

Q & A

BY KERA ABRAHAM

RICHARD HEINBERG

Peak oil educator



*Richard Heinberg is one of America's foremost experts on peak oil, the anticipated peak and decline of the global oil supply. Heinberg teaches courses on energy and sustainability at the New College of California, and is the author of *The Party's Over: Oil, War and the Fate of Industrial Societies* and *Power Down: Options and Actions for a Post-Carbon World*. He will present "Peak Oil: Challenges and Opportunities at the End of Cheap Petroleum" at 7 pm Tuesday, Jan. 10, at the Eugene Hilton downtown. Mayor Kitty Piercy will introduce Heinberg. The event is sponsored by EWEB and LTD and costs \$5 at the door.*

What's new in the peak oil conversation?

There's a discussion going on about whether the global oil production peak might have happened in the fourth quarter of 2005. There is more production capacity that will be coming online in the next few years, but will that be enough to offset declines from existing fields? We're seeing some of the world's largest oil fields going into decline, and if those decline rates are substantial, we can say that the world's oil is at peak right now.

What do you want the public to understand about peak oil?

This is a huge turning point for humanity. We need a real group effort to turn away from fossil fuels deliberately, collectively and in a coordinated way. Right now I'm working on the Oil Depletion Protocol, which was proposed by Colin Campbell, the founder of the Association for the Study of Peak Oil. The essence of it is, the oil-importing countries would agree to reduce their oil imports each year by the world depletion rate, which is about 2.6 percent.

How does climate change relate to peak oil?

Both oil depletion and climate change are consequences of our dependence on fossil fuels. So far, most [international] agreements have been to reduce the amount of carbon dioxide emissions. The Oil Depletion Protocol starts from a different premise: that we will have to reduce our oil usage simply because there isn't enough of the stuff. So it's not a question of *whether* we're going to do it; it's *how* we are going to do it. Are we going to do it in a cooperative way, or are we just going to let the market take care of it? The former strategy will result in the most survivable outcome. The consequences of the latter would be catastrophic. We'd see extreme competition for remaining oil supplies that would probably turn very ugly — oil wars, terrorism and global economic collapse.

Is it effective to examine one issue, climate change or peak oil, without the other?

In my view, climate change is the trump issue because we're not talking about the global economy; we're talking about the survival of millions of species. But climate change is theoretical and vague, and I think the problem of peak oil gets people's attention because it hits them in their pocketbooks. The Oil Depletion Protocol has something to offer the Kyoto Protocol, because it's a way of getting both the heavy users and the producing nations on board under the same terms. And Kyoto has something to offer the Oil Depletion Protocol, because if we all reduce our oil usage cooperatively and simultaneously, the temptation of many nations will be to substitute coal for oil, which would have a disastrous effect on the global climate. We need to have both protocols in place at the same time: the Oil Depletion Protocol and a strengthened version of Kyoto.

Can alternative auto fuels like biodiesel help wean us off oil?

They could be helpful on a small scale, but we have to understand that biofuels require agricultural production, and so ultimately they're going to be competing for land with food production. I think that for emergency vehicles and farm equipment, on a small scale, it's a good idea. But I see a real danger here: If transportation fuels become so expensive that it's a better money-maker for farmers to grow fuel than it is to grow food, then we could have millions of people starving so that a few thousand people can drive their SUVs.

Would the U.S. be able to maintain its superpower status if we decreased our oil use?

I don't think so, ultimately, but should one nation in the world be setting the terms of negotiation for everyone else? Of course, that's a different kind of discussion. That's not just physics; that's politics.

Can we talk about peak oil without getting political?

Ultimately, no. And that's what the Oil Depletion Protocol does: It puts all nations on the same footing by asking all nations to reduce their fossil fuel consumption by the same percentage. Over time, that reduces the inequality between nations. Because right now, America's economic and military prowess is really based upon the fact that we are able to use vastly more fossil fuels than any other country. If you take away that fossil fuel subsidy gradually, over time you end up with a very different world.

Can a globalized economy operate without fossil fuels?

I think the answer is probably no, but if the answer is yes, then not to the same degree that we see globalization occurring today. Transportation will become more expensive as fossil fuels become more scarce, so we'll have to look at re-localizing economic activity wherever we can. The main focus of our strategy should be reducing demand. That means re-designing our cities so that people can use public transportation, bicycles and other human-powered vehicles. And it means re-shaping our food systems so that there's less reliance on fossil fuels. Just about every aspect of modern life needs to be re-thought so that we use less. But realistically, even the cities that are furthest ahead on this are just starting.

Do you think that the Bush administration understands the concept of peak oil?

Absolutely. There's no doubt about that. When Dick Cheney was CEO of Halliburton, he made a speech to the Petroleum Institute back in 1999, and he said that the world would have a very difficult time supplying enough petroleum to meet demand by the year 2010. So it's clear that he understands the situation. The CIA has been studying peak oil since the 1970s, and we have clear documentary evidence about that.

Has peak oil driven the U.S.'s involvement in the Middle East?

Unquestionably. As soon as the U.S.'s oil production peaked in 1970, it was clear that this country would become more and more dependent on oil imports, or we would have to wean ourselves off oil. President Jimmy Carter advised us to reduce our dependence on oil, but we chose the other path, and we've increased our dependency on oil imports ever since then. That carries a geo-political cost; it means that we have to ensure the availability of those supplies. And so since 1970, the U.S. has shown greater and greater interest in the political affairs of the Middle East.

How do you respond to people who don't take peak oil seriously?

I think we need to focus primarily on policy-makers, and not try to get all of the folks who are at home watching television, eating pizza and drinking beer to sit up and start talking about peak oil. We need to get city councils, county boards of supervisors, people at the state level, and also prime ministers and presidents to look at this situation seriously, because they're responsible for other people's lives. We could see Hurricane Katrina coming for days and hundreds of miles away. Peak oil is the same thing; we can see it coming. The question is, are we going to do anything about it?

What kinds of questions should the leaders of Eugene be asking about peak oil?

Where does your water come from? Where does your food come from? How reliant on fossil fuels are you? All of the basic services that are provided for us by municipalities are energy-dependent. How do you keep emergency vehicles running if you can't afford fuel? You folks in Eugene should be working with your local power utility to start making some good choices about where your energy is going to come from. There's no free lunch here. Every energy source has economic and environmental implications. We have to study those and find our way through the thicket of tradeoffs as best we can.