



Report on First General Assembly of ASPO Switzerland, May 24th 2008, University of Basel

Posted by [Francois Cellier](#) on May 27, 2008 - 1:00am in [The Oil Drum: Europe](#)

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[*editor's comment: this conference report by Professor Cellier from ETH Zurich provides some high level insight to European thinking on and attitudes towards the peak oil problem. It's all in English below the fold.*]

ASPO Switzerland was founded 1.5 years ago by [Daniele Ganser](#), a young professor of contemporary history at the University of Basel. His primary research interests concern the politics of peace, and it was in this context that he began to study the political and sociological implications of Peak Oil: How can humanity transition from a paradigm of continuous expansion and exponential growth to one of sustainable development and stagnation while avoiding violent [resource wars](#) as they are likely to erupt over control of the last remaining oil fields?

Prof. Ganser managed to assemble a [competent team of ASPO enthusiasts](#) including Basil Gelpke, the executive producer of the 2006 movie [A Crude Awakening: The Oil Crash](#), two retired oil geologists, a chemist, and a lawyer to serve on the board of ASPO Switzerland.

Last Saturday, ASPO Switzerland held its first general assembly in the Aula of the University of Basel, the oldest of our Swiss universities, established in the 15th century. Although the Aula doesn't date back to the founding years of the university, its air conditioning system didn't work, and also the sound system worked only sporadically; but maybe, this was intended to give us all a glimpse of what life after the oil crash may look like.

[Colin Campbell](#), the [spiritual father of all ASPO organizations](#), had been invited as the guest of

honor, and he sat patiently through the conference, although the official conference language was German, a language that Colin claims not to speak or understand. For this reason, although Colin offered a fascinating, highly authoritative, and very convincing presentation as always, he could not fully participate in the subsequent debate, and in particular, he could not comment on the speeches delivered by other participants.

As was to be expected, Colin told us that the peak of *conventional* Oil is taking place right now. There remains lots of *unconventional* oil in the ground, but those oil reserves are expensive to produce, and their EROEI is very low. It takes at least as much energy to produce this oil as one can get out of it. Hence he does not believe that unconventional oil, like tar sands for example, will ever play more than a marginal role in meeting our energy needs. He told us that the current high oil prices are caused by supply no longer meeting demand, and that the time of cheap oil is over for good.

Colin also mentioned Peak Gas. He told us that gas is different from oil, because it expands on its own. Thus, the percentage of cheaply producible gas is higher than that of cheaply producible oil, and consequently, Peak Gas does not occur when 50% of the gas has been produced, but only, after maybe 75% will have been used up. The good news is that Peak Gas will occur a few years later than a Hubbert-type analysis would suggest. The bad news is that, once gas starts declining, it will do so very very fast.

It is customary here in Switzerland that all sides of an issue be heard, and consequently, Ganser also invited [Dr. Rolf Hartl](#), the CEO of the [Erdöl-Vereinigung](#) (Swiss Association for the Use of Fossil Fuels), to give a talk.

Dr. Hartl is immensely influential in Swiss politics. He is a member of the Energy Commission of the [Swiss Academy of Engineering Sciences](#), and since every member of a committee here in Switzerland is essentially given veto powers, he is able to exert enormous influence on the energy policy of Switzerland. The way it works is that one side claims that Peak Oil is taking place right now, whereas the other side claims that it won't occur for another 50 years, and rather than trying to establish the facts, the committee aims to come up with a paper that everyone is willing to sign; and so, official Switzerland issues the "verdict" that Peak Oil will take place 25 years from now. Direct democracy comes at its price, and the price to be paid is often that important decisions get blocked indefinitely.

Of particular interest in Hartl's talk was a recent change in his message. Whereas Hartl in the past always claimed that Peak Oil is still many years away, he meanwhile admits that the peak of conventional oil is occurring now. His new story is that the unconventional oil, of which there still is plenty, as everyone agrees, will be able to replace the conventional oil and will facilitate a continued growth of oil exploration and exploitation until at least the year 2030, at which time we might reach a plateau. A decline of oil supply is not to be expected until at least the year 2040.

