

[The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

The Big Picture - What Have You Changed Your Mind About?

Posted by [Nate Hagens](#) on May 24, 2009 - 9:10am in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

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I just got the book, [What Have You Changed Your Mind About - Today's Leading Minds Rethink Everything](#). Given my cognitive overload, I have so far only managed a quick skim. But the title/content made me reflect on what I've crammed into my brain these past 6 years or so exploring issues related to resource depletion; how many times I have been wrong about things, misunderstood concepts - I've even restarted my entire understanding from scratch on three occasions. As such, I thought this book title a good segue for TOD:Campfire - an opportunity for a 'community' that has become increasingly aware of the wide boundary energy decline story to share what they've learned - any surprises, insights, or 180 degree 'a-ha' shifts in thinking...



Firstly, here is one Amazon reviewers thoughts about that book:

Not all of these speculations are rosy, and a number of writers put forth doomsday ideas. The possibility of accidental nuclear war, the idea that we have already reached in many areas the best we are going to do and can expect from now on only Decline, the possibility that disaster may come through radical climate change, or though supernova

explosion or asteroid collision are mentioned. But from my point of view the dark possibilities also grow out of some of the most optimistic prognoses. There are many essays here on various ways 'humanity' is going to be transformed or transcended, rendered obsolete or irrelevant. There is talk of the singularity the moment when machine- intelligence replaces ours as prime - maker of our world. There are various speculations on ways in which our minds may be copied and then downloaded into machines which will then go on self- improving themselves cognitively. There are thoughts on ways we will engage in a cosmic competition and spread through the universe our silicon- descendants or perhaps viral heirs. There are also a whole host of speculations on shadow-worlds, parallel universes, perhaps microbially small, perhaps vast in ways we cannot imagine. There are too speculations of how we disappointed in our search for extraterrestrial intelligence are going to produce alternative intelligences who will become our real friends, and ensure that we are not lonely in the universe.

What disturbs me in considering many of the essays is that they often seem to relate to humanity as if we were simply 'minds' and not people who live lives, and have histories and complex relationships with other human beings. The whole presumption that some other kind of being can be manufactured by us or can somehow come out of our own researches seems to me a vast simplification as to what we in all our complexity are. Here I should note that there are a number of writers who question the very question of the project. One says nothing can possibly change everything, and another suggests that we cannot possibly know what the change will be, as we have in the past never been able to see the surprise which would come to take history and our understanding of the world in a new direction.

With that poetic introduction, I'd like to turn the reflective mirror onto the topic of peak oil. What have we learned? What have we been wrong about? What insights have years of interdisciplinary data-sharing created? Because 'facts' can be distinguished from 'synthesis', I would therefore partition the question "What Have You Changed Your Mind About (with regards to peak oil/resource depletion) into two subcategories:

A) What are some key points you learned that you were previously unaware of and/or what were you wrong about before and now see differently?

and

B) What are some areas where lateral thinking (connecting dots between different subjects) allowed you a higher level synthesis/insight into our situation? What are the new insights?

I'll briefly share some of my own answers to these questions, and then throw it open to The Oil Drum readers. I came from a Wall St/Finance path -an ecological tabula rasa, so in the past 6 years I have learned virtually everything I know of value - ergo my mind 'change' has not been trivial. Below are some things I've learned, in no particular order, and non-inclusive.

1)What are some key points you learned that you were previously unaware of and/or what were you wrong about before and now see differently?

- 1) Peak Oil is a symptom, not the cause, of global consumptive overshoot.
 - 1a) People have been thinking and writing about these problems since before I was born. (I thought in 2003 I was onto something new....)
 - 2) I now think EROI's usefulness is overrated. (largely because because the alt. energy timing 'fulcrum' is backloaded and therefore incompatible with modern decision criteria - it also can't adequately measure quality which will pose a problem with liquid fuel shortages). Still, I remain firmly aware that net energy and natural resources are what we have to spend, not gross energy or dollars.
 - 3) The origin of 'steep discount rates' in economics and 'impulsivity' in psychology lies in the ecological Maximum Power Principle.
 - 4) Hubbert Linearization as such was not used by King Hubbert.
 - 5) Peoples pre-existing belief systems will trump fresh facts the vast majority of the time. Optimistic attitudes and the social traction they engender have been adaptive for vast periods of our history, only rarely interrupted by fight-or-flight realities.
 - 6) Generalists are better predictors of bigger picture events than specialists.
 - 7) My first introduction to Peak Oil was Jay Hansons website dieoff.org, where a recurring theme was that we are just clever apes competing for resources in order to move up the social (mating) ladder. I didn't believe that. Now I do. (It probably extends to bloggers and oil forecasters and stock market prognosticators...)
 - 8) The majority of humans are not emotionally 'strong' enough to overcome our baser impulses. I.e. rational neocortex is not the supreme behavioral commander that most believe.
 - 9) The neural habituation to higher and more 'unexpected reward' is a primary driver of consumptive behavior.
 - 10) Melting ice is endothermic. (it absorbs energy, not releasing it). Duh.
 - 11) There are likely no [sasquatches](#) alive at present.

B) What are some areas where lateral thinking (connecting dots between different subjects) allowed you a higher level synthesis/insight into our situation? What are the new insights?

- 1) Group selection/multi-level selection is real and is a better fit with biological history than 'selfish gene' theory. However, the timeframe for humans to effectively use this aspect of our wiring to full advantage was probably a generation ago.
- 2) Money/currency is the ultimate example of Jevons Paradox.

