



Drumbeat: August 26, 2010

Posted by [Leanan](#) on August 26, 2010 - 9:26am

Topic: [Miscellaneous](#)

[Why our agricultural empire will fall](#)

In an age of super-sized meals and obesity epidemics, food-shortage doomsday scenarios always seem a little surreal. Backed by half a century of agricultural abundance, it's easy to imagine that cheap food will permanently abound. But in a new book, "Empires of Food," academic Evan Fraser and journalist Andrew Rimas show us that we are not the first advanced civilization to have a hubristic, misplaced confidence that we'll always be fed.

By tracing the rise and fall of a number preindustrial empires, the authors show us just how much trouble we're in. The Romans, the Mesopotamians and the medieval Europeans, for example, all had agricultural systems that, much like ours, were yoked to complex technology and highly specialized trade networks. And each of those societies eventually failed because they hadn't accounted for soil erosion, growing overpopulation and weather changes. Climate change, anyone?

sumption of deep-water drilling," according to the report today from the Bipartisan Policy Center, a Washington-based research group. The rules, if followed by BP, Apache Corp. and other drillers, and enforced by regulators, "will achieve a significant and beneficial reduction of risk."

[Shell tests method to reclaim oil sands waste](#)

Alberta (Reuters) - Royal Dutch Shell Plc said on Thursday it was starting up a demonstration project to test a new method of speeding up reclamation of toxic waste ponds at oil sands operations, a source of tension between oil companies, environmentalists and regulators.

[Existing house is remade into green home-of-the-future](#)

A lucky British couple won a free home makeover that reduced their carbon emissions 80% and turned their energy bills into net income.

[Fiddling while the Earth burns](#)

No more 'politics as usual' should mean having enough courage to tackle the sickness of mindless consumption.

[Why our agricultural empire will fall](#)

In an age of super-sized meals and obesity epidemics, food-shortage doomsday scenarios always seem a little surreal. Backed by half a century of agricultural abundance, it's easy to imagine that cheap food will permanently abound. But in a new book, "Empires of Food," academic Evan Fraser and journalist Andrew Rimas show us that we are not the first advanced civilization to have a hubristic, misplaced confidence that we'll always be fed.

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[US Interior Dept Defends Decision to Re-Issue Drilling Ban](#)

The U.S. Interior Department is defending its decision to withdraw, revise and re-issue a controversial ban on deep-water drilling after a federal judge questioned the department's ability to change the ban while it was being challenged in court.

[Chalmette to shut some units due to poor market conditions](#)

(Reuters) - Exxon Mobil Corp said it will close down some redundant process units at its 196,000 barrel per day refinery in Chalmette, Louisiana due to poor market conditions.

[Enbridge pipeline to link Suncor plant](#)

Enbridge Inc. will build a new 95-kilometre connection between Suncor Energy's oil sands plant and the pipeline system serving northern Alberta.

Enbridge says the new Wood Buffalo pipeline will cost \$370-million and run parallel to the Athabasca pipeline that Suncor currently uses.

[Asia gasoline to USWC, Mexico down sharply on narrowing economics](#)

Singapore (Platts) - The volume of arbitrage gasoline heading from Northeast Asia to Mexico and the US West Coast in September has fallen sharply to an estimated 30,000-70,000 mt (253,500-591,500 barrels), as import demand eases amid expectations of narrowing economics, industry sources said this week. In comparison, about 161,100 mt of gasoline loaded from South Korea and Singapore in August have headed for the USWC and Mexico.

[Pemex Sells \\$1 Billion of Bonds in Third International Offering This Year](#)

Petroleos Mexicanos, the state-owned oil monopoly, sold \$1 billion of bonds maturing in 2035, its third dollar debt sale this year.

Pemex, as the Mexico City-based company is known, sold the 6.625 percent bonds to yield 5.975 percent, according to data compiled by Bloomberg. Bank of America Corp. and Credit Suisse Group AG arranged the offering.

