you can.)

While there I missed Congressman Bartlett's peak oil conference in Frederick, Maryland, where I had to decline speaking due to other commitments. The Sept. 26th event had Matthew Simmons, whom I hope to meet and debate future economic growth. His belief that collapse could be imminent with a 50% probability is akin to mine, but he also speaks of bridging the energy gap to accommodate growth.

I rode Amtrak to New York's Penn Station and was met by my new friends and fellow organizers for our Petrocollapse Conference. The Peak Oil Meet-up group, affiliated with Post Carbon Institute, had been thinking of holding its own conference but kindly jumped in to make the Culture Change-sponsored Oct. 5th day-long event a success. (You be the judge by listening to the talks; link is at bottom.) The group there is putting on another peak oil conference this spring.

As New York City, with its 25 million people in the metro area, is unsustainable, the few who are aware of peak oil and are getting together with kindred scared spirits are pursuing practical survival strategies. Some are acquiring skills useful in rural and wild areas, some are buying gold to weather economic collapse, and some hope to set sail for lower populated areas beyond the United Paved Precincts of America (the USA).

The Petrocollapse Conference was a wonderful experience, a first for us all: a few hundred people from all sectors of society attending in a supportive, civil manner. It was fun to play music afterwards and see speakers such as Jim Kunstler chatting with Jason "Plan B" Meggs at the bar. The mainstream media were well aware of our conference, but our best exposure turned out to be the alternative press such as Free Speech Radio. One piece of coverage turned out to be a hatchet job stemming from a speaker who was privately criticized for not addressing petrocollapse. The incident brought to light that the impotence of the reformist/technofix approach makes its proponents angry at those who point out that the emperor has no clothes; i.e., that petroculture has no future. And discussing die-off honestly as a reality of our biological and energy predicament can elicit ad-hominem attacks by any journalist overcome by emotional bias.

I enjoyed the Big Apple with more friends landing from afar, soaking in the museums, thinking it could be our last time there together. Such a notion that the pearl of Western Civilization could become a hell-hole where urban remnant gangs roast rats over furniture fires makes a mainstream believer in civilization red with rage or doubled over in incredulous laughter.

On to DC again and Virginia. I walked the halls of Congressional offices with John Darnell of Congressman Bartlett's office as we distributed The Oil Age Poster and the book The End of Fossil Energy and The Last Chance for Sustainability (John G. Howe, author). Roscoe Bartlett asked me if I perceived rising interest in peak oil by the general public, and I replied that I did. He shared with me that a shipping magnate had expressed to him the idea that greatly increased oil prices spell "disaster."

Showdown over "The Hydrogen Highway"

Amtrakking back to the West Coast I took a more southerly route, as I had one more appearance: Santa Barbara. The Institute of Reverential Ecology, The Community Environmental Council, and the Santa Barbara Permaculture Network presented a "Community Design and Energy Forum" on Nov. 19.

Almost 37 years ago the president of Union Oil Company frantically called my father in Greece to ask for public relations advice on the infamous 1969 oil spill off Santa Barbara. Today, after the players have changed but the problems of oil remain and are much more advanced, some of us are struggling to turn the situation around armed with much more information and experience. The approach is going to have to involve radical conservation, as I told the Nov. 19 forum.

This was clearly grasped by one speaker, the recent director of the Community Environmental Council, Bob Ferris. He admitted that peak oil means needing to personally relocate so as to survive socioeconomic collapse. Essentially, the day-long event was a show down between well-paid technofixers touting the "Hydrogen Highway" and the anti-car, mostly poorly funded activists. The low-tech solution for post peak oil survival was probably best portrayed by the Cuba film which I presented during lunch.

The Milken Institute's senior fellow Woody Clark, who works with Jeremy Rifkin for a "Hydrogen Economy," was a major draw, but he was delayed on Highway 101 by an overturned oil tanker truck. This ironic demonstration of our wonderful transportation system should have settled any argument, as the county is divided over whether to allow more lane-widening or build a rail system to supplement Amtrak. In the opinion of my mother Mesa Lundberg, let out for an afternoon from the "hospice/respite facility" and in good health, her son argued his position "very well." A local nonprofit group, For the Future, best deflated the technofixers' fantasy by pointing out that their "new paradigm" of newer cars was really the old paradigm and would solve nothing. The Milken consultant Clark said he disagreed with me, presumably about the impact of peak oil and our future low-energy culture, but he did not specify.

