

Relocalization: What it is and how we can get started

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1. Summary

V8A has two main goals for our region: sustainable development and open government. Consequently, it has formed two committees dedicated to achieving these goals: the Research & Education Committee (REC), which will oversee the creation of plans for sustainable development; and the Political Action Committee (PAC), which will research the political opportunities and the electoral process, in an effort to find or support candidates for political office who will work with the community to develop and implement our sustainable development plans.

The purpose of this document is to present some of the key ideas of the emerging global movement towards local economy, sustainable living, and sensible responses to global warming, peak oil, and the ever-increasing corporatization of all aspects of the public sphere. I propose that we adopt the framework for planning the transition to reduced fossil-fuel use which is being codified by the Transition Town movement in the UK and by the Post Carbon Cities network in North America. The outcome of adopting this framework will be an Energy Descent Action Plan (EDAP), which we can use to galvanize public involvement and political action.

2. What is relocalization?

"Relocalization is a strategy to build societies based on the local production of food, energy and goods, and the local development of currency, governance and culture. The main goals of Relocalization are to increase community energy security, to strengthen local economies, and to dramatically improve environmental conditions and social equity."

(From <http://relocalize.net/about/relocalization>)

Many experts in peak oil planning expect that, as fossil fuels become ever more expensive, local economies will become more important, since we will need to supply as many of our needs as possible from a smaller geographical area. This shift away from the globalized economy is known as "relocalization". Obviously, it is an enormous challenge to create a plan for sustainable development that takes into account the massive challenges posed by climate change and peak oil. Luckily, we have some very good models to learn from: Transition Towns like Kinsale and Totnes in the

UK, and the fast-growing Post Carbon Cities network in North America. I propose that V8A follow the Kinsale model as described by Rob Hopkins and work towards creating an energy-descent action plan (EDAP) for our region. I also propose that V8A become a member of the Post Carbon Cities Relocalization network, in order to be connected to other municipalities and regions throughout North America in which citizens' groups are driving the process of transition planning.

The 4 Recognitions of the Transition Movement (Albert Bates)

- Life with less energy is inevitable and it is better to plan for it than be taken by surprise;
- We have lost the resilience to be able to cope with energy shocks;
- We have to act for ourselves and we have to act now;
- By unleashing the collective genius of the community we can design ways of living that are more enriching, satisfying and connected than the present.

2.1. What are the goals of relocalization?

From <http://relocalize.net/about/relocalization>:

- Increase community energy security;
- Strengthen local economies;
- Improve environmental conditions and social equity.

2.2. What are the benefits of relocalization?

From <http://transitiontowns.org/Totnes/Main/WhatIsAnEnergyDescentPlan>:

- Healthier food;
- More active lifestyles;
- Greater self-reliance;
- A sense of connection to place and products;
- Re-emergence of local identity;
- Emphasis on quality over quantity;
- A meaningful common goal and sense of purpose.

2.3. What is an Energy Descent Action Plan (EDAP)?

"An Energy Descent Action Plan (EDAP) is a local plan for dealing with Peak Oil. It goes well beyond issues of energy supply, to look at across-the-board creative adaptations in the realms of health, education, economy and much more. An EDAP is a way to think ahead, to plan in an integrated, multidisciplinary way, to provide direction to local government, decision makers, groups and individuals with an interest in making the place they live into a vibrant and viable community in a post-carbon era."

(From <http://www.eatthesuburbs.org/edap-primer/>)

3. The steps to producing an Energy Descent Action Plan

These are taken from <http://www.eatthesuburbs.org/edap-primer/>, but we could imagine tweaking them for our own needs:

- Education, consultation & networking;
- Research;
- Community projects & having fun;
- Producing the plan;
- Gaining political support;
- Implementation.

3.1. Education, consultation & networking

The early stages of V&A's planning are already heading towards an EDAP (if we want one), not to mention all of the work that is going on throughout the region in community organizations, social service organizations, and local government. The work of ALERT, PR Legacy, TAN, MCPP and many other organizations can feed directly into the EDAP process. Working groups responsible for specific area of the EDAP can be formed out of existing groups who already have a great of knowledge and passion in certain areas of the eventual EDAP. For instance, many of the people associated with TAN and MCPP might be interested in being part of an EDAP working group dedicated to assessing the region's energy needs and current energy sources, then developing a plan for reducing energy consumption and moving towards sustainable sources of energy under local control where possible.

It will be vital to the eventual success of the EDAP that we include as many people as possible in the planning process from the early stages. We need to find the local experts, keen amateurs, people whose voices have been shut out of public planning processes, and be sure to reach out to political and business leaders. (See the attached material for more on this, esp. the 12 step on p. 8 and the 5 lessons from Kinsale's EDAP process on p. 14.)

3.2. Research

Again, we're well under way in certain areas, and it's not hard to imagine how to proceed. Assuming we decide to adhere to the EDAP model for producing a plan for sustainable development in the region, we need to figure out the main areas of research, form working groups in these areas, and then get to work roughly along these lines for each area:

- How does it currently work?
- How should it work in order to be sustainable?
- How are other cities/regions handling this? What new technologies exist?
- How do we move towards sustainability in this area?

So, for example, if we are looking at the water supply for our region, then the working group dedicated to producing the "Water Supply" section of the EDAP will need to:

- Examine our current water supply, by looking at engineering reports & talking with local experts;
- Understand the challenges that we face when we move into a lower-energy future;
- Look to other cities and regions to get more ideas about how to address the challenges;
- Produce a set of recommended actions, preferably prioritized and ordered in time.

3.3. Community projects & having fun

An obvious challenge in producing an EDAP is that it is potentially off-putting to many people to have to be confronted with some unpleasant facts and speculations about the future, especially when that future is one in which we will have less energy from fossil fuels. V&A will need to be very careful to stress the positive aspects of this work, by including the public as much as possible, and by emphasizing the (very real) potential benefits to our region that come from embracing a planned and thoughtful response to the transition away from cheap energy and large-scale privatized solutions to local problems. (See Lesson #3 from Kinsale, "Creating a Vision of an Abundant Future", p. 15).

We will need to involve the whole community as often as we can, and make sure that we do not slip into the "Them and Us" mentality (see Lesson #1 from Kinsale, p. 14). It will be crucial to manage our public image so that we are not perceived as anti-everything and focused on bad news. This won't be easy, but one thing that will help is if we are involved in real grassroots activities that benefit the community in the present and at the same time point the way forward to a more sustainable community. We should be not only producing plans and proposals, but creating institutions of lasting value to our region. Examples are CSA programs, community-scale composting, a public campaign to encourage water conservation, a buy-local directory, a car-free day, etc.

