

Peak oil activism that denies petrocollapse

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Why do we publish Culture Change and put on Petrocollapse Conferences? Hint: it has something to do with the influence of corporations on the mainstream media and on "nonprofit" activism, and also something to do with too many activists catering to business-as-usual politics.

The main culprits in withholding news and insight from the public regarding energy are in places such as Washington, DC, Wall Street, and other corporate centers. So when we take progressive activists to task for not doing their peak oil work quite as we like, it's important to keep things in perspective.

Several events this year that I witnessed are illustrative of peak oilists shading the truth, whether by mistake or deliberately. The most recent example is last month's impressive annual conference put on by the Association for the Study of Peak Oil and Gas - USA (ASPO-USA). May the ensuing critique provide some constructive insight to where the peak oil movement may be spinning its wheels.

While we're at it, is philosophy important? If the rapidly deteriorating state of the world matters, then we need to grapple with attitudes and viewpoints that may be rooted in self interest and that bow to the status quo. Again, critiquing others is unpleasant, but we must refine the debate and get as many people as possible participating. A current example of what I believe is fuzzy thinking by hip luminaries is author Paul Hawken. Before I launch into peak oilists' self-muzzling, let's look at the bigger picture:

Hawken is a brilliant thinker, writer and popular speaker. One may quarrel with his notion of "Natural Capitalism," but after he wrote that book he was pepper sprayed as a peaceful protester at the "Battle of Seattle" on November 30, 1999, when many of us combined to shut down the World Trade Organization's meeting. He woke up some more after that experience. But last month Hawken told a large, adoring crowd "we are in danger of seeing civilization disappear" as his concluding message. Granted, this is a weighty concept, and almost everyone appreciates some aspect(s) of civilization.

However, when we must expect 90% of today's species fished in the oceans to disappear before 2050, those sea creatures would voice no benefit to civilization. If we do not question the very idea of civilization, or we don't advocate a new one -- when Western Civilization has accomplished in short order the end of much life on Earth -- then we may be fatally closed-minded. Is Amadeus Wolfgang Mozart's genius and beauty a sufficient excuse for the terror of technology? (Alternatives to civilization are discussed in culturechange.org and other publications. Jared Diamond helped touch it off in 1987 in Discover magazine.)

There was one peak oil conference this year (not ASPO-USA) that was designed to calm the public at the same time that the message about peak and even petrocollapse was delivered.

The organizers knew that a major die-off was inevitable, but they still proceeded in the conference's design as if there were hopeful, workable solutions available through government agencies, community organizing, and some technological improvements. Indeed, the organizers had already decided that their own personal strategy was to "get out of Dodge." Given that decision, one may as well offer radical action commensurate with the threat and let attendees and the press decide for themselves. But that would possibly deter some people from supporting or attending the conference.

Similarly positioned on those issues, but more extreme, was the ASPO-USA conference Oct. 25-28 in Boston. It was more controlled and carefully structured -- so much that some attendees felt the message of the conference was skewed from acknowledging collapse as a part of peak oil reality. This took away from the valuable message offered by one speaker, Matt Simmons, who masterfully complemented the big picture: "We have over six billion people and one billion TV sets..." and "Another North Sea is too late." He is on record as telling a Pentagon audience in June that the energy crisis is already here and that panic must result. He told them that "maybe the enemy is us," and that it is essential for the U.S. population to "grow food at home."

The ASPO-USA conference was rich in data-presentation by many talented researchers and analysts. But it got off on the wrong foot when the first set panelists, dealing with climate change, lacked a good grasp of peak oil and its role in ending economic growth. Throughout the conference, there seemed to be a reluctance or aversion to addressing the issue of what happens when growth ends forever. This may be described as the elephant in the room.

The problem with the conference can be best appreciated when considering that speakers were from Toyota, Rand Corporation and Raytheon, among many other groups such as the oil industry and academia. They are the problem,

generally, so voices should buck the conventional wisdom, as some did to an extent. But the more "radical" speakers such as Richard Heinberg and Julian Darley were a tiny portion of the total time, and rather than take on oil crash, they focused on the Oil Depletion Protocol and local economics, respectively. This was not enough to achieve a balance for the overall conference message. A Wall Street Journal reporter covered the conference; perhaps it was feared he would not come if one of the many talk' titles suggested the ideas "Collapse" or "Die-off."

I believe M. King Hubbert (originator of peak oil thought) and other peak oilists would have found the Boston conference's message to be wrongly in denial of the end of growth ahead and of the likelihood of collapse. Colin Campbell, the geologist responsible for so much interest in peak oil today, has spoken of an historic "discontinuity" of the economy and society as we know it. Last year he republished on his ASPO website the Culture Change report "End-time for USA upon oil collapse."

At ASPO-USA's conference, the "peak oil tent" (that one might assume we'd all fit under) heard only a couple of references to "collapse." The longest one I heard was from The Oil Drum's Stuart Staniford, who concluded his rundown of evidence-of-peak with the claim that adaptation to peak oil has begun, and the claim that "Peak Oil Does Not Equal Civilization Collapse." His justification was only this shaky rationale: "Peak is here, and since civilization is still here, we don't get collapse from peak oil."

