

Designing Energy Descent Pathways: one community's attempt at designing a prosperous way down from the peak

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(Originally appeared in Permaculture Magazine Issue No. 45 (2005))

Traveller, there are no roads. Roads are made by travelling. Spanish proverb

Reaching the Peak

There is an emerging consensus now that we are either very close to or have passed the peak in world oil production. As someone who has been involved in environmental issues for 16 years, and permaculture for 13 years, I have to ask myself how I didn't see this one coming. Its implications are profound. No longer is it in any way an appropriate response to say 'we need to recycle', when the process of recycling require transporting recyclable waste long distances. We have to look much deeper at the whole waste question. An excellent recent report by Tim Lang and Jules Pretty "Farm Costs and Food Miles: An Assessment of the Full Cost of the UK Weekly Food Basket", argued that food could only be called sustainable when it is grown and consumed within a 20 mile radius. We have to build a local food economy from an almost totally non-existent base. There has been no time in history when anything less than 70% of the population were involved in some way in the production of food. Nowadays it is more like 6% (in Ireland), and of those, a high proportion would have lost much of that knowledge. 'Green' building that relies on imported 'ecological' materials from Germany or Denmark will no longer be viable, leading to our needing to rethink how we will actually construct energy efficient shelter in a lower energy near future. We are looking at the need for a process of localisation, of looking at what is essential to our lives (food, warmth, shelter, water) and rebuilding the local economy in such a way that it is actually able to supply these. The process of dismantling our diverse and complex local economics over the last 50-60 years was a disastrous one – it was easy to do but incredibly hard to rebuild.

The recent award winning film 'The End of Suburbia' is a very sobering look at the whole peak oil issue. It makes it very clear that the problem is of a scale that is almost unimaginable, and that the solutions are really not in place at all, or indeed anywhere near being so. We are so dependent on oil for every aspect of our lives, that its gradual (or rapid, depending on who you listen to...) but steady disappearance from our lives will force us to redesign our communities and our own lives. We need to relearn the skills that sustained our ancestors; crafts, local medicines, the great art of growing food. This is a big challenge. This is THE big challenge.

Becoming Aware

My introduction to all this came through meeting Dr Colin Campbell. He lives in Ballydehob in West Cork, and sets up and runs the Association for the Study of Peak Oil. He worked in the oil industry for over 30 years, and since his retirement has devoted himself to researching the real picture in terms of oil availability, how much is left, where it is and so on. It is Colin who has really brought the awareness of Peak Oil to the world's

attention, untiringly travelling the world, lecturing governments, investment bankers, energy experts, telling them all the same thing, we are about to peak, and you need to re-evaluate what you are doing, because it is going to change everything.

Last September Colin came into Kinsale FEC to talk to my second year permaculture students, who had seen *The End of Suburbia* the previous day. Colin gave them an introduction to petroleum geology, how and where oil forms, and then went on to look how much is left and where it is. His presentation was so thorough and well researched that his findings were compelling. It was a real eye opener, for me and for the students. I met a friend the following week who said “what did you do to your students last week, they all looked ill for the rest of the week!”.

First Steps

This led on to our planning of the Kinsale Energy Descent Action Plan project. The term energy descent was originally used by ecologist Howard T Odum in his book ‘A Prosperous Way Down’, and was picked up and used by David Holmgren in his seminal ‘Permaculture, pathways and principles beyond sustainability’. It refers to the time beyond the peak, the downward trend in energy availability. Holmgren makes the point that we need to plan for this descent, rather than simply allowing it to unfold in a series of random and chaotic events. This point is also made by Richard Heinberg in his book ‘Powerdown - options and actions for a post-carbon future’, where he calls for a planned descent, an international response to Peak Oil on the same scale as a wartime mobilisation, to begin building a low energy future.

Another inspiration for me around that time was a talk I went to by a woman from a community organisation in the north of Ireland who was from a very dynamic community development group for a small town in decline. Farming was dying they felt, and they wanted a new direction for the town with a sustainability focus. What they did was bring in a sustainability ‘expert’ who told them that they needed to develop ‘eco-tourism’, and that that would be a sustainable replacement for farming. I was horrified by this; it seemed to me to be taking all the community’s eggs out of one basket and just putting them all into another. Also, all the ideas had come from the ‘expert’ rather than the community itself. I thought that actually a lot more would have been achieved by running a permaculture design course for the people in the village and letting the ideas come from them.