3.4. Producing the plan

Hard work, but hopefully each working group will produce a good set of recommendations which are technically and politically feasible. The REC will somehow have to stitch these all together into a coherent document, although this will be a living document that can grow along with our continually evolving understanding of the global situation and the facts on the ground in our region.

3.5. Gaining political support

We need to aim for political support throughout the entire planning process, in so far as this is feasible. In effect, ensuring that our work has regional political support is the job of the PAC, but V8A as a whole has an enormous responsibility not to get drawn into pointless oppositional political games.

3.6. Implementation

This is so far out that not much needs to be said here. But here are some of the specific components of the implementation of Mexico City's Green Plan, not a full-on EDAP but similar:

- Financing: via varied mechanisms, so that the plan's actions have the resources needed for their execution;
- Legal framework: some of the proposed strategies outlined in the plan will require updating and modifications of the city's laws and regulations;
- Environmental education: motivate citizens to participate;
- City participation: being a living instrument, the plan requires active participation during its execution and follow-up;
- Regionalization: Mexico City is part of a larger megalopolis that includes neighbouring states; the city will need reach cooperation agreements with these states;
- Transparency & accountability: citizens have to be certain that the economic and human resources used for designing and executing the plan are being put into good use;
- Evaluation & follow-up: Mechanisms must be designed and put in place to monitor and evaluate the actions outlined in the plan. Milestones must be reached and an evaluation commission will be set up;
- Internationalization: a city with the dimension and importance of Mexico City must consider its policies and actions in the context of globalization, both to inform the efforts of other cities and to learn from international best practices.

(From <http://www.worldchanging.com/archives/007426.html>.)

4. Action plan

Here's my proposed plan of action:

- Decide whether or not to be a Transition Town/Region & produce an EDAP; if so, then
- Determine areas of concern, prioritize;
- Find & enlist experts, local & otherwise, and passionate amateurs;
- Develop draft plans, review, refine, repeat;
- Work continually to get political will behind the EDAP; and eventually
- Start implementing the components of the EDAP.

I propose that we decide in the very near term whether or not we wish to set ourselves up as an organization dedicated to producing an EDAP, following the Kinsale model.

If we decide to do this, then the REC will be the committee to oversee creation of the EDAP. The REC will contain working groups dedicated to the areas of concern that will be addressed in the EDAP (e.g., food supply, energy supply, etc.). These groups will be responsible for producing recommendations that can eventually be implemented, assuming that public and political will can be mustered. Furthermore, the REC as a whole will be responsible for all outreach and educational activities in the community, such as symposiums, film nights, potlucks, teach-ins, etc., especially when those activities concern the EDAP in its entirety. Working groups can of course plan activities that specially pertain to their area of research; e.g., the transportation group can bring in someone to give a public talk about car-sharing, and use that venue as a way of increasing public awareness, recruit more members into the group, brainstorm, and so on.

Examples of areas of concern that we may want to address:

- Water
- Food
- Housing
- Energy
- Economy & Livelihoods
- Transportation
- Education
- Health
- Waste
- Culture
- Land use

4.1. What you can start doing right away

- Subscribe to various sites and blogs devoted to peak oil & post-peak planning; e.g., The Oil Drum, Transition Culture, Post Carbon Cities, EnergyBulletin.net, Global Public Media, etc. (if you don't know how to subscribe to a website, ask me);
- Read more about peak oil, but especially about how to plan for the transition to a low-carbon world (see some basic references in section 5);
- Talk to people about what we are hoping to accomplish;
- Follow your passion to find the area of transition planning that most interests you, find others who share your interest, and create a working group to create a transition plan in that area.

5. Some useful references

5.1. Books

- Bates, Albert. 2006. *The Post-Petroleum Survival Guide and Cookbook: Recipes for Changing Times*. New Society Publishers.
- Brown, Lester R. 2006. *Plan B 2.0: Rescuing a Planet Under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble*. Norton. [Available online at <http://www.earth-policy.org/Books/PB2/Contents.htm>]
- Chiras, Daniel D., & David Wann. 2003. *Superbia: 31 Ways to Create Sustainable Neighborhoods*. New Society Publishers.
- Columbia Institute, eds. 2006. *Going for Green: Leading Edge Policy and Inspirational Initiatives for Communities*. Columbia Institute.
- Danaher, Kevin, Shannon Biggs, & Jason Mark. 2007. *Building the Green Economy: Success Stories from the Grassroots*. Polipoint Press.
- Darley, Julian, David Room, & Celine Rich. 2007. *Relocalize Now!: Getting Ready for Climate Change And the End of Cheap Oil*. New Society Publishers.
- Doppelt, Bob. 2003. *Leading Change Toward Sustainability: A Change-Management Guide for Business, Government and Civil Society*. Greenleaf.
- Edwards, Andres R. 2005. *The Sustainability Revolution: Portrait Of A Paradigm Shift*. New Society Publishers.
- Hawken, Paul, Amory Lovins, & L. Hunter Lovins. 2000. *Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution*. Back Bay Books.
- Heinberg, Richard. 2004. *Powerdown: Options and Actions for a Post-Carbon World*. New Society Publishers.
- Heinberg, Richard. 2005. *The Party's Over*. Temple Lodge Publishers.
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- Holmgren, David. 2003. *Permaculture - Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability*. Holmgren Design Press.
- Homer-Dixon, Thomas. 2007. *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity and the Renewal of Civilization*. Vintage Canada.
- James, Sarah & Lahti, Torbjorn. 2004. *The Natural Step for Communities - How Cities and Towns Can Change to Sustainable Practices*. New Society Publishers.
- Kunstler, James Howard. 2006. *The Long Emergency: Surviving the End of Oil, Climate Change, and Other Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century*. Grove Press.

Lerch, Daniel. 2007. Post Carbon Cities: Planning for Energy and Climate Uncertainty. Post Carbon Institute.
McKibben, Bill. 2007. Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future. Times Publications.
Register, Richard. 2006. Ecocities: Rebuilding Cities in Balance With Nature. New Society Publishers.
Schumacher, E.F. 1999 [originally published 1973]. Small is Beautiful. Hartley and Marks Publishers.
Schumacher, E.F. 1979. Good Work. Harper Colophon.
Suzuki, David, & Holly Dressel. 2003. Good News for a Change: How Everyday People are Helping the Planet. Greystone Books.

See also http://www.facilities.usask.ca/sustainability/reports_publications.php.

