

PEAK OIL

1. What is peak oil?

Over the past century the amount of oil we use has steadily increased. The world consumes about 80 million barrels of oil a day, and this is predicted to rise to 121 million barrels a day by 2030. Almost all our transport, most of what we buy in the shops and the food we eat is dependent on oil. But the amount of easily and cheaply accessible oil is limited. At some point the production of oil will reach its peak, as it gets more expensive and technically difficult to extract ever-increasing quantities. ***Peak oil is the time when the demand for oil will exceed our capacity to produce it at an affordable price.***

This does not mean that world oil will run out. There are still unconventional sources of oil in tar sands or oil shale for example, but it is expensive and needs a lot of energy to extract. And there is still plenty of oil in conventional reserves, but the more you extract the more difficult and expensive it is.

There is still considerable controversy over when the world is likely to reach peak oil. The oil industry is bullish, pointing to their massive reserves, and looking to new extraction technology to cut costs. Critics, several with a background in the oil industry, accuse oil companies of exaggerating their reserves, pointing out that the discovery of major new oil fields peaked in the 1970s. Some think that we will reach peak oil by around 2010-2015.

2. What is the likely impact of peak oil?

Already the future holds challenges for rural areas such as the impact of road pricing policies, which, however valuable to the environment, will impact unevenly on rural communities. Indeed, the post-oil world will look very different from today. Local economies will be much more important, with most food and other products being produced close to home. 20% of the UK workforce could be employed in agriculture, compared to under 2% today.

As with climate change, we face a choice. There could be a major world recession, with a widening of the gap between rich and poor, and military action to secure oil resources for the powerful. Or the renewed emphasis on the local economy could lead to a flowering of local communities, for example, with more village shops, local services and a sustainable way of life. Much will depend on how much we plan ahead.

<http://www.communitysolution.org/problem.html> US site, but with good FAQs and Powerpoint presentations. See also the Soil Association conference resources.

3. How do the issues of peak oil and climate change interrelate?

“Taken together, Climate Change and Peak Oil make a nearly air-tight argument. *We should* reduce our dependency on fossil fuels for the sake of future generations and the rest of the biosphere; but even if we choose not to do so because of the costs involved, the most important of those fossil fuels will soon become more scarce and expensive anyway, so complacency is simply not an option.”¹

However, the motivation behind action on the two issues is different. Action on climate change is based mainly on altruism: it is hard to see how cutting our personal carbon emissions can directly affect our own environment. Peak oil is much more immediate, with the focus on how individuals and communities will

¹ Heinberg, Richard. Bridging Peak Oil and Climate Change Activism. Energy Bulletin Jan 2007.

cope with scarcity. This appeal to self interest is a real strength. Unfortunately, there is still controversy over the extent of the peak oil threat among academics, industry and politicians, and only limited awareness among the general public. Climate change, on the other hand, now has a high profile and credibility. Peak oil may also make climate change worse, if an oil shortage leads to greater use of coal which produces more greenhouse gas emissions, for example.

It is important for activists on the two issues to bring the arguments together, and use them strategically according to their audience and situation, as well as to reinforce the call for action.

<http://www.energybulletin.net/24529.html> Heinberg, Richard. Bridging Peak Oil and Climate Change Activism. Energy Bulletin Jan 2007. Excellent essay exploring the links between action on the two issues. The website acts as a clearing house for peak oil information and research.

4. Key players and initiatives

Association for the Study of Peak Oil and Gas. ASPO groups have been established from Ireland to Australia (but not in UK). Dr Colin Campbell (ex oil industry) is the founder member and speaker on peak oil issues. <http://www.peakoil.net/>

Powerswitch is a network aimed at promoting grassroots action, with regional contacts. <http://www.powerswitch.org.uk/> Useful website with introduction to peak oil, list of resources and suggestions for action.

Transition Towns: Totnes is the UK's first "Transition Town", launched in autumn 2006. Several more towns and areas have followed, mainly in the South West. Transition Towns prepare an "energy descent action plan" in preparation for the localisation and reduced energy use required to meet peak oil.

<http://transitiontowns.org/> Information on "transition towns" in the UK.

<http://transitionculture.org/> Website of Rob Hopkins, the transition towns pioneer, with good background information. For details of the effective community development approach used, see Rob's presentation (workshop 2) at the Soil Association conference.

Soil Association: The Soil Association 2007 annual conference focused on one planet agriculture, and preparing for a post-peak oil food and farming future. This was seen as the starting point for a long term campaign.

<http://www.soilassociation.org/conference> Presentations and materials from the conference are available on the website: these are an excellent resource. The One Planet Agriculture Handbook for Practical Action will be available soon.