



All of this press coverage doesn't mean all that much (or, the tragedy of the commons revisited...)

Posted by [Prof. Goose](#) on May 31, 2005 - 2:13am

< soapbox >

[All of this MSM coverage of "peak oil" we've seen over the past couple of days should not make us feel better](#), even though [the Peak Oil series over in Kevin Drum's world](#) is pretty good.

Sure, information is getting out there...and that IS a good thing. But, it's been out there for a while for those who want to hear about it or are open to the ideas therein.

So, it seems to me that, if anything, this should awaken this generation of the peak oil community to the fact that now, we have to start thinking about the inevitable next phase: policymaking and political involvement.

I can hear some of you saying something to the effect of "oh lordy, there he goes again." No, that's not my point.

My point is, well, isn't it true that this coverage does nothing but throw a little manure on the ground that prepares the field for the planting of the ideas? Salience is a wonderful thing, but it must be maintained for political pressure to bring change, especially in our politics.

So, the question is whether or not we actually put in the time to grow the crops so we can eat this winter...that's the other story.

What the peak oil community will have to come to understand is that behaviors and attitudes must change en masse in order to apply the requisite political pressure for the consequences of peak oil to be ameliorated at all.

Another thing to remember, there's so many pieces to the puzzle. Remember [Matt Savinar's little list](#) of things that have to come together sooner rather than later...(yes, it's a little over the top, but it captures the essence of cooperation and political action that is required...)

1. A few dozen technological breakthroughs,
2. Unprecedented political will and bipartisan cooperation,
3. Tremendous international collaboration,
4. Massive amounts of investment capital,
5. Fundamental reforms to the structure of the international banking system,
6. No interference from the oil-and-gas industries,
7. About 25-50 years of general peace and prosperity to retrofit the world's \$45 trillion dollar per year economy, including transportation and telecommunications networks, manufacturing

industries, agricultural systems, universities, hospitals, etc., to run on these new sources of energy,

8. A generation of engineers, scientists, and economists trained to run a global economy powered by new sources of energy.

So, yes, the coverage is nice, but we have to keep our eyes on the prize here. That's my main point.

I also wanted to bring back to your mind the idea of the "tragedy of the commons." This idea contains the ideas of cooperation, etc., that have to occur for this whole thing to work out, at least to my mind.

The commons is the idea that public goods (available resources initially not owned by anyone, existing prior to the state), when they are used by individuals, those individuals do not bear the entire cost of their actions.

Instead, individuals (are conditioned to?) maximize their utility; which means that the best (non-cooperative) short-term strategy for individuals is to try to exploit more than their share of public resources. Meaning that this resource gets used up and benefits only those who hoard that resource.

In political science (and economics), we call those folks "free riders." The more of them there are, the more tragic/unequal the problem of the common resource will become.

The catch is that, by pure rationality, every actor should be a free rider unless they are constrained by some force, whether coercion or social identity, to do otherwise.

For instance, take the person who is 72, but doesn't contribute a dime to AARP. That person still benefits from the lobbying efforts of AARP for prescription drug reform, but they didn't help out the lobbying effort at all. Why? There was no benefit to them for doing so. They didn't deem the cheaper insurance, the calendar for the fridge, or the psychological perk of joining and making a difference, to be enough of a benefit to overcome their ability to skate by without paying.

What people forget is that it is completely rational for seniors to free ride from the AARP...just as it is rational for us to not want to pay an energy tax at the pump in order to expand our energy alternatives through research and development, or redistributing resources to assuring a soft landing.

The use of natural resources is not so different than the AARP perks, though there are a few caveats that are needed to make the two scenarios gibe.

The only solutions that truly solve the tragedy of the commons are either government control over the resources or involvement or a sense of shared purpose and identity that overcomes the sheer rationality of exploiting every resource at your fingertips.

The former requires government power. The latter requires the decisionmakers being on the same page.

This is the problem with governance of the commons, one solution restricts freedom by definition, the other comes from a sense of connection and community that has formed over generations, and usually only forms in smaller ecological units, such as tribes and families.

Assuming a majority of individuals follow the free rider strategy, the theory goes, the public resource gets overexploited and the collective bears much of the cost in one way or another, sooner or later. The problem is particularly important and troublesome when considering goods or resources to which access cannot be excluded or the market controls.

And that folks, it seems to me is the road we must go down in order to solve this situation for the betterment of our society. Taxes are almost inevitable, demand destruction as well.

So, news stories are nice, but changes in attitudes and behaviors in the public realm are the only thing that's going to soften the blow.

Talk to a friend. Call your congressperson. Call your senator. Call your state representative. Call your state senator. Seriously. I'm going to call a couple of them today where I live.

Sure, they may have no idea what you're talking about. They may think you're a freak. But only with an educated public outcry and changes in attitudes and behaviors **while we have the resources to make a difference** will a difference actually be made.

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Edited to add: For all of you folks that are new to these ideas, [a cute but informative set of powerpoints can be found here](#). (Thanks SB!)

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