5.2. Online

Post Carbon Institute:

<http://www.postcarbon.org/>

Global Public Media:

<http://globalpublicmedia.com/>

Relocalization Network:

<http://www.relocalize.net/>

Transition Town Network:

<http://www.transitiontowns.org/>

Energy Descent Action Plan (EDAP) Primer:

<http://www.eatthesuburbs.org/edap-primer/>

Titanic Lifeboat Academy:

<http://lifeboat.postcarbon.org/>

The Community Solution:

<http://www.communitysolution.org/>

PDFs available for free download: <http://www.communitysolution.org/nsreports.html>

100 things you can do to get ready for peak oil:

<http://www.ourvictoryathome.com/200things.html/>

Plenty of other online resources:

<http://del.icio.us/parkidavid/energy-descent-planning/>

Portland Peak Oil:

<http://www.portlandpeakoil.org/>

Post Carbon Toronto:

<http://www.postcarbontoronto.org/>

Wendell Berry's 17 Rules for a Sustainable Community

(<http://briarpatchnetwork.wordpress.com/2007/09/21/seventeen-rules-for-a-sustainable-community-wendell-berry/>)

1. Always ask of any proposed change or innovation: What will this do to our community? How will this affect our common wealth?
2. Always include local nature - the land, the water, the air, the native creatures - within the membership of the community.
3. Always ask how local needs might be supplied from local sources, including the mutual help of neighbours.
4. Always supply local needs first (and only then think of exporting products - first to nearby cities, then to others).
5. Understand the ultimate unsoundness of the industrial doctrine of 'labour saving' if that implies poor work, unemployment, or any kind of pollution or contamination.
6. Develop properly scaled value-adding industries for local products to ensure that the community does not become merely a colony of national or global economy.
7. Develop small-scale industries and businesses to support the local farm and/or forest economy.
8. Strive to supply as much of the community's own energy as possible.
9. Strive to increase earnings (in whatever form) within the community for as long as possible before they are paid out.
10. Make sure that money paid into the local economy circulates within the community and decrease expenditures outside the community.
11. Make the community able to invest in itself by maintaining its properties, keeping itself clean (without dirtying some other place), caring for its old people, and teaching its children.
12. See that the old and young take care of one another. The young must learn from the old, not necessarily, and not always in school. There must be no institutionalised childcare and no homes for the aged. The community knows and remembers itself by the association of old and young.
13. Account for costs now conventionally hidden or externalised. Whenever possible, these must be debited against monetary income.
14. Look into the possible uses of local currency, community-funded loan programmes, systems of barter, and the like.
15. Always be aware of the economic value of neighbourly acts. In our time, the costs of living are greatly increased by the loss of neighbourhood, which leaves people to face their calamities alone.
16. A rural community should always be acquainted and interconnected with community-minded people in nearby towns and cities.
17. A sustainable rural economy will depend on urban consumers loyal to local products. Therefore, we are talking about an economy that will always be more cooperative than competitive.

Five principles for the long term

From Post Carbon Cities: Planning for Energy and Climate Uncertainty
(Post Carbon Institute, www.postcarbon.org)

Integrate these five principles into your local government's decision-making and planning processes to comprehensively address energy and climate uncertainty over the long term:

1. Deal with transportation and land use (or you may as well stop now). Fundamentally rethink your municipality's land use and transportation practices, from building and zoning codes to long-range planning. Make land use and transportation infrastructure decisions with 100-year timeframes. Organize with neighboring jurisdictions to address the land use and transportation challenges of energy and climate uncertainty at a regional level.
2. Tackle private energy consumption. Use the tools you already have to encourage serious energy conservation and efficiency in the private sector. Engage the business community aggressively, challenging your local business leaders to reinvent the local economy for the post-carbon world.
3. Attack the problems piece-by-piece and from many angles. Meet your energy and climate uncertainty response goals with multiple, proven solutions, pursuing many different kinds of solutions at different scales. Enlist the entire community, setting clear community goals and spurring action from all sides to meet them.
4. Plan for fundamental changes... and make fundamental changes happen. Educate and involve your fellow elected officials, staff and community stakeholders about energy and climate uncertainty, challenge them to come up with serious solutions. Lead your city's transition by integrating peak oil and climate change considerations in your own decisions.
5. Build a sense of community. In short, do anything you can to get people talking with each other, forming relationships, and investing themselves in the larger community.

12 Key Steps to embarking on your transition journey

<http://www.transitiontowns.org/TransitionNetwork/12Steps>

To begin with, it is important to note that although the term "Transition Town" has stuck, what we are talking about are Transition Cities, Transition Islands, Transition Hamlets, Transition Valleys, Transition Anywhere-You-Find-People.

1. Set up a steering group and design its demise from the outset

This stage puts a core team in place to drive the project forward during the initial phases. We recommend that you form your Steering Group with the aim of getting through stages 2 - 5, and agree that once a minimum of four sub-groups (see #5) are formed, the Steering Group disbands and reforms with a person from each of those groups. This requires a degree of humility, but is very important in order to put the success of the project above the individuals involved. Ultimately your Steering Group should become made up of 1 representative from each sub-group.

2. Awareness raising

This stage will identify your key allies, build crucial networks and prepare the community in general for the launch of your Transition initiative.

For an effective Energy Descent Action plan to evolve, its participants have to understand the potential effects of both Peak Oil and Climate Change - the former demanding a drive to increase community resilience, the later a reduction in carbon footprint.

Screenings of key movies (Inconvenient Truth, End of Suburbia, Crude Awakening, Power of Community) along with panels of "experts" to answer questions at the end of each, are very effective. (See next section for the lowdown on all the movies - where to get them, trailers, what the licencing regulations are, doomster rating vs solution rating)

Talks by experts in their field of climate change, peak oil and community solutions can be very inspiring. Articles in local papers, interviews on local radio, presentations to existing groups, including schools, are also part of the toolkit to get people aware of the issues and ready to start thinking of solutions.

3. Lay the foundations

This stage is about networking with existing groups and activists, making clear to them that the Transition Town initiative is designed to incorporate their previous efforts and future inputs by looking at the future in a new way. Acknowledge and honour the work they do, and stress that they have a vital role to play.

Give them a concise and accessible overview of peak oil, what it means, how it relates to climate change, how it might affect the community in question, and the key challenges it presents. Set out your thinking about how a Transition Town process might be able to act as a catalyst for getting the community to explore solutions and to begin thinking about grassroots mitigation strategies.

4. Organise a Great Unleashing

This stage creates a memorable milestone to mark the project's "coming of age", moves it right into the community at large, builds a momentum to propel your initiative forward for the next period of its work and celebrates your community's desire to take action.

In terms of timing, we estimate that 6 months to a year after your first "awareness raising" movie screening is about right.

The Official Unleashing of Transition Town Totnes was held in September 2006, preceded by about 10 months of talks, film screenings and events.

Regarding contents, it'll need to bring people up to speed on Peak Oil and Climate Change, but in a spirit of "we can do something about this" rather than doom and gloom.

One item of content that we've seen work very well is a presentation on the practical and psychological barriers to personal change - after all, this is all about what we do as individuals.

