Update from DC: Occupy, pepperspray, peak oil, sail power, Congress

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Greetings from the U.S. capital, variously occupied.

The main purpose our webmaster John Mendonça and I had in coming to Washington, D.C. this month was the annual peak oil conference. But it was even more exciting to witness and participate in Occupy actions in DC and New York. Additionally, we advanced sail power on Capitol Hill and the news media.

We don't ever want to put on a happy face for you, that of "reform the system," when the world we see is broken and does not work. But from time to time we find ways to make a difference long term.
For all intents and purposes, the powers-that-be are the mega-polluting interests. They defend their "right" to pollute for profit, couching their justifications in "jobs" and "growth." The best that one can expect from the system is, typically, a slight improvement in average fuel economy for cars. An approach is way narrow if it is patently too little and too late, serves to extend petroleum dependence, and works neither for the embattled ecosystem nor the world of community cooperation that modern humanity has to bring back.

The entire system requires the present order to hold sway, so of course protesters will be forcefully put in their place -- pepperspayed, beat up, locked up -- when possible or "necessary." Fortunately, and tragically, the collapse of the dominant order has begun, causing confusion among most people: for example, social justice advocates who think their wealth is on Wall Street in the hands of greedsters. But the end of economic growth -- accompanying the recent peak in conventional oil supplies -- means much more than redividing the toxic pie. A "new" way of living has been put in motion, and a prime directive is to keep in mind that there is no social justice on a dead planet.

Culture Change and the Sail Transport Network offer, along with related sub-movements and communities, vision and direction. We continue to work with additional activists, voices, and even industry and politicians -- whatever brings about helpful culture change! We joined the 350.org Surround The White House action on Nov. 6, resulting in the halt in federal approval of the tar sands pipeline. [see our photo] The highlight for some protesters was the departure from the planned sidewalk-only Occupation, as crowds finally swung into the street to march, and could not be stopped by police.

Although our message and priorities at Culture Change are limited and focused, we believe nonviolent civil disobedience is the ticket. Past examples in history that have proved it are Gandhian triumphs, monks setting themselves ablaze in Vietnam in the 1960s (nonviolent to others), and the UC Davis students who recently braved unjust punishment for their protest against tuition hikes and in support of the Occupy movement. A few of us with long memories were surprised at the attack by a police officer -- a lieutenant, no less -- when a clear precedent had been set in 2005 with Lundberg v Humboldt County. Pepperspray torture by Q-tip of nonviolent but resisting protesters was found to be excessive force and unconstitutional. I've just been interviewed on the two cases; we will share with you soon the links to the resulting news coverage. Meanwhile, pass the word that pepperspray's use as intimidation translates to painful legal damage in dollars to local governments.

The greatest accomplishment of the Occupy movement to date may have been thus far unappreciated: to refute the pro-violence, impatient advocates of taking human life (as one option) to save life on Earth. I have come across the would-be movement's proponents, people I formerly admired, and criticized them by outing them in public (see Minimize violence), only to see myself called a liar. At least the result of our kerfuffle was their sudden suppression of their message of violence toward humans (as distinct from property damage, which many argue to be part of nonviolence when called for). Welcome anytime is both denial and abandonment of cockeyed ideas.

More on the Occupy movement and our involvement after this side-update:

Peak oil conference: vindication, but to what end?

I arrived in Washington in time for participating in the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Peak Oil - U.S. Chapter, November 2-5. It was worthwhile, particularly for Culture Change's advancing sail power as a premier renewable energy source. We paid for an exhibit table where we flew the Sail Transport Network burgee.

Some of the presentations at the conference were interesting enough for a few highlights to be summarized in an upcoming article; it will be mainly about the state of the peak oil movement. A preview: here are two one-word assessments of the acceptance of peak oil "theory" in the U.S. today that I obtained: "Vindicated" and "Respectable" (Congressman Roscoe Bartlett, R-Maryland; Jenna Orkin, New York City activist; respectively). But when government policy and words from politicians' and talking heads' mouths omit peak oil, is peak-oil consciousness really gaining, to result in leadership and action?

