



## Peak Oil and Community Solutions Conference (Friday)

Posted by [Stuart Staniford](#) on September 26, 2005 - 9:55am

Topic: [Environment/Sustainability](#)

I'm currently at the 2nd annual [Peak Oil and Community Solutions Conference](#). I think I'm going to try and break my report up into three pieces, one per day of the conference to keep it manageable. These are getting posted after the conference is over, but each day's report was written right after the conference that day, and then just lightly edited for correctness later. You'll see the evolution through the conference. This is the first report, covering Friday.



Richard Heinberg giving the keynote speech.

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Technorati Tags: [peak oil](#), [oil](#), [gas prices](#)

For background, I work in the high-tech industry, and live in San Francisco. The conference is in Yellow Springs, Ohio, which is a tiny little town in the midwest. So that's culture shock #1. And this conference very much draws the eco-sustainability wing of the peak oil movement, so that's culture shock #2. The crowd here will cheer at the mention of Hugo Chavez's name, or at the idea that we definitely should not solve this problem by building any more nuclear power plants. I suspect those sentiments will not have been expressed much at Roscoe Bartlett's peak oil conference.

It's an interesting thing about the peak oil movement that it completely cuts across the traditional political spectrum and makes for strange bedfellows. To a certain extent, you've either drunk the koolaid, and you're obsessed and more-or-less frightened and ready to collaborate with anyone who shares your views on this issue, regardless of what they might think about gay marriage or

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abortion, or you haven't and you won't. Yet still there are discernable left/right/eco crowds within the movement. Here we have the eco crowd.

[Yellow Springs](#), population 4000, is close to Springfield, and slightly less close to Dayton. So it's very much the Midwest around here: decaying industry, all the jobs moved to Asia, big petro-agriculture. But the houses are incredibly affordable and it's pretty: everything is green in September and there are lots of trees. I think it's the kind of place James Kunstler would approve of: rain-fed, horse-powered agriculture would work great here: lot's of good soil still, and an excellent growing climate. Small towns that can be rehabilitated. The only downer is going to be staying warm in the cold, cold winters. So a good place to come to focus on community responses to peak oil.



The main drag in Yellow Springs.



Ohio cornfield and farm just outside Yellow Springs.

Yellow Springs seems to have as its cultural heart [Antioch College](#), which is a small and very cool and progressive liberal arts college. It was shaped a lot by its president in the 20s and 30s [Arthur Morgan](#), a famous communitarian. Morgan was deeply concerned by the trend of increasing large cities and the loss of rural life and small communities. He founded a non-profit, Community Service, Inc, to work on this issue. They have existed for 65 years, but recently discovered peak oil, and realized, "Oh, it's fossil fuels that have been driving the trend we were created to oppose. And now the fossil fuels are going away - we have something to offer in solving this problem." And part of what they are offering is this conference.

This first conference last year drew 212 people, according to Faith Morgan, one of the organizers. This year is up to 450. That's 112% annual growth - not bad. The crowd is very knowledgeable and involved. At one point Heinberg asked how many people had either given a speech or written an article about Peak Oil. It looked to me like about two-thirds of the hands went up.

The conference kicked off with introductions from organizers Megan Quinn and Pat Murphy, and then moved to the keynote speaker Richard Heinberg - long time Peak Oil author (including "The Party's Over", and "Powerdown"). Heinberg gave an excellent and engaging overview of the problem which I won't cover too much here, since it will be very familiar to regular Oil Drum readers. Instead I'll pick a few highlights that struck me.

One of his best laugh lines was speaking of ordinary newspaper readers who read the phrase "proven reserves", and think that "there must be somebody doing the proving; some global oil cop who goes round with a giant dipstick and sticks it in the ground and measures that stuff."

He drives a 25 year old Mercedes Benz which he mostly fuels with bio-diesel. But he doesn't believe biofuels are a scalable solution due to the land requirement (I thoroughly agree). He put it a very interesting way. At some point, if we go down that road, it's going to be more profitable to use land for making fuel than growing food. Rich people will pay \$20/gallon to have gas, and we'll have hundreds of millions of people starving so a few million people can drive.

He sees the poor government response to Hurricane Katrina as a metaphor for the likely response to Peak Oil - too little, too late, so a lot of unpleasant consequences. It's not that peak oil is insoluble, in his view, it's that we won't do what it takes in time.

At the end of his presentation, he gave a list of resources and he plugged the Oil Drum, as a particularly good way to stay up-to-date!

In the Q&A afterwards, a questioner asked about nuclear energy. Heinberg basically said that while nuclear power plants could indeed be helpful, he felt that it would take a long time to ramp up the necessary changes, and nuclear power was also something that required a tremendous level of technical competence and organization to build and maintain. Thus in a world that was becoming less complex and more local, it was hard to see how it could be a major part of the solution.

Another questioner gave a comment to the effect that there's hardly any uranium reserves anyway and nuclear power wouldn't be cost effective without large subsidies - renewables such as wind were more cost effective. I don't believe either of those things are true, but he got applause.

And that led me to reflect. I think the attendees at this conference would a) not want to do nuclear, b) not want to do large scale LQHCs and coal because of global warming, and in general c) go back to a simpler, more local biomass based society, augmented by wind and solar were they aren't too environmentally damaging. Now, I haven't investigated it carefully enough yet, but my

gut feel is that a society that low in energy usage could not feed 6.5 billion on the way to 9-10 billion people. Before 1750 we were feeding less than 1 billion people with biomass and wind energy, and there were plenty of famines. The efficiency of photosynthesis has not changed in the meantime.

So I think that's going to be my mission while I'm here amongst the eco-folks. I'm going to see if I can find somebody who can give me a convincing quantitative argument that there's a way to organize a society of 10 billion humans who all get fed reasonably without using fossil fuels and without using nuclear energy. You can talk till you're blue in the face about local sustainability on the village scale, but if there isn't a path to doing it on a global scale without massive die-off, then it's not a good direction to try and go in.



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