It needn't be just talks, it could include music, food, opera, break dancing, whatever you feel best reflects your community's intention to embark on this collective adventure.

5. Form sub groups

Part of the process of developing an Energy Descent Action Plan is tapping into the collective genius of the community. Crucial for this is to set up a number of smaller groups to focus on specific aspects of the process. Each of these groups will develop their own ways of working and their own activities, but will all fall under the umbrella of the project as a whole.

Ideally, sub groups are needed for all aspects of life that are required by your community to sustain itself and thrive. Examples of these are: food, waste, energy, education, youth, economics, transport, water, local government.

Each of these sub groups is looking at their area and trying to determine the best ways of building community resilience and reducing the carbon footprint. Their solutions will form the backbone of the Energy Descent Action Plan.

6. Use Open Space

We've found Open Space Technology to be a highly effective approach to running meetings for Transition Town initiatives.

In theory it ought not to work. A large group of people comes together to explore a particular topic or issue, with no agenda, no timetable, no obvious coordinator and no minute takers.

However, we have run separate Open Spaces for Food, Energy, Housing, Economics and the Psychology of Change. By the end of each meeting, everyone has said what they needed to, extensive notes had been taken and typed up, lots of networking has had taken place, and a huge number of ideas had been identified and visions set out.

The essential reading on Open Space is Harrison Owen's Open Space Technology: A User's Guide, and you will also find Peggy Holman and Tom Devane's The Change Handbook: Group Methods for Shaping the Future an invaluable reference on the wider range of such tools.

7. Develop visible practical manifestations of the project

It is essential that you avoid any sense that your project is just a talking shop where people sit around and draw up wish lists. Your project needs, from an early stage, to begin to create practical, high visibility manifestations in your community. These will significantly enhance people's perceptions of the project and also their willingness to participate.

There's a difficult balance to achieve here during these early stages. You need to demonstrate visible progress, without embarking on projects that will ultimately have no place on the Energy Descent Action Plan. In Transition Town Totnes, the Food group launched a project called 'Totnes- the Nut Capital of Britain' which aims to get as much infrastructure of edible nut bearing trees into the town as possible. With the help of the Mayor, we recently planted some trees in the centre of town, and made it a high profile event (see left).

8. Facilitate the Great Reskilling

If we are to respond to peak oil and climate change by moving to a lower energy future and relocalising our communities, then we'll need many of the skills that our grandparents took for granted. One of the most useful things a Transition Town project can do is to reverse the "great deskilling" of the last 40 years by offering training in a range of some of these skills.

Research among the older members of our communities is instructive - after all, they lived before the throwaway society took hold and they understand what a lower energy society might look like. Some examples of courses are: repairing, cooking, cycle maintenance, natural building, loft insulation, dyeing, herbal walks, gardening, basic home energy efficiency, making sour doughs, practical food growing (the list is endless).

Your Great Reskilling programme will give people a powerful realisation of their own ability to solve problems, to achieve practical results and to work cooperatively alongside other people. They'll also appreciate that learning can truly be fun.

9. Build a bridge to Local Government

Whatever the degree of groundswell your Transition Town initiative manages to generate, however many practical projects you've initiated and however wonderful your Energy Descent Plan is, you will not progress too far unless you have cultivated a positive and productive relationship with your local authority. Whether it is planning issues, funding issues or providing connections, you need them on board. Contrary to your expectations, you may well find that you are pushing against an open door.

We are exploring how we might draft up an Energy Descent Action Plan for Totnes in a format similar to the current Community Development Plan. Perhaps, one day, council planners will be sitting at a table with two documents in front of them - a conventional Community Plan and a beautifully presented Energy Descent Action Plan. It's sometime in 2008 on the day when oil prices first break the \$100 a barrel ceiling. The planners look from one document to the other and conclude that only the Energy Descent Action Plan actually addresses the challenges facing them. And as that document moves centre stage, the community plan slides gently into the bin (we can dream!).

10. Honour the elders

For those of us born in the 1960s when the cheap oil party was in full swing, it is very hard to picture a life with less oil. Every year of my life (the oil crises of the 70s excepted) has been underpinned by more energy than the previous years.

In order to rebuild that picture of a lower energy society, we have to engage with those who directly remember the transition to the age of Cheap Oil, especially the period between 1930 and 1960.

While you clearly want to avoid any sense that what you are advocating is 'going back' or 'returning' to some dim distant past, there is much to be learnt from how things were done, what the invisible connections between the different elements of society were and how daily life was supported. Finding out all of this can be deeply illuminating, and can lead to our feeling much more connected to the place we are developing our Transition Town projects.

11. Let it go where it wants to go...

Although you may start out developing your Transition Town process with a clear idea of where it will go, it will inevitably go elsewhere. If you try and hold onto a rigid vision, it will begin to sap your energy and appear to stall. Your role is not to come up with all the answers, but to act as a catalyst for the community to design their own transition.

If you keep your focus on the key design criteria - building community resilience and reducing the carbon footprint - you'll watch as the collective genius of the community enables a feasible, practicable and highly inventive solution to emerge.

12. Create an Energy Descent Plan

Each subgroup will have been focusing on practical actions to increase community resilience and reduce the carbon footprint.

Combined, these actions form the Energy Descent Action Plan. That's where the collective genius of the community has designed its own future to take account of the potential threats from Peak Oil and Climate Change.

So far, we have taken many practical actions in Totnes. However, they add up to just a mere fraction of the final range and scope of initiatives that are currently being devised by our community.

Regarding specific timescales for Energy Descent Action Plans, here's part of a presentation made to Glastonbury at their inaugural "Shall we become a Transition Town meeting?" in April 2007.

"You may be wondering about timescales for Energy Descent Action Plans. There are no rules - each community will embark on a plan that's right for them in terms of timing. Kinsale took a window of 15 years, Lewes is looking at 20.

If you're looking for greater precision and specified dates, here's my response:

When I recognise the effort that's gone into setting today's meeting up and the effort that each of us has made in getting here and devoting most of our Saturday to these pressing issues, when I think of all the wonderful efforts of pre-existing groups in Glastonbury that hopefully will be incorporated into, and reenergised by, a wider "transitioning" initiative, I say that the work has already started.

And if I look at what we need to do to create the communities that we're happy for our grandchildren and their grandchildren to grow up in, then that work certainly won't finish in our lifetimes..."

Incidentally, the embryonic steering group at Glastonbury decided at the end of that day to indeed adopt the Transition Town model for designing their lower energy and more resilient future.

The 7 barriers that stand in the way of a Transition Initiative

(<http://www.transitiontowns.org/TransitionNetwork/7Buts>)

One of your first tasks, - individually and collectively - will be to navigate the initial barriers - real and imagined - that stand in the way of you starting off on the transition journey. We call these 'The Seven Buts'.

