

Where's your ecovillage as meltdown approaches?

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Israel's Lebanon invasion has passed from the average U.S. citizen's view, as so few of us are directly affected. Bloodshed in Iraq is like some chronic condition we live with, like a sore elbow that does not really slow us down. With some slackening of major violence, anyone who can goes right back to sleep. Nothing is solved.

We are witnessing war that's not confined to being a limited problem somewhere else. People don't want to recall that some of these are rogue nations with nuclear weapons: Israel, which hasn't signed the nonproliferation treaty, and the U.S. and Russia. Will Iran have its nukes taken out by conventional weapons or by nukes? But why should that be a bigger issue than the fact that the U.S. and Russia are both on hair-trigger alert with thousands of nuclear warheads each - and more being made? Or that depleted uranium continues to be strewn about Iraq by the U.S. military, to despoil the Earth for 4.5 billion years?

War is not the problem; war is a flashpoint or a symptom. (It's hard to keep this in mind when we realize the astounding dollar cost of the Iraq War to date is over \$300 billion.) Dealing with the real contributing factors to war is what would make a difference toward peace, but society's dominating players refuse to allow airing of fundamental issues. Those who engage in such discussion are marginalized, but hopefully are savvy enough today to look toward, say, an ecovillage future.

War is simple proof of the failure of civilization. One can say there was war more than 10,000 years ago as well, but if so, there was no civilization to accomplish the growth of numbers to the point that we are all threatened today by a host of unprecedented, worsening crises. With some new, universal global awareness - or a global lesson - we may be spared the ultimate nuclear horror.

Sometimes we must step back in our perspective about particular threats, even about this writer's most frequent subject which is petrocollapse. Culture change is the real subject, and as it's all-encompassing it therefore includes the positive. Keeping this in mind, we can see beyond the war-dependent, hopeless nation-oriented present. Most people seem to have a negative impression of petrocollapse, but as petrocollapse seems unavoidable, we might start imagining how it could be beneficial - besides being one of those "sooner rather than later" resignations, or Dr. Strangelove's "how I learned to love The Bomb." Which brings us back to nukes as one source of meltdown, but only one form of meltdown at hand.

The results are in: we have meltdown of various kinds. Just as importantly, they are interrelated, often clearly so. We should agree that whichever meltdown ends up taking over everyone's attention, the other crises veering toward meltdown helped cause final, general meltdown.

Whether we refer to this summer's news of ocean die-off off the Pacific Northwestern U.S., or another year of alarming loss of polar ice, or global armed conflict over dwindling geopolitical resources, the overall sense many people have of their world is that it is rapidly deteriorating out of control. This is felt on a societal level too, such as in the U.S. regarding its woefully inadequate health care. Far worse is yet to come for this debt-and-deficit-ridden nation that chose guns over butter. Less security seems to come from seeking it, at least by force. The vast majority of people in the world hold the view that the U.S. is the greatest threat to peace. But one can also observe in the most affluent societies the erosion of security heretofore sought by accumulating material wealth.

In the minds of folks self-educated enough to grasp the need for sustainable living and cooperative social relations - at odds with the corporate approach of competition for maximum consumption - people want a real community and the individual skills to survive in a post-petroleum culture. This essay traces the factors in societal meltdown in the context of our crashing global ecosystem. And as a way of offering a solution, we report on the ecovillage movement that this writer has been studying all summer.

The meltdown that a growing number of people are fretting over, as they lose confidence in government and the market system, does not become more understandable or manageable from incessant revelations on the malfeasance of officials. Yet when we pay close enough attention to world events while putting U.S. political developments in perspective, we can start to reposition ourselves - at least mentally - to change our lives and prepare for the future.

As serious as the daily news can be about the world in turmoil, we cannot rely on mainstream corporate news or even most alternative sources: they dwell only on minor points. The big picture and the deeper truths are lacking because they are a tremendous threat to the status quo, and contradict the framing done by the media. A good piece of investigative

journalism that dares to challenge the political establishment never seems to offer insight or solutions to the threat to our survival posed by modern society itself.

Only a few years ago, the public was patiently enduring the usual onslaught of bad news, decade after decade, while hoping for national and global improvement from another election. Now, after Florida and Ohio, after illegal wiretapping, after war crimes that would be made retroactively legal, and the melting of ice caps, the public may be past the being-fooled stage to some extent. But it is not where The Who were when they vowed in their song "Won't get fooled again" in 1971. Will it be, as they warned, "Meet the new boss, same as the old boss"? But The Who and their generation did not identify the real enemy as themselves, as they blasted their global-warming electric noise beyond the threshold of aural pain most profitably.