Upon gestating over the conference, appreciating the dynamic presentation of data by speakers such as Matt Simmons and Charlie Hall, but feeling there was a major aspect of the peak oil story missing, I decided to write this report and publish it only after addressing the organizers directly with the draft of this Culture Change letter and a cover letter:

Dear Dick, Steve, Jim, Scott and Tom,

Thanks for accommodating me as press in Boston. I had a good trip and it was very worthwhile for me to attend your conference. I'm impressed with ASPO-USA's healthy growth.

I was glad to be in the role of observer in order to offer Culture Change readers my view of the conference. Overshadowing the good data and findings from speakers I heard, is my conviction that ASPO-USA or the conference didn't permit the full range of valid thought on peak oil. I heard complaints from others who noticed what I did: that some speakers were selected to frame the organizers' (your) intent and policies to give the overall impression to government, industry and investors that a mainstream-acceptable message and image is what you maintain at all times. I don't want to be unfair, and in that spirit I give you a draft of my report below.

I believe we should work together. If that's not practical, I'd like to see ASPO-USA honor the strong belief and expectation as expressed by some well-known peak oil figures that peak oil is truly "A turning point for humankind" (the title of Colin Campbell's article in Culture Change magazine, 2001). I believe you have weakened the success of having as many as 500 peak oilists gather, when skewing the dominant viewpoint is done for the sake of protecting business as usual (BAU) -- something you know to be a serious error. In a world of trade-offs, you did your best. I'm just one guy questioning things and wanting action, although not exactly the same kind you may envision.

I offer you a first look at my draft report, attached, and look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Jan Lundberg

Culture Change

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If ASPO-USA is not indicating a future without growth, the organization is part of the growth paradigm. An indication of ASPO-USA's not understanding the full meaning of peak oil is its slogan: "Energy Action for a Healthy Economy and a Clean Environment." Economy as singular, rather than Local Economies, is an obsolete concept not evident to those monitoring BAU too closely. Global trade as we've come to know it -- a function of cheap oil -- is soon going to be history, replaced in tiny part quantitatively by such throwbacks as a sail transport network.

Perhaps no two people share the same exact understanding or viewpoint on peak oil and its ramifications. The scary

aspects of petrocollapse are real, and must be tempered with an idea of the positive steps one can take to minimize petroleum dependence and improve one's life over consumerism.

The culture that brought about peak oil is not going to solve it. Profit and success are about to take a back seat to nature's will, while the wisdom and cleverness of humans to fit into a greenhouse-shocked, resource-depleted world may be the best we can hope for. Some surprise bonuses, such as more equality and sanity, can follow the discontinuity marked by peak oil, once we experience the catastrophe of petrocollapse and usher in a successor culture of bioregional diversity.

A wealth of information is at ASPO-USA's website:

<http://www.aspo-usa.com>

"The maturation of Matt Simmons, energy-industry investment banker and peak oil guru" -

http://culturechange.org/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=60&Itemid=33

Note: ASPO-USA kindly responded to the letter above, in a timely fashion. Their position is that they are open to future public discussion on collapse. I nevertheless felt compelled to respond:

"I've always known you and your colleagues were well informed. My point is that you and your colleagues do know what's happening and about to happen. That's why Toyota and Raytheon don't belong at a serious peak oil conference unless they are being spotlighted as the problem and possibly having little if any future. If they really "get" peak oil, that's another matter, but I missed those presentations. Because you and your colleagues are so well informed, that's also why the climate change panel on your opening night should not have assumed unending economic growth. Or were they saying that unending growth was unacceptable and crazy while nevertheless being planned by the government, industry and academia?

"The fact that there is "fear" involved in peak oil consciousness (and regarding climate change news daily) is offset by the value of truth, and secondly, one should consider the fear already present in the confusing, stupid approach to the world by clueless industrial society.

"When you say 'we are not convinced that the peak oil transition will play out as quickly as some believe; this might take decades to unfold; and peak oil is surely not 'the end of fossil fuels,' or the 'last days of ancient sunlight.' and "we think hardship rather than collapse, over the next two decades at least, is probably the more likely outcome' - okay, you are entitled to that opinion, but that position should be debated openly, and dissenters should not be absent from your organization or conferences. Could you agree? As an oil supply analyst I am happy to present my dissenting view, anytime, anywhere. But you've been reading it for years. It could just as well be said that ASPO-USA's view is the dissenting one.

"Funders are connected to the status quo. Those of us calling for fundamental change and giving up on the technofix are automatically poorly funded. Your letter did not say anything about ASPO-USA's funding and support, and I make no assumptions or accusations about industry's support influencing ASPO-USA's views. But moneyed interests want something for their support, if only "level-headed sanity" or "conservatism" - seldom a prophetic or radical message about collapse. Now that your organization is well established, relevance should be top priority rather than concerns about people's fear or the danger of people learning that peak oil may not be a "transition... taking decades to unfold" in a non-collapse.

"I'm in this kind of journalism and activism for the learning and the experience, although it's also nice to be able to pay some bills. I decided it wasn't worthwhile to assure the ability to pay bills by getting (well) paid to limit my focus on fleeting developments in the oil market. Unfortunately, this doesn't translate into high demand as an independent commentator on oil, energy or environment."

I accepted the ASPO-USA board's invitation to join the organization.