As the students and myself started looking around at the books available on the subject was that what was lacking was examples of towns who had actually started to look at this issue. Had anyone actually started to design pathways down from the peak for a settlement anywhere in the world? Cuba is an often cited example, but we have to remember that Cuba was forced to localise by circumstance (the Russian oil that had underpinned the country until that point being no longer available), and a friend who visited there recently expressed a feeling that there was no great enthusiasm for it among many people. What we wanted was to try and create an example (as we were unable to find one in practice) of a town looking at what Peak Oil will actually mean to them, and

to vision how they want a low-energy future to be. As there was no pathway for this in place, we had to make one up.

Starting from Scratch

The first thing we did was to visit a number of good permaculture/organic projects in the West Cork area for ideas and inspiration, but also to talk to their proprietors about what they saw as being practical responses to energy descent that they felt that they felt were tried and tested. That proved to be very interesting, and gave us some useful insights. We heard about the practical realities of making a living growing organic vegetables for local markets and how a changing economy would make that more viable. We heard about the realities of living off the grid, and the financial implications of doing so. We saw the practicalities of the people trying to put the first building blocks in place, and their visions for how things might change. We began to envisage a 3-4 year process of community consultation, education and awareness-raising, combined with practical implementation of projects on the ground and the formulation of a timetables plan for making this transition. This plan became christened the Kinsale Energy Descent Action Plan. The idea was that this year's second year students produce the first draft, which is then put out to the community for consultation, and then the following year's students revise the document and update it. We felt that this would take about 3 years to produce something nearing a definitive document, although there would always need to be space allowed for the document to adapt to developments, to be 'tweaked'.

We had brainstorm on each of the different areas we identified for the Action Plan. These were Food, Youth & Community, Education, Housing, Economy and Livelihoods, Health, Tourism, Transport, Waste, Energy and Marine Resources. Future years may add new categories to this, but it seemed a good starting list. We made Mind Maps of the issues raised and possible solutions to them. We also invited speakers into the class who had a lot of knowledge on some of these topics.

Kinsale 2021

On Saturday February 12th 2005 we held an event in Kinsale called "Kinsale in 2021 - Towards a Prosperous, Sustainable Future Together", which took place at Kinsale Town Hall. The event was presented as a 'community think-tank' in order to hear the community's ideas about how energy descent would affect the community and what might be done about it. Before the event we sent personal invitations to the people in Kinsale that we had identified as being the movers and shakers in the town, drawn from the sectors identified above. We also left the event open to the public and put posters up around the town. From the 60 people invited, about 35 turned up on the day. The event itself was opened by the Mayor of Kinsale, Mr Charles Henderson, who spoke of the importance of energy as an issue and how it affects all aspects of our lives and our economy. This was followed by a screening of 'The End of Suburbia'.

After the film, Thomas Riedmuller, who teaches Community Leadership at Kinsale FEC, introduced the concept of Open Space Technology as a tool for facilitating such events. Open Space is based on the idea that the most productive discussion and idea sharing at any event happens during the tea breaks. Open Space is, in essence, a long tea break,

where groups are formed to discuss certain issues, and everyone is free to move between discussion groups, based on the principal 'where you are is where you are meant to be', and 'if you feel you need to be somewhere else, go there'. Those assembled took to the Open Space model with great enthusiasm, and it was extremely productive. People were invited to identify the specific problems and issues that the film raised for them. These were then recorded on large sheets of paper and pinned up on the wall. These were then collated into subject areas, and each of these became the basis for a discussion group. The groups covered the following subjects, Food, Rebuilding Communities, Youth Group/Education, Business & Technology, Tourism and renewable energy.

The groups came up with a wealth of ideas and possibilities that were then fed back to the rest of the participants afterwards. The feedback after the day was very good. We learnt a few lessons from the event that would be helpful for people doing it again. Firstly, a lot of people sent apologies that they would have liked to come, but they were just too busy to give up a whole day. We found it difficult to come up with another model though, because for us it worked very well showing the film and then having the discussions straight away while the feeling of urgency that the film engenders is still fresh in their minds. We were able, thanks to the generosity of many cafes and restaurants in Kinsale who sponsored the event, to put on a sumptuous spread for lunch, which people loved, and which kept the energy of the event up. We wondered if it might have been good to have had a few screenings of the film in the community first, so some people could have seen it in advance one evening, and so wouldn't have had to give up so much of their time to attend the discussion. We found Open Space an excellent tool for getting people talking in a relaxed and informal way.

