The Oil Drum
DISCUSSIONS ABOUT ENERGY AND OUR FUTURE

# Peak Oil and Community Solutions Conference (Sunday)

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Megan Quinn explains Agraria, a planned post-peak community.
Full report on the last day of the conference below the fold.

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Technorati Tags: peak oil, oil, gas prices

Diana Christian explains her intentional community.

The morning began with a witty and fascinating presentation from Diana Christian, who is the editor of Communities magazine, and a resident of Earthaven Ecovillage, an intentional community in North Carolina.

For those readers not familiar with it, the term intentional community covers a very broad range of situations where people for some reason or other choose to live more closely than in single family housing. This can range from 60s communes (yes, some survived and prospered), through monasteries and other spiritual communities, cohousing (middle class communities where neighbours own their own houses but share common meals and spend more time together), and ecovillages (communities that formed to try and live more sustainably).

I do believe the conference organizers are correct in identifying that some of these communities have considerable relevance to peak oil because they are almost the only places in the developed world where we can see people trying to live with little or no modern energy sources (which they did out of choice rather than necessity).

Christian talked about several communities, but the one that she spent the most time on, and that really caught my attention, was Earthaven, where she lives. Earthhaven started building an ecovillage in 1996. They picked a plot of 320 acres in the back-of-beyond in North Carolina. Although they do use cars to some extent, the community is off the grid. The 60 residents built their own houses using hand labor, and solar power, inverters and battery carts to run power tools. They used mainly natural building techniques - mostly timber post-and-beam with trees cut from their own property, though at times they did bring excavators onto the property for some tasks (and I'm guessing they used gasoline powered chainsaws and sawmills also). They grow a sizeable fraction of their own food. Most of them get their income from businesses run on site.

Thus energy sources for Earthhaven, besides a certain amount of gas for getting to and from the place, are biomass, solar pholtovoltaics, and micro-hydropower. Looking at Christian's slides, I couldn't help comparing with yesterday's pictures of Cuba. The way of life and the standard of living look roughly similar. Earthhaven's houses look somewhat bigger and newer.

One of the strongest impressions from Christian was how much work this has been. They've been working their tails off for eleven years clearing forests, planting gardens, building houses, hauling battery packs around. Lots of hard physical labor. They have not been able to do everything they planned or maintain everything they started for lack of time.

The most fascinating thing to me was the visual impression made by the solar panels in Christian's pictures. Earthhaven has a funky hippy chic with it's handmade timber frame buildings and various low-tech furnishings and homemade appropriate technology appliances. In the midst of this, the solar panels with their neat clean geometric shapes and shiny surfaces look like they were dropped in from some alien advanced civilization. As indeed they were.

Ok, the following is a non-scientific, non-quantitative impression that needs to be carefully examined at a future time. I realize this isn't going to convince anyone who doesn't already have the same impression. But,... but,... the strong visual impression I received was this: a society made up of many Earthhavens might well not be able to manufacture solar panels.

I talked to Christian afterwards and asked her how she thought Earthhaven would do after there

was no oil. She thought they'd be ok for a while, but only a while. They could ramp up their food production pretty readily, and they have lots of wood. However, as the solar panels, batteries, and inverters started to wear out, they wouldn't be able to keep them working and would be reduced to all biomass before too long. She also didn't think they'd be safe from their neighbors (who are apparently prone to getting drunk and then roaring around the area in pickups with rifles to go hunting).

Liz Walker amused by a questioner.

Next up was Liz Walker, the burning soul behind Ecovillage at Ithaca, a project in Ithaca, New York. This development involves multiple cohousing communities intermixed with natural areas and community supported agriculture projects. From a peak oil perspective, it showcases integration of housing with local food production. Liz states that environmental assessments of the housing suggest the overall footprint is about half of conventional housing. While definitely a lot greener than your average project, this is still very much industrial-age housing from the market economy, and thus has somewhat less to teach us about any potential post-peak future.

Megan Quinn explains Agraria.

Megan Quinn is the Outreach Director for Community Service, Inc and is also project manager for Agraria, a deliberately planned post-peak community. Megan looks like she's about 16 years old, but belied that impression with a powerfully delivered and confident summation of the last 250 years of industrial history and the likely consequences of unwinding it's energy basis. The broad knowledge of the issues, commitment demonstrated via extensive travel and study, and general thoughtfulness and maturity in one so young suggest a powerful future leader.

