



Preparing for peak oil

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At an April 11 panel discussion, film and television writer-producer Jon Cooksey decided to focus on the emotional impact of rapidly diminishing oil supplies rather than on the numbers. Cooksey, a member of the Vancouver Peak Oil Executive, told the audience of more than 100 people at the Ukrainian Orthodox Church that it was a “very hard transition” for him to accept that this century won’t be an extrapolation of what happened in the past.

He predicted that humanity will soon experience a “discontinuity” because of diminishing oil supplies and sharply rising energy prices. Cooksey—who is making a humorous film about peak oil, global warming, and other pressing issues—also expressed worries about his daughter’s future. He acknowledged that the end of cheap oil required him to learn more about food production than just how to grow mould in his refrigerator.

“I do not come to this as Farmer John,” Cooksey quipped. “I’m as urban as a spark plug.”

Then he explained why he started spending time with members of the Vancouver Peak Oil Executive, a citizens’ group trying to promote solutions to peak oil in Metro Vancouver. “I want to go someplace and not feel crazy,” Cooksey said. “I want to go someplace where I can talk about this with other people who don’t think I’m a nut.”

Now, Cooksey doesn’t appear quite so nutty.

When the first peak-oil story appeared in the Georgia Straight in May 2003, a barrel of oil sold for US\$25. When the Straight published a cover story on peak oil in October 2005, the price had passed US\$70 per barrel. Earlier this month, oil reached US\$112 per barrel. The world is consuming approximately 85 million barrels of oil per day; the U.S. uses more than 20 million barrels per day, with the majority imported from abroad.

University of Arizona professor Guy R. McPherson pointed out in a recent essay on Straight.com that a 1.1-million-barrel decline in world oil production between 2005 and 2007 resulted in a doubling of the price of crude oil. McPherson wrote that in the future, oil at \$100 per barrel “will seem like the good old days”.

Over the past few years, a bunch of books have been published on the subject with such titles as *The Party’s Over*; *Twilight in the Desert*; *Blood and Oil*; and *The Last Oil Shock*. They all convey a looming Armageddon after the world surpasses peak oil production.

Peak-oil authors point out that as petroleum becomes more inaccessible, it is more expensive to extract. Because so much of our economy, including agriculture, is built upon petroleum, peak-oil theorists say that rapidly escalating fuel prices will threaten world food supplies and lead to mass migration out of large cities.

Recent bestselling books, such as Jared Diamond’s *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* and Jane Jacobs’s *Dark Age Ahead*, offer insights into what happens when civilizations crumble. Jacobs used the phrase “mass amnesia” to describe the disappearance of education, culture, and even traditional diets. Though the topic of civilizational collapse won’t lead television newscasts, it’s a very real possibility in the eyes of some peak-oil theorists, including McPherson.

Here in Vancouver, another book lays out a blueprint for addressing this situation before it happens. *Strategic Sustainable Planning: A Civil Defense Manual for Cultural Survival* (Old City Foundation Press, 2007), by Vancouver architect and planner Richard Balfour and architect Eileen McAdam Keenan, was the product of two seminars by the Vancouver Planning Commission. People were put into crisis situations and forced to make sustainable-planning decisions in four different peak-oil scenarios.

Balfour, who chaired the commission's strategic-sustainable-planning committee, was also on the panel at the Ukrainian Orthodox Church on April 11. Whereas other speakers, including District of North Vancouver mayor Richard Walton, adopted a positive approach, Balfour didn't mince his words.

"Somebody has to be Dr. Doom up here, so I'll play the role tonight," Balfour said to scattered laughter in the audience. "Before I give you hope, I want to give you a despair message."

He said that planning processes are based on linear projections, whereas the future will bring unpredictable changes. He added that there are already too many people who are consuming too much. It isn't just a matter of peak oil, he noted, it's "peak everything", including molybdenum, copper, and water resources.

"I think this is not a normal time in history," he warned. "Everything you now have, you can't take for granted."

Balfour said that the patterns of communities will have a dramatic impact on people's likelihood of survival in an age of severely curtailed oil. He said that big cities are not sustainable because supply chains won't be able to provide necessary volumes of food. He called for a massive emphasis on building rail-transportation networks, as well as for the creation of "green fingers" of vegetation into cities to promote urban agriculture.

Citing a provincial government report on B.C.'s food self-reliance, *Strategic Sustainable Planning* notes that the province produces more than 1.5 billion kilograms of dairy, meat and alternatives, vegetables, fruits, and grains. B.C. residents consume more than twice as much food in these categories.

In an interview after the panel discussion, Balfour said that in the age of peak oil, it's imperative to claw back all the land that has been removed from the Agricultural Land Reserve over the past 20 years. When asked what the real carrying capacity of the Lower Mainland would be in an era of diminished oil supplies, Balfour said it might be half the current figure of two million. He has even created a "die-off curve", and predicted that major problems will begin within six years if nothing is done.