The Action Plan

After the event we collated the information that had come in from the day and pairs of students selected different subject areas. I supplied a wealth of reading material for background research, and the students did a lot of internet research of useful ideas and examples from around the world. The final result is the 'Kinsale Energy Descent Action Plan – Version.1. 2005' which is our first attempt at a year-by-year plan for the town. Each section of the report begins with a section called 'The Present'. This attempts to succinctly summarise what is the problem now, in 2005, with regards to the subject in question. This is followed by The Vision, which is written in such a way as to give the reader an idea of how Kinsale could be, if all the recommendations up to that point had been implemented. Part of the challenge with permaculture I feel is how we convey to people the concept that a lower energy future could be preferable, more fulfilling and more abundant and more fulfilling than the present. This section aims to do that, so that people can see in their minds eyes what it would look like.

This is then followed by a list of suggestions and recommendations, in chronological order. These are meant to be ambitious but also achievable, given a good deal of ambition and support. Each section is then rounded off with a collection of resources and internet links. The last section of the Action Plan is a proposal for a Kinsale Sustainability Centre. The idea is that the Centre would be formed with the brief of implementing the Action Plan, and would create 5 posts for students at the end of their second year. They would, in

effect, be Community Permaculture Field Workers, out in the town helping the community to put in place the steps of the Action Plan. The Sustainability Centre would act as a focus for the work, running courses and training, but also providing a service, providing initiatives such as an urban market garden.

Next Steps

Next years second years will take the Plan as it is and develop it further. The idea is to set up a series of Think Tank events, like the Kinsale 2021 day, but which are more specific to different areas of the Plan, for example one on health, where they invite all the people in Kinsale working in the field, and another on education, inviting teachers, parents and other people with an involvement. These events would be based around what has already been proposed in the Plan, but getting feedback as to how practical our suggestions are. These events will serve a dual purpose, firstly they'll act as an essential community sounding board for the Plan's ideas, and secondly they open doors into the community for the project, all kinds of new practical projects are proposed and contacts made. They also serve to bring this work to the community, rather than expecting it to come to us, or sitting around thinking "why is no-one doing anything". The great thing with being based in a college doing this work is that you can call on 30 pairs of hands if the feeling is to go and build a garden somewhere. 30 pairs of hands get a lot done!

Final Thoughts These are early days for this project. We have had no models to work from and have had to invent this process as we go along. It has not been conducted by professionals or by a respected research organisation. It has had no external funding other than the ability to use the college facilities. It is a student project, and we make no claims for it being a complete and thorough document.

What it is though is a very important and far-reaching piece of work. It does something that I think is very bold and powerful. It invites people to look beyond where we are now, and beyond simply allowing events to unravel, and to look towards where they would like to be. It allows people to dream, but not in a woolly ungrounded way. It is rooted in practicality, looking at the building block, we can't put the second one in place before the first one. In the same way that in permaculture design we aim to make our mistakes on paper first so as to avoid costly mistakes in the landscape, with Energy Descent Action Plans we aim to clarify a step-by-step way down, so as to best focus our energies.

I also think it is important to be realistic. For example, I don't feel it is realistic to imagine that anything approaching a majority of the population will start growing food without a massive crisis to force them into doing so. However, what we can do is start putting in place the infrastructure that will be needed (seed saving clubs, excluding a certain proportion of land in urban areas from development, preserving skills and knowledge, teaching skills to younger people, creating community compost schemes so we have a resource of compost for growers). When people say "but where will our fruit come from?", we can say "from the 5 acre orchard over there that we planted 7 years ago". We can begin to build systems around people. At the same time we need to engage them as much as possible, and see our work as being of service. I feel this is fascinating

work and should be begun in every settlement. It is big picture thinking, town-scale permaculture, and needs to be rolled out across the country as a matter of great urgency.

Source:

<http://www.transitionculture.org>