The realization many people are having today, no matter what their background or political affiliation might have been, is that the system (i.e., society) is so flawed that things cannot be fixed. Efforts to fix corruption in public office that are thwarted; corporate crimes; irreversible damage to the environment, and all manner of ills associated with population growth, are still unlikely to be addressed seriously by our leaders on any level. The big picture is avoided. This is one reason more and more citizens lack confidence in most any voice of concern. Reform of the whole system is never a mainstream media issue, except when some claim that election finance reform, for example, is "the answer" for everything.

As awareness and alarm grow, the citizenry tries to take in stride the bad news and the added pressures of modern living such as higher petroleum prices. This is another way of saying that people are generally doing nothing about their predicament. They perceive themselves as separate from one another and are isolated, without social means or community mechanisms for problem-solving. Still, it surprises activists that around 99% of their fellow citizens hardly lift a finger to change their own lives or help the beleaguered world (apart from maybe voting, often just for Tweedle Dum or Tweedle Dee).

It is an outrage that our food is not only tainted but expensive. It is unbelievable that bottled or filtered water is essential in many places. Yet, nothing is done to change these awful situations - except when on the individual or family level one makes for a rural escape. The price of progress is beginning to appear as it really is: a monstrous joke. The situation is clearly unsustainable, and one reason is the persistence of outrageous problems which indicates the system is unable to provide basic needs to members of society. One cannot provide for members of one's family if external threats are substantial. As individualists, the extreme misfortunes of some of us do give many of the rest of us a bit of solace; others' misfortunes are reasons for contentment when one is saddled "only" with the prospect of cancer or heart disease from being obedient consumers.

The only solution offered by the present society is for its victims to keep working hard in order to "afford a decent life." This strategy is false when we consider meltdown, perhaps instigated from the world's passing its peak in oil extraction. This event is all but upon us, and precludes the old social strategies of revolution and electing better leaders.

I was talking recently with a family member about our changing world's threats of overpopulation and the inevitability of the system to escape violent upheaval. She said, "I don't say this often or to many people, but I believe we need a revolution." I responded with, "It won't happen without hunger in the belly. The only form of revolution ahead as we normally picture it will be people rioting for food." What happens after that is anyone's guess.

People have generally learned nothing about civilization and its unfolding, inevitable failure. The signs of collapse are all around, but the speed of collapse will be unlike any in the past. Never have so many people depended on dwindling, non-renewable resources. The next oil shock will deal a lethal blow to the system. Yet, many in the peak oil movement believe that the economy will merely experience "bumps", and that collapses of civilization always take hundreds of years.

Our so-called leaders, the politicians, know almost nothing about petroleum dependence in its full implications - except to demand more supplies that are cheap. Some "leaders" believe they address the problem by promoting solar or wind power, biofuels and other technologies. Most of these "leaders" are clueless, but some are useful for occasionally pointing out that global warming is a real threat.

As national denial regarding imminent petrocollapse and climate chaos continues to seal our fate, we can anticipate being dragged down to a most ugly, violent end of any semblance of socioeconomic or political stability. Today when we can raise our heads momentarily over the crisis du jour (e.g., state or private terrorism), we sometimes ask "What can be done? Will government help us at all?" The answer is no, if we look at New Orleans after Katrina and Rita. The answer is no, if we look at mercury levels being allowed to rise.

A way out

The above atrocities and other factors are why many an intelligent person actively seeks a way out. That way seems to typically mean an escape from the city and finding a real community that has ecological consciousness. The U.S. has a small but growing ecovillage movement. People join these home-owner associations or communes with the hope of riding out petrocollapse and bringing about their own cultural change toward sustainable living.

A larger movement is the ecocity or green cities movement, more tied to the existing infrastructure while aspiring to change it radically. This movement shares many of the same values as the ecovillage movement, but wants to greatly alter today's cities by stopping urban sprawl and redevelop the urban landscape to improve density and open up spaces for nature and food production. The movement hopes to see transportation transformed from car-based to walking, bicycling and rail. Whether these goals are realistic - considering the time and resources available prior to petrocollapse - the ecocities/green cities adherents are right that there are too many people for everyone to "go back to the land."

Dovetailing with the ecovillage and ecocities movements is a recent effort, the relocation movement. It is developing projects, tools, networks and relationships to enhance regional self-reliance, sustainability, and equity at a time when the end of cheap energy for global mega-trade is anxiously anticipated.

Ecovillages may consist of lower-intensity consuming and small systems that may indeed represent the bringing of city problems into small, semi-isolated, rural locations. But escape has its appeal and logic for ecovillage dwellers and enthusiasts. One ecocity activist who understands peak oil refuses to admit that die-off of urban populations will happen, simply because the thought of it is too unthinkable while one can still agitate for sane planning and redesign of cities.

