

**Time to Start Counting Carbs**

*by Mary Dalton*

While the planet as a whole is at the end of the Cenozoic era, we humans are at the end of the first half of the age of oil. Petroleum, or “rock oil”, was created during a one-time, geological event. Chemically, oil is so incredibly precious, that some scientists have remarked that burning oil is “like burning a Van Gogh painting to run a car”. Not a food, plant or life form constantly replenished by solar activity, this gift is set into geological time like a mountain range. This “excessive free energy released from fossil sunshine” is not a fundamental law of physics that is ongoing, like gravity. In fact, the exact opposite is true. It was created during a one-time geological event and its intrinsic characteristics are very specific and rare, needing to be carefully measured. Colin Campbell writes:

The bulk of the world’s current production comes from deposits formed in two brief epochs of extreme global warming 90 million and 150 million years ago. Algae proliferated in warm sunlit waters, providing the raw material that eventually became oil. It was preserved and trapped in places having the right combination of geological conditions.

There is an urgent need for modern humans to become more intimately familiar with the aspect of time involved in the creation of all the elements extracted from the planet that run our hyper industrialized lives. Fossil fuel extraction and consumption, especially the liquid fuels, will need to be carefully measured, prioritized and adjusted. Naturally, these precious commodities can only be used when absolutely necessary, and as a last option.

Technology does not produce energy, it consumes it. Inevitably, we must confront the urgent need for reduction and conservation. Sometimes the simplest ideas are the hardest to consider. Like an alcoholic who is told they must stop consuming alcohol to save their lives, it is a simple step, but far from easy. Similarly, rampant consumerism has confused our orientation to space/time, and created demented and pathological behavior.

Willingly or unwillingly we will experience a form of collective sobriety. Some will be relieved at the idea that the party—of turning our planet into a junkyard—is over. Most will resist, frustrated with the culture shock of a drastically changed system. Our technology is especially seductive and anesthetizing, while seemingly beneficial and expansive for planetary consciousness. Fossil fuels have nurtured our psychological needs and compulsions, as well as physical ones. In the near future, our ability to escape present reality, either by hopping in the car or buying another gadget, in essence to “check out”, will be missing or radically altered.

Perhaps the need for a “carbon diet” is more accurate than full-scale sobriety. It is impossible for most to consider using zero fossil fuels at this point. Weight-loss diets can be more challenging for some than the concept of total abstinence, where, when practiced correctly, there are no decisions to make. The former user does not pick up a drink/drug under any circumstances. A food diet can be trickier, the temptation to overindulge is always there and moderation has to be practiced with every meal.

Industrial society must go on a carbon diet. “The Oil Depletion Protocol” is such a plan put forth by Colin Campbell and Richard Heinberg.<sup>1</sup> In the plan, everyone ranging from individuals to entire nations would voluntarily sign up to reduce petroleum consumption by the annual world wide depletion rate of 2-3% per year. Projects like the Oil Depletion Protocol can act as a model for those needing guidance once blindsided by unforeseen energy shortages.

Post Carbon Institute is a think tank set up with the recognition of the highly unusual situation we humans currently find ourselves in regarding fossil fuels. Created just three years ago, PCI has hit the ground running. “Global” (needs to happen everywhere) “Relocalization” (getting needs met locally) is PCI’s main objective. In other words, Reduce (consumption) / Produce (locally).

Post Carbon Institute has set up a network of autonomous local groups that use a common web presence to skill share, information share and connect to other relocalization communities. Each group/outpost is autonomous and has individual goals and projects, but is broadly connected by the theme of relocalization: bringing consumers and the products they consume closer together, getting daily needs met by products and services produced within the locale, and generally weaning communities off fossil fuels.

There are now 120 outposts nationwide and 11 internationally, with new groups signing up steadily. Inventory taking, education, emergency preparedness, energy audits, asset maps and community discussion groups are tools offered for communities to use to discover and articulate their needs. Community Supported Manufacturing, Local Energy Farms, Energy Backed Currency and the Oil Depletion Protocol are ongoing projects promoted by the Institute.

Our next task is to awaken to where and when we are in planetary history.

In order to have a “sense of place” so critical to our navigation, we must know exactly where we sit in relation to all the chemical compounds on the earth and their history.” — David Holgren.

As part of our new collective diet, many of us will need to become aware of where our food comes from at the very least, and grow our own food at the very most. In the plant world, evolution happens more through cooperation than competition. Forming connections is how plants solve their needs. In mimicking this system, greater abundance and intimacy with the natural world will result. Creative interaction with the natural world through the art of permaculture design and bioregional practices is taking seed in scattered regions across the globe.

Permaculture design...is not something generated in isolation, but through continuous and reciprocal interaction with the subject. — David Holgren.

Our unique mental capacity for planning, foresight, and envisioning future scenarios is what differentiates us from other species. By engaging this uniquely human ability to precisely

---

<sup>1</sup>The Oil Depletion Protocol is an initiative and operating unit of Post Carbon Institute. Post Carbon Institute is a think, action, and education tank offering research, project tools, education, and information to implement proactive strategies to adapt to an energy-constrained world. The protocol is available at <http://www.oildepletionprotocol.org/>; Internet; accessed 12 October 2006. The present Oil Depletion Protocol, with slight changes in wording, has been previously published as “The Rimini Protocol” and “The Uppsala Protocol.”

measure and carefully adjust and combining it with intense objectivity and imagination, humans can activate the critical inner resources needed during the upcoming lower energy, design intensive, plant encouraging, ecozoic period. Physical, spiritual and creative efforts will be tested over and over. Constant adjustments will have to be made. Fresh bursts of creative energy will be released and help burn off the guilt and calories accumulated from the last 200 industrial years.

Creativity involves extremes. —Brian Swimme