Where do we go from here - I'm in Oregon

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
09 March 2006

Culture Change Letter #124 - March 9, 2006

As I end my Oregon tour of speaking about petrocollapse and culture change, I have a mixed feeling about what's going on in the world as it relates to the lives of those anticipating great changes just ahead. Some folks I have met on this trip have said they look forward to my thoughts on what I found in Oregon.

I spoke in the most "progressive" enclaves of the state: Ashland, Eugene, and Cave Junction. (Portland was scratched at the last minute.) I ended the tour by attending the Public Interest Environmental Law Conference at the University of Oregon, meeting up with activist and musician friends. I began the groundwork for a campaign to have at least one Oregon town enact an ordinance to charge a fee on plastic bags given away at supermarkets.

Despite the positive energy at the campus and in Eugene, it is dawning on us all that modern humanity is deliberately killing the Earth. "The tipping point" for irrevocable climate distortion has been reached, according to the latest scientific studies, and still we use fossil energy.

On the positive side, the nation is now fully aware that Peak Oil is upon us. On March 1, In its editorial "The End of Oil," the New York Times said "America needs to break its petroleum habit soon because the reserves that now fuel the world's economy may soon be running out." However, at some point, the wake-up call comes too late to save the motorized lemmings driving over the ecological cliff. Yet, some of us are embarking on the adventure of finding out just how interesting radical energy conservation can be.

The Congressional Peak Oil Caucus calls for the equivalent of "the 'Man on the Moon' project to address the inevitable challenges of 'Peak Oil'." This is real progress, although the technological analogy is misleading. Instead, cutting energy consumption is mostly about abrupt curtailment, not an "Apollo Alliance" (a technofix coalition). Just as vital, it is the coming era of sharing of tools, appliances and above all the land and water -- in cooperation rather than competition -- that implies restructuring social relations to get at root problems.

Although I saw, listened and learned in Oregon for one month, and tried to impart what I know about petroleum and activism, now I'm less certain about our collective prospects than I was a month ago when I gave three presentations in Los Angeles. What have I been certain of? Nothing you don't know: modern society has achieved astounding consumption levels of energy, created unimaginable levels of pollution and climate change, and we are faced with an unrepentant regime in Washington DC that relies on violence and fear in order to tighten political and economic control. Sustainable living is still suppressed and "uneconomic" up against the force of the market.

Then there's what I am perhaps uniquely certain of. Few know the workings of the petroleum market and how it will play on the effects of Peak Oil, and how petroleum dependence reaches beyond transportation, agriculture and U.S. militarism. Petroleum dependence also translates into cultural traits and people's psychological states. I took note of this in my years of activism and learning about sustainable living. I've explored my potential for experiencing nature more directly in part by incorporating what might be needed and useful (or unnecessary and useless) for individual, community and global survival. In my talks and writings I pass along these tidbits and ideas.

The most frequent questions at the end of my presentations usually include: "How sustainable do you think our area is - can we surmount general collapse taking place beyond our region?"; "How can we do more to educate people and bring people together to take action?"; "What technologies do you see as most likely to come into play for our future energy needs?"; "How soon do you see Peak Oil and petrocollapse hitting?", and "What would you recommend that people do with their investments or time, considering conditions may turn out to be what you describe as critical and dire?" In addition to these general, big-picture questions that I try to answer (even though my presentation has just covered them), I am asked more specific questions such as, "How do we baby-sit the nukes, as you recommend, without a future national or global capability after petrocollapse and absence of strong central authority?", and "How did you live without a refrigerator for years?", and "How can you live without plastic?"

Answering such questions gives me the opportunity to cover any points I missed in my presentation, such as about energy use and the real alternative to dependence on money, machines and private property: sustainable culture. Rather than focusing on the frightening prospect of loss of energy resources and goods and services, I maintain that closer social relations for cooperation and mutual aid will assure survival and ultimately a more rewarding way of life. Much as the loss of petroleum in Cuba during its "Special Period" - triggered by the sudden loss of Soviet petroleum at the end of the 1980s - ushered in the forced reliance on organic agriculture and bicycling, the island's experience gathered positive momentum; this should be the case in the U.S. as well. In Cuba, the sudden weaning off petroleum started bringing rapid improvements in productivity through experimentation, citizen involvement, and eventually feelings of security for all concerned. Now the nation has a proud track record of having coped with serious adversity (beyond the threat of U.S invasion and subversion).

The lesson of Cuba, as aptly documented in the new documentary film "The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil," has become an element of many Peak Oil presentations, including my own. If it were not for Cuba's example and the uplifting testimony of the film's participants and experts in organic farming and decentralized energy systems, the task of convincing U.S. consumers that another world is possible would be harder.

In the world's "richest, most powerful nation," we are hooked on energy-intensive living and total reliance on long-distance corporate products. This is disturbing to anyone looking at ecological trends and the ever-busy U.S. war machine, and to those yearning for a simpler, slower life that allows them to enjoy health and family.