[On Doomed Rig's Last Day, a Divisive Change of Plan](#)

On April 20 at 10:43 a.m., a young BP PLC engineer sent a 173-word email to colleagues aboard the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig. The email spelled out a recent change to a key safety test that sparked confusion and debate aboard the rig.

Less than 12 hours later, the rig was engulfed in flames so hot they melted steel. Eleven workers were dead.

The worst offshore oil spill in U.S. history had begun.

[50 years of OPEC](#)

Interestingly, the emergence of OPEC was triggered by the tempers of the time, the result of a 1960 law instituted by the then American President, Dwight Eisenhower. That law compelled oil quotas on Venezuela and Persian Gulf oil imports in favour of the Canadian and Mexican oil firms. The immediate result was a sharp fall in prices of oil in these regions.

Venezuela reacted by seeking an alliance with Arab oil producing nations as a preemptive strategy to maintain the autonomy and profitability of its oil resources. Common interests pulled other oil producing nations together. Economically, the decisions of OPEC continue to have considerable influence on international oil prices. This impact was most felt in the 1973 energy crisis during the Yom Kippur war, which Israel fought against Egypt and Syria. During the 6-day war, OPEC refused to sell oil to western countries as a protest against Israel.

[UAE topped energy investment in Iran last year, Germany came second](#)

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) was the single largest investor in sanction-hit Iran's power sector in 2009, according to a report in Emirates 24-7 newspaper.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad speaks during an anti-chemical weapon ceremony in Tehran June 29, 2010.

The UAE companies invested nearly \$720 million in energy projects in Iran in 2009, before the latest round of sanctions was slapped on the country, the Dubai-based daily said in a report.

Germany was the second largest foreign direct investor in Iran's energy sector last year, with investment totaling \$445 million.

[Game resumed: Iran pockets Bushehr and plays on](#)

IT WAS meant as a marker for the world's readiness to accept Iran's right to benefit from the peaceful uses of nuclear power, despite its provocative behaviour. By this reasoning, the fuelling this week by Russia of the Bushehr nuclear reactor, Iran's first power-generating nuclear plant that is due to start supplying electricity to the national grid by year's end, could help persuade the regime to return to the negotiating table over United Nations demands that it suspend more troubling nuclear work.

For Iran, however, Bushehr symbolises something altogether different: the fruits of defiance.

[Green Energy: Why We're Still Not Using It](#)

The United States expends a lot of energy studying green energy. There's no shortage of ideas. For example, San Francisco considered installing giant turbines under the Golden Gate Bridge and harnessing tidal power to generate electricity. There are all kinds of research projects, coalitions and advocacy groups touting renewable energy, but the country is still heavily reliant on fossil fuels. Only 7% of energy consumed is from renewable sources. So why haven't we made more progress and what can be done to change the numbers?

[The simple future beyond oil: The convergence of our economic and ecological futures and the importance of change](#)

We are living through "interesting times"; credit crises, recession and rising debt threaten to destabilise nation states. Whilst reckless bankers and traders might have a certain amount of responsibility, if we are to understand the larger processes that are

driving these trends we need to stand back and look at the human system as a whole. Change is inevitable – it's one of the implications of the Laws of Thermodynamics. What we need to understand is the way human ecology works within these natural physical processes, how the contradictions between human systems and these natural processes define what is “unsustainable”, and what this means for our future as we adjust to the natural limitations of our environment.

[Palm Oil to Climb as Demand Outstrips Production, Godrej's Mistry Predicts](#)

Palm oil must jump at least 19 percent to discourage imports by India and China, the world's largest consumers, as production will be little changed this year, according to Godrej International Ltd.

[Ramesh raises alarm against Bio-fuel for food security](#)

NEW DELHI (Commodity Online): The Union Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh today raised alarm against the use of bio-fuels in the automobiles citing the food security concerns in the country.

[Making sure we get it right on biofuels](#)

While numerous efforts are underway to bring biofuels made from non-food sources into the marketplace, today America's principle biofuel crop is corn. And as Purdue economist and author of a recent study on land use emissions Wally Tyner says: “With almost a third of the U.S. corn crop today going to ethanol, it is simply not credible to argue that there are no land use change implications of corn ethanol.”

