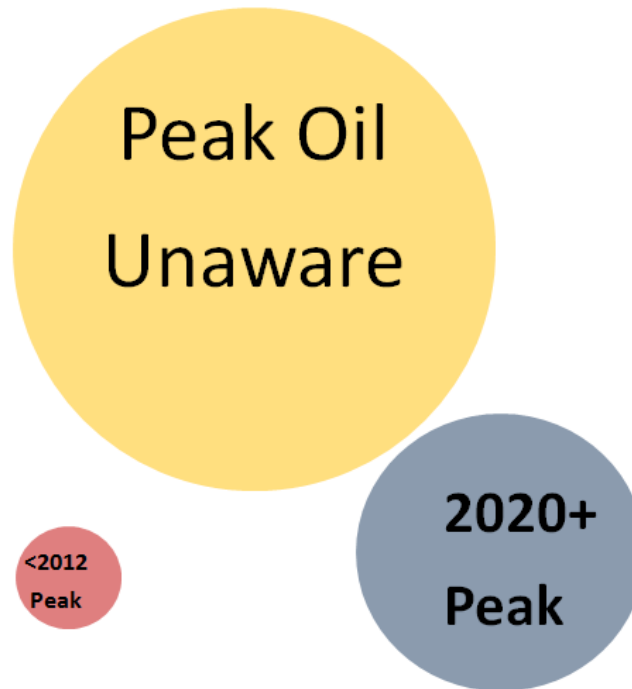


[The Oil Drum](#)

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

Whither The Oil Drum?

Posted by [nate hagens](#) on October 4, 2009 - 9:00am in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

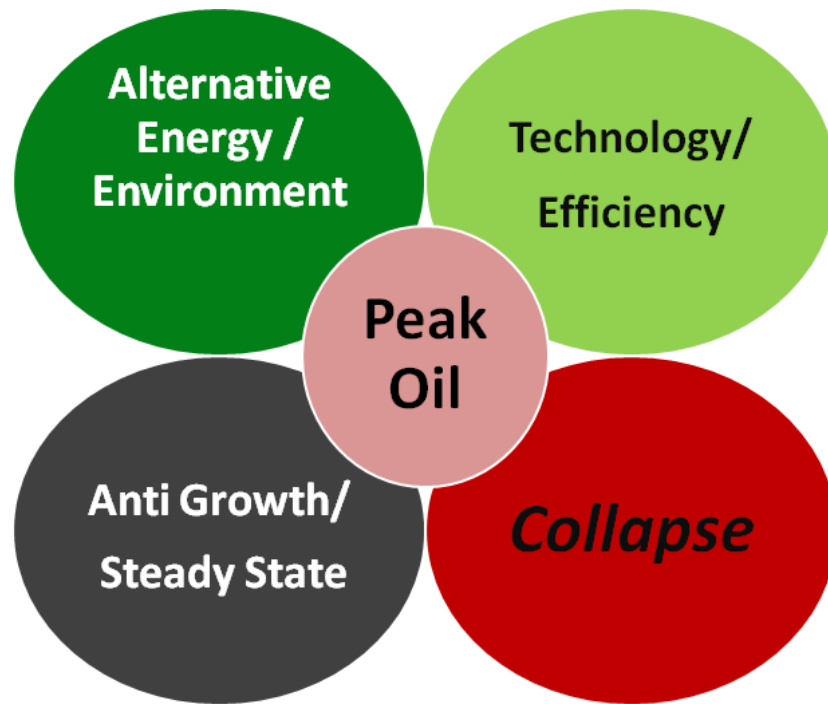


A few short years ago, in 2005 when I started contributing here, it seemed that people could generally be partitioned into 3 main groups regarding their views about Peak Oil. By far the smallest group were those calling for a near term (<2012) peak in global oil production. A larger, and definitively more vocal and deeper pocketed group (including IHS, CERA, most Wall St. firms and energy agencies) were in the "peak oil is not real" or "peak oil is post 2020 at a minimum" camps. But by far the largest % of the population were oblivious to these debates on oils peak, unaware of the possibility and/or importance of a potential peak and decline in our socioeconomic hemoglobin.

As such, those in the smallest camp, irrespective of age, social status, political affiliation, demographics, education, objectives, or sexual preference, united together in a collective effort to raise the analytical alarm bells about the possibility and implications of a near term peak. There were occasional tangential discussions such as renewable energy technologies, relocation, psychology of consumption, finance and geopolitics, but by and large the focus centered on Peak date (and post peak decline rates), which were topics most of the Peak Oil tribe could agree on within certain parameters. We were all on the same team.

Fast forward to Q4 2009, and the landscape has changed considerably. The % of people acknowledging at least the possibility that we are already passed the peak in global oil production has markedly increased (though is still a minority overall). However, though most of the 'early peakers' (the small pink circle above) remain in that camp, 4+ years of analysis and insights have created a vast disparity of world views, beliefs and objectives within this once homogenous group.