Dr. Walter Ziegler, ASPO board member and retired oil geologist, told us about his experiences with producing conventional oil over half a century. He showed us graphs of oil production of one field after another, each exhibiting a period of growth, followed by a peak, and then followed by a period of perpetual decline, just as Hubbert had predicted.

[Michael Kaufmann](#), Associate Director of the [Swiss Federal Office of Energy](#), spoke about the political efforts undertaken at the level of the Swiss Federation concerning the establishment of a meaningful energy policy.

ASPO Switzerland, of which I am a proud member, was founded with the intent of raising the awareness of the Swiss public to Peak Oil and its consequences.

Has ASPO Switzerland reached its goal?

The Aula of the University of Basel holds 400 people, and most seats were occupied. ASPO Switzerland has meanwhile close to 300 members, many of whom attended the event, some bringing family members or friends along. Swiss TV as well as RTL came and interviewed Colin Campbell and Daniele Ganser. Until now, Swiss Radio broadcast a 3.5 minute interview with Colin Campbell, and three Swiss newspapers, the St. Galler Tagblatt, the Berner Zeitung, and the Basler Zeitung, printed reports about the event. Yet, how many people pay attention to these reports?

When my wife and I were wandering through the old parts of Basel after the conference, asking ourselves, how many of the people we saw going about their daily business have an inkling of Peak Oil and what it means for them, we came to the conclusion that Switzerland by and large is still behaving like Sleeping Beauty before the prince came to rescue her.

Switzerland is at the tail end of European countries with respect to fuel efficiency in private vehicles. Whereas 10 years ago, the average private car in Switzerland weighed 1300 kg, the average weight of private cars has meanwhile risen to 1500 kg. Whereas the minergy standard was developed here in Switzerland in the 1990s, even today, only 20% of the new houses are built to that standard. Central oil heatings still dominate the heating market here in Switzerland, and even new buildings are still frequently equipped with oil burners.

The economy continues to be going strong, and the warning signs of the looming oil crash aren't on the wall yet. For Mr. and Mrs. Swiss, Peak Oil has not turned into an issue as of now. They are more surprised than alarmed about the suddenly rising prices at the gas stations, and they have not modified their driving habits yet because of them.

Maybe at least as interesting as asking who attended the conference and reporting about the speeches that were delivered may be the questions of who did *not* show up, and which topics were *not* mentioned.

As far as I can tell, not a single one of my 40 colleagues of the [Energy Science Center](#) here at ETH Zurich was in attendance. I might have overlooked one or the other, but at least, I did not notice a single one of them. Are they all simply too busy, or is the study of Peak Oil of no concern to them?

A good case was made establishing Peak Oil as a reality, as a historical fact. One speaker after another came forward to present data and arguments establishing the reality of Peak Oil. Even Hartl had to admit that "Peak Conventional Oil" is taking place right now, and since unconventional oil isn't ready "yet" to replace it, we may see a few years of oil shortage.

However, with all this talk about when Peak Oil is going to occur, there was hardly any time to talk about its consequences. What does Peak Oil mean for Switzerland?

Colin Campbell mentioned briefly that, after Peak Oil, the oil producing nations will keep more of the remaining oil for themselves, i.e., oil export will dwindle faster than oil production. Switzerland, as a country poor in natural resources and big guns, may suddenly find itself at the end of the feeding line. Yet, I doubt that this message came across.

It was mentioned once in a fleeting remark that one of the consequences of Peak Oil and its accompanying high fuel prices will be a shift of wealth from the consumer to the producer nations. Hence Switzerland may find itself in a considerably weakened position economically after Peak Oil.

It was never mentioned that agriculture is an engine for turning oil into food. Peak Oil means Peak Food. What does this mean for Switzerland? How is Switzerland going to feed its population of 7.5 million people after Peak Oil?

How will Switzerland defend its position in the world? What, if anything, can we do to improve our

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situation? Unfortunately, there are no very good answers. The problem is simply too big. There will hardly be a happy ending. Princes only show up in fairy tales.



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