

Peak Oil and the Precautionary Principle

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Recently my partner Dana and I invited several dear friends over to our place for dinner. There were six of us around the table. As is often the case at dinner parties the conversation was sprinkled with light banter, stories and anecdotes. But then, and I don't remember the hinge point, the conversation shifted to the sobering topic of whether each of us believed all the reports these days about "Peak Oil" and the economic collapse that will ensue as oil becomes more scarce.

Specifically, we considered the question: How would we act if we accepted that in the near future we will be descending into an economic collapse with life-altering impacts for each of us and those we love?

Before going further, allow me to explain why we would even ask this seemingly alarmist question in the first place. The question is grounded in the uncontested fact that the health of our economy depends on the abundance of cheap oil and that there are finite limits to the availability of this oil. Most experts predict that oil production for the world as a whole will peak in the very near future – before 2020.

Now here is the sobering part: Once that peak is reached, oil availability will decline by an estimated 3% per year (a conservative estimate). This means that if we reach peak in, say, 2010, then 25 years later in 2035 there will be only half the oil now available to fuel the global economy. Imagine: A world swollen to 8 billion-plus people, everyone wanting the good life, but with only half the petroleum resources we now have available each day.

This scenario is more than a little worrisome for those of us in the U.S. in so far as we consume approximately one-quarter of the world's oil, but we possess only about 4% of Earth's petroleum resources. Think about it. The majority of the stuff we consume from computers to toasters to blue jeans relies on oil for its production. Moreover, our transportation, food, and health care systems are highly oil dependent, not to mention our whole system of national defense (and offense).

Of course, there will still be oil available after the peak, just less of it to go around. And with increased scarcity, demand will rise and so will prices. Indeed, if the past is any indication, we can expect that with a decline in oil availability by as little as 5%, prices will increase 3-4 fold. This is what happened during the 1970 oil shocks and again in California a few years back when there were sudden shortfalls in the production of natural gas. Now, imagine, if you dare, the astronomical rise in prices as oil availability declines not by just 5%, but plummets relentlessly downward year after year.

As I take all of this in, there is a part of me that reacts with "Yes... but..." For example, "Yes but coal will save us.... Yes, but biofuels will save us.... Yes, but tar sands will save us...." However, each of these alternatives has severe limitations and compares very poorly to oil in terms of energetic returns and versatility.

If you are immobilized by uncertainty as you consider how to respond to the specter of peak oil, I recommend that you visit: <http://www.lifeaftertheoilcrash.net/> and read the center piece that begins “Dear Reader...” Then, I invite you to ask the same question my friends and I asked each other over dinner: How would you act if you accepted that in the near future we, as a nation, will be descending into an economic collapse with life-altering impacts for you and those you love?

Asking this question is tantamount to abiding by The Precautionary Principle. This principle, in effect, states: if the future for our species is uncertain, it is best to choose a path with the lowest risk, even if this path is not the most profitable or the most comfortable. The Precautionary Principle advises that, given present uncertainties and considering the very real possibility of widespread economic collapse, the most prudent thing to do is to take measures now to drastically reduce our dependence on petroleum.

As the six of us sat around the dinner table that night we allowed ourselves to consider, in concrete terms, what it would mean to adopt The Precautionary Principle—i.e., what it would mean to significantly reduce our dependence on oil. Noting that it was a chilly night, we first considered how we would heat our homes without oil and/or natural gas (Note: the natural gas peak will follow close on the tail of the oil peak). Then we wondered what we would do for food in so far as much of what we eat comes from far away and requires lots of oil to grow, process, package and transport. We wondered, too, how we would get around with gas selling for \$10.00 a gallon.

Initially, our responses had an every-man-for-himself survivalist quality. We would stockpile food and water, buy a gun, **and** hunker down. In this vein we begin to consider our personal survival skills. Did anyone know where to get fresh water nearby? Could anyone make a fire without a match? Did anyone know how to identify edible wild plants? We were humbled as we realized the limitations of our individual survival skills.

Clearly, going it alone was not an option. The way to “power down,” we realized, was to tap into the power inherent in community. The question wasn’t so much, what can I do for myself? Rather, the question should be, what can we do for each other?

I take inspiration these days from a group of citizens in Brattleboro, VT, who have formed an organization called Post Oil Solutions (POS).

POS relies on local Yankee ingenuity to create lifestyles grounded in energy self sufficiency rather than oil dependency. They are doing this, first, by focusing on food security and thus taking steps to ensure that they can feed each other with food grown locally. So it is that POS recently instituted the “Localvore Challenge,” a call to eat for a week consuming only locally produced food. One hundred and fifty people took part and in so doing challenged the predominant pattern in America where each item of food we produce requires ten times as much energy—in the form of fossil fuel—as the food, itself, actually contains. This is so because our food travels, on average, 1500 miles before reaching the supermarket shelves and is often highly processed and excessively packaged. By contrast,

eating local, fresh (read unprocessed and unpackaged) food results in a dramatic decline in petroleum dependence.

The Vermont localvores, recognizing that peak oil may very well signal the end of our current far-flung, oil-dependent global food system, decided to test their prospects for survival in the event that they only had access to locally produced food. They discovered that there was an abundance of healthful and delicious food available in September. Now they are set to repeat the test in January, a more challenging month to be sure. In the process of these experiments, participants are making new friends, sharing food knowledge and hatching new food-related projects (e.g., developing community gardens, offering workshops on food self sufficiency, creating a winter farmer's market, and establishing a task force to create solutions for sustainable living in a petroleum-scarce world).

The upshot of all this for me is most surprising. By sidestepping doubt, denial and despair and simply choosing to believe that the age of cheap oil is rapidly coming to an end (i.e., by applying The Precautionary Principle), I feel more energized and purposeful. In closing, consider that one of the remarkable qualities of Americans is our ability to muster creativity and ingenuity as we rise to face daunting challenges. Now at the outset of the 21st Century we have before us a challenge worthy of our greatness—namely to avert economic collapse by resurrecting our local economies and moving toward energy independence. It is time to get moving. What better way to start than to ask in our communities and neighborhoods: What can we do for each other?