1. But we've got no funding...

This really is not an issue. Funding is a very poor substitute for enthusiasm and community involvement, both of which will take you through the first phases of your transition. Funders can also demand a measure of control, and may steer the initiative in directions that run counter to community interests.

We'll show you how you can make sure your process generates an adequate amount of income. We're not talking fortunes, your Transition Town won't be floated on the Stock Market, but, as an eco-village designer Max Lindegar told me years ago, "if a project doesn't make a profit it will make a loss."

Transition Town Totnes began in September 2005 with no money at all, and has been self-funding ever since. The talks and film screenings that we run bring in money to subsidise free events such as Open Space Days. You will reach a point where you have specific projects that will require funding, but until that point you'll manage. Retain the power over whether this happens... don't let lack of funding stop you.

2. But they won't let us...

There is a fear among some green folks that somehow any initiative that actually succeeds in effecting any change will get shut down, suppressed, attacked by faceless bureaucrats or corporations. If that fear is strong enough to prevent you taking any action, if the only action you're willing to take is to abdicate all your power to some notional "they", then you're probably reading the wrong document. On the other hand, Transition Towns operate 'below the radar', neither seeking victims nor making enemies. As such, they don't seem to be incurring the wrath of any existing institutions.

On the contrary, with corporate awareness of sustainability and climate change building daily, you will be surprised at how many people in positions of power will be enthused and inspired by what you are doing, and will support, rather than hinder, your efforts.

3. But there are already green groups in this town, I don't want to step on their toes...

We'll go into this in more detail in Step 3 of the 12 steps, but in essence, you'd be exceedingly unlucky to encounter any "turf wars". What your Transition Town initiative will do is to form a common goal and sense of purpose for the existing groups, some of which you might find are a bit burnt out and will really appreciate the new vigour you will bring. Liaising with a network of existing groups towards an Energy Descent Action Plan will enhance and focus their work, rather than replicate or supersede it. Expect them to become some of your strong allies, crucial to the success of your Transition.

4. But no one in this town cares about the environment anyway...

One could easily be forgiven for thinking this, given the existence of what we might perceive as an apathetic consumer culture surrounding us. Scratch a bit deeper though, and you'll find that the most surprising people are keen advocates of key elements of a Transition Initiative - local food, local crafts, local history and culture. The key is to go to them, rather than expecting them to come to you. Seek out common ground, and you'll find your community to be a far more interesting place than you thought it was.

5. But surely it's too late to do anything...?

It may be too late, but the likelihood is that it isn't. That means your (and others') endeavours are absolutely crucial.

Don't let hopelessness sabotage your efforts - as Vandana Shiva says, "the uncertainty of our times is no reason to be certain about hopelessness".

6. But I don't have the right qualifications...

If you don't do it, who else will? It matters not that you don't have a PhD in sustainability, or years of experience in gardening or planning. What's important is that you care about where you live, that you see the need to act, and that you are open to new ways of engaging people.

If there was to be a job description for someone to start this process rolling it might list the qualities of that person as being:

- Positive
- Good with people
- A basic knowledge of the place and some of the key people in the town.

That, in truth, is about it... . You are, after all, about to design your own demise into the process from the start (see Step#1), so your role at this stage is like a gardener preparing the soil for the ensuing garden, which you may or may not be around to see.

7. But I don't have the energy for doing that!

As the quote often ascribed to Goethe goes, "whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it!" The experience of beginning a Transition Town certainly shows this to be the case. While the idea of preparing your town (or city, hamlet, valley or island) for life beyond oil may seem staggering in its implications, there is something about the energy unleashed by the Transition Towns process that is unstoppable.

You may feel overwhelmed by the prospect of all the work and complexity, but people will come forward to help. Indeed, many have commented on the serendipity of the whole process, how the right people appear at the right time. There is something about seizing that boldness, about making the leap from 'why is no-one doing anything' to 'let's do something', that generates the energy to keep it moving.

Very often, developing environmental initiatives is like pushing a broken down car up a hill; hard, unrewarding slog. Transition Towns is like coming down the other side - the car starts moving faster than you can keep up with it, accelerating all the time. Once you give it the push from the top of the hill it will develop its own momentum. That's not to say it isn't hard work sometimes, but it is almost always a pleasure.

5 Lessons from Kinsale

Rob Hopkins

A Brief Recap

The process that produced the Plan was begun in September 2004 when, inspired by the work of Richard Heinberg and his Powerdown concept, and also David Holmgren's "Permaculture - principles and pathways beyond sustainability", I began to work with the second year students on the Practical Sustainability course to devise a strategy to enable Kinsale to make a smooth transition down from the oil peak. This began with a talk from Colin Campbell and a screening of *The End of Suburbia*. We then made numerous visits to various 'green' projects in the area, and spoke to a number of people with useful opinions on the subject and with relevant skills. This then led to the first stage, of pulling together a picture of the challenges facing the town, as well as beginning to identify a number of possible areas of the challenge for consideration.

In February the staff and students hosted and facilitated a one day Open Space event in the Town Hall, which was attended by around 45 members of the community. They watched the *End of Suburbia* and then explored the issues it raised through Open Space. This yielded a lot of very useful information. The students then began to work up their ideas, the ideas from the Open Space event and also ideas from further research into a timetabled plan for the town. The final Plan was produced in May 2005, and was printed in time for the Fuelling the Future conference, which brought together many of the leading thinkers in the international peak oil movement. The printing was in part funded by Kinsale Town Council and Kinsale Environment Watch.

Since then, the Plan has been taken over by Transition Design, a not-for-profit company, set up by Louise Rooney and Catherine Dunne, former students of the Practical Sustainability course. They made a formal proposal to Kinsale Town Council that the Council support the motion that Kinsale adopt the Plan's recommendations and work towards becoming a "Transition Town". This was unanimously passed by the Council in December 2005, and work is now underway to begin its implementation. A more detailed account of the Kinsale process can be found here and the Action Plan is available in a free download here

Lesson 1 - Avoiding 'Them and Us'

It would have been easy to fall into the trap that so much campaigning and activism falls into of creating a sense of 'them and us', painting the Council as being the villains of the piece because they had failed, thus far, to begin formulating responses to peak oil, indeed done very little that could be called "green" at all. The KEDAP strenuously avoided setting up this dynamic. Members of the Council and other 'pillars' of the community were invited to the Open Space day as well as to the Fuelling the Future conference, many of them were approached and asked for their views and the Town Hall was used to host the Open Space event. The project was always carried out in a spirit of inclusion and openness. Most of the local restaurants and cafes were asked to donate food for the lunch for the Open Space day, and felt included and interested by what was going on. The Practical Sustainability course has attracted, from the outset, a wide range of people, many of them from Kinsale itself, who helped spread the concepts around the town.

