

The Oil Drum: Campfire

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

Is There Any Silver Lining to a Collapse Scenario?

Posted by [Gail the Actuary](#) on September 20, 2009 - 10:54am in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

Topic: [Environment/Sustainability](#)

Many Oil Drum readers imagine what is ahead as a slide down the net energy curve, as the amount of oil and natural gas available gradually decline. Somehow, business as usual will continue, but at a lower level, as resources deplete. But what if a better model for what is ahead is overshoot and collapse?

There are no doubt different ways this could happen. My own concern is that systemic risk might affect the world's financial system, credit system, and international trade system. Globalization might rapidly wind down, and with it our ability to manufacture goods using materials from around the world. Our ability to maintain technology would drop quickly, as it becomes impossible to manufacture essential items such as computers, tires, batteries, and replacement parts for vehicles. The extraction and use of fossil fuels and uranium might also wind down quickly, eliminating most electricity and nearly all commercial food supplies. World population in this scenario might drop to perhaps 10% of its current level, in a matter of years.



If we **knew** such a scenario were going to happen in the new few years (or next 20 or 30 years), how would it change the way we think? The chance that any one of us would live through such an event would be fairly low. I am sure we could all think of negative impacts, but tonight we are going to try to look for the positive. Could this be in any way liberating, or positive? Below the fold, I will give you a few of my ideas.

Appreciation for what we have today

If we knew that what we have now would soon be gone, perhaps we could better appreciate what we have today. We might be more concerned about family and friends and what is truly important, instead of worrying about amassing more wealth.

I suggest reading the post [Life After the Crash: Lessons from Kenya](#), if you haven't done so. Derek--the guest author--writes,

It's the mindset that makes most Kenyans experience a happiness most Westerners would never consider to be possible given realities - as they see and experience them.

In Kenya, we do use electricity (hydro / diesel), if we can. We have constant power cuts. But that's not the only limit. In fact, the vast majority of us, even the so-called middle-class, build our lives around limits. Limits are the basis for every decision we make, business or otherwise. It is, you could say, a way of life that is happy when it is not done in - not unhappy if things go wrong (I am not sure that this makes sense).

People there - including me - celebrate every day that was a good day. And a good day is one where we got by. I would say, for 95% of Kenyans, life there is very much focused on the hour - and hardly ever on the future.

According to Derek, people can be very happy just celebrating each day, and not worrying too much about the future. Even if we knew (or suspected) there was likely to be a crash ahead, we could be happy with what we had each day. There is no real reason to worry about possible future calamities. We can only live one day at a time, anyhow, and we are pretty limited as to what we can do to change things.

Less pressure to get ahead

If we knew our situation prior to the crash was only temporary, we might be freer to enjoy what we have today, and not worry whether it will lead to some supposed better step in the future, since likely no one will be getting much ahead. If it is good enough for now, than it is good enough.

Of course, if we feel that it is terribly important that we be one of the 10% (or whatever) who will ultimately remain after the collapse, then there is huge pressure on taking the steps necessary to make this happen. But if we know (or strongly suspect) that a collapse is coming, we can at least take steps that are likely to be appropriate for a crash, such as moving to a farming community.

Less pressure to pay off debt

If we strongly suspect that we are headed for a crisis in which everyone else has trouble paying off their debt, perhaps paying of debt is not as important.

This is admittedly a guess. But what will a government or bank do with thousands of unoccupied homes? Lots of cars that people cannot pay for and cannot drive for lack of gasoline?

Reduction in worries about later life

Many things done today are done out of concern for later life. We save money for retirement. We invest our money with the hope it will grow before retirement. If we strongly suspect that we are not likely to live until normal retirement age (or if we do, our financial system won't be around anyhow), the point in saving for retirement becomes much less. If we do survive the crash but the financial system doesn't, saving for retirement may still not be much of an issue. In a poorer world, most people will work as long as they are able, making retirement a thing of the past.

In fact, if we have already saved, and we suspected a major crash scenario were coming, the knowledge might free us to use what funds we had saved for things that we value now. We could even donate funds to charities we consider worthwhile.

Besides monetary worries regarding old age, many of us have other concerns. Will I be well? Will my spouse pass away first, and I be left by myself? Will I be able to drive? Will I be able to take care of my adult disabled child? If you really are likely not going to live very long anyhow (and neither is your adult disabled child), these issues may become less important.

Are We in Charge, or is Mother Nature?

Right now, some of us feel like we have an obligation to help Mother Nature out on environmental issues.

If Mother Nature really is in charge, as in this scenario, things may get fixed pretty quickly, even without our assistance. Fossil fuel burning is likely to drop quickly; acid rain is likely to stop; overfishing of oceans will likely drop quickly; and industrial agriculture will likely come to an end. A lot of environmental challenges will be repaired as quickly as Mother Nature can arrange it.

Our anxiousness may not really be necessary. Things may straighten themselves out, even without our assistance.

Conclusion

I think the idea of a terrible crash (even if it takes place over 20 or 30 years) has at some point gone through all of our heads. The idea is pretty awful, but maybe it is something we should at least be thinking through. There might even be a few bright spots. If you have some ideas, perhaps you can share them with the rest of us.



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