I managed to spend quality time on Capitol Hill, giving away copies of my autobiography, Songs of Petroleum, and discussing such topics as sail power. I also visited major nonprofit activists and news reporters in Washington. I could have just stayed home in Santa Cruz, perhaps going to San Francisco and other Bay Area cities, to be productive while taking it easy. But I find there's no substitute for actively engaging in the nation's capital on occasion:

Where else could I bring sail power and peak oil to the attention to a large grouping of world renewable energy experts, Congressmen, and many reporters? Probably no-one likes the idea of bunker-fuel burned in ships, when reminded of this atrocious air pollutant. Renewable energy's potential today has thus far been ignored as to the highly efficient power of sails capturing wind -- even though world trade is a lynchpin of the global economy that is teetering. The venue was the Congressional Visitors' Center, on Nov. 15, for a presentation by the Worldwatch Institute on the new REN21 Renewables Global Status Report Policy Briefing on renewable energy industries' and governments' progress. At the guest microphone I got a good reaction from New Jersey's Representative Rush Holt, as well as from Scott Sklar, the famous solar energy activist.

Segue: peak oil was brought to Occupy Wall Street, by activists Gusti Swarz, Ben Zolno and Jenna Orkin, for the last weekend of freedom at Zuccotti Park, Sunday, Nov. 13. A panel presentation and a teach-in hopefully made inroads on protesters' understanding of "peak everything." [I unfortunately could not participate, having had to return to D.C. before the event.]

In Manhattan, checking out Occupy Wall Street, Nov. 7-8.

Police state crackdown: Occupiers' demise or energizing?

I felt my best contribution to OWS would be to draw the connection to the ecological context of the struggle. Oil has much to do with it, of course. So my paper on Occupying The Land (How The Occupy Movement May Be Off-Base, and How It Can Evolve) was distributed at Zuccotti Park and the Atrium nearby, on Nov. 7th and 8th, and injected into the OWS Vision and Goals process.

Funny how a few color copies seemed to make quite an impression, but really it was the positive spirit and ethic of collaboration I encountered that certainly accounted for the good reception the "Occupy The Land" paper got -- amidst much, much input and intensity all around. Our anti-nuclear poster with the Shakespeare quote was already there from the day before. A third publication did not fare well: I was down to my last copy of my book to donate to the People's Library, but I discovered a freak defect; the first page in it was page 5. So Songs of Petroleum was not among the 5,000 books trashed this week by the police -- an outrageous and telling act.

The heavy police assault showed that respect for fellow citizens is completely and foolishly lacking, when one would think the powers of the 1% ought to start being nicer and get along better with the human race. I felt compelled to write a letter to the New York Times, receipt of which wasn't acknowledged, on the occasion of the violent eviction of peaceful Occupiers at Zuccotti Park. What people fail to remember is that occupying Zuccotti was a compromise early on, in that the protesters were barred from actually occupying Wall Street.

In support of the Occupy movement I've written a song, "Red, Black, Brown, Yellow and White -- 99% Is Alright." I hope to have the recording available on CultureChange.org soon. Such an effort might do as much good as a letter in the New York Times.

I was motivated to do that very thing, particularly since the Bloomberg police assault on Nov. 15 brought to my mind Karma: destiny or fate, following as effect from cause. At such times one wonders what the hardhearted of "the 1%" grasp of reality. Here's what I sent the newspaper, on Nov. 16:

Dear Editor,

The Times lacked perspective regarding, "Will their [Occupiers'] movement wither?" Just as a Washington Post blog erred in conjecturing that Mayor Bloomberg did the protesters a favor by getting them out of the cold, the idea that "New York City officials might have done Occupy Wall Street a favor 'by providing a dramatic ending'" is off base.

The movement is inadvertently boosted by police crackdowns across the nation. Protesters treated harshly when having their rights violated are invigorated for future action that could up the ante. Pent up protest-energy could brew, sending record numbers of people into the streets, a Tahrir Square phenomenon -- too many people to be swept aside.

A catalyst for greater discontent and confusion is assured fairly soon. Why? Expansionary growth of the global economy is ending with the passing of cheap, abundant oil -- and there is no ready technofix. On the bright side, a positive culture change in harmony with nature is inevitable if our common survival is to have a chance.

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Note: the writer is a former oil industry analyst who ran Lundberg Survey, who later joined the grassroots environmental movement and founded the Sail Transport Network.

