

Public Domain

by Steve Krulick, Village of Ellenville Trustee

A Pre-Oil Past as our Future?

*This is the way the world ends / This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper.*
– T.S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men,” 1925

Suggestion: We should be preparing *now* for the potential impacts of peak oil, critical resource shortages, global climate chaos, and more people than the Earth can support.

Scope: Everybody, everywhere. Local to global.

Necessity: Level 1 / Highest (Apocalyptically broken.)

This past Sunday, April 22nd, marked the 38th year **Earth Day** was celebrated. *Observed* might be more accurate, as there seems to be less to *celebrate* each passing year. Sticklers will note that John McConnell, – designer in 1969 of the Earth Flag, which shows the whole planet from space – called for a vernal equinox global holiday at a 1969 UNESCO conference; San Francisco issued the first Earth Day proclamation on March 21, 1970. Since then, the UN continues to recognize the first day of each spring as Earth Day. (As it is also my birthday, I tend to concur.)

Without that first-ever photo image of Earth as a singular blue marble of land and water (liquid ocean, vaporous clouds, solid ice) instantly in everyone’s consciousness, Earth Day likely would never have happened, or inspired individuals and nations to work for environmental protection. Indeed, as a response, the US passed the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and the Endangered Species Act, among others.

Little noted in 1970 was that the US also reached **peak oil** that year... meaning conventional oil from the lower 48 states grew in production from the 1880s as a bell curve, exponentially increasing due to rising demand and more efficient discovery, extraction, and refining capacity, until peak output was reached; then, production began declining, also exponentially. After peaking, less and less oil from any given field or country is found, extracted, and produced, and usually at a rate that fails to meet ever-increasing demand; had it not been for OPEC, Alaska, and North Sea discoveries, the US would have had to face the brick wall of *that* reality during the 70s. (It’s not that there will never be *any* oil or gas left in the US or elsewhere; peak oil simply means that it becomes increasingly more expensive than it’s worth to extract and refine the lesser-quality fossil fuel remaining.)

This pattern was first described by American geophysicist M. K. Hubbert, who created a method of modeling a peak rate of production given an assumed ultimate recovery volume for a finite resource (hence, it’s also known as *Hubbert Peak* or *Hubbert’s Curve*). In 1956, Hubbert predicted that production of oil from conventional sources would peak in the continental US around 1965-1970 (the actual peak was 1970). Hubbert further predicted a *worldwide* peak at “about half a century” from publication. That, folks, means *2006*, give or take a very few years. Although we won’t know for certain until several years after the fact, preliminary numbers are in, and many independent analysts say Earth went peak in 2005; some say 2007, or hold out for as late as 2012. (Centuries ago, the Mayan calendar predicted the end of this age arriving December 2012. Hmmm.)

Four reigning supergiant oilfields, discovered decades ago – the Burgan field of Kuwait, the Daqing of China, Cantarell of Mexico, and Ghawar of Saudi Arabia – were responsible for 14% of the world’s oil production, and are now in decline. All but Ghawar have been officially declared past peak by their own governments, and Ghawar (60% of Saudi Arabia’s production) is showing clear signs of trouble. Saudi total production is *down 8%* this past year. Britain, which floated on a raft of North Sea oil for a few decades, has peaked and is again an oil importer, as is Indonesia. Russia peaked in the 80s. Venezuela and Iran have peaked. Iraq and Nigeria may not peak until next decade, but they are both failed states in turmoil.

Except for a few tree-huggers, visionaries, maverick scientists, and energy entrepreneurs like myself, most people assumed things could continue forever as they were going, or that technology would solve any problems down the road. The *American Way of Life*, which Dick Cheney has said is “not negotiable,” was about endless growth and expansion, made possible by cheap fossil fuels, more roads and cars, and cheap foreign labor and shipping.

When we should have – and could have – been re-directing our talents and capital towards weaning ourselves from our oil addiction while there was still enough time, we willfully engaged in *more* suburban sprawl as the entitlement American Dream (and watched as more nations emulated us), in what James Howard Kunstler called “the greatest misallocation of resources in the history of the world.” Why? “Because it is a living arrangement with no future... because it was designed to run on cheap oil and gas, and in just a few years we won’t have those things anymore.”

Sorry, but we’d better accept *now* that our blithe world of endless *Happy Motoring, Flying the Friendly Skies* and *Always Low Prices* is about to end, abruptly and painfully. For most people, each coming year will be worse than the previous year; for some – perhaps many or most – it will be gruesome and/or terminal.

In a race to see whether *The End of the World As We Know It* will more likely be caused by **energy descent** (what happens when fossil fuel and other energy demands keep outstripping supply), **global climate chaos** (a more accurate term than “global warming”), pure water shortages, sea-levels rising, overpopulation, nuclear or biological war over scarce resources, pandemic diseases (AIDS, or new super-strains of influenza, or other viruses), or the mysterious loss of bees, coral reefs, or plankton... we may find ourselves facing a “perfect storm” in which many or all of the above hit simultaneously, or in rapid cascade – what Kunstler calls a “clusterf**k.”

Next, in Part 2: Just how bad *could* it get, and is there *anything* we can do to make it less bad? And, if this is the biggest story of the 21st century, why isn’t the media or government alerting and preparing us?

Steve Krulick, sk@krulick.com
or PO Box 467, Ellenville NY 12428