[With So Much Oil & Natural Gas, is Biofuel a Viable Mideast Fuel Option?](#)

When it comes to producing large quantities of biomass fuel in the Middle East, the big question is how serious this technology can become in a region that still contains a large portion of the world's remaining petroleum supplies, and where new fields of natural gas are being discovered in the Mediterranean Sea, Persian Gulf, and other locations.

[John Michael Greer: The care and feeding of time machines](#)

The distinction between intensive and extensive food plant production discussed in last week's post has implications that go well beyond the obvious. When you garden a backyard or a few acres intensively, you can spare the time, energy, and resources to do things you can't do on an extensive farm of a few hundred acres, and the payback can be spectacular.

[Drawing a roadmap to sustainable food, and sustainable practices](#)

There's never been a better or more crucial time for business leaders to accelerate the adoption of sustainability principles by fully engaging in the process. An incredible number of companies are doing good work but what really counts at the end of the day is transparency, accountability and involvement at every level of the business. The "talk-do" index, as we've come to call it, is a key measure — making sure change is on a systemic basis versus something shallow, on the surface.

[Who built the electric car?](#)

McCubbin's Firefly contains 11 12-volt lead acid batteries, each weighing around 25 kg (56 pounds). Together, these batteries give the Firefly a range of around 35 kilometres on one charge.

The car is highway legal (ICBC has a category for electric vehicles) with two emergency battery shut-offs and a crash sensor. McCubbin can easily get the vehicle up to 85 km/h on the highway with its 19 horsepower DC motor. Unlike a gas car, an electric motor develops maximum torque when stalled/starting, so although the motor is only rated 19 hp when it gets up to speed, the motor is rated at 87 hp when starting!

[BP frozen out of Arctic oil drilling race](#)

BP has been forced to abandon hopes of drilling in the Arctic, currently the centre of a new oil rush, owing to its tarnished reputation after the Gulf of Mexico spill.

The company confirmed tonight that it was no longer trying to win an exploration licence in Greenland, despite earlier reports of its interest. "We are not participating in the bid round," said a spokesman at BP's London headquarters, who declined to discuss its reasons for the reverse.

The setback, which follows the announcement this week of a major find in the region by British rival Cairn Energy, is the first sign that the Gulf of Mexico disaster may have permanently damaged BP's ability to operate — not just in US waters, but in other environmentally sensitive parts of the world.

[Oil Rises for Second Day as Stocks Gain on Speculation Prices Fell Too Far](#)

Oil rose for a second day in New York, buoyed by advancing equity markets and speculation that crude's 7 percent drop this month has been excessive relative to the economic outlook.

[Refining Margins' 51% Decline May Worsen as China Slows](#)

The combination of slowing Chinese economic growth and expanding refineries means this year's 51 percent decline in profit margins from turning crude into gasoline, diesel and kerosene is poised to worsen.

[PetroChina Profit Misses Estimates as Government Controls Curb Price Gains](#)

Profit growth at PetroChina Co., Asia's biggest company by market value, slumped in the second quarter after government controls on gasoline and diesel tariffs curbed gains from higher crude oil prices.

[U.S. Winter Will Be Warmest in Five Years, Forecaster MDA Federal Says](#)

The U.S. will have its warmest winter in five years, which will reduce demand for natural gas, according to forecaster MDA Federal Inc.

[Shell Moves Sakhalin LNG Manager to Australia to Build Project](#)

Royal Dutch Shell Plc has brought the former manager of Sakhalin-2, Russia's first liquefied natural gas project, to Australia to oversee development of a proposed venture that may cost more than \$20 billion.

[UK and Norway team up to tap North Sea potential](#)

The UK and Norway yesterday agreed to step up levels of co-operation between the two countries as they each attempt to re-establish the North Sea as one of the world's leading energy hubs.

