



## Peak Oil and L.A.

Posted by [Robert Rapier](#) on July 15, 2006 - 10:12pm

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I have visited 43 states, about 20 foreign countries, and 4 continents, but somehow never made it out to California. That changed last week when I had to take a business trip to L.A. I spent 5 days there, seeing some sights and taking care of business. I visited the La Brea Tar Pits, toured Hollywood, got harassed by the LAPD at Hollywood and Vine, spent a day at Universal Studios, checked out Venice Beach, and drove around the city quite a bit. The topics of Peak Oil and energy utilization were constantly on my mind, but what I saw there was mostly depressing.

The trip started out well. The man in the airplane seat next to me struck up a conversation. It turns out that he was a fraud investigator for a bank. He told some pretty interesting stories about bank fraud. But we eventually got into my line of work, and I brought up the topic of Peak Oil, as I am apt to do every chance I get.

I explained the dilemma to him. I told him that I don't think we are at a peak yet, but that it is coming in the not too distant future. I told him that the situation we are in right now - with a supply/demand imbalance that may continue right up through the actual peak - should provide a preview of coming attractions (and keep upward pressure on prices). I explained the worst case scenarios, as well as how I think [it is going to play out](#). And he "got it", just like people almost always do when you talk to them one-on-one. If only we could talk to every person in the country one-on-one, we might start making some real progress.

Then he asked me a tough question that I always struggle with: "What should I do to prepare?" Now, this is something I think about every day. But the answer to the question is completely dependent upon how bad you think things will get. How much insurance do you need, and how much are you willing to pay for it? Each person must prepare according to their personal situation, but more importantly is how we prepare globally. After all, my preparations won't amount to much if the country falls apart and descends into chaos.

I had a connecting flight in Salt Lake City, and we flew over the Great Salt Lake. I had flown over it before, but I had never noticed how much algae is in the lake. I started wondering about the prospects for a large-scale [algal biodiesel operation](#) there. From there, we flew over a lot of desert that appeared to be completely barren from the air. I wondered how much electricity we could produce from covering those barren areas with solar panels.

On the descent into L.A., I noticed two things. The first was the infamous L.A. traffic. I have lived in Houston before, and I have heard people say that Houston traffic is as bad or worse. Based on what I saw, it's not. The other thing I noticed was that the air was brown. It would be several days before I figured out this was the reason my eyes were burning and itching during my entire trip.

Driving around Hollywood, I saw some reason for optimism. There were a lot of city buses

operating, and a sign on the back of one indicated that L.A. has the largest natural gas fleet in the country. There were lots of people out walking (something you don't see in Houston), even away from the major tourist attractions. At one point I saw a sign indicating the presence of a methanol pump, but I couldn't figure out why they would be using methanol.

However, once I left Hollywood and got back on the freeway, my optimism faded. Not only was the traffic incredibly dense, but it was all moving at 80 miles an hour, and Hummers and SUVs were abundant. In fact, I have never seen so many Hummers in one day as I saw on my first day in L.A. I have often thought that Houston has to be one of the worst possible places to be post-peak. But L.A. may be even more car-dependent. I drove 30 miles north of L.A., and the traffic was still very heavy. I finally pulled off of the freeway, and just observed the traffic for a while. Fuel-efficient vehicles were greatly under-represented. Speed limits seemed to be optional. Conservation certainly did not appear to be embedded in the collective consciousness.

I arrived at my hotel in Thousand Oaks, and asked at the front desk about restaurants within walking distance. They told me there was only 1, less than a block away. It later turned out that there were quite a few within a one-mile radius. But apparently, that's not walking distance. I did walk to a restaurant about a half mile away at one point, and there were few pedestrians out. Just like Houston, it seemed that everyone drives everywhere. My first impression from Hollywood was that a lot of people traveled by foot. That's not what I saw as I got away from Hollywood.

Before I left L.A., I did get to engage one more person on the subject of Peak Oil. Once again he quickly grasped the seriousness of the issue. I was pleased that I had brought the issue to the attention of another person. But all I had to do was look back at the freeway to realize that my efforts were like a single drop of rain in a downpour. Two people listened. Millions were still oblivious in this one city. Sometimes I feel so helpless. I want to affect change. I want to help point us in the right direction. So, I take little steps by writing as much as I can to educate people, and by talking to people one-on-one. Then I go to a city like L.A. and am frustrated that so many people are not getting the message. What can we do? How can we affect the behavior of the masses? And what are the consequences if we don't?



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