"That's why we're doing the exercises—to be optimistic," he said. "You have to say, 'Here's the looming disasters. Here's the global impacts coming together.'"

Balfour also advocates putting housing on hillsides and leaving valley floors free for food production. And he says planners in Vancouver are taking "baby steps" based on linear projections. "They're not doing the radical shift that's needed," Balfour said, noting a pressing need for flat roofs in the city to facilitate more food production.

Balfour's book contains aerial images of various cities around the world and evaluates their preparedness for a post-oil economy. Havana, Cuba, ranks very highly because the U.S. trade embargo has already forced the country to become more self-sufficient. The authors also praise Osnabrück, Germany, and Moscow for retaining greenspace. Shanghai and Los Angeles, on the other hand, come in for criticism.

Despite the recent jump in oil prices, not everyone accepts that petroleum production has peaked. In B.C., Michael Walker, founder of the Fraser Institute, and SFU resource economist Mark Jaccard have both suggested there are ample supplies of energy in the world. The environment and energy correspondent for the *Economist*, Vijay Vaitheeswaran, has ridiculed what he has called the "Depletion Doomsday Gang": a group of petroleum geologists who have decried governments' unwillingness to address peak oil.

In his 2003 book, *Power to the People: How the Coming Energy Revolution Will Transform an Industry, Change Our Lives, and Maybe Even Save the Planet*, Vaitheeswaran described leading peak-oil theorists Colin Campbell and Jean Laherrère as extreme pessimists. “It turns out there is much more oil hidden away under the earth’s surface than most people imagined back in the 1970s, and technology is making much more of it recoverable,” Vaitheeswaran wrote.

In 2006, Vaitheeswaran penned a special feature in the *Economist*, “Steady As She Goes: Why the World Is Not About to Run Out of Oil”, citing the work of Cambridge Energy Research Associates, former International Monetary Fund chief economist Kenneth Rogoff, researchers at the libertarian Cato Institute, and ExxonMobil, among others. Vaitheeswaran suggested that technological innovation will offset any shortfall in conventional oil supplies. As examples, he cited the growing reliance on heavy oil and creating a new form of diesel from natural gas.

Meanwhile, the president of the B.C. Institute of Agrologists, Keith Duhaime, recently caused a flap with some of the province’s soil experts when he also took a shot at peak-oil theory in the profession’s February newsletter. Citing the 2006 article in the *Economist*, Duhaime wrote: “Rarely a day passes when the popular press does not indulge itself in propagating hysteria in the form of an errant obsession with ‘peak oil’ or the ridiculous hyping of local food, to mention but two examples.... Often these simplistic revelations are sourced and/or proffered by a supposed think tank or visionary whose true ‘food security’ issue might have be [sic] rooted in their self interest to scare up some grub to butter their bread with, [rather] than a genuine interest to enlighten the public.”

On April 13, well-known agrologist and writer Wendy Holm submitted a rebuttal to the institute’s newsletter. “It is unacceptable for the incoming (now sitting) President of the BC Institute of Agrologists to label peak oil and local food as ‘simplistic revelations’ and ‘errant obsessions’ pursued by those whose ‘self-interest is to scare up some grub to butter their bread’. Both are serious discussions that should be better understood by all professionals.”

In the February newsletter, Duhaime encouraged agrologists to “challenge our fellow professionals” when passion gets ahead of reason, noting there are procedures for doing this through the institute’s conduct and discipline committee. Duhaime mentioned the possibility of “fines, suspensions, and even expulsion”. Holm’s rebuttal stated that this, too, was “unacceptable”.

“We as an institute must encourage, not muzzle, the important contributions Agrologists can and should make to public discussion of matters impacting agriculture and public policy,” Holm wrote.

UBC agriculture professor Art Bomke wrote that the content of the February newsletter was so disturbing to him that for the first time in nearly 30 years in the institute, he felt like not renewing his membership. Another agrologist, Arthur Hadland, wrote a letter to Holm expressing his support. “I find it abhorrent that ALR land is now being viewed as a land bank for urban development purposes,” he stated.

In the Lower Mainland last year, 65 of the 111 applications to remove land from the Agricultural Land Reserve were approved. On Vancouver Island last year, 48 of the 71 exclusion applications were approved. Some were simple home-site severances, according to Holm.

If the peak-oil theorists such as Balfour are correct, agrologists could play an increasingly important role in helping B.C. feed itself and prevent people from starving to death. But if the agrologists’ self-regulating organization muzzles them every time a developer wants to remove a parcel from the Agricultural Land Reserve, it could have the opposite effect.

Hadland’s letter to Holm included the following quotation from Daniel Webster: “Never forget that the cultivation of the earth is the most important labour of man. When tillage begins, other arts follow. The farmers therefore are the founders of civilization.”

And as Jane Jacobs and Jared Diamond pointed out in their books, without farmers, a civilization is far more vulnerable to collapse.

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