Community Service believes a likely consequence of peak oil will be a need to resettle agricultural areas. Currently around 2% of the workforce is involved in agriculture - as recently as the 1930s, it was 50%. Instead of people, we use massive petroleum powered machines. Just as in Cuba, it is very unclear that our agricultural system can evolve to a low-oil future without massive transformation to being much more labor intensive.

I tend to agree with this perspective **if** post-peak depletion rates are reasonably high, and/or we get sufficiently far into the future without having developed a reasonable alternative way to power large agricultural machinery. Both Russia and Cuba have had to do this to cope with their respective problems, and during the great depression was the one time the urbanization trend in the US reversed itself. Also during the world wars, there was a massive program of victory gardens in both the US and the UK. In hard times, people, of necessity, have to focus on food production. My sense is that, if the evidence for a near-term peak continues to grow stronger, we will start to see a back-to-the-land movement similar to what happened in the late sixties and early seventies, or during the depression.

The midwest seems a particularly likely target since parts of it have been significantly depopulated but it remains a place of enormous agricultural productivity where there's year-round rainfall. The Agraria project is intended to represent a model for this kind of thing. It posits building a small community of super-insulated houses integrated with food production in Yellow Springs (Ohio has cold winters).

It will be very interesting to see how demand for this kind of thing evolves in the next few years. If you're interested, contact Community Service Inc. They are actively recruiting potential members.

Bob Waldrop as a latter day Socrates.

Bob Waldrop is a huge teddy bear/Santa Claus of a man who ebulliently told us of his efforts organizing something called the Oklahoma Food Cooperative. This is not your usual food coop - co-operatively owned retailing of healthier foods. It's more radical than that: an attempt to build an alternative and local food distribution system. Using the web, they are building a local market between food producers in Oklahoma and food consumers in Oklahoma. The goal is to have a less transportation-intensive system (food in the US is consumed an average of 1500 miles from where it is produced) that will be more robust in the face of oil shortages, and to produce healthier foods. At the moment they are basically organizing monthly food distributions, but hope to evolve to a store-front with weekly distribution. Bob gave a bunch of interesting tips for replicating what he has done - see his website.

Richard Heinberg in closing.

Richard Heinberg gave the final summation. This is a difficult task at a peak oil conference - the

goal of a conference summarizer in general should be to leave the participants inspired, energized, and anxious to go home and put what they've learnt into action. Peak Oil has something of a tendency to be a huge downer as a subject, and so there's a strong pull to get polly-anna and unrealistic about it. Richard managed beautifully to be inspiring and completely realistic at the same time.

What Richard said, in loose paraphrase, was this. Drawing on cultural anthropology, you can look at a society's ideas and values and they say something about how the society will be. You can look at a society's political organization and that says something about how it will be. But in fact, the most fundamental thing about a society will be its core infrastructure. In particular, if you know the way a group of people get their food, you can predict a lot about their political organization, their values, and even their spiritual beliefs.

For example, if a group of people get their food by hunter-gathering, you can be confident that they will live in small tribes, have relatively decentralized decision-making, and they will have animistic beliefs: they will believe the world is alive, sacred, and populated with spirits. (This is true - there's absolutely incredible concordancies between the spiritual beliefs of hunter-gatherers all over the world, see Shamanism by Mircea Eliade for the classic academic study of this.)

On the other hand, if they get their food by agriculture, with the resulting annual surpluses, you will find a hierarchical, class-based society. The possibility of raiding those surpluses will mean there's a military class for doing the raiding or protecting against raids. There will be a managerial class for measuring the surplus, organizing it's distribution, etc. Writing and arithmetic is likely to be developed for managing the record-keeping. And their cosmology will involve a hierarchy of gods, reflecting and justifying the earthly hierarchy. This same pattern has arisen again and again all over the world many times, wherever people switch to an agricultural society. In the special case of a herding society conquering an agricultural society, you get monotheism.

And then we have industrial society, with its unique way of getting food via fossil fuels and its unique set of beliefs and political organizations.

Thus as we go through the de-fossil-fuelizing of this society, we can expect absolutely profound and radical change in everything about our society - its social organization, its political organization, and its cosmological beliefs. This is scary and overwhelming and is likely to get more so. And yet, as a society, we almost certainly have choices between options that are better and worse. We would like to do this without descending into Fascism. We would like, if at all possible, to achieve this transition without a large scale die-off.