Whether one seeks a rural haven or is committed to seeing one's city through petrocollapse, there will not be much love lost for the dark side of the American Dream. For the filth of modern society is swept under the rug. Cars, coal mining, petroleum-based agriculture, toxic landfills for consumerism, wars for oil - all these and more equal filth worse than tracking dogdoo into one's home or seeing disturbing graffiti by resentful youths.

Over the past month I visited five ecovillages in the U.S. None except the L.A. Ecovillage was accessible by train, and only one of the rural ones was accessible by bus. There is increased interest in ecovillages due to growing awareness of peak oil and climate change. People of like-minded inclinations who are more concerned about the U.S. as a rogue state that slights domestic programs are more likely to try to move to Canada, or at least daydream about it. However, creeping fascism and corporate domination are not confined to the U.S., and these expressions of terminal civilization continue to grow and spread - as long as there's plenty of oil.

So, although there is no escape from Babylon in this day and age, as indigenous and primitive peoples bite the dust, the ecovillage movement as well as a few primitivists strive to create a new Eden. Upcoming reports from Culture Change will offer details and news of specific ecovillages and their admirable progress, so this general report can focus on burning issues: Keeping in mind the main purpose of ecovillages in this time of global petroleum dependence and corporate hegemony, we can look at some drawbacks and challenges for most of today's U.S. ecovillages:

- Population threat from nearby cities: If hundreds of thousands or millions of people can walk to the ecovillage, within days after the fuel supplies dry up and masses of people face starvation, they will seek food there beyond the city limits. Perhaps there will be government/military attempts to confine people in the cities that will serve as concentration camps to give other (small) areas the chance to make it. The paranoia some have about germ warfare to be used selectively according to race is off base, because even if the nonwhite populations could be eradicated (according to the thinking), the remaining whites would still be far too numerous for the ecosystem's carrying capacity and for what may remain of society's resources and social services anyway.

- Faulty design for food production/gathering: If farming is going to be attempted locally for the ecovillage, it should not be devoted to growing ethanol or other fuels for car use. The simple reason for this no-no is that growing enough food will be a very tough challenge as it is. Nevertheless, operation of a community truck would be quite useful, as long as people aren't assuming that there will necessarily be places to go to trade with. Also, methods of supplementing farms and gardens must include animal husbandry, gathering acorns, fish-farming and hunting. These are generally being put off for serious discussion, even at ecovillages, until the time of need comes.

Lastly, there's a form of urban ecovillage that is a state of mind if nothing else. I'm thinking of the one in Oakland, California known unofficially as "The Ecovillage" or "Ecovillage510" (after the area code). Its website bills the group as "A community of relationships of people who like to do things together." It's a "social ecovillage" but not a residential or spiritual ecovillage (as in a religious community). It has no geographic boundaries; most of the people associated with it live around Oakland's Lake Merritt. "The Ecovillage" has no organization, no officers, no membership, no dues, no rules, but folks meet at least monthly for a potluck to create a "neighborhood" calendar of free events that are "sponsored" or led by the individual who shows up to propose the event. Its calendar, published monthly, maintains the focus on relationships as much as the content of listed events and classes.

One of the regulars in "The Ecovillage" is also involved in peak oil issues. She is actively concerned about the reluctance people have to change their lifestyles toward conserving energy as if petrocollapse is going to hit during our life times - even when some people know well what may be ahead. The basic problem is that not much practical progress seems to be happening anywhere, while the average oil addict in The United Paved Precincts of America can still drive endlessly, throw away more plastic, and flick a switch for endless electricity, all the while enhancing economic growth. Despite the prevalent mindset, at least some awareness grows and spreads with today's growing ecovillage consciousness. That's more than what 99% of the U.S. public is up to.

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Further reading and resources:

Ecovillage artwork on CultureChange.org by Greg Jalbert:

culturechange.org/cms

The Trojan Horse Sisters (fiction, Culture Change Letter 126) by Jan Lundberg:

culturechange.org/cms

Earthaven Ecovillage:

earthaven.org

Moonshadow (Sequatchie Valley Institute):

svionline.org

The Farm and its Ecovillage Training Center:

thefarm.org

Los Angeles Ecovillage:

laecovillage.org

The Ecovillage (Ecovillage510):

ecovillage510.org

Ecocity Builders:

Ecocitybuilders.org

Post Carbon Institute and its relocalization initiative/outpost program:

postcarbon.org

Relocalization Network/Bay Area Peak Oil

relocalize.net/groups/bayarea

Bay Area Relocalize (San Francisco Bay):

bayarearelocalize.org

The War in Iraq Costs (Congressional appropriations):

nationalpriorities.org

"Connecting for Change" - Bioneers By The Bay, Oct. 20-22. Jan Lundberg will hold a workshop on Saturday Oct. 21. Come to the University of Massachusetts - Dartmouth. Register now at:

connectingforchange.org