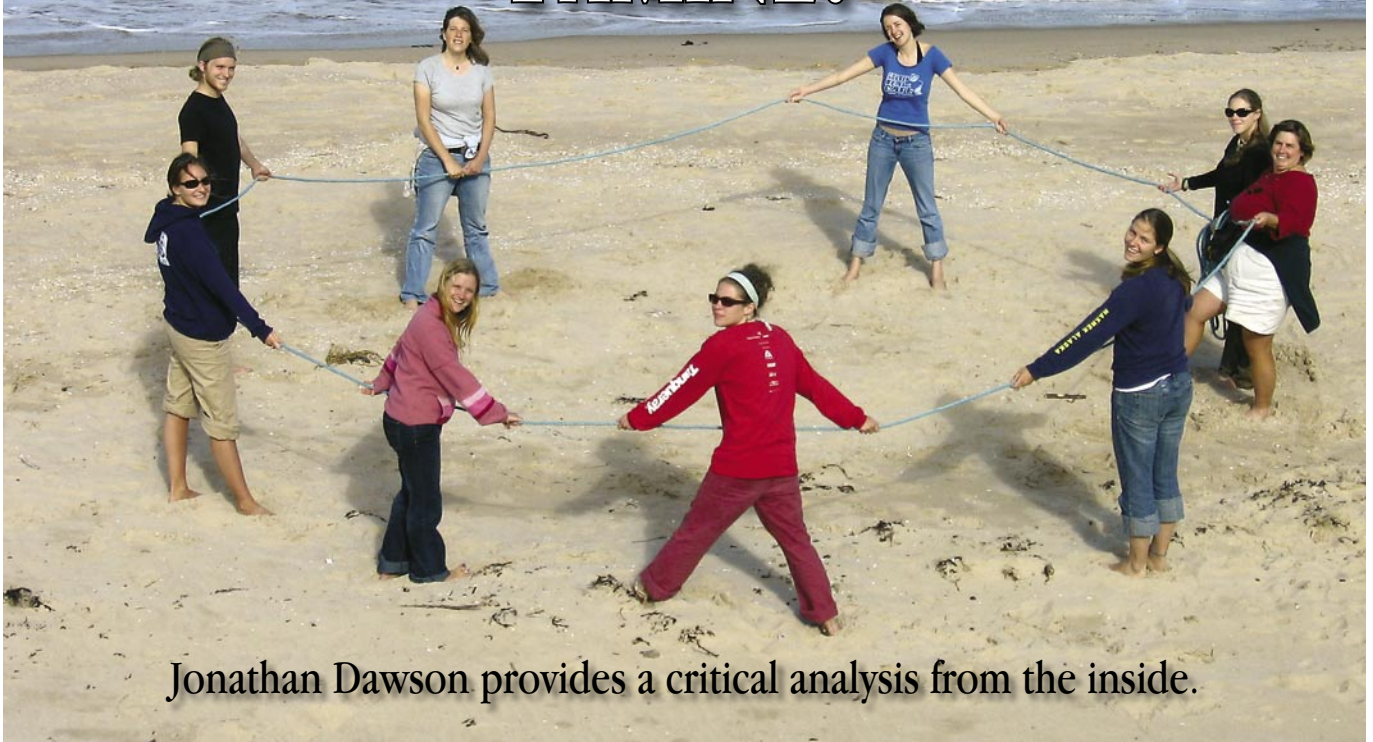


# ARE ECOVILLAGES A SOLUTION TO THE COMING ENERGY FAMINE?



Jonathan Dawson provides a critical analysis from the inside.

*“I am reminded also of friends in several intentional communities and ecovillages around the world who have... decided to pursue Powerdown and lifeboat-building strategies simultaneously. While they engage in activism on many fronts – participating vigorously in the anti-globalisation, peace, and environmental movements – they also have established rural bases where they save heirloom seeds, build their own homes from natural and locally available materials and hone other life-support skills that they and future generations will need. I admire those people unreservedly: if there is a sane path from where we are to a truly sustainable future, these folks have surely found it.”*

Richard Heinberg, *Powerdown*

**T**he 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 real problem, of course – the great body of the iceberg whose mere visible tip is our reaching the mid-way point in the exhaustion of oil global supplies – is the scale and nature of global human society, which easy access to oil has made possible.

In the Fall of 2004 in Massachusetts, there was squirrel road-kill like I have never seen before. 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 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% 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 Philadelphia 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?’

This is the scenario that is 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 specifics 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 envision. 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, they are modern pioneers in creating a culture based on the abundance of simplicity.

#### NAIVE

However, appearances can be deceptive and what looks like an opportunity can, on closer inspection look considerably more threatening. I note two implicit beliefs within the permaculture and ecovillage families that I find naive. The first is that the crisis will be serious enough to force the disintegration of global capitalism but not so serious as to cause deep and widespread suffering in the general population. And what of the likely authoritarian reaction of the state, using the opportunity of crisis to strengthen its powers. In this context, claims that Peak Oil and the socio-economic consequences it forces upon us are to be welcomed appear facile.

The second 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 my 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 saving.

#### LOCAL REORIENTATION

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 partnerships. Our organic CSA box scheme 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 is deeply tied into its local educational infrastructure and is an active player in a programme to make Tompkins County the lowest footprint county in the US.

But if we are headed in the right direction, 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, often living far away, paying for their 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 .

*Jonathan Dawson is the Executive Secretary of GEN-Europe (the Global Ecovillage Network). He has spent the last 15 years working as a consultant, project manager, author and educator in the field of appropriate technology and small enterprise promotion in Africa. Now living at Findhorn, Jonathan is exploring how Ecovillages in the global North can develop small-scale economies appropriate technologies to tread more lightly (and with greater fun and creativity) on the earth.*