

Peak Oil as “Opportunity”?

Overestimating the Preparedness of the Ecovillage and Permaculture Movements

By Jonathan Dawson 1558 words

Within the permaculture and ecovillage communities, the dominant response to Peak Oil is one of jubilation. Finally, the juice that powers the juggernaut of monopoly capitalism, crushing all in its path, is drying up. The flowers of biodiversity, so the story goes, will once again bloom and small-scale community economies will thrive. Permaculture will move centre-stage as the philosophical foundation of the new decentralised societies and ecovillages will be their principal laboratories for social and technological innovation.

However, there are strong grounds for suggesting that we are misreading the situation and seriously over-estimating the preparedness of the permaculture and ecovillage movements for the social revolution that lies before us. Just because corporations will not be able to survive the coming energy famine does not necessarily mean that we will see a smooth transition to the kind of societies we envision, or that we will be embraced as the harbingers of the new age. Human societies are set upon a considerably more hazardous and unpredictable path than the prophets of a cosy new ecovillage-driven sustainability would have us believe.

The truest thing to say about the looming Peak Oil crisis is that, at its heart, it is not primarily about oil at all. If it were that simple, there might just be some grounds for optimism in the search for the magic elixir of an alternative source of fuel. The mere visible tip of the iceberg is our reaching the mid-way point in the exhaustion of global oil supplies. The real problem, of course—the body of the iceberg—is the scale and nature of global human society that easy access to oil has made possible.

Last fall in Massachusetts, I saw road-kill on an unparalleled scale. Seems that in 2003, there had been a bumper harvest of acorns. 2004 had seen a return to normal harvest levels. But so immediate had been the rise in squirrel fertility in response to the increase in food supply, that by the Fall, numbers were unsustainably high. The squirrels were taking risks on the road they normally wouldn't, knowing that without additional supplies, they would not make it through the winter. This is ecology at work. It is called die-off. So it is with all species, even our own.

Oil is astonishingly energy-rich. There is nothing quite like it. A gallon of the stuff will take an average-sized car somewhere in the region of 35 miles. Imagine how many person-hours

would be required to push the car that far. Then, reflect on the fact that 150 years ago in the US, 85 percent of all energy expended was muscle-power—draft animals and human power. As we head down the path of oil descent, this is our return destination point.

I have in my library a book that charts the trends in human population for every country in the world since records were kept. In almost every case, the level curve suddenly shoots upwards from the middle of the nineteenth century. Oil was first drilled in Pennsylvania in the 1850s. The chart for England is especially interesting since the records go back to the Domesday book, written almost 1,000 years ago. Before 1750, the population never rises above five million (and on the two occasions that it touches five million, it drops sharply almost immediately afterwards due to plague and resource wars). Today, the population of England is 50 million. The first homework assignment I set my undergraduate students is “Describe the various ways in which we eat oil.” The second is “What will the global human population be in 2100 and why?”

These are among the concerns that are all too easily described by permaculturists and ecovillagers as an “opportunity.” Of course, one understands where they are coming from. Society will have no choice but to take its foot off the accelerator pedal. The huge surpluses on which the great concentrations of power and wealth are dependent will no longer be possible. Life must necessarily become simpler and more decentralised and, to survive, people will need to become much more knowledgeable about the specificities of their own bioregions.

This is very much in congruence with the ecovillage vision. It looks, in broad outline, much like the type of world we are seeking to model. Moreover, ecovillages are in the forefront of exactly those types of applied research, demonstration, and training that will be required in the transition: saving seeds, developing place-specific technologies for growing food, energy-efficient housing, energy generation, and so on. Perhaps most important of all, ecovillages are modern pioneers in creating a culture based on the abundance of simplicity.

However, appearances can be deceptive and what looks like an opportunity can, on closer inspection, look considerably more threatening. Two implicit beliefs among leaders of the ecovillage and permaculture movements who write on the subject appear to be especially naïve and complacent. The first belief is that the crisis brought upon by dwindling oil supplies will be serious enough to force the disintegration of global capitalism but not so serious as to inflict a wholesale breakdown in the social order. The picture painted all too often (see, for example, David Holgrem’s article in *Permaculture* magazine, #46) is of suburban neighbourhoods needing to do little more than replace their lawns with fruit trees and create some shared play-space. No mention here of an authoritarian state using the opportunity of crisis to strengthen its powers or of hungry mobs requisitioning food supplies at the point of a gun.

The second belief is that because of the nature of the work we are engaged in, ecovillagers will be the natural inheritors and pioneers of the new age dawning. That, in some sense, we need simply wait for the new Jerusalem to be delivered into our hands. This, I think, is dangerous folly. There are great perils on the post-Peak Oil path that we are embarked on and for ecovillages to even survive, never mind thrive, they are likely to need to change radically.

Let us consider how the transition to a state of sustainability is likely to roll out. Richard Heinberg provides powerful arguments to support our common-sense intuition that this is most unlikely to be achieved as part of a consciously chosen and planned power-down strategy. Much more plausible is a scenario in which global supply lines crumble and food shortages follow in short order. What follows then is unlikely to be pretty. Hunger, as I know from two decades working in Africa, is a terrible and degrading thing. It is no friend of appreciative, reasoned argument. It pays scant heed to ideological or aesthetic purity as found in ecovillages.

One thing and one thing alone can serve to keep ecovillages from being swept away in the great hungry tide. That is, they must become so deeply embedded in and of service to their own local social economies that the more conventional surrounding communities will protect them. It is only if ecovillage R&D and training activities are geared specifically to the post-Peak Oil needs of their surrounding populations that this is likely to happen.

Yet, all too often, relations between ecovillages and their surrounding communities are strained. Ecovillages, especially those that are dependent on income from educational activities, often prioritise relations with their consumer base or ideological allies in cities and countries far away over those with their immediate neighbours. This breeds the kind of resentment that will serve us ill in a post-Peak Oil world.

Moreover, the great majority of places that call themselves ecovillages are simply too small to be called, in any meaningful sense, centres of research, demonstration, and training appropriate to the needs of the times to come. By becoming marginally more self-reliant in food and having one or two energy-generating devices, small groups of well-meaning people are most unlikely to be considered sufficiently relevant to the well-being of their surrounding communities as to be worth protecting.

Here at the Findhorn Foundation ecovillage, all our marketing for educational courses is now geared towards the UK. Having taught undergraduates from universities in the US for some years, we are now dialoguing with Scottish universities to explore the development of local partnerships. Our organic CSA farm caters for many local consumers outside of the ecovillage. Our theatre draws crowds in from the surrounding areas for a vibrant diet of concerts, theatre, and cinema.

This is a growing trend in the ecovillage movement. The German ecovillage, ZEGG, won several awards in 2005 (including the European Ecovillage Excellence Award) for its work in taking innovations developed within the ecovillage out into its bioregion. The Auroville community in India is ever more engaged in ecological restoration and social justice campaigning in support of local people. Ecovillage at Ithaca in upstate New York is deeply tied into its local educational landscape and is an active player in a programme to make Tompkins County the lowest ecological-footprint county in the US.

We are headed in the right direction, but there is a long way to go—and the time is short. Ecovillages are all too often caught between the present requirement to cater to the needs of their paymasters (those workshop participants, often living far away, paying for the ecovillage's educational courses) and the impending imperative to be of primary service to their own bioregion. Resolving or transcending this conflict in ways that keep us financially afloat in the short term and locally integrated in the long term is the heart of the journey that lies before us.

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(Note: We preserve the spelling of our Commonwealth country authors.)

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