Thanks to Robert Hirsch's latest report in World Oil, I was able to inform the Santa Barbara audience that the Hubbert bell curve on peak oil extraction appears to have a sharp, unseen crest. As Culture Change has been saying all along, post-peak extraction will be a steeper decline than most people assume. Hirsch confirmed this by tracking available country-data on past peak-oil experience, and postulated that the world's upcoming experience could reflect nations' and regions' histories.

Although I was in town to give my talk on "Energy and Community Design in a Catastrophic Future," and I was billed as "a former oil industry insider and Peak Oil theorist," my main accomplishment might have been presenting a few days later at the Community Environmental Council the film "Our Synthetic Sea." Although it is about plastic pollution in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and a main source, mega-urban runoff, let's look to Santa Barbara to give Berkeley, San Francisco and Arcata a run for their money at being the first North American municipality to put a fee on plastic bags distributed at supermarkets.

One tragic note was the sight of my friend's 40' ketch ruined on the beach in Santa Barbara. A treacherous anchorage dashed his hopes for continuing what might have been a solo voyage around the world. When I was hatching the Sail Transport Network (STN) in the Puget Sound in 2000 he was the first yachtsman I approached. STN was a bit before its time, but maybe only by a factor of weeks now, if this winter's global petroleum demand rocks the oil market and the corporate economy.

End of a low-petroleum-consumption odyssey

Lugging too much luggage on and off many a train and subway resulted in a rotator cuff injury, but I was blessed to discover osteopuncture and acupuncture. These treatments are good for healing more than just my shoulder. But I must caution the would-be touring troubadour relying on donations that health care can eat up much of the savings obtained from buying used clothing and friends buying you a beer.

Overall, the learning and the adventure via poor old Amtrak are far better than sitting in one's pseudo-community anywhere in The United Paved Precincts of America -- no matter how many DVDs, CDs, selection of herbal teas, drums, and whatever else surrounds us in a four-walled box we may call home. That's just the perspective of a single man with a mission. But no matter what our differences and struggles are today, our real home and community await us in the near future, and I hope to meet you there or on the way.

* * * * *

A special offer: We are revamping our subscription system to make our service self-supporting. Those contributing \$30 or more at this juncture will have their subscription period doubled: A temporary subscription is being extended to all 8,500 Letter recipients who are about to be grandfathered with the equivalent of paying-subscriber status. Except for the latest ongoing website items, the whole site will remain free to the public. Thanks for supporting Culture Change. Please visit our funding information/online donating page at

<http://www.culturechange.org/funding.htm>

Sign up for the Culture Change Letter for your inbox weekly:

<http://lists.mutualaid.org/mailman/listinfo/culturechange>

* * * * *

Resources:

For a grasp of what wind energy can really contribute, listen to Michael Kane's speech at the Petrocollapse Conference at <http://www.petrocollapse.org/#audio>

Listen to the Petrocollapse Conference's introduction by Jenna Orkin and Jan Lundberg's opening address, at <http://www.petrocollapse.org/#audio>

Robert Hirsch's "Shaping the peak of world oil production" from World Oil, Oct. 2005:

http://www.worldoil.com/magazine/MAGAZINE_DETAIL.asp?ART_ID=2696&MONTH_YEAR=Oct-2005

Get The Oil Age Poster at <http://www.oilposter.org/>

"Our Synthetic Sea" DVD available from <http://algalita.org/videos.html>

(Mention you learned about it from Culture Change)

Mesa Vernell Lundberg, prisoner of oil, and the eviction of Culture Change from her home (Culture Change Letter #13):

<http://www.culturechange.org/cms>

For assurance that you cannot be tortured in the U.S. for protesting, read this syndicated Culture Change Letter: <http://www.culturechange.org/e-letter-pspraytorture.html>

[Note: the above two cases involving grandmother and granddaughter are significant human rights cases, one pursued in pro per, and one pursued by celebrated lawyers. It's no wonder the latter case is the one that won.]

Second U.S. Conference on Peak Oil and Community Solutions Conference:

<http://www.communitysolution.org/p2conf1.html>

Richard Heinberg's Museletter:
<http://museletter.com/>

Santa Barbara's Community Environmental Council website:

<http://www.communityenvironmentalcouncil.org/>

Santa Barbara Permaculture Network and Southern California Permaculture Guild:
<http://www.sbpermaculture.org/resources.html>

The Institute of Reverential Ecology: <http://www.reverentialecology.org/>

High Country Citizens Alliance:
<http://www.hccaonline.org/>

The Land Institute:
<http://www.landinstitute.org/>
Beyond Oil Philadelphia conference website: <http://phillybeyondoil.org/>