[Former Chief of Drilling Agency Says New Inspection System Is Needed](#)

S. Elizabeth Birnbaum, the former head of the Minerals Management Service who resigned under pressure a month after the blowout of BP's well in the Gulf of Mexico, said Wednesday that the offshore drilling oversight agency needed a thorough overhaul of its regulations, inspection procedures and culture.

[Engineer says he warned BP over deepwater well](#)

A Halliburton engineer has testified he warned BP its design for the Macondo well was flawed.

The deepwater exploration well, which had struck oil in the Gulf of Mexico, would be susceptible to surges of natural gas without changes to the design, testified Jesse Gagliano, a shore-based technical adviser assigned by Halliburton to work with BP.

[Missing Piece in Oil Rig Inquiry: Who Was in Charge?](#)

HOUSTON — Even after dozens of witnesses, a hundred hours of testimony and three months of investigation, a chairman of a federal panel exploring the Deepwater Horizon disaster admitted Wednesday that he still lacked a simple fact: Who was the top authority on the oil rig when it exploded?

[After the Leak, Restoring the Gulf Coast](#)

This week, a coalition of dozens of environmental and social justice groups, led by Oxfam America, released a report calling for billions in financing for ecosystem restoration, storm protection and community development along the Gulf Coast.

“On the five-year anniversary of Katrina and the devastating 2005 hurricane season, it’s well past time for the nation to commit to a true restoration vision and plan for the central gulf, long the nation’s energy sacrifice zone,” Aaron Viles, campaign director for the Gulf Restoration Network, which co-authored the report, said in a statement.

[No plan set for pipeline dent](#)

The company that owns the crude oil pipeline that burst last month in mid-Michigan has no time line for repairing a dented section of pipe beneath the St. Clair River at Marysville, despite a congresswoman's concerns that any spill there could be "simply catastrophic" to metro Detroit's drinking water supply and the environment.

[Nigeria announces power grid sale, repair](#)

LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) -- Nigeria's president announced a multi-billion-dollar plan Thursday to repair and privatize the oil-rich nation's decrepit national power grid that forces people to rely on private generators to provide electricity.

President Goodluck Jonathan said the nation would sell off the state-run Power Holding Company of Nigeria and workers at the state-run power company would receive "generous" severance package.

[Iran has material for 1-2 atom bombs: ex-IAEA aide](#)

(Reuters) - Iran has stockpiled enough low-enriched uranium for 1-2 nuclear arms but it would not make sense for it to cross the bomb-making threshold with only this amount, a former top U.N. nuclear official was quoted as saying.

[New Greatest Generation is needed](#)

Today, our country faces daunting challenges which are greater than anything we've seen since the Great Depression and World War II. Our economy is stalled, with high unemployment and five to six applicants for every job opening. Our infrastructure is corroding, with many roads, bridges, water and sewer systems in need of repair or replacement. Our energy, transportation and land-use systems are rapidly becoming obsolete in a world facing peak oil and catastrophic climate change. Our health care system is inefficient and increasingly unsustainable. And an increasing portion of our economy is based on "financial services," rather than on production of useful goods. And the extent of income inequality is greater than at any time since before the Great Depression of the 30s.

['Green' commute for bus-less school](#)

Green Ways to School is a new campaign launched in January. Funded through a grant from the Marin Community Foundation's Climate Change Initiative, the campaign consists of a new Web-based SchoolPool trip-matching program (The SchoolPool Marin program helps families find others in their neighborhood to carpool, walk, bike or take the bus together to and from school), and contests and promotions that encourage students and their parents to find Green Ways to School.

[Severn Trent's 'Concrete Cow' Is First U.K. Crop-Fed Generator](#)

Severn Trent Plc started generating electricity from the U.K.'s first commercial-scale crop-fed power plant as the utility seeks to lower its carbon emissions by using an emerging form of renewable power.

The company's Severn Trent Water unit began supplying the national power grid from a gas-fueled turbine at a site near Nottingham, Gill Dickinson, a company spokeswoman, said in a telephone interview. The gas comes from anaerobic digestion towers, which use micro-organisms to break down corn and wheat.