Slow collapse, fast collapse, catabolic collapse; renewable energy to the rescue; conservation and efficiency champions; human extinction let me count the days; powerdown, drill baby drill, retreat to steady state economy, World War III, Mad Max, the dawn of space based energy, lets just party and enjoy ourselves, etc. - the list of differing views is a long one.



I would argue that within the "*Peak Oil is likely past tense*" group, there are four main camps with respect to our likely future trajectory. 1) **The "renewable energy" contingent**, who generally subscribe to the belief that solar based flows will eventually replace fossil fuels in a somewhat seamless transition and that Peak Oil is probably a good thing with respect to the environment, 2) **The energy technologists**, who believe that even in face of near term peak, that better drilling, seismic, and recovery techniques combined with increases in unconventional fuels will keep us roughly on a business as usual path, 3) **The End of Growth group** - who think we have overshot resource limits (not just energy) and must generally powerdown to some cocktail of both more sustainable means and aspirations and 4) the human species meets Reindeer Island group (**The dieoff crowd**) - that some large proportion (possibly all) of humankind will perish due to biological tenets based on fact that we are akin to a plague species, our rapaciousness trumps our ingenuity and ability to plan for future...essentially humans are not smarter than yeast. These world views have some small overlap but are largely mutually exclusive, though the numbers of people in each is vastly different (I suspect the hard collapse/dieoff group is the smallest). There are of course some other viewpoints not represented above.

Nestled within each of these groups are objectives that differ both in timing and in scope. Some of have no objective other than continuing to ride the wave of current dopamine - searching the internet for unexpected reward, reacting daily but having no particular long horizon concern or plan. Others care only about a more comfortable next 5-10 years. Others have a longer term horizon, and care about the world of their children in 10-30 years. Still others (rarer) care about what this planet might look like 100 or 1000 or 100,000 years hence. Too, voicing ones objective and concerns does not always equate to the truth. A great many eloquent writers and speakers might not be eloquent doers. Actions speak louder than words. It takes all kinds, etc.

For myself, I continue to view the future as a probability distribution, which includes a non-zero possibility for each of the above scenarios, and also some % chance of both business as usual continuation and of World War III trajectory, etc. I change my opinion about these things without even realizing it as I incorporate new understanding or new events come to light. My time spent here over the years has significantly improved my understanding of the various emergent properties of different disciplines accompanying global overshoot. I'm quite certain that there are some themes out there that will emerge in next few years that I am oblivious to, however, I have been frustrated that so many of the things we have talked about on this site are coming to pass, yet so little has been accomplished in mitigation.

In the face of this backdrop, I find myself with increasing occasion questioning the role and focus of resource depletion outreach, both via blogging and at conferences, etc. It is my opinion that we have enough knowledge (by far) to be making serious social changes, yet few of any importance seem to be occurring. (In fact, most changes that ARE being made are for the worse, buying us some small short term comforts at cost of greater ultimate declines in standard of living and environmental conditions.) How can this tribe, brought together with a common purpose of educating policymakers about peaking in oil production, continue forward: a) when what we were purporting to educate about has already happened, b) when our constituents now have widely disparate views about the future, c) when for the foreseeable future fossil fuel decline rates are likely to be trumped by currency/central bank and financial outcomes and d) and as will be discussed below, when our efforts might only have outsized impact under unlikely scenarios?

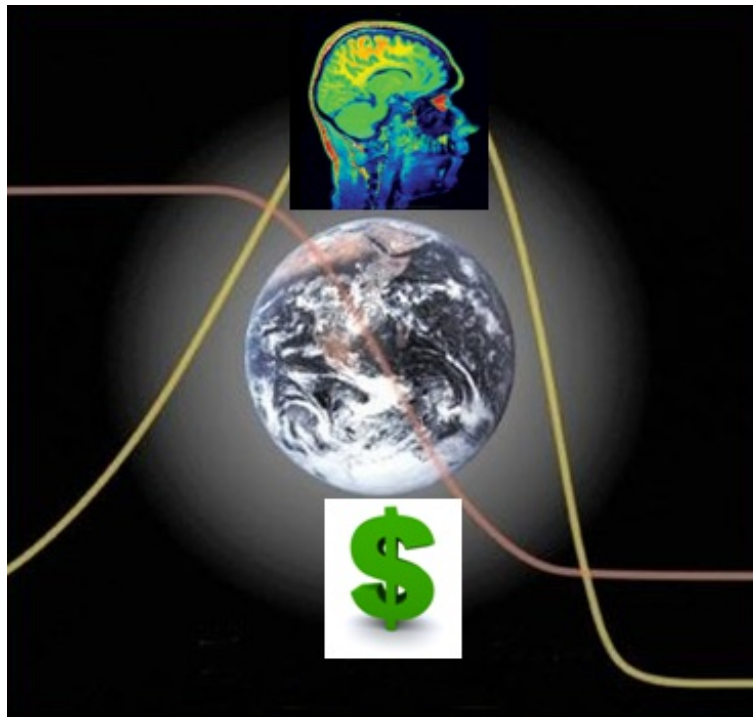
WHAT ARE WE DOING AND WHY?

