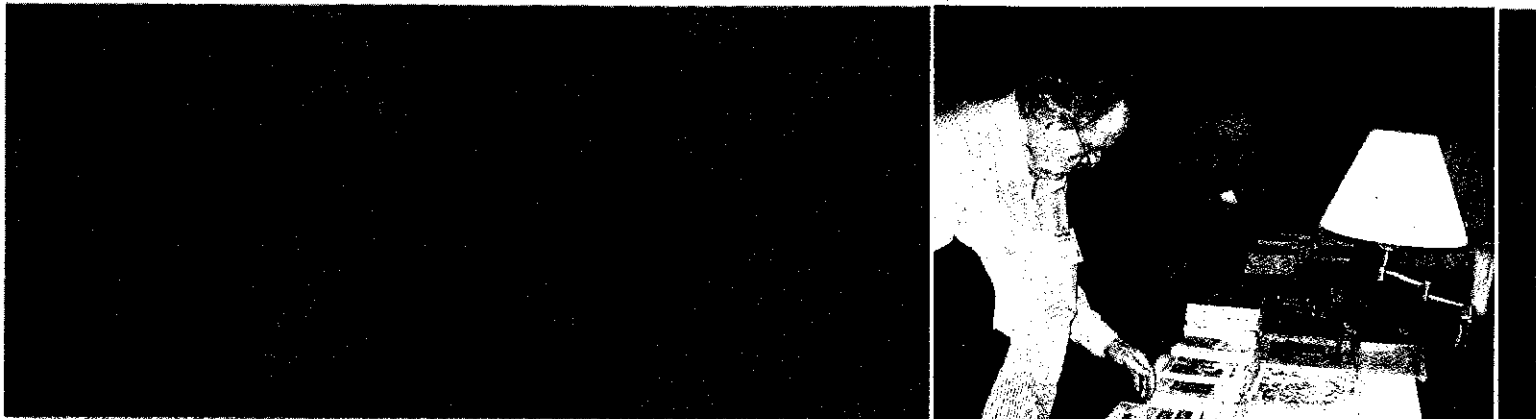


# When the Oil R

## Antioch Conference Discusses Preemptive Alternative



It was a late afternoon on a crisp, early autumn day in Yellow Springs when I biked to the Third U.S. Conference on Peak Oil (held September 22-24) on the Antioch College campus. Opting for the bike seemed to be the appropriate choice, not only because I imagined parking would be tight, but also because I was about to embark on a weekend of examining the implications of Peak Oil.

I got there and sure enough, the streets around the college were bumper to bumper with Priuses and Insights sporting license plates from Maine to Florida, and there was nary a Hummer in sight.

For the third year in a row, Community Solution — a local organization dedicated to the growth and development of small communities — has sponsored this conference.

But what is Peak Oil, exactly?

It refers to the point in time when we will have used up roughly half of the recoverable oil reserves — conventional oil that has dominated world oil production and will likely continue to do so in the future — left in the world. In 1956, M. King Hubbert, a geophysicist and chief consultant for Shell Oil, created what became known as Hubbert's Curve. His prediction that U.S. oil production would peak in 1970 was widely ridiculed, and Hubbert was considered a quack until approximately 1973, when his analysis proved to be remarkably accurate. Apparently, peaks become more quantifiable in retrospect. He went on to

optimistic 2030, which is the view coming from the U.S. Department of Energy. The issue of what will happen on the downside of the peak is troubling, to say the least. One might conclude that if it took us 140 years from the beginning of the Industrial Revolution to use up this much oil, we probably have less than another 140 years left, taking into account increased populations and technology, to develop alternative energy resources.

This line of thinking is complicated by several factors. The first being that analysis of countries that have already peaked in their oil production — for example, the UK, Norway, and Venezuela — indicates that the drop-off from the peak is very steep. Another issue is the rate at which our consumption steadily increases each year, particularly with the booming economic growth in China and India.