[California Approves First U.S. Thermal Solar Plant](#)

California regulators on Wednesday approved a license for the nation's first large-scale solar thermal power plant in two decades.

The licensing of the 250-megawatt Beacon Solar Energy Project after a two-and-a-half-

year environmental review comes as several other big solar farms are set to receive approval from the California Energy Commission in the next month.

[Could a superbee from Swindon save the world?](#)

Will Swindon be remembered as the home of a major breakthrough in halting the global decline of the honeybee? Ron Hoskins, a 79-year-old beekeeper from the town, has spent the last 18 years looking for a bee that is resistant to the parasite blamed for killing billions worldwide. And yesterday he claimed that his superbee could assure the future of the insect that pollinates around a third of everything we eat.

[EPA to cruise lines: No dumping sewage off California coast](#)

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency today proposed a rule forbidding cruise ships from dumping sewage off the California coast.

[Riverside Park Plans Composting Restroom](#)

The bathroom, which would compost sewage to fertilize park greenery and use solar panels to power the complex, is being designed to operate without causing carbon dioxide emissions, which contribute to global warming. In addition to producing fertilizer instead of sewage, composting toilets typically use little or no water (about three ounces) compared with three and a half gallons per conventional toilet flush.

[Archaeologists find new clues why the Maya left](#)

The whole idea of a widespread catastrophic collapse of the classic Maya is overstated, Alexander says, suggesting centers likely went through many cycles of building, abandonment and reuse.

[Texas fights global-warming power grab](#)

The state's slogan is "Don't mess with Texas." But the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is doing just that, and at stake is whether the Obama administration can impose its global-warming agenda without a vote of Congress.

[Exhibit envisions a Kansas City altered by climate change](#)

Kansas City conceptual artist Tim Brown is preparing for future calamity.

In "Floodplain Refugee Housing, Kansas City 2050-2100," a thought-provoking exhibit at the Writers Place, Brown proposes a solution to the possible refugee problem brought about by climate change and the flooding of the Earth's coastal areas. Twelve black-and-white photocopies mounted to plywood panels imagine buildings that take environmental issues into account and make efficient use of space.

[It's a Communication Challenge, Not a Scientific Challenge](#)

Even if you're Al Gore (and maybe especially if you're Al Gore), I caution you against arguing the science of climate change. You cannot change the mind of a global warming skeptic by citing scientific facts. The reason is simple; resistance isn't grounded in facts. Instead, it's grounded in emotion, political ideology and perceived financial self-interest.

[Dr. Fatih Birol's words of warning: Melting permafrost, cheap oil and the end of the world as we know it](#)

Greenhouse gases are heating up the earth's atmosphere and, as a result, global weather conditions now seem to have gone truly haywire. Temperatures are unusually high in certain places, while rain in other places is causing unprecedented floods and loss of life. Pakistan, China, North Korea, and Niger are now threatened with floods such as they've never seen before. In view of the rise in temperature, some scientists even predict that there will be no more summer ice in the Arctic by 2030. And where will all that water go then?

[Time to blame climate change for extreme weather?](#)

IT IS time to start asking the hard questions. Countless people in flood-stricken Pakistan have lost families and livelihoods. Who can they hold responsible and turn to for reparations?

Less than a decade ago, these questions would have been dismissed outright. "Many scientists at the time said that you can never blame an individual weather event on climate change," says Myles Allen of the University of Oxford. But a small meeting of scientists in Colorado last week - organised by the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the UK Met Office's Hadley Centre, among others - suggests the tide is turning.

[Huge ice chunk breaks off Ellesmere Island](#)

A large parcel of ice has fractured from a massive ice shelf on Ellesmere Island in Nunavut, marking the third known case of Arctic ice loss this summer alone.

The chunk of ice, which scientists estimate is roughly the size of Bermuda, broke away

from the Ward Hunt Ice Shelf on the island's northern coast around Aug. 18, according to NASA satellite imagery.



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