Cutting out fossil fuels by building community

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Ecovillages and isotherms

CUTTING OUT FOSSIL FUELS BY BUILDING COMMUNITY

The urgent need to slash today's extreme consumption of fossil fuels is not a numbers game, nor is it a matter of degree. Rather, it is a matter of reduction in kind.

We cannot break our hyper-addiction to our fossil-fueled economy of hyper-consumption incrementally, or gradually, or by means of some pain-free twelve-step program. We have to go cold turkey wherever we can. Right now. We have to begin by taking a good hard look at every single thing we do - at every single thing we have, at every single thing we want. Then we have to start the hard job of cutting out every single thing we can do without.

This approach is in direct contrast to seeking energy efficiency, which often represents only a small reduction of waste while continuing to live altogether unsustainably. Efficiency is an illusion: short-term reductions in per capita energy can stall. And if the population and economy grow, then any reductions are cancelled out. Efficiency is the false promise that we can continue our unsustainable ways if we're only just a bit nicer about raping the planet.

The pro-industry, Me Consumer First ethic tells us, "We must keep burning fossil fuels, although perhaps more efficiently for as long as we have the current crisis." This disregards the science of global warming and the reality of rapidly dwindling fossil fuels.

True, we are caught in our own trap of depending on cars, electric appliances, petrochemicals for food and medicine, and other conversion of crude oil and natural gas to products that either go into the air, water, our bodies, and the landfill. The entropic, toxic effects of this conversion results in the vicious circle of heat waves and forest fires that raise global temperatures. In turn, these extreme weather events cause greater heat waves and fires.

Today, with a record hot year shaping up again, and heat waves causing power outages that can kill many thousands of vulnerable consumers, peak consumption has met peak extraction of petroleum. So the supply crisis is an ongoing one; it will only get much worse. Anyone can see that there is no planning going on for petrocollapse, and the substitute fuels don't make the grade on the scale necessary. The government and the corporations know this, so now we are witnessing the last of major profit taking before the great unraveling and crash.

While individual responsibility to slash fossil fuel use is workable, a more efficient and socially enforcing way is to band together to cut energy waste and share resources and skills. There already exist bands, affinity groups and other organizations and institutions of all sizes to take on the fossil fuel challenge, but many of these are compromised, corrupted, and out of touch with reality if they subscribe to mainstream corporate values. In any case, a new or established group can try the following changes through decisions:

- In the event of a crisis in supply or heat wave, have a work holiday: don't commute. Follow this for the entire duration of heat waves or cold snaps, so that people can take a break to think, communicate and plan.

- Neighbors and local people can walk or bicycle to pre-selected town hall locations to form Citizen Petroleum Councils

and explore other projects.

- Keep cool without air conditioning by using solar-powered electric fans, and hope that the dwelling you are in is protected by shade trees. Take a cold shower which cools the body and saves fossil fuels.

- Except for the fan in extremely hot circumstances, don't plug in or use machines and appliances. One can get used to not having air conditioning.

- Eliminate electronic entertainment by picking up a book, an acoustic instrument, or just talk to someone. The internet, however, can prove to be critical for communications and obtaining information for sustainability.

- To start meeting future needs, save seeds and plant a garden. Thus, long-distance food production is sharply minimized. Meanwhile, buy local produce and refrain from buying foods out of season. Cut down on packaging; buy in bulk. When the weather is cool enough, dig up the lawn and depave the driveway to create space for gardening, a la Victory Gardens of World War II.

There is much more to do, starting with education, but sharing information and skills will accelerate the learning process especially if what is learned becomes action. People need to come together to plan and take steps that they will hold each other to. Helpful information is not likely to come from the government or the corporate news media.

Although it is possible to keep using "EnergyStar" machines and burn compact-fluorescent lights and be off the grid - apparently absolving ourselves from global warming - it may be up to everyone to simply curtail almost all energy use radically. In this way, we also interrupt our dependency on the comparatively low amount of imbedded energy in manufactured gadgets that are transported and packaged with petroleum. In solidarity with low-income people and those uneducated in sustainable, low-energy living, those who enjoy renewable energy technology should, during a crisis, publicly eschew conveniences that the mass of people are suddenly doing without. One must decide what practices are really necessary and not merely convenient or habitual. This "sacrifice" is necessary because a class division of those with energy and those without is unsustainable.

If the above steps and principles sound inconvenient or unlikely from a voluntary standpoint, think of the inevitability of petrocollapse: The global peak of oil extraction is probably hitting the world and economy now. If Culture Change and its 18-year track record, and its publisher's petroleum industry background, are not convincing enough, another source of information and insight on peak oil is Matthew Simmons, the energy investment banker who has advised George W. Bush: Simmons now says "Grow food at home." (See Culture Change Letter #134, June 24th, 2006).

The strong measures we can take are more than energy-saving measures that we start doing as a strong community: They amount to going on strike, to demand and pursue a better way of living. We can demonstrate that the global corporate economy is too costly to maintain. Why wait for it to fail us utterly and catch everyone off guard? To reinforce this and kick where it hurts, we never buy a new motor vehicle when a used one will do. To say this more constructively, we maximize local economics and make sure those closest to us are being helped and are following the new measures taken by the community for the common good.

Find your sources of information and inspiration for sustainable living, and make common cause with friends and family. Together, we are more likely to get through periods of wrenching change - and come out stronger and more secure.

Ecovillages and changing climate

Many energy-saving measures have been developed and pursued at ecovillages. At The Farm, in Summertown, Tennessee, the Ecovillage Training Center offers courses on Permaculture and alternative building techniques, practicing the art of living more harmoniously with nature since 1994. Over 50,000 students have come through and experienced energy-saving, renewable energy, cool-building construction, organic gardening, low-energy transport, and cooperative living.

The Farm was founded in 1971 when a bus caravan of hundreds of Haight Ashbury migrants found remote refuge in the countryside, in a location where they could quietly escape attention long enough to mature their vision. The Farm has a rich history of collective decision-making and pragmatic development. Nonprofit activism at The Farm has made history and is part of what The Farm offers society: not a perfect model for everywhere, but a rich example of a successful effort towards self-reliance and sustainability.

No ecovillage is an island, as Albert Bates is quick to point out. At The Farm they are trying to protect more than 5 square miles of oak and hickory forest through land trusts and management for biodiversity. Lately they have been confronted with problems of a far greater scale than any they've encountered in the previous three decades. According to NOAA research scientist, James Hansen,

"During the past thirty years the lines marking the regions in which a given average temperature prevails ("isotherms")

have been moving poleward at a rate of about thirty-five miles per decade. That is the size of a county in Iowa. Each decade the range of a given species is moving one row of counties northward."

To The Farm, this means that the climate they are experiencing in the summer of 2006 was what prevailed in Nashoba County, Mississippi in the summer of 1971. When the bus caravan arrived in Lewis County, Tennessee in 1971, it had a climate that can be found today 100 miles north, in Kentucky. Trees don't migrate that quickly. They are accustomed to shifts of 3 to 4 miles per decade. When you accelerate the rate of change, whole ecosystems disperse. This is more than enough reason to slash energy use now and come together as if we are tribes. Bring on the future and keep pace, if possible, with climate and cultural change.

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Citizen Petroleum Councils:
Culture Change Letter #11
http://culturechange.org/e-letter-11cont.html

The Farm, Albert Bates, and the Ecovillage Training Center:
http://www.thefarm.org

Earthaven ecovillage and Communities Magazine:
http://earthaven.org/

Source on isotherms:
NASA scientist Jim Hansen writes in his review of Al Gore's book for the JUNE 6 New York Times