A third factor is the difficult question of supply. The fact is that we have no idea how much oil Saudi Arabia — our chief supplier — really has left or which of their major oil fields, now over 50 years old, are near or past their peaks. We believe what they tell us because we don't have much choice. They are under no obligation to provide any internal data, and they do not allow foreign inspections of their oil fields.

Matthew Simmons, a leading energy investment banker to the likes of Halliburton, GE and the World Bank, energy policy adviser to the 2000 Bush-Cheney campaign, and author of the recent book, *Twilight in the*

assumptions, that oil usage will grow by at least 30-50 percent over the next 25 years. In other words, we would end up with only 70 percent of the oil we have today when we would need to have 150 percent."

Back at the leafy Antioch College campus, the convocation was in progress. The weekend was filled with lectures and workshops on everything from how to build a straw bale house (energy savings: 75 percent) and how to retrofit existing houses to how to dig up your front lawn and plant a "Victory Garden," a term resurrected and dusted off from World War II, when people turned to growing their own food to supplement their rations.

This was not a conference for Peak Oil newbies. While Antioch's Kelly Hall played host to over 300 participants across a diverse range of ages, geographic locations, and walks of life — farmers, teachers, builders, activists, to name a few — this was clearly a group already up to speed on the issue and ready to glean some hands-on information on what to do next.

The draw for many this weekend was undoubtedly Richard Heinberg, the unofficial leader of the Peak Oil movement, author of *The Party's Over: Oil and the Fate of Industrial Civilization*, and a professor at the New School in Santa Barbara, California. Heinberg was unassuming in appearance but projected a commanding presence onstage. He was a lively and funny speaker and led the audience through an update on Peak Oil, including a rebuttal to the hits the theory has taken in the

flow coming to market.

"Jack 2 is eventually expected to produce 400,000 barrels per day, while America alone currently consumes 21 million barrels a day," he said. "The U.S. government itself predicts a rate of increase in world oil consumption of 1.4 percent a year, to 98.3 million barrels a day in 2015 to 118 million barrels a day in 2030. At that rate, it doesn't look like Jack 2 is going to make any significant contribution to offsetting Peak Oil."

Heinberg's latest book is *The Oil Depletion Protocol*, the title of which refers to an international agreement that will enable nations to cooperatively reduce their dependence on oil by 2.6 percent per year. It was initially proposed by Colin Campbell, a prominent petroleum geologist and founder of the Association for the Study of Peak Oil and Gas. Whereas the famous Kyoto protocols focus on what comes out of the tailpipe, the Oil Depletion Protocol focuses on what goes into it. Heinberg is currently promoting the initiative worldwide.

While it seems like a long shot that the U.S., China or Russia would voluntarily adopt such a long-range plan to reduce dependence on fossil fuels (Sweden being one of the only countries that has pledged to be fossil fuel-free by 2020), Heinberg stressed that without taking such measures, we will be exposing ourselves to price volatility, increased international conflicts over remaining oil reserves, accelerated climate change, and the danger of trying to produce oil at maximum

# UNS DRY

## Energy Solutions by HOLLY HUDSON



rather than taking less heroin."

"Focusing on bio-fuels or corn-based ethanol and hoping that the market or latest technology will rescue us in the eleventh hour is no substitute for simply consuming less," Heinberg said.

Next, Julian Darley, author of *High Noon for Natural Gas*, took the stage. Founder of the Post Carbon Institute, which is described as a "think tank for an energy-constrained world," Darley introduced the idea of "global relocalization" as an antidote to globalization, the former being the pursuit of rebuilding and retrofitting communities to strengthen local production, shortening supply chains, moving from a foot to fuel economy, and building low-energy infrastructure. He encouraged us to borrow from the past in our thinking of solutions to today's problems.

"Just as the composers Bach and Handel were great borrowers of their time, we should borrow from the infrastructure and architecture of European cities in considering how to build close-knit, sustainable communities for the future," Darley said.