It is very easy to fall into blaming others for not doing anything, but often when we take the time to sit and listen to others, we find they share many of the same concerns but lack the skills, time, resources or motivation to do anything. To alienate people through criticism is ultimately self-defeating. Beginning this process elsewhere, this always strikes me as one of the most important principles, creating a process which is inclusive.

The more I have been involved in things like this and have met people working in positions of authority, be they planners, engineers, councillors and even politicians, I have seen ordinary people, often with families, just as bewildered by turns of events and which way to go as everybody else. For us to scream "why aren't they doing anything" does nothing to help, very often they have as little clue as to what to do as the rest of us. For me, coming from an activist background, this has been a very important lesson to learn (clearly it is not always the case, sometimes people are deliberately obstructive for whatever reason, but in most cases it is). Most of the actual techniques for avoiding sinking into 'them and us' comes from the next principle "creating a sense that Something is Happening", which I shall explore in the next posting.

Lesson 2 - Creating a sense that Something is Happening

The KEDAP process arose from the Practical Sustainability course at Kinsale FEC, which began in 2001. Over the last 4 years, it has developed a reputation in the town for being a place where unusual yet fascinating things are occurring. People often commented to me that they loved the 'buzz' around the town created by it. The various building projects that have taken place there have particularly been of great interest, indeed sometimes students would spend the

morning cob building or clay plastering, and then head down to the town for some lunch, leading to their being fondly referred to in the town as the 'Mud People'. We also had an annual Open Day where visitors would eat pizza from the clay pizza oven built by the students, eat salad from the polytunnel, have guided tours and generally soak up the atmosphere.

The amphitheatre project at the college which was completed in May 2005 did a great deal to put the college on the map. Many who attended the performances of 'The Merry Wives of Windsor' put on by the college's drama students, talked about the 'magical' feeling of the space. The college's combination of interesting courses and groundbreaking practical projects has done much to make the community well disposed to the Action Plan process when it began. When it came to developing the Plan itself, people were delighted to have input into it, and the reputation that had been built up for work that was exciting and done with good heart went before it. For people starting from scratch in other settlements I think it is one of the key factors for the success of this process, creating a 'buzz' from an early stage.

This could be done by staging a really uplifting and high profile conference, as was done in Kinsale with the Fuelling the Future conference. A conference such as this, if designed with lots of outreach elements, and also involving local people with relevant skills and knowledge, can really embed the process in the town, bringing in new information and inspiration, while at the same time reinforcing and reaffirming the work that others have already been doing in the town. Remember that you will almost certainly not be the first person in the area to have developed an awareness around these issues. A high profile conference or similar event can draw in some very surprising people who will become central to your efforts. One great example of this is the Community Solution in Ohio, who run the annual Community Solution conference (which originally inspired Fuelling the Future) and are now branching out into all kinds of other things. They also produce a wonderful newsletter that you can download from their site.

Another way of creating this 'buzz' is through developing a reputation for addressing concerns that are seen as important more widely than peak oil. For instance some of the college's students organised a clean up of a local nature area which was reported in the local press. Some others designed and planted a permaculture garden for a local hostel. One of my favourite examples of this is the City Repair organisation in Oregon in the US who do a festival every year called the Village Building Convergence, building cob bus shelters, community gardens and what they call "intersection repair". They create a wonderful sense of innovate and positive things happening. I think we have yet to really understand the power of an approach based on solutions offered with positivity and non-judgment, as opposed to a more adversarial one. People get to see that you 'walk your talk', that you live by your ideals in a way that has tangible benefits for others.

There are many other ways to create a Sense that Something is Happening, perhaps you might have some thoughts that you might post below. When I say 'something', I don't mean just any old thing, what we need to communicate is that this 'something' is profoundly meaningful and transformative, and has a sense of magic and a spark of wonder to it. To conclude, I feel that creating this atmosphere is like the oil that lubricates the engine of your energy descent process. The more you can create a feeling that something important, positive and dynamic is underway, the less friction and resistance your work will encounter.

Lesson 3 - Creating a Vision of an Abundant Future

One of essential things in developing community strategies to peak oil is that of facilitating the community to create a vision of how the future could be. We move from working with peak oil, which is about probabilities (how probable is it that it will be horrendous, how probable is peak in 2007 and so on...) to possibilities. The shift is subtle but illuminating. Through the Open Space event we ran in Kinsale, we gave the community (well those who came at least) permission to dream. It was very powerful to see it happening, people going home excited about how the future could be, and feeling they had met some kindred souls with whom they could do it.

Asking people to visualise a future with one quarter of the fossil fuels available is asking a great deal of them. Especially in Ireland, where the Famine still looms over modern history, and is only 7 generations ago, it becomes people's default picture of life without oil. I feel that as people working in communities trying to engage people in energy descent work, what is vital is that we help people to see that life without oil could be far more satisfying than life at present. This can be done through a variety of methods, permaculture design courses, Open Space events, reading/study groups, community councils, practical workshops, Future Search events, there is a wealth of literature out there on the subject. Tom Atlee's book "Tao of Democracy" gives a good overview of many of these. He has written an article called "Scenario and Visioning Work" which gives an excellent overview of the various ways you can help a community to vision its future, and says what I am trying to say in this post, only far more eloquently. Has also written of his own vision of the future in terms of how communities organise themselves.

The important thing is that people can see where they are going and like what they see. If we present people with a vision of disaster and social collapse, what incentive do they have to do anything? I have come to see that I am in a

tiny minority who is able to digest “bad news” and turn it into action. Most people simply don’t respond in that way, and I no longer believe that it is simply because they don’t care. As one contributor to TransitionCulture.org wrote, “many of the books I have read on peak oil should have a razor blade in a pocket on the back sleeve”. This is not to say that we should not aim to raise awareness and talk about the issues, but at same time, simply presenting people with bad news and expecting them to respond by engaging boldly and imaginatively is unrealistic in the extreme. One of the lessons for me from the Kinsale process is that the vision created is becoming infectious, and has reached the Town Council with a power behind it that can’t fail but infect.

Tom Atlee writes of creating what he calls an “alternative story field”. This is in essence creating new myths and stories that begin to formulate where we want to go. He identifies a couple of novels, such as Callenbach’s ‘Ecotopia’ and Starhawk’s “The Fifth Sacred Thing”. He also talks of the potential power of bringing together activists, creative writers and journalists, to form ‘think tanks’ that create new stories for our times. Perhaps in a town when we start doing Energy Descent work, we should also be looking to draw in the novelists, poets, artists, storytellers. It could be the next step for Kinsale, writing the ‘great Kinsale novel’, set in the near future. Another idea of Atlee’s which I have mentioned in previous posts is creating a newspaper from the future, full of stories of how things have turned out. This could be very powerful. FEASTA have done a bit of this in their Energy Scenarios work for Ireland, but I think there is a lot more that could be done. This is best summed up in one of my favourite quotes, from poet Gary Snyder, “it is best to think of this as a revolution, not of guns, but of consciousness, which will be won by seizing the key myths, archetypes, eschatologies and ecstasies so that life won’t seem worth living unless one is on the transforming energy’s side’.

