

Energy descent – or everyday chaos?

The twin realities of climate change and 'peak oil' – the point when supply starts to decline – will soon force us to change our oil-dependent ways. It is vital to start now for a smooth transition to low-carbon living, says Ann Link.

Over the last 150 years, based on an ever-increasing supply, oil has become essential for our transport, trade, plastics, food supply, healthcare, cosmetics, construction and indeed most of the things in our everyday lives. Food transport and fertilisers mean that 22-27% of our CO₂ emissions come from the food chain¹. Oil analysts² now suggest the amount pumped each year will peak by 2008 then permanently decline. Oil company Chevron says production is already declining in 33 out of 48 oil-producing nations, with more joining year by year. Already the gap between supply and demand is very tight, so prices are rising. Cosmetics companies are saying that oil price rises are threatening their profits.³ We are witnessing the end of cheap oil.

Everyone will have to learn to adjust to using less each year, while the price continually increases. This crisis is already affecting many poorer countries. No combination of alternative energy sources will allow the world to continue as it has. Too many questions about safety, health risks, costs and waste disposal still cling to nuclear power to make this a viable option – and women are reportedly more against it, and more in favour of renewable options, than men. So we must use the resources and knowledge we have now to smooth the transition to a low carbon way of living, known as 'energy descent'.

Many of the solutions are already promoted by the environmental movement. People, including WEN members, who live a low energy, low waste lifestyle already have many of the answers. But steep price rises could cause chaos if communities do not prepare now. And every day we hear evidence that action on climate change is more urgent. It is shocking that energy use and CO₂ emissions are still rising and

¹ WEN briefing Sustainable Sustenance, September 2004

² Chris Skrebowski for example, at Oct 11th conference on the End of Oil: see www.powerswitch.org.uk

³ <http://www.cosmeticsdesign-europe.com/news/ng.asp?n=62742&m=2CDE926&c=yhyjjnvtiuldzx> Avon and Estee Lauder lower expectations; 20/09/2005 – 26/09/2005

dwarfing the small progress on renewables,⁴. UK CO₂ emissions in the first 5 months of 2005 were about 2% higher than in the same period in 2004.⁵ Progress on Kyoto is welcome but is not enough.

Women's Environmental Network wants more women to get involved in planning for a low carbon future: our diverse members and groups have expertise that is vitally needed. We want to contribute to local networks on energy descent and give all our contacts among women's, waste, food and chemicals groups the chance to get involved. Oil touches all the issues we work on in some way, from cosmetics to packaging to local food.

We have an opportunity to combat climate change, as well as helping to avoid fuel hardship and sending a signal to Government. The sooner we start, the better, because 'peak oil' is a turning point in human history.

Over to you

- switch to a renewable energy supplier.
- pledge to CRed to cut energy use by 60% by 2025.
- use less energy at home and cut car and plane use
- Avoid products made using oil: these include plastics, most modern cosmetics, pesticides and fertilisers.
- Make other people aware and help them prepare for living a low carbon life.
- Source food as locally and organically as possible
- Learn skills that are useful if there is less energy, in food growing, energy efficiency and renewable energy
- Find out who is already working on these issues in your area: get in touch with other networks
- Initiate an energy descent plan where you live

Useful websites

www.powerswitch.org.uk - a network spreading awareness about Peak Oil

www.greenelectricity.org - switching easily to green energy supplier

www.electricityinfo.org, - information on where supplies come from

www.cat.org.uk useful practical information on low carbon living and much more

4 Energy Beyond Oil, Paul Mobbs 2005, Matador Publishing. ISBN 1 905237 00 6
5 FoE, quoted in ENDS Report 368, September 2005.

www.cred-uk.org - Carbon Reduction (CRed), informative and clear website about the five hot-air balloons-worth of CO₂ each of us in the UK produces each year – and a challenge to reduce them from five to two by 2025 - the 60% challenge.

www.stopclimatechaos.org - a coalition of green and development organisations modelled on Make Poverty History

Additional ideas

TEQs: tradable energy quotas

Each of us would be given carbon credit cards to spend on transport, home energy, food and other goods. If we chose to fly everywhere, we would then find it difficult to have enough hot water. www.teqs.net

Kinsale Plan for energy descent

The town of Kinsale in Ireland has started planning its descent from oil dependency. A Permaculture lecturer at the local college organised a meeting involving most sections of the community; students put the plan together and it will be revised every year to monitor progress. <http://transitionculture.org>

Climate change law

Friends of the Earth is calling for a new law to make the Government reduce carbon emissions by 3% a year, every year from now on

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