Rachel Maddow contextualized last week the spate of crackdowns on Occupy Wall Street encampments around the country with crackdowns in the past -- like the one at Berkeley in the 60s - -which have only served to galvanize the movements they hoped to quash. [Alternet.org, Nov. 16, 2011]. Also from Alternet on the day after the police attack:

"Oakland mayor Jean Quan, whose police force forcibly evicted that city's embattled Occupy encampment early Monday, casually mentioned that she 'was recently on a conference call with 18 cities across the country who had the same situation. . . .'
United States Conference of Mayors had organized two conference calls 'to share information about the occupying encampments around the country.'" Voila, conspired stupidity.

Regarding "Did Bloomberg do Occupy Wall Street a favor?" Yes, but not in the way that a Washington Post blogger imagined. The writer had claimed that the crackdown in NYC was an inadvertent favor because the protesters were about to freeze their asses off. My Karmic analysis:

[from an EnergyBulletin.net comment on its site, on above story excerpt, by Jan Lundberg]

Ezra Klein's idea is hilarious: that the Occupy protesters needed a favor from Mayor Bloomberg. When I saw Klein's headline, "Did Bloomberg do Occupy Wall Street a favor?", I thought, "Oh, someone sees what I see."

But no. Here's my thought on how the movement was inadvertently boosted by the crackdowns sweeping across the nation in the last several days. (Whether they are related or coordinated from an on-high central authority may not matter.) What I foresee is that the people in the streets and parks have not just been treated with disrespect, feeling their rights violated, being "saved" from cold weather, but are invigorated for future action that could up the ante. Pent up protest energy could brew, particularly as the economy won't be growing (thanks to the historic loss of cheap oil).

So a political or economic catalyst could send record numbers of people back into the streets at any time, a real Tahrir Square phenomenon -- too many people to be swept aside. Then what? For one thing, the authorities and their servants might lament that they did not let the Occupiers continue to harmlessly make their statement in public space where they were exercising their Constitutional rights.

Albert Bates provides historical perspective on Occupy, going back to the radical 1930s. His Occupy Wall Street and FDR’s four freedoms tells of restructuring an opportunity in more innocent times for this nation. I commented on his article and added background on my Occupy activities in NYC, again in EnergyBulletin.net:

Albert's message is spot on. And I know his rendition of the goings on at Occupy Wall Street and the Atrium is accurate, for I was there with him. I found the people at OWS sincere and energized. The drums were a bit loud and unorchestrated -- I say this to appear objective.

The movement is not going away, especially after the dumb move of violent suppression by mayors and police. But I believe that it's critical that the strife from modern overcrowding, taking various forms such as greed that causes eventual uproar and possibly violence, is understood dispassionately by many more protesters: for it is the Earth, and sharing it, that is the real wealth. "Occupy The Land" (How The Occupy Movement May Be Off-Base, and How It Can Evolve) was the main message I brought to Occupy Wall Street. The other was to push for a universal 20-hour work week maximum which would eliminate unemployment and prevent madly overworking to acquire material wealth. I had to leave before last Sunday's peak oil teach in and panel presentation. But New Yorker Jenna Orkin participated and suggested to the Occupiers, "1. Occupy the Suburbs. Get the message, "Food Not Lawns" into the mainstream. 2. Occupy the Schools. Bring practical skills back into good repute and the education system. 3. Occupy the Military/Industrial Complex. That one's a gargantuan project but it represents a step for OWS in the direction of connecting the dots between the banks

and the corporations."

That's our update. More later. Keep us on task by making a donation at our donation page. Thanks, and take good care in your Occupations.

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Use of pepper spray at Davis brings back memories of '97 Palco protest; university president launches investigation - Jan Lundberg interviewed by Donna Tam in Eureka's Times-Standard, Nov. 23, 2011

Lundberg v Humboldt County: Pepperspray via Q-tip, war, ecocide:
A culture of torture, May 5, 2005, by Jan Lundberg -- See links on the case at bottom of the article.

Pepper spraying Calif. officer previously honored, U.C. Davis' pepperspraying police lieutenant Associated Press, Nov. 22, 2011

Humboldt's history of pepper spray recalled

The militant ivory tower enviros, silenced and discredited by the peaceful Occupy movement:
Minimize violence: Prepare for collapse and "new" culture, "Staking out Culture Change's role: nonviolence and understanding collapse," by Jan Lundberg, January 19, 2011.

Did Bloomberg do Occupy Wall Street a favor?
by Ezra Klein, 11/15/2011

Association for the Study of Peak Oil and Gas - U.S. chapter's website: ASPO-USA