Atlee recommends the following links for further reading on visioning. Green, Gary, Anna Haines, and Stephen Halebsky. Building Our Future: A Guide to Community Visioning, Organizing Hope Initiative. Guide to Community Visioning Minneapolis: Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs and the University of Minnesota Extension Service, 2001, and Peterson, Mark. Harnessing the Power of Vision - Ten Steps to Creating a Strategic Vision and Action Plan for Your Community. A short version is available on line here. The power of visioning the most powerful lesson I learnt personally from observing the Kinsale process. As I have mentioned previously, Ken Jones, the Buddhist writer has spoken of ‘changing the climate, rather than winning the argument’. Visioning is a very important part of this.

Lesson 4 - Designing in Flexibility

I once did a course with Australian permaculture teacher Dave Clark, who talked about his experiences working doing permaculture in refugee camps in Macedonia. You can read more about his work here, here, and especially here. He was dealing with large numbers of people moving to places with no infrastructure, all of which had to be created. He did amazing work, building strawbale buildings, food gardens, putting in miles of swales and hundreds of thousands of trees. One thing he said really stayed with me. He spoke of having to work with professional engineers who would design something such as a drainage system, which Dave could see wouldn’t work, but which, because the person was a ‘professional’ could not be questioned. He saw much money wasted through this unchallengeable ‘rule’ that the professional is always right. He talked about how in his work he always worked from the premise that he was wrong. This designed into the process the openness to reassessing at any stage.

An Energy Descent Action Plan should be like this. It is not cast in stone. It is a collection of ideas that should be reworked and revised regularly. The original idea was for an annual revision, with each new update containing news of what had been achieved since the last one. From the experience of those now driving forward the Kinsale process, this is too onerous a task, what with the time required to actually implement the thing. The principle still applies though, that once the first plan is done, it is taken out into the community and ‘tested’ through a series of specific Open Space events, say, one on food and one on housing. This would take the chapter on that area and explore its feasibility and desirability through Open Space. One could then produce specific publications on an area such as food or education, but which links back to the original Plan.

The worst case scenario would be what happens with some other ‘Plans’. They become, like the work of the engineer referred to above, carved in stone, immutable and fixed. “We are working our way through the Plan”, even though that Plan may be long since irrelevant. Be designing in the flexibility to reflect and apply the principles of Action Learning to the process, we can make it infinitely more powerful, and give the community a far stronger sense of ownership and involvement.

Lesson 5 - What Could Have Been Done Better...

This is not really something I should be writing really, this is more something that the people who have taken the Kinsale Energy Descent Action Plan (KEDAP) on or the residents of Kinsale should be writing, but I will give some thoughts that I have had on the subject. As previous posts have set out, the KEDAP arose from a programme of community brainstorming, awareness raising, the work of the students and the inputs of various people in the area with

ideas to offer. It has gone on to end up being approved by the Town Council, and is leading to some interesting developments. But if we had our time over, what might we have done differently?

Firstly, the process was not really as embedded in the community as it could have been. It was principally my initiative and concept (with the support and inspiration of an assortment of others), and despite many of the students having been involved, when I left at the end of term due to changes in other areas of my life, I hadn't left any obvious support structure in place to take on the process. The team who had driven it forward were mostly not from Kinsale, and there was no community group in place to carry it forward. Had it not been for Louise and Catherine (both former students) who formed Transition Design, and Graham Strouts, my replacement as course teacher, continuing to drive it along, it could have disappeared without trace. I guess that from this I learnt that it is important that the process is rooted in the community, although I can excuse it I think in the Kinsale case in that the Action Plan is, in effect, a suggestion for further action, and once finished was offered to the community to take and develop in whatever way they felt most appropriate. Basically the lesson here is that the process needs an inbuilt resilience, so that one person can drop out without affecting the project.

We didn't do enough awareness raising. What would have been ideal would have been at an early stage to have trained students up to run peak oil awareness workshops in schools, youth clubs, gardening clubs, to anyone who would listen basically. The reason in Kinsale we didn't do this was constraints of time, to start with we didn't know what the process we were developing was going to look like, and we still coming to grips even with what energy descent would mean to Kinsale ourselves (and still are!). Now in the process I am designing for Totnes, we are looking at an early stage to offer a 10 week training to equip people to be able to do this. This also grows out of the above, making the concept better embedded in the community. The problem with Kinsale was that I didn't live there, so I didn't know all the groups and networks, something that the training course would get round. The idea is for a 10 week course where each week would be 50% class time and 50% Open Space about what the material covered in the first half would mean to the town. This would also start to contribute to the Action Plan.

We didn't do enough background research. There is a fine line with this. I have only seen a very very early draft of the Post Carbon Institute's Relocalise Now! (due at the beginning of February from New Society, and what looks like it will be a crucially important book) but in that one of the steps they suggest is a community energy audit, or a community food assessment. It is important I think to question this, and say where does a small community group looking to develop Energy Descent plans start with doing such a thing? It would take qualified energy engineers a long time to do an Energy Audit for a town, where is a small group of committed amateurs to start? Louise at Transition Design, is trying to get funding for a company with expertise in renewables and energy to do an energy audit for the town, in such a way that the surveys and community ground work can be done by the citizens group. This is an expensive option though.

What is important I think is to have some kind of measures against which to assess the success of the projects. Some kind of baseline information is needed, to assess that the measures are bringing the town under the depletion curve recommended in the Oil Depletion Protocol. To be honest, despite doing the Kinsale Plan, I couldn't tell you the population of Kinsale, how much it spends on energy and food every year, where its energy comes from, how many new houses are built there each year. That is pretty poor, and any Action Plan should pull all that information together in its first year. Maybe it needn't do full assessments, but at least establishing some baseline figures which it can revisit each year to assess its success or otherwise is essential. Again, the only excuse for that I can offer is that the KEDAP was done in limited time and with limited resources.

