



Agriculture Meets Peak Oil: Soil Association Conference

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[The Soil Association](#) is a 60 year old UK organisation responsible for setting standards in organic farming. They describe themselves as "*UK's leading environmental charity promoting sustainable, organic farming and championing human health.*" Their logo is the UK's most recognisable trademark for organic produce. It is found on more than 70% of all UK organic produce.

Last summer they launched a major peak oil initiative going by the name of [Food and Farming – Post Peak Oil](#). This theme was the focus of their 26-27th Jan 2007 annual conference, subtitled "*Preparing for a post-peak oil food and farming future*".

With over 800 delegates and the peak oil educator stalwarts of Campbell, Heinberg and Leggett amongst the speakers this was the largest and potentially most significant peak oil communication event yet.



I've been to many peak oil conferences over the years, they all had one thing in common. They were organised by people interested in peak oil, for people interested in peak oil. It's a small community with virtually the same few hundred people at each one! Okay, I exaggerate a little but it is true to say the core messages from these conferences have, for the most part remained within the peak oil "community".

This was different. A step change. This conference wasn't organised by or for the peak oil community. It was the first time (that I'm aware of) the peak oil message – as delivered by Campbell and Heinberg et al – was core to the annual conference of a major organisation.

The event kicked off on the Thursday night with a discussion between the Soil Association's president, Jonathan Dimbleby and director Patrick Holden. From this I got the impression the peak oil focus was Holden's rather than Dimbleby's doing. Holden described the subject of this conference as making it the most important conference in the Association's 60 years history. Justifying this by explaining that to date the Soil Association had been focused on:

Development, defining, of a prescription for the application for sustainable agriculture.

And that this was now doubly important as things are changing, due to climate change, decline of fossil fuels and food security meaning the Association needs to consider the wider issues. Holden

The Oil Drum: Europe | Agriculture Meets Peak Oil: Soil Association Conference <http://europe.theoil Drum.com/node/2225> mentioned he “argued very hard” for the peak oil theme so presumably someone was arguing almost as hard against.

Dimbleby did say he was sympathetic to the direction Holden was taking the conference but suggested there were other problems, today’s problems, prices, DEFRA, standards, attracting more people to organic farming etc. and that perhaps they should be the focus, that peak oil is a case of biting off more than one can chew? Holden’s defence was to say that was the day job but peak oil was:

...far far bigger than that, it’s going to completely threaten all the systems that we take for granted.

Having described his own farm as quite radically sustainable he went on to say:

...but then I realised that when my food gets to the farm gate it goes into a centralised distribution system which is entirely dependent on the existing fossil fuel driven national distribution infrastructure. And if this scenario of progressive decent of fossil fuel energy which could halve it or maybe even reduce it to a quarter or less than that by the late 2020s happens I’m going to have to rethink all that. Which means maybe I’m going to have to rethink how the food is sold which begs the question, can I get loyalty of the citizens around me because at the moment they are buying food on price or they are buying a commodity food...

The following day covered the meat of the conference in a series of plenary sessions where the following spoke:

Jonathon Porritt, One Planet Agriculture

Dr Colin Campbell, Energy Shortages: How soon and how serious?

Dr Jeremy Leggett, Climate change and peak oil: The two great oversights of our time

Rob Hopkins, Energy descent plans: The Kinsale and Totnes projects

Carwyn Jones, Minister’s address

Richard Heinberg, Implications of peak oil for agriculture

André Viljoen, Agriculture without external inputs: The Cuban experience

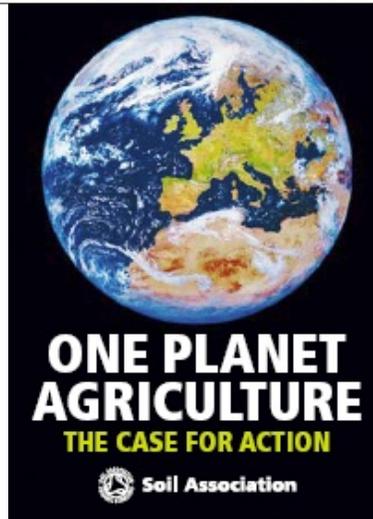
Peter Melchett, Organic farming and food distribution: Present strengths and weaknesses

To their credit the Soil Association have made MP3 audio recordings of each speech available on their conference page [here](#).

I won’t describe the content in detail however I will especially recommend Porritt’s, for a well articulated, intelligent, linking of a broad range of difficulties, Hopkins’ for a humours and inspirational account of his response to peak oil, Melchett’s for discussion of climate change impacts of farming, land use, nitrous oxide and carbon loss from soil and Leggett’s for bringing together climate change and peak oil in his authoritative manner.

Jeremy Leggett has also recorded his thoughts on the conference at [his blog](#) hosted by the Guardian newspaper in an article titled [Take to the fields](#):

If the peak-oil proposition is correct, the tipping point of global oil production will happen - largely unexpectedly - in this decade or early in the next, accompanied by a dire energy shock. The people in the room will be in the front rank of those first affected. They can also be in the vanguard of those who can offer a proactive vision of what a survivable post-shock future could look like.



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A 13 page booklet containing contributions from the speakers was given to the delegates and is available to download as a pdf from Rob Hopkin's [Transition Culture](#) site [here](#) or by clicking the above picture. This will be expanded upon over the coming weeks based on output from the conference workshops.

The closing address was given by Dr Vandana Shiva, physicist, ecologist, activist, editor, and author of many books. In India she has established Navdanya, a movement for biodiversity conservation and farmers' rights. She directs the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Natural Resource Policy (blurb lifted from [here](#)). Her speech on "*how to get the oil out of food*" is also available to download from the link above - probably worth the 36 minutes of your time. Impressive lady.

Whilst the core peak oil message was not new to me, I left the conference enthused. Agriculture and food security is a vital aspect of peak oil, climate change and our future. The organic farmers at the conference I met and who contributed to the workshops came across as incredibly smart and well informed people. These people know what's going on, know what is important and seemed to accept peak oil without batting an eyelid. As the unsustainability of industrialised farming come home to roost, organic farmers represent the future of agriculture and by extension our very civilisation itself.

Unfortunately the mainstream media have not widely reported on the conference. The BBC's Environment Correspondent Sarah Mukerjee reports on the conference [here](#), however she seems to have missed the point. She doesn't mention peak oil itself with her only mention of oil being quoted from Holden "...when oil demand outstrips supply, and it becomes too expensive to import food from around the world, we will have to think fairly radically about how we use the land to support ourselves." Instead Mukerjee focuses on the growing popularity of the organic movement:

Within a few years, the organic movement has found itself swept from tree-hugging hippy obscurity to the mainstream. And for an organisation that has spent most of its existence shouting angrily from the sidelines, this entry into the establishment takes quite a bit of getting used to. They face a question that many other environmental charities are asking themselves: Now we have won many of the arguments, what do we do next? And what do we say to all the people who are finally listening?

Well, Sarah, the Soil Association had a very powerful message this conference, they know exactly what they are saying. It would seem however you still aren't listening!



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