Say You Survive Die-Off: Then What?

Contributed by Jenna Orkin
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They're a rum bunch, those Peak Oil folk. You watch The End of Suburbia and get the feeling that inside their buttoned-up suits and behind their reasonable-sounding explanations, those experts are scared out of their gourds.

Likewise when you read The Peaking of World Oil Production: Impacts, Mitigation, and Risk Management, also known as the Hirsch Report —commissioned by that nest of left-wing dissidents, the United States Department of Energy.

The good scientists of SAIC (one of the largest military contractors on the planet, according to journalist Michael Kane) know their way around writing a scientific article. Most of the language is dry enough to delight the heart of the dreariest bureaucrat.

Then in a section called “Wildcards,” while suggesting possible ways out of our predicament, they let the cat out of the bag. The cards are so wild, it's obvious that in the interest of preserving hope, the bearers of unpleasant tidings have morphed into fantasists:

First comes the pipedream, touching in its whimsicality: "Huge new reserves of natural gas are discovered..." (under the refrigerator.)

Then, the vortiginous descent into increasingly outlandish scenarios: "World economic and population growth slows and future demand is much less than anticipated..." (because people get tired of profits and sex.)

"Middle East oil reserves are much higher than publicly stated..."

That one might almost sound plausible if it weren't for that kill-joy Matt Simmons telling us that the public statements do indeed paint an inaccurate picture, only in the opposite direction.

Finally comes the grasping at straws: "Some kind of scientific breakthrough comes into commercial use, mitigating oil demand well before oil production peaks..."

(Some kind of scientific breakthrough...any kind. Anybody got any ideas?)

The members of the NYC Peak Oil Meetup are only a little freer with their inner freak-out over the issue. I'm not naming names because I didn't announce at the meetings that I'd be writing about them, since the idea hadn't occurred to me yet. But some members, including those whose knowledge about the issue rivals that of the most renowned experts, betray more teeth-chattering helplessness than they intend. Or perhaps less – maybe they'd like to spill it all and have a catharsis. The trouble with Peak Oil is, you can have your catharsis but it isn't going to change a damn thing about the problem.

"How can you stand knowing about this?" Michael Kane says he is sometimes asked.

It's a question Peak Oilists might all ask each other except that it's a little like asking an inmate how he feels about being on Death Row.

What the question means is: How can you know what's around the corner and not go crazy?

The answer is: Do I have a choice?

No, you don't, and the absoluteness of that is strangely comforting. There's not much you can do about Peak Oil except hit good ol' google who's always there when you need it; find out which communities are preparing for the coming apocalypse that you could stand to move to, and learn about permaculture.

Let's go back for a moment to the Edenesque days before anyone outside of a few geeks in the oil industry and arcane corners of the government ever heard about Peak Oil. Back then, it was generally agreed that just about the worst moment in the average person's life came when she heard she was going to die. "How beautiful life is," she'd think miserably, "and I won't be around anymore to see it."

But here's the rub about Peak Oil, that makes this disaster different from all other disasters: With Peak Oil, even if you survive, life as you know it won't.

According to the starkest of the Peak Oil paradigms, we each face two possible fates:

1. Die in the 'die-off' (an awful expression, complains a friend who prefers to remain nameless for a reason you'll understand in a moment: She says it has the impersonal ring of 'jerk-off').

2. Survive while everyone who refused to heed the warnings dies.

Either way, you're fucked:

1. You die.

2. You don't die; you're the Last Man Standing in your neck of the all-too-metaphorical woods. Now what?

The joy of crying, "I told you so!" to those bastards who called you 'crazy' loses some of its appeal when you're also crying it to a bunch of dead loved ones. They may have called you 'crazy,' too, but they had their redeeming moments.

According to Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' well-known description of how people come to terms with their own death, depression is followed by acceptance. Let's say the same sequence of attitudes applies in the case of Peak Oil, here's what acceptance might look like:

"The human race destroyed the planet anyway, so Mother Earth will be better off without so many of us."

Mmm... I'm all for the big picture but maybe this one's a little too cosmic? For all its blind, selfish destructiveness, isn't the human race, like old age, better than the alternative?

Of course there's always the bright side that Jan Lundberg looks on. Lundberg, who coined the term 'petrocollapse' isn't what most people would call an optimist. He's the one Congressman Roscoe Bartlett quoted saying,

The trucks will no longer pull into Wal-Mart. Or Safeway or other food stores. The freighters bringing packaged techno - toys and whatnot from China will have no fuel. There will be fuel in many places, but hoarding and uncertainty will trigger outages, violence and chaos. For only a short time will the police and military be able to maintain order, if at all.

But post-Peak is a time that Lundberg sees as an opportunity for a fresh start. Those who survive, whether or not it's because they're the fittest, will have learned their lesson: Live In Harmony With Mother Nature Or Else.

This lesson will have been so hard come by, it will be passed down from generation to generation so that our tragic yet absurdly avoidable end is never repeated. And if the moral gets diluted over time and mankind grows cocky again, there won't be any easy oil anyway for them to destroy whatever's left.

That's not such a bad vision to live with: Sustainable living, at last. So what are we waiting for? Bring it on! It's just getting from here to there that looks like it could be a rocky ride.

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The WTCEO's website is

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