Some of the areas we attempted to address we were simply unequipped to do. One group of students were asked to look at Marine Resources. If you look at the Plan (some people have asked me about this!) you will see that in the Contents page there is a reference to a chapter on Marine Resources, but this chapter doesn't appear in the text. This is because the students really struggled to come up with something meaningful to contribute on the subject, and, despite their best effort, the end result was fairly poor. If I am honest, had I written it myself it would have been little better (it being an area little covered in permaculture). In the end, at the editor, I took the decision to leave it out (but neglected to update the contents page accordingly!). There is a danger with trying to tackle every aspect of the town's life that we end up trying to offer intelligent advice on things we know nothing about. At the end of the day we can't know everything, and it is an insult to offer poor suggestions, people see through them straight away and they devalue the other suggestions. If the process is better embedded in the community, it is more likely that people will get involved who know more about the subject in question. The use of Open Space events can help with this, as it will hopefully draw in the people who have information and ideas on these subjects to contribute, at this stage, putting together an Action Plan is more a process of facilitation and networking that of constantly coming up with great ideas.

I'm sure that others involved might have other insights, which would be good to hear. Although some of the above might be me being a bit too harsh on what was after all a student project being made up as it went along, I have tried to be honest and am thinking towards other people who also want to do similar projects, and what I might do better

when I do it again. There may be other things come to mind that I will post later, but I hope that you have found these few points of use.

Designing Energy Descent Pathways: Unleashing Abundance as a Community Response to Peak Oil

Rob Hopkins

(<http://www.permacultureactivist.net/articles/EnergyDescent.htm>)

“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 (although I know some you did!). 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 anyway), 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 rapid process of re-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, where I was living until recently, 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 through the vehicle of the Association for the Study of Peak Oil (ASPO), which he founded. 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. His life story and his case for peak oil are set out in his latest book "Oil Crisis".

Last September Colin came into Kinsale FEC where, until last June, I taught the Practical Sustainability course, the first 2 year full time permaculture course in the world (as far as I know), which I set up in 2001. He came 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 founded in his deep knowledge of the oil industry 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 this time was a talk I went to by a woman from a very dynamic community development group for a small town in decline in the north of Ireland. 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, which was somehow better because it had an 'eco' tag on it. 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. There are also some very interesting comparisons with the period immediately before and during the Second World War in the UK. This was a national Powerdown on a huge scale, with 10% of the nation's food being grown on allotments and private gardens. Although much has changed since then, there are some very important lessons that can be learnt from it. 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 brainstorms 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 four principles of Open Space, whoever comes are the right people, whatever happens is the only thing that could have, whenever it starts is the right time, and when it's over it's over. 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. 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 (a pdf of the final report can be downloaded from www.transitionculture.org).

Next Steps

The plan is for this year's second years to 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

The Kinsale Energy Descent Action Plan has been very well received.

Reviewing it for Permaculture Magazine, Patrick Whitefield described it as a “remarkable piece of work” and continued “I recommend their plan to people everywhere who would like to see some positive action happen in their own community”. Despite its not been conducted by professionals or by a respected research organisation it has touched a chord and excited lots of people with its possibilities. It had no external funding other than the ability to use the college facilities. However, I think what was created in the Plan 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, creating the building blocks, we can’t put the second one in place before the first. 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.

New Pathways...

The Action Plan was completed and printed in June 2005. Around that time we held a conference at Kinsale FEC called ‘Fuelling the Future - the challenge and opportunity of Peak Oil’. It was very successful, and brought together speakers such as David Holmgren, Richard Heinberg, Colin Campbell, Richard Douthwaite and myself. It looked at peak oil, but also at the solutions.

As well as the main speakers there were a number of smaller breakout sessions on permaculture, food, energy, building, local economics and so on (all of the main speakers can be heard at www.fuellingthefuture.org). Many people said they had never been to a conference on peak oil that they had left feeling so positive before. Two of the students who graduated from the permaculture course at Kinsale are looking to set up a consultancy called Transition Design, working with communities and Councils to set up Energy Descent Action Plans. Their idea is that towns are helped to work through certain criteria to earn the accolade of being a ‘Transition Town’. Work has also begun on Version 2 of the Action Plan.

And me? After 10 years living in Ireland I handed the permaculture course over to permaculture colleague Graham Strouts and returned to Devon in the UK to pursue a PhD on this whole topic. It feels to me like the most essential work I can be doing at this point in history. Also I feel it is important to counter some of the more lurid catastrophe scenarios being put out by some in the peak oil movement. I see peak oil as the great opportunity, the chance to finally create the world we have been talking of for years. In my research now, I am putting together a book (as well as the PhD) which will explore what I call the Head, the Heart and the Hands of Energy Descent. The Head means the factual understanding of peak oil, what it is and what it means, as well as the economics and politics of localisation. The Heart refers to an area pretty much unexplored in the peak oil literature, being how do we tell people and communities about this stuff without them retreating further into fear and denial? How do we present something so potentially catastrophic as a positive choice and opportunity? Some of the answers to this question can be found in eco-psychology, some in the works of Joanna Macey, Ken Jones, Tom Atlee and others, people exploring the area of turning trauma into action, despair into empowerment. I feel it is an essential part of this work, as giving people bad news and expecting them to do something has clearly not worked for the environmental movement in the past. We need a new approach.

The Hands refers to the practical work of grassroots led responses to peak oil. Energy Descent Action Planning could be the model, but the Natural Step and the Global Action Plan have something to contribute as proven methods for inspiring communities to change their practices. Also, how much food will the settlement need and where will it come from? What structures are best for promoting energy independence? Once you start to think about them, the practical implications and the list of questions are huge. What I hope to do is produce a set of principles and a toolkit of techniques that can be used anywhere. The focus of the work will be the designing and undertaking of a transition process for the town of Totnes, in Devon where I now live. As part of this work I have set up a website, www.transitionculture.org, where I will post findings, links, ideas and references as I proceed with this research. The site also has archives of other useful information. I hope to have the book finished by next Autumn.

The Totnes process will begin around the same time, once the process has been carefully designed.

For me, I feel that the advent of peak oil offers those people who have long envisioned a more sustainable world the opportunity to step forward and start building the world of their dreams. To retreat into an attitude of “well it’s not worth it, we’re doomed”, is to deny our own potential. In the speech that Nelson Mandela gave when released from prison, he said “our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us”. Energy Descent Action Plans, or whatever approach to this challenge we ultimately devise, offer us a vision for embarking on a great journey and for unleashing both permaculture’s and our untapped potential. It is time now that we roll up our sleeves.

Rob Hopkins is a permaculture designer and teacher. Founding Director of The Hollies Centre for Practical Sustainability (www.theholliesonline.com), and creator of the Practical Sustainability course at Kinsale FEC, he has long been at the forefront of practical approaches to sustainability in Ireland. He has now returned to his native England, where he is pursuing a PhD on Energy Descent Action Planning at Plymouth University. He runs www.transitionculture.org, a resource for people interested in this work, and also a place where The Kinsale Energy Descent Action Plan can be downloaded. He can be contacted at robjhopkins@gmail.com. Plans are afoot for Fuelling the Future 2, which will most likely take place late June 2006.

For more information visit www.fuellingthefuture.org.

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