- 3) Sexual selection continues as a real and driving force. We can't change our drive to compete, so on a finite planet we have to change what we compete for.
- 4) Explaining all this to 'the masses' will be counterproductive and actually accelerate social decay. (google toilet paper / Johnny Carson)
- 5) The likely role of peak oil 'outreach' will be to lay a foundation of knowledge to be used (and remembered) after the paradigm change - not actually to create it as I once hoped. (note: my opinion not likely shared by other TOD contributors).
- 6) There is increasing talk of outlawing or restricting "derivatives" – instruments whose value "derives" from something else. stocks, bonds, futures, etc. are also derivatives – they are financial markers for REAL assets. (for calculus geeks and ecological economists, think of stocks and bonds as derivatives and derivatives as the second derivative of real assets.;-)
- 7) Government, politicians, billionaire etc. are not responsible for our problems. There was not some devious plot forged on Jekyll Island for world domination. Where we stand today was arrived at by a path dependent series of small steps of people pursuing power in culturally condoned ways. It's a giant chinese finger trap with huge momentum- but the players are mostly benign, with few true conspiracies.
- 8) Nature abhors a gradient. Humans encountered a giant lottery ticket in fossil fuels. As the gradient began to dissipate in 1970s consuming nations replaced it with debt, imported energy, and borrowing from nature, future, and thin air.
- 9) As our problems worsen, mitigation efforts accepted by the current system will actually worsen the problems with increasing positive feedbacks.
- 10) We will hit social limits to growth before we hit hard resource limits. (We already have).
- 11) There are some silver Peak Oil BBs are on the supply side. Though there are no silver bullets the majority of good ammo is squarely on the demand side.
- 12) The cultural trajectory for the past 2+ generations has been towards efficiency (and financial profit), subsidized by cheap fuels. As extremely cheap energy (in real terms) becomes less available we will likely substitute time and labor for what energy and money now provide us. This will move the pendulum away from efficiency/profit back towards resilience and redundancy and away from globalization towards more localized economies.

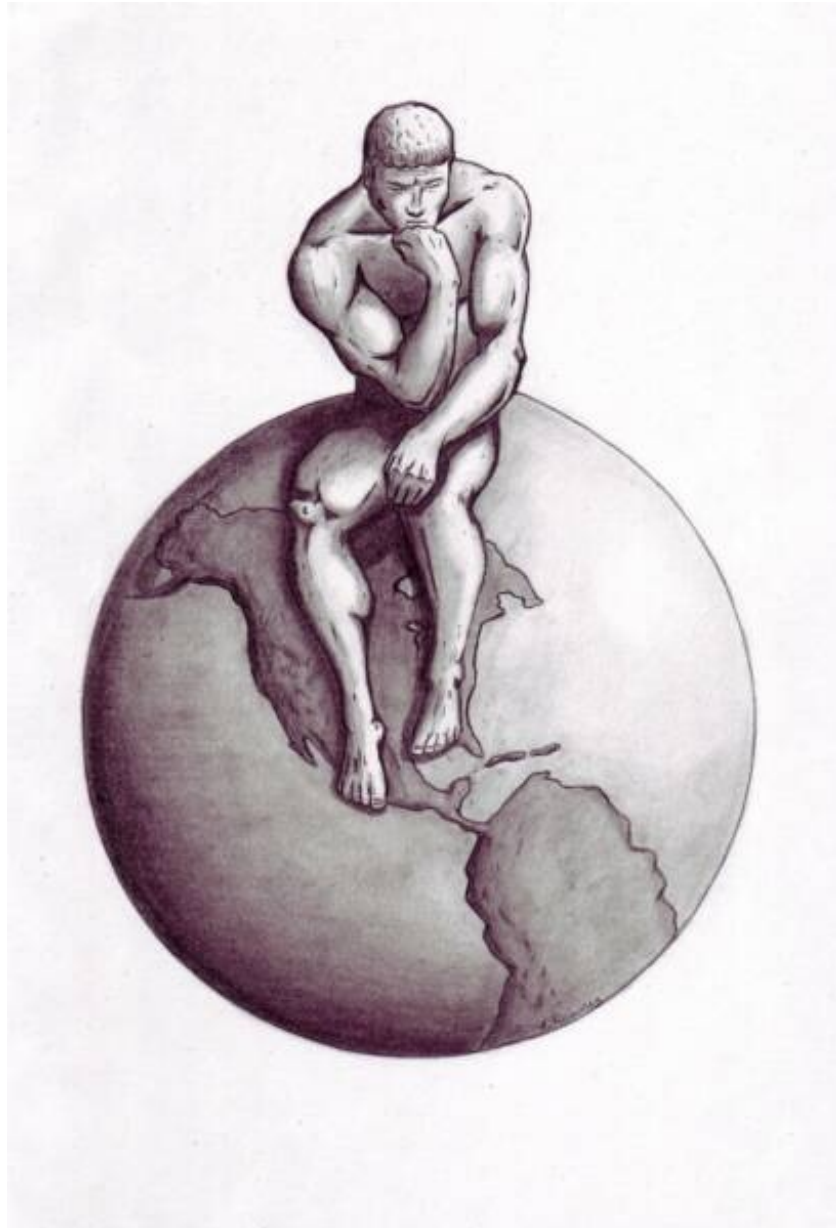
That list is quite long and could be longer so I'll stop....In sum, 5 years ago I was optimistic but not hopeful. Now I am hopeful but not optimistic....;-)

Feel free to discuss any of the above, or add your own answers to those two Campfire questions:

A) What are some key points you learned that you were previously unaware of and/or what were you wrong about before and now see differently?

and

B) What are some areas where lateral thinking (connecting dots between different



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