Those of us in the peak oil movement have a very important role to play. As individuals who understand what is going on, when the larger society does not yet, the knowledge and expertise we have developed is likely to get very valuable. And we have an opportunity to provide leadership at every level as the rest of society increasingly tries to figure out what the hell is going on. It is our responsibility to exercise that leadership as energetically and wisely as we can in order to steer the transition as well as possible.

I don't know if I've managed to capture the spirit of what he said, but I found it very uplifting and inspiring.

I don't agree with Richard about everything - I think he's a bit too prone to conspiracy theory for my taste - but I do think he has many very wise things to say. He's been thinking about the social and political response to peak oil for a lot longer than most of us. I managed to sit down with him

for a one-on-one conversation during the conference (before his closing summation), and I'll report on that tomorrow.

## Final Reflections

I found this conference extremely stimulating. I disagreed with a number of speakers, in some cases deeply, and yet I was glad I came and my thinking was moved forward and crystallized by the experience. I heartily recommend it for next year.

My strongest impression is that peak oil is spawning a political movement. That's my new insight. I have tended to view peak oil through the lenses of dynamics, of economics, even of military strategy, but not that of politics. And yet this is going to be a political movement. There were 450 people at this conference - they came from all over the country to a tiny town in the midwest. Just about every single one, by a show of hands, had read multiple books. Two thirds had written an article or given a speech themselves. Everyone I talked to spent numerous hours a day working on the subject in one way or another. Almost everyone I talked to was planning to go to the ASPO-USA conference in November as well. I talked to no-one who was kind-of-curiously looking around, wondering what all the fuss was. These people all had basically the same story. At some point, some piece of evidence persuaded them there was a problem, and they've been utterly obsessed ever since, and nothing yet has disabused them of their worry. They are all incredibly knowledgeable and their worldview has been utterly transformed by what they've discovered and figured out. Peak oil has a way of being transformational to both ends of the political spectrum: Cuban communists discover the value of individual land tenure, Republicans discover limits to growth.

And this movement has grown by over 100% in the last year, judging by attendance at this conference. I believe that level of passion, commitment, and growth spells a very powerful political force in the future. I can't remember any time in my life, on any issue, sitting in a room with such a large and powerfully committed group of people. As long as the evidence for the core hypothesis remains reasonably strong, this is only going to get stronger. And so the good news is that, as scary as peak oil is, at least we are not confronting it alone.

And I think we at the Oil Drum have a role to play here. Despite it's newness, the majority of people I spoke to at this conference were aware of the Oil Drum, and the majority of **them** viewed it as their first or second source of daily peak-oil information. People came up to me and told me, in the most heartfelt manner imaginable, their appeciation for our work in doing this (even though I, as its most junior editor, should get very little of the credit).

And the reason people liked it was in part because they felt that, with our tremendous team of commenters, they could find almost everything they needed to know by reading the Oil Drum. But also because we are, for the most part, reality-based, open-minded, and professional, rather than being stuck in a fixed ideology. "You guys are the voice of reason in the peak oil movement" as one man put it to me.

And that's our task here I think. This movement is going to be an extremely powerful force. It is tiny and utterly powerless now. It will be somewhat less so next year, and the day will come when politicians will quake and run as fast as they can to get out in front of it. At 100%+ annual growth, that day will not be too long in coming. If near-term peak oil is true, this movement is going to grow into a political force comparable to the Civil rights movement, or the Suffragette movement, or Bolshevism, or Fascism in its historical impact. It has the potential to be good or bad. It's **critically important** that it goes in a direction that will actually work. As with the Cubans, our

society probably only gets one chance to manage our oil peak. And that means gathering all possible points of view and pieces of evidence, examining them as rationally, fearlessly, and open-mindedly as possible, and debating each other; debating fiercely, yes, but respectfully and with a deep understanding that what binds us is more important than what separates us: as a society, we **must not screw this up**. We must, as rapidly as possible, figure out the best possible path over this very dangerous terrain and get that word out. The Oil Drum has a role in helping to do that.

Unless, of course, we are wrong about oil supply issues, or someone invents a silver bullet. In that case, we'll all disperse off and do something more productive, as we should. Only time will tell.

Finally, I'd like to give my thanks to Community Solutions: Pat Murphy, Faith Morgan, Megan Quinn and the many others who helped them organize this extremely stimulating conference. I'd also particularly like to thank Larry and Gail Halpern who put me up in their house, provided excellent conversation, and generously tolerated me monopolizing their computer for hours each night after the conference in order to write these reports.