The Oil Drum: Campfire

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

Unintended Consequences: The Long Term Impacts of Crisis Blogging

Posted by Nate Hagens on June 6, 2009 - 10:22pm in The Oil Drum: Campfire
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The genesis for tonight's Campfire topic was an argument with a close friend a few weeks back, questioning the purpose/effectiveness of time spent blogging/speaking/educating about the various systemic errors embedded in conventional energy, economic and social thinking. Her question to me, before I left for a speech at U of Wisconsin, was unexpected:

"How can you be certain that all yours and others 'outreach' efforts will only result in slowing down our consumption paradigm just enough to allow for 20 or 30 more years of pulling in resources from the periphery, thereby unintentionally causing an ultimately greater ecological disaster than the one you are efforting to avoid?

I didn't have a quick answer to that one, though I have since puzzled out a rational response. Tonight's short essay then, is about unintended consequences, our human penchant to 'mess with things', and the benefits (or drawbacks) of wider education on our looming energy crisis.

Well intentioned actions can have unintended consequences.

Based on a detailed bottom-up approach, CERA sees no evidence of a peak before 2030. CERA believes that we will see an undulating plateau of global production starting sometime after 2030, which is likely to last for a number of decades. Towards the end of the plateau period, we envisage that global production will decline more gently compared to the very rapid production decline predicted by the peak oil lobby.

The peak oil theory causes confusion and can lead to inappropriate actions and turn attention away from the real issues. Corporations, governments, and other groups,

> including nongovernmental organizations, need to have a coherent description of how and when the undulating plateau will evolve so that rational policy and investment choices can be made. It is likely that the situation will unfold in slow motion and that there will be a number of decades to prepare for the start of the undulating plateau.
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> #Oil is too critical to the global economy to allow fear to replace careful analysis about the very real challenges of delivering liquid fuels to meet the needs of growing economies. This is a very important debate, and as such it deserves a rational and measured discourse. Source

The above comments were from a 2007 CERA report. To me it is clear what the risks are of such statements. In following this conventional line of thinking (resources vs reserves, gross vs net, in the ground vs. affordable flow rate etc.) we lose a most valuable asset - time. Resource depletion 'answers' revolve around reducing the amount of existing infrastructure dependent on resources that are about to get scarcer, and investing in infrastructure that can be supported for the long haul. If significant uncertainty exists about timing and decline rates, then the precautionary principle applies. Live to fight another day, etc. Simple.

With respect to blogging, speaking and educating, I have always felt that the facts are on my side (I suppose all of us, even CERA, believe so). A sample of these integrated (not to be rehashed here) facts are:

-we are wired to compete (between groups)
-there is a finite amount of land and net primary productivity available for human appropriation
-the OECD, and social democracies in general, are incredibly dependent on cheap, just-in-time liquid fuels, a fact that cannot be meaningfully mitigated in less than 10-15 years.
-depletion is in a race with technology, and is winning.
-debt/leverage/credit replaced cheap energy for a time, drawing marginal projects into production that are now below break-even. Higher oil and gas prices are needed for long term investments, but supply and demand won't justify such prices.
-we become habituated/addicted to higher novelty/stimulation via the ratchet effect.
-historical resource per capita drops have been met with wars (between groups).
-our steep discount rates, or penchant to overweight the here and now vs the future manifest in a market and political system with nearly ubiquitous short term focus, which ultimately makes marginal futures pricing bad signals of scarcity.

etc.

Blogs highlighting our problems in ecology, economics, finance, energy and human behavior abound, ostensibly to publicly synthesize issues not being adequately addressed by conventional media. I'm sure some of that traffic is driven by ego, or by the need to scratch a puzzle solving itch etc. Personally, it feels meaningful to share and accelerate awareness of these wide boundary issues to those who will listen, even to those I've never met. The more people that can articulate and synthesize these manifold related issues, the more likely a non-zero number of localities, communities, regions and possibly nations will have fast tracked changes in reducing consumption, investing in renewables, become more locally interdependent, etc. But my friends pointed query has nagged at me...what if the efforts at raising the bar on energy/sustainability discourse will have *unintended consequences*. And what kind of consequences?

From wikipedia:

> Unintended consequences are outcomes that are not (or not limited to) the results originally intended in a particular situation. The unintended results may be foreseen or unforeseen, but they should be the logical or likely results of the action. For example, historians have speculated that if the Treaty of Versailles had not imposed such harsh conditions on Germany, World War II would not have occurred. From this perspective, one might consider the war an unintended consequence of the treaty.
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> Unintended consequences can be grouped into roughly three types:
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> * a positive unexpected benefit, usually referred to as serendipity or a windfall
> * a negative or perverse effect, that may be contrary to what was originally intended
> * a potential source of problems, such as described by Murphy's law

Our impacts on the future, if any, are unlikely to be binary. Firstly, they may impact different time periods in opposite ways (e.g. a positive impact on the next 20 years but a deleterious impact on 100 years hence or vice versa). Secondly, there are many subgroups (and species?) who reside in the future - it stands to reason that behaviours engendered today will have different impacts across future demographics. Finally, I think it difficult to answer questions about the future without defining how 'success' might be measured differently in future years/generations.

In sum, non-linear systems need to be near the fringe in order to make successful leaps to new trajectories. 'Successful' peak oil outreach may actually bring our existing socio-economic system closer to equilibrium - in so doing, resource depletion mitigation and responses will likely come from the same quiver of unsustainable arrows that got us here to begin with. I do not spend as much time here as I used to. But my overall intent to lessen the social decline rate I expect will accompany a higher-than-socially-expected-oil-decline-rate has seemed to be worth time and effort. To this point I have believed that fewer people using fewer resources will buy us time to figure out more reasonable long term goals than importing Veblen goods and exporting desire for same? But one unintended consequence is what happens during that bought 'time'? I've realized with increasing occasion that the whole story might be a bit more complicated...

> *Choosing an ineffective or detrimental policy for coping with a complex system is not a matter of random chance. The intuitive processes will select the wrong solution much more often than not. Jay Forrester - Urban Dynamics 1969*

> Campfire questions:
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> There will likely be unintended consequences from 'peak oil outreach'. Are they more likely to be positive or negative? What might some be?

> Could my friend be right, (or at least in the ballpark)? That educating leaders to put the breaks on our consumptive trajectory might alter the natural human impact pulse just enough to pull in currently non-scarce resources from the periphery, making us worse off in the long run than if we attempt to mitigate?
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> Mitigating overconsumption, overpopulation, and resource depletion requires a longer term view. But perhaps focusing on making the next 10-30 years more sustainable discriminates against 30 years and beyond?

Tough questions. I don't have the answers. Perhaps some of you do....