The U.S. has all but forgotten its Victory Gardens that grew local food via depaving and converting lawns. Modern consumers honestly have no clue how their elders and previous generations managed to live without endless, convenient plastic for storage, wrapping, and shopping. Daily living via plastics also involves our cars, bathrooms, workplaces, kitchens, and "health" products - not to mention weaponry and space technology. When I get questions such as these, I point out that our grandparents our great-grandparents, and all generations before them, got along without plastics and refrigerators.

Only a few years ago my presentations on fighting urban sprawl through opposing road construction, coupled with my message of living "conservatively" so as to save the planet as well as one's health and money, elicited occasional reactions riddled with confusion, denial and hostility. But now, as everyone can agree that modern society is failing to address energy gluttony and its consequences of climate change and war over oil, little of what I say is considered radical anymore. This is not to say people are all on board to find agreement and make changes that will get us to a conserving culture characterized by sharing, pooling skills and restoring our trashed ecosystem. Indeed, the corporate bottom line and the narrow ends of well-funded environmentalists' technofix agendas continue to rage on and distract people from the task of changing or abandoning the mainstream lifestyle.

It's not a matter of people lacking answers or opportunity; they lack access to them. Additionally, they lack the interest or courage in learning and adopting them. This is what we are up against: the dilemma of change-avoidance despite clear threats and the failure of government and almost all our institutions to either lead or get out of the way.

Complicating the process is secret government, sometimes called "the Octopus," representing the world financial elite's dark side that engages in manipulation, conspiracy and self-interest. What is allowed to filter through to the average citizen in the way of news and "democratic" involvement is strictly limited through powerful commercial media, years of relentless public schooling, and the unimaginative utterances of elected and bureaucratic officials. Additionally, people are full of fear based on real information as well as their suspicions and uncertainty. In spite of this, being independently outspoken and active is starting to return to favor, after many of the clever 9-11 effects to stifle opposition and free speech are wearing off. However, we must not get too caught up in the dominant system's own rules of engagement: looking at whodunnit and how, whereby skullduggery may or may not result in indictments or a replacement of the Republican Party at the reins of the big-business/war-machine government. And it is vital to clearly understand why things are happening even if we do not know completely how or who exactly is involved.

Every area of the world has its particular assets and unique characteristics, which are the key to sustainability. Some areas are severely impacted by ecological damage, compounded by human overpopulation. Areas can benefit from know-how that can improve our survival chances, but there are also obstacles such as cultural and psychological resistance to change, sociopathic behavior and other mental illness, Ignorance of Western Civilization's historical role in our species' direction makes for wishy-washy reformism and confused goals.

Although I too am mostly in the dark as to what will happen and when, as pressure builds for total transformation and chaos, I remain sure that the learning and sharing of tools for sustainability is the most essential pursuit for one and all. If social movements fail to bring about vital changes such as redirecting the U.S. "defense" budget so as to provide food security and a chance for protecting our ravaged environment, we may look forward to the continuity of critical knowledge. Models of sustainability will be remembered and utilized, in varying degrees, as petrocollapse and/or empire collapse grips the planet and rapidly starts to fade (probably with die-off).

One minority peak-oil analysis goes like this: “There is a post carbon future but not for us. There are too many of us. There may be germ/chemical warfare against surplus consumers." But this is only a possibility, especially if petrocollapse hits first and takes out the whole system.

I remain a "pessimist" about Peak Oil and the clear failure of government and industry to replace the petroleum infrastructure when there was still time. However, I am still optimistic about the possible rise of local-based economics and the self-reliant, politically independent bioregional states that will pick up where Walmart, Safeway, FEMA and CNN suddenly leave off. The support of one's close family, friends, neighbors and fellow citizens in one's actual homeland will replace the culture of consumerism and isolation that has denied us liberation and security. Our bodies, psyches and spirits will heal along with the ravaged Earth after the last death throes of greed and violence from today's outmoded system of exploitation and oppression of colonialism and imperialism.

Love and peace to all,

Jan Lundberg

* * * *

About this essay's title: “Where do we go from here” is a song by
by Chicago (Peter Cetera, 1969) with soulful lyrics about needing to change our way of life. It is, significantly, without electric arrangement. Music can help us onto a beautiful and honest path, although eco-music performed with eardrum-splitting electric power as occurred in Eugene in connection with the Envionmental Law conference is a painful irony.

Further reading:

Jan Lundberg in the Eugene Weekly newspaper:

http://eugeneweekly.com/2006/02/23/news.html#5

Apollo Alliance exposed (scroll down):

http://www.oilempire.us/apollo.html

Cuba documentary: "The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil" available from

http://www.communitysolution.org/cuba.html

Mike Ruppert's and the Eugene Register-Guard's rundown of Eugene's Environmental Law Conference speech by former central intelligence head Woolsy:

http://www.fromthewilderness.com/members/030706_woolseys_sheep.shtml