The clash of ecological economics and the technofix

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Conferences on petrocollapse, sustainable economics & ecology, and local solutions

The May 6th DC Petrocollapse Conference focused on the inevitability of collapse of the world economy due to the end of cheap oil and the lack of realistic technofixes. Solutions such as ecovillages and organic farming were emphasized, with all the concern and caveats that come from keen awareness
of devastating climate change, the intransigence of the corporate state, and cultural change.

The next day another conference, Peak Oil And The Environment / Sustainable Energy Forum 2006, was held (until May 9), also in Washington. The array of speakers was impressive for its depth and range. Stellar scholars William Catton, James Hansen and Herman Daly spoke and interacted with the audience. Many other prestigious speakers participated, including Peak Oil experts Roscoe Bartlett, Richard Heinberg and Julian Darley.

Unless an attendee was well-versed in issues such as net energy (or "energy gain," as speaker Joseph Tainter calls the process of trying to obtain energy from an energy process), a mixed message comes from divergent agendas of "optimists" and "pessimists."

Optimists visualize a greener continuation of the global economy - the status quo - featuring car dependence, present population size and consumerism (e.g., energy-sucking appliances), while ignoring likely collapse. Pessimists don't believe growth can continue, and they look to a more nature-based form of economics. Yet, all participants – speaker or audience member, and even the sparse news-media – proved quite open to the new reality of peak oil and what can result. Almost no one involved thinks the government is going to lead society to rational, bold solutions.

If it seems odd that two similar conferences were held back to back in the same town, let us instead think of the Peak Oil movement on the rise. Indeed, in New York City there was another Peak Oil conference from April 27-29, Local Solutions to the Energy Dilemma. None of the three conferences resulted in large crowds or intense media interest, although success can be claimed by all three events.

Before you read an objective participant's rundown of our May 6th Petrocollapse Conference, first have a glimpse of the philosophical conflict evident at the May 7-9th conference. Lester Brown offered a convenient "marriage" of wind energy for car propulsion, while warning of ecological deterioration and the rise of China. What Brown does not acknowledge is that the petroleum infrastructure is required for his technological fixes, especially if they would be the key to a seamless transition to greener economics. Nor does he allow that collapse is inevitable due to Peak Oil and the total dependence on petroleum for agriculture and distribution.

It took other speakers such as economist Robert Costanza and author William Catton to challenge Brown and his faction to point out that the bicycle can lead us away from being an Obese Nation dependent on using no end of resources.

Brian Schweitzer, governor of Montana, entertained a ballroom of diners with his folksy anecdotes and faith in trade between food producers and energy exporters. His biofuels and coal liquifaction "solutions" were tempered by his call for conservation: "How low can you go? A hybrid car or a bicycle?" I asked him publicly if he could grasp the scalability required for so-called solutions to perpetuate the consumer economy. His response was

to emphasize conservation and curtailment of energy use, but he challenged the audience to give up cars and "live naked in trees, eating nuts." He is pro-Amtrak and enjoys a high approval rating.

Our May 6th Petrocollapse Conference attracted grassroots activists, a result of our outreach and the coordination of Ethan Walker of Culture Change. We believe that activists such as environmentalists need guidance such as we have offered, because a social-justice tendency sometimes manifests itself as mere suspicion of Big Oil: "Peak oil is a hoax." And, the big environmental groups, funded to push the technofix, have not been leading the way on Peak Oil awareness. If you would like to join our efforts, contact us. Thank you, Jan Lundberg

SUMMARY OF PETRO COLLAPSE II CONFERENCE IN DC

by 1truthteller

Sat May 06, 2006

Earlier today about 100 concerned citizens gathered at All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, DC for the second Petrocollapse Conference on surviving in a world with declining fossil fuel resources.

The event was sponsored by Jan Lundberg's organization, CultureChange.org, he of the Lundberg Oil Survey Letter family, although not involved with that publication since the late 1980's. Nine speakers and two videos were on the program. They dealt with a variety of topics related to our current energy, environmental, and related political issues.

Dr. John Darnell is energy advisor to Republican Congressman Roscoe Bartlett, MD-6th, the only member of Congress who is talking about peak oil and the realities of our dismal energy future. He compared our current energy situation to the Apollo 13 near-disaster of 1970, when that Moon mission suffered a catastrophic explosion and only made it back to Earth safely through training, cooperation, conservation of remaining energy, and innovative thinking on the fly. He called for a similar emergency crash effort to deal with declining fossil fuel resources and the need to move to a sustainable society, both in the short and long-terms.

Several themes recurred among various speakers. Micheal Kane of "FromtheWilderness.com" warned of the big lie of Big Renewables, and the political snake oil sales people pushing them. Mark Robinowitz of "Permatopia.com" also warned of malicious politicians guiding the World to a "Last man standing" scenario in a global struggle for the World's remaining oil reserves while defrauding voters at home in electonically rigged elections. Conference organizer Jan Lundberg outlined many of the myriad problems that will befall the World if our leaders won't tell citizens the truth, leaving it up to us to spread the word, although he did hold out hope that a more localized and sustainable World would eventually emerge. Conference moderator Jenna Orkin, whose child was a high school student four blocks from the WTC on 9/11, added that most Congressional staffers are totally in the dark about our energy problems, and that most people in this Country can't comprehend the coming crisis because they have no reference point for anything this dire in their memory or that of anyone they know.