Here is how my mind is coming to terms with these questions.

Ahead of this month's ASPO conference and amidst the 4 and 5 year anniversary of this site, I've tried to step back and assess what we've done, what we're doing and where we're going. On the one hand, this has become one of the 'go to websites' for news and information broadly related to energy and resource depletion. Whether by 1% or 30%, TOD was instrumental in accelerating discussion and awareness of depletion issues in international conversations from 2005-2008 - to what extent and to what ends we'll never know. On the other hand, I doubt in 2005 that many of us imagined we would still be writing and hanging out here in 2009-2010. Perhaps we thought that public awareness of the central truths regarding Peak Oil would obviate the need for armchair analysts to share data and perspective for free on the internet. Perhaps we didn't think that far ahead. In any case, I am virtually certain I won't be blogging 4 years hence (if for no other reason than my elbow will be permanently in the shape of a right angle).

As readers here are aware, I don't remotely believe that Peak Oil caused the credit crisis, the seeds of which started a generation ago. Though the financial crisis was largely (but not totally) ignored within the peak oil community until after the fact, its onset was arguably the largest reason that peak oil is cemented in the past due to: lack of price signals bringing on new supply, highlighting the non-viability of low EROI (high cost) projects, and implied smaller differential between natural and observed decline on existing fields in production. However, oil depletion, irrespective of causal chain, will be now be a permanent constraint on global society from here forward. But many other subjects will increasingly become more important: water and other non-energy inputs, social equity, geopolitics, fiat/biophysical relationships, energy technology, human aspirations, complex systems, etc. Put simply, these discussions will never again be just about oil (not that they ever really were). However, those effecting change on these issues will need accurate information on reserves, costs, and depletion more than ever before. As such we face both a dramatically larger tribe, and a smaller one at the same time.

I would hypothesize that each of us participating in the online muckraking/analysis sphere spends time on their websites of choice for some of the following reasons: 1) to increase our own social capital (through either social recognition or through an increase in our own understanding of a complex situation which will then in turn improve ours and our families future), 2) because we are puzzle solvers (meaning it's fun/meaningful to figure all this out), 3) because we want to make a difference to steer society away from making poor long term choices, and 4) being right. I would guess that all of TOD staff and most who hang out have done so for some combination of the above. My fear is that we, the analysts, are neither advocates, nor doers, generally speaking, which means we put stuff up continually in subtle hope that someone at a higher level will incorporate and implement it. To what end, we don't know. My gut feel is that a plurality of TOD staff fall under the number 2) above, and that increases in social status and/or societal transformation due to our work are only externalities of our passion for puzzle solving. I suppose things could be worse...;-)



Putting it all together

As usual, this essay represents my own musings, and is not reflective of the philosophy or objectives of anyone else on staff, but as one of the senior contributors to this site, I've begun to ask myself the purpose of a peak oil movement, in a post-peak environment where financial issues are likely to dominate for the foreseeable future, objectives and beliefs about the future are increasingly disparate, and synthesis of information is only as good as one's understanding of the weakest link (ergo - there is TOO much information for most people if not everyone). Furthermore, our ability to plan and change for the long term diminishes in negative correlation with how badly real time events erode. As such, in my view the highest leverage lies in the integration and subsequent implementation of systems analysis. What is needed is a 2010 version of Limits to Growth that not only improves on the 1970s natural resource type model, but integrates two new layers: knowledge on human demand/neuroscience and the current status of our economic/financial system, into a holistic scientific project that can be used for serious and urgent global policy change. Perhaps a site like this could be a public forum to discuss and hone in on aspects of such a project. I don't know. I must admit I've learned as much from the relatively uneducated on this site than from those with stellar resumes. In the end we're all in this together.

Finally, I think 'Peak Oil' has eponymously outlived its usefulness. Too many now associate doom, gloom and fundamentalism when they hear those 2 words. Though doom and gloom may possibly be the end reality of Peak Oil, such an immediate emotive reaction can't be productive among people of influence. As such, the energy community, and broader natural resource paradigm change movement probably needs to rebrand the whole discussion. Peak Oil may or may not be past, but the term 'Peak Oil' is now passe.

CAMPFIRE QUESTIONS

1. Is it worth it for this website to continue? And if so in what direction? And why?
2. How can those interested in these issues continue to share/compare and synergize when knowledge of an increasing array of topics becomes necessary?
3. How can 'Peak Oil' be reframed?

Any other comments welcomed.



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