

Presentations by Richard Heinberg and Megan Quinn
Transition Forest of Dean Event on 30th March 2008
summary by Frank Hemming, Transition Hereford

Richard Heinberg was the first to speak. He spoke directly to the audience of about 200, but also had “slides” showing. He showed graphs of “peak everything”. The Club of Rome report “Limits to Growth” first published in the 1970s had different scenarios for the depletion of resources under different growth scenarios. “Limits to Growth” was taken seriously at the time, but then was ridiculed for political reasons by selectively treating one of the many scenarios as a prediction. Most of the scenarios showed resource problems early in the 21st century. This seems to fit with the situation as he described it in several books on Peak Oil, including “The Party's Over” and his latest book “Peak Everything”.

Most oil fields are in decline. The North Sea is a good example. Maximum production occurred in 1999 and production now is 50% of that. Global extraction has levelled off, and was at its maximum so far in 2005. This is in spite of the huge recent rises in the oil price. Industrial agriculture depends on fossil fuels, particularly natural gas for fertiliser, and oil for machinery. In the US and Britain oil is mainly used for home heating and in transport. To reduce oil dependency we need to reduce oil use in the three sectors of food production, transport, and home heating. This implies re-localisation to reduce food miles and commuting, improving the energy efficiency of buildings and generally using far less energy. Agriculture would be more labour intensive, smaller scale and local. Herbie Girardet was in the audience and took the opportunity to say that he thought Richard was being too negative, as there were many promising alternative energy projects being carried out around the world. I thought Richard was being realistic.

All this implies a transition from growth to a steady state economy. Richard answered questions on this, but I felt there was a lot more to discuss. For instance could there be a smooth transition, especially as inequality along with population, resource use and soil loss is at a maximum? Richard had touched on economic problems, particularly acute in the US. I managed to talk to him briefly in the interval, as I wanted to ask if he thought large scale alternative energy projects such as the proposal to build a high voltage DC network linking solar, wind, hydro, thermal, and wave energy projects across Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East were feasible as we entered a period of crumbling economies. He thought the time to have done this was about 20 years ago. Now the advantage of balancing one source of alternative energy with others could be achieved on a more local scale. He had already said in his talk that locally and community owned projects are more likely to be successful.

Megan Quinn spoke after the interval. She talked about the experience of Cuba after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when Cuba suddenly found it could not import oil. It was suddenly necessary to grow much more food and to grow it locally, and the initiative came from the people with the government following. A lot of food was grown in and around towns on small plots. For transport the government bought a million bikes from China and manufactured another quarter of a million. With oil now coming into the country from Venezuela, people are using cars more, but the local (and organic) food system is still thriving.

Megan spoke about the implications of peak oil for us. She preferred the use of the word curtailment rather than contraction implying I think a more positive choice. The rural areas of the country such as the Forest of Dean (and Herefordshire) with their small towns were well placed for transition as potentially there is access to land particularly for local food production. She also talked of the huge amount of grain involved in most modern meat production. Transition implied less meat, but possibly a more interesting diet. It required retro-fitting houses to a very high standard. She referred to the German Passiv Haus standard which is effectively zero carbon. (This I know is extremely difficult to achieve even on new build.) She is involved in a project called Agraria which seemed to be about putting ideas of local community self reliance into practice. She is a communitarian not a communist in answer to a question from the audience.

The whole event attracted maybe 200 people with about 70% from the Forest of Dean area. Congratulations to Forest of Dean Transition for organising the event.