Three presenters and one video did provide positive visions of a more hopeful future - if we act soon:

Diana Leafe Christian, editor of "Communities" magazine, and a resident of Earthaven Ecovillage in NC, showed how sustainable communities and practices can succeed in rual, urban and suburban settings.

Alternative farmer Joel Salatin explained how environmentally sound agriculture can be sustainable, nutritionally healthier and profitable. He also warned not to believe the "organic" label on food products, since that designation has been hijacked by the corporate food industry. His was perhaps the most uplifting and humorous presentation of the day.

Pat Murphy of Community Service, Inc. presented their video "Cuba After Peak Oil". This look at how Cuba coped with the end of Soviet support of their economy and the U. S.'s virtual blockade of the island nation for trade, by drastically reducing individual energy consumption, implementing local, organic agriculture, and concentrating on local communities and solutions. They went from the most petroleum dependent agriculture in the Caribbean to the least, and are able to sustain a life expectancy as good as ours and an infant mortality rate better than ours while consuming 1/8th the energy per capita the U. S. does.

After a lunch break and press conference that did not include very many reporters and no TV coverage (just one indication of how much we have to overcome to get the message out), featured speaker Richard Heinberg, the professor and author of "The Party's Over" and "Powerdown" presented his take on the Colin Campbell term "The Oil Depletion Protocol". Warning of resource wars and mass die-offs in a global economic collapse if we do nothing, Prof. Heinberg presented a rational plan to deal with declining energy resource alocation on a global basis.

A second video on plastic pollution in the seas painted a grim picture of how universal the problem of petroleum based plastic pollution is to sea life and the other creatures that live off of them. There is virtually no place left in the oceans that has not been touched by this problem.

Albert Bates, the final speaker, and a resident of "The Farm" in TN, dealt with what would happen to any country, like ours that tries to go it alone to maintain an oil-intense economy. He suggested that terrorism is a logical outcome of such a policy, as well as accelerated climate change resulting in more intense storms, rising sea levels, and increased release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

Several speakers did touch on the very sensitive topic of overpopulation, something either ignored or denied by the mainstream media and commercial interests. They did vary widely in their judgements of how big a sustainable population would be. Mark Robinowitz suggests that as many as 9 billion people could live in a low energy consumption sustainable world, while most who comment at all on this believe that without massive petroleum inputs the world can only sustain a population of less than 2 billion.

The conference ended with a peak oil folk music jam session led by Jan Lundberg on guitar and Richard Heinberg on

violin.

All told, the conference left one with mixed feelings of doom at the lack of interest by most of the world at the train wreck we're headed for environmentally and energy-wise, but hopeful that at least some people are working to build a human-scale sustainable future for those willing to change their ways and learn how to survive.

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The column above appeared also in Peak Oil News and the Daily Kos, in slightly different form. Peak Oil News is compiled by Tom Whipple for ASPO-USA (Association for the Study of Peak Oil and Gas).

Moderator Jenna Orkin played wonderful Chopin, Michael Kane performed spoken word, The DC Guerilla Poetry Insurgency provided rap and rhythem, and Randall helped out on guitar with Richard and Jan performing Depavers tunes.

The volunteers made things possible, as did the Unitarian church and its capable audio-visual faciliator Scott. The Resistance Media Collective and environmentalist-consultant Greg Smith helped our conference get decent media attention.

The New York Times, famous for acknowledging Peak Oil in its March 1, 2006 editorial, seemed to forget about peak. So, during the local Peak Oil conference when an editorial came out about the pathetic gasoline-price remedies coming out of Washington, I whote this letter that the Times published on May 1st:

To the Editor:

Re "Pander at the Pump" (editorial, April 28) was hard-hitting and informative, but included a contradiction.

While certain Band-Aids and half-measures by Washington would merely boost demand for gasoline, as you pointed out, the same effect would result from your plea for better fiscal management than tax cuts for the wealthy.

So "struggling families would be better able to weather higher prices at the pump" also means consumers' being able to afford to drive more.

The overarching point should be that the world's peak in oil extraction is a major factor in higher prices for fuel.

Transportation fuels are only part of what oil provides. Petroleum is our source for food production, distribution and preparation — more essential to survival than the ability to drive personal cars.

Jan Lundberg

Arcata, Calif., April 28, 2006

The writer is executive director of Culture Change, a nonprofit energy advocacy group.
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Jan Lundberg's "publicist," the firm he formerly ran, continues to monitor aspeacts of the oil market:
"CAMARILLO, Calif. (AP) — The average retail price of a gallon of gas rose nearly four cents across the nation during the past two weeks, according to a survey released Sunday. Self-serve regular averaged about $2.94 a gallon, up from $2.91 two weeks ago, said Trilby Lundberg, who publishes the nationwide Lundberg Survey of roughly 7,000 gas stations."

Resources online:

petrocollapse.org

beyondpeak.org

energysolutionsconference.org

aspo-usa.com/