Other speakers included David Orr, the eminent environmentalist and author of *Earth in Mind* and many more, who gave a rousing political speech that skewered America's mass consumerism (4 percent of the world's population consumes 26 percent of its energy) and proposed that corporate power is the main reason why climate change and Peak Oil have not found its way onto the political agenda.

A 10-foot-high PowerPoint presentation projected tentacles of darting hurricane paths

Saturday night, the conference diverted from the practical to the more esoteric and spiritual aspects of the issue. Vicki Robin, co-author of the bestselling *Your Money or Your Life*, gave an impassioned talk on the idea that freedom and restraint are not mutually exclusive.

"The very word, 'limits,' is practically off-limits for discussion in American society," she said. "Yet the boundaries of our world are sites of incredible creativity if you honor them."

She challenged the audience to redefine limits as the "shaping tools of freedom" — an invitation to learn to live lightly yet creatively in a world of finite resources.

In between lectures, the crowd gathered outside, many eating apples provided by nearby orchards and networking as if it were a software conference. The two days were packed end-to-end with speakers on sustainable building, permaculture (an ecological design system that aims to create sustainable habitats by following natural patterns) and relocalization. There was a student from Ohio State University who recently switched his major to environmental economics and was considering investing in compact fluorescent bulbs for his apartment to see how much energy he and his roommates could save. There was also a massage therapist from Hawaii who came to learn how to start a biodynamic farm. Then there was the trucking company worker from Dayton who said he talks to anyone who will listen about Peak Oil.

"It's not just about having enough money to feed your SUV," he said. "It's about not being

farm with her husband in upstate New York. At one point she came out from behind the podium, stood before the audience, and said, "Look at me. I'm average. If I can do this, any one of you can do this."

When Peter Bane addressed the packed hall, he predicted that the coming decade will be defined by the question, "Who feeds you and whom do you feed?" He felt that we may well see a return to the traditional social groups that characterized the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where it was customary for 15-25 people to live closely together. He elicited groans of laughter when he itemized the potential roster of people.

"Grandma and grandma, sons and daughters, spouses, kids, a spinster aunt, a couple of orphans and hired hands," he said.

One of the last speakers was Pat Murphy, Executive Director of Community Solution, who introduced their plan for a "Smart Jitney," a small bus that carries passengers over a regular route on a flexible schedule. The jitney would be fitted with a "Smart Jitney Cell phone," GPS system, emergency call button and a reservation/tracking computer system — a thinking-outside-the-box solution to America's insistence on individual car ownership.

The weekend was finally drawing to a close, and I was wiped out, my brain shifting into some previously unknown gear in an attempt to process all the new information I'd absorbed.

I expected to be more depressed after being

cabal of geeky doomsayers. He seemed to suggest that "Peakists" have chosen to believe in Peak Oil as if it were an act of faith requiring some sort of personal salvation, when in fact it's a thesis now supported both by a large body of scientific evidence and experts from a wide political spectrum and diverse fields of interest. For example, a major supporter of the movement is the hard-line conservative congressman Roscoe Bartlett (R-Maryland).

Even if you take the wild-eyed, optimistic view of plentiful, cheap oil for another 20 years, how can we not act now to change our habits, both as individuals and as a country? As Dr. Bob Brecha, the straw bale house builder and professor at UD asked the audience, "How often are we faced with the opportunity to make slight changes in our behavior to address three major world problems at once — climate change, peak oil, and international conflicts? How can we not act?"

By Sunday night, there was a whiff of nascent revolution in the air, a tangible expectancy that somehow this group of 300 strong would begin the work of knitting our communities together, relocalizing our economies, work lives, and food production, and redefining our longstanding love affair with the automobile.

When it comes to the idea of Peak Oil occurring in my lifetime, and certainly my children's lifetime, I decided I can either choose to ignore it, to "keep on trucking" (no pun intended), or I can start with three practical ways to consume less oil: buy locally