

Running on Empty--Gas Pains Provoke Higher Anxiety

*“The fundamental driver of the 20th Century’s economic prosperity has been an abundant supply of **cheap oil.**”*

Thus begins an article by a petroleum exploration geologist, Colin Campbell, on the subject of what has come to be known as “Peak Oil.” His article in Scientific American in 1998, marked the beginning of a series of publications, conferences, articles and web sites devoted to the issue of what happens when the world runs into a “slight problem.” Demand for petroleum is still growing in spite of declining production and dwindling supplies. Even though Shell Oil got busted in 2002 for lying about its reserves, the subject has been largely untouched by the mainstream media. The implications of this historical development are hard to grasp in their entirety. As one writer on the subject noted wryly, people really have a low tolerance for reality. Predictions by a wide range of experts range from dire to worse.

The President of the United States, George W. Bush, has received briefings on the subject, but has not addressed the issue with the degree of concern that is warranted. Words by his father at an environmental conference in 1992, “The American life style is not up for negotiation,” may sum up his position on the subject. Sooner, not later it now appears, the American life style will run into Murphys law: “if you don’t deal with reality, reality will deal with you.”

Even prior to the invasion of Iraq, the collapse of Yukos in Russia, the dramatic surge of demand in China, and before prices rose to the historic high of \$60 per barrel, Colin Campbell expressed a certain incredulity, at the lack of society to put a patch on the Achilles” heel of modern industrial civilization:

All of this is so incredibly obvious, being clearly revealed by even the simplest analysis of discovery and production trends. The inexplicable part is our great reluctance to look reality in the face and at least make some

plans for what promises to be one of the greatest economic and political discontinuities of all time.

Where Campbell's work focuses on the specifics of petroleum discovery, production and consumption trends, a new book, *The Long Emergency*, by James Howard Kunstler, provides both an overview of the petroleum situation, a less than optimistic look at the hoped-for alternatives and a grim portrayal of the possibilities for post-petroleum life in the US, region by hard-hit region. The take home message—if you're close to fertile farmland and don't need air conditioning, you're much better off. The 1500 mile average transportation before a food item gets consumed in the US as well as the 12,000 mile trip from manufacture to sale which characterizes global Wall Mart operations are likely to go the way of inefficient organisms faced with a sudden change in climate.

It is worthy of note that the peak oil scenario did not surface in the pages of Greenpeace, the Sierra Club Magazine or the Earth First Journal. A recent study for the US Department of Energy demonstrates even further that this is not just another conspiracy theory, or some eco-freak rambling by the doom and gloom types who are always anti-progress. It was prepared by Robert L. Hirsch, a senior energy programme adviser at the private Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC), the same policy advocacy company which has received \$658,000 in funding from Exxon Mobil since 1998 to refute the idea that global warming is the result of burning fossil fuels. Those are pretty good non-fringe group credentials.

The report traces three scenarios. Twenty years before the refuse hits the rotating blade we sort of make it through an uncomfortable transition. "Without massive mitigation more than a decade before the fact, the problem will be pervasive and will not be temporary." (Note the foreboding echo with the title of the book by Kunstler—*The Long Emergency*.) If we wait until we are in the midst of the oil crunch, we get squeezed hard, fast and long.

One of the difficulties lies in knowing just when it will happen. As in the case of Shell Oil, the numbers are always a matter of guesswork, educated or not. Nonetheless, the report by Hirsch spells out a

scenario of symptoms indicative of the zero hour. One reviewer calls this “the most worrying aspect of the report, as it seems to describe the very events that are taking place at the moment.”

If all that is not enough to make you reach for the Valium, the DOE report concludes: "the world has never faced a problem like this. Previous energy transitions were gradual and evolutionary. Oil peaking will be abrupt and revolutionary".

So, let's assume you are fortunate enough to be reading this in a country where it never freezes, never gets much hotter than 98 degrees and where 80% of the electricity is generated by hydropower. Let's say you have some land and are thinking of building a house. What kind of decisions can be made now that will help you feel both comfortable and real smart if the future turns out somewhat as painted above.

1. Build smart, low maintenance employ natural ventilation and cooling and think seriously about some minimal solar and wind back up. (*Feeling at Home in Paradise Naturally*, The Howler, April 2005) You might also consider cluster designs, they are easier to ventilate and if you're like me a lot of friends now seem to think that moving to Costa Rica was not so crazy, they all want to visit. Soon.

2. Design and build access roads which last, every time the dozer and dump trucks come to fix the mess you or your developer made is going to cost more and more as time goes on. (Note, when you see a hydrogen powered or hybrid dump truck or dozer please inform me, as yet they are not on the market.)

3. Build water conservation into your house and landscape. As energy prices inevitably rise, so do pumping costs. At present electricity rationing in Costa Rica is forecast by 2007, without taking into account the effects of peak oil.

4. Smile at your neighbors, say hi, learn Spanish. In the book by Kunstler he foresees that regions with greater social cohesion will fare much better than others.

5. You might take a new interest in the agricultural traditions of our region.

Before the environmental Holocaust of the cattle boom Guanacaste was largely self sufficient in food production. The next time you see a guy out there with a stick, poking holes in the ground and planting corn, consider this simple fact: corn agriculture has fed this part of the world for 6000 years. They harvest more calories in food energy than they invest in work energy; it's just like a business. Otherwise they go out of business. The sources above indicate that that is precisely what is going to happen with the oil based culture—and agriculture--of North America. Kunstler argues that we will have to go full circle, back to tilling the soil if we want to eat.

Frankly, that doesn't come as such bad news to some of us who relocated to Guanacaste. After all, there is an old Chinese proverb: *If you want to live a long life, grow a garden.* Giving away surplus food is one of the best ways to cultivate friendships. The Long Emergency promises to put new meaning into the expression, "a friend in need, is a friend indeed."

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