

## The Oil Drum: Campfire

### Discussions about Energy and Our Future

#### The Tropics - A Two Step Transition

Posted by [Nate Hagens](#) on August 26, 2009 - 7:22pm in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

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The following is a guest post from Tom Peifer, ([Tpverde](#)), a TOD reader from Costa Rica. Thirteen years ago, Tom, an agroecologist, writer and builder from California took on the mission of regenerating a section of a 500-acre reforestation project near Paraiso, Costa Rica. In the last decade he has restored this seasonal pasture and spiny jungle thicket to a sustainable farm and research facility and educational institute called El Centro Verde (ECV).

*(Reminder: The Oil Drum's Campfire series runs on Wednesday and Saturday nights, highlighting missives from readers on practical aspects of Peak Oil on Wed., and 'big picture' questions and discussion on Sat..)*

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#### The Tropics--A Two-Step Transition

##### ***The past is still here; it's just not widely distributed***

As someone who has spent the past quarter of his life in the lower latitudes, the fancy footwork and the tropical rhythms still present a bit of a challenge on the dance floor.

All the same, when I see my peak oil-aware brethren struggling to define and implement the best way to achieve a lower carbon future, I feel a bit of confidence that in this corner of the world, we are a couple of steps ahead of our temperate climate cousins. At times the contrasts are striking, at times comic.

Take yesterday. My neighbor Evido showed up on his bike at 6:30 AM. Dark circles under his eyes, he was delivering the kilo of ribs and loin that I ordered 3 days before. He slaughters at midnight, butchers until early light and then sets out to deliver. No refrigeration, no gasoline, nada. Grass fed beef to the doorstep and your dollars recycled in your community.



*Evido, the local butcher, corn grower and deliveryman.*

Ironically, Evido appeared just while I was skimming a review of the latest survival manifesto. This, on a web site featuring all the latest gadgets and multipurpose, stainless steel, apocalypse preparedness accessories so you can head off into the wilderness ready to dig in to a sumptuous repast of rat meat sashimi. Evido had a more primitive toolkit: a sledgehammer, an axe, a machete and a sharpening stone. All I had to do was plug into a socio-economic network with the 'tools and the talent' to deliver fresh filet on a weekly basis.

The area where I live, Guanacaste, the province of Costa Rica bordering Nicaragua, in fact, used to be more self-sufficient. Much food is now imported, processed, industrial junk with all the familiar brand names and unpronounceable ingredients. However there are nooks and crannies of the old ways. People like Evido or his mother Doña Juaquina who makes cheese and tortillas by hand. Other neighbors raise chickens and hogs. Anyone who has land plants corn in the rainy season. Many still gather food from the wild, shellfish off the rocks, crabs from the nearby mangroves. There is also a growing awareness that some of these hokey old traditions might be harbingers of a more livable future.

Our area has seen an influx of foreigners over the past decade. They are drawn by the warm weather, the margaritas at sunset or the relaxed pace of life. Local economies have flourished, but usually not in the directions favored by "transition" thinkers. Without going into a detailed critique of the negative impacts, I would like to offer up some advice to people whose plans for transition include the possibility of relocation to an area where the locals might be 'behind the times' but, unbeknownst to themselves, ahead of the game.

Try to remember, the better you are as a "scout" the more likely you'll be able to claim "mission accomplished." Try to get a handle on who is who, what is what and when and where you can begin to make a difference. Let's go back to my relationship with Evido the butcher.

He also happens to be the only guy locally who maintains the tradition of preparing and selling the whole range of dishes which are prepared from "green corn," before the kernels have gone starchy and are waiting to be dried and stored. The corn bread, tamales and green corn 'crepes' are delicious. Equally important, this is the season sometimes called the "hungry gap," when the seeds are in the ground and everybody is waiting for grain to make tortillas, one of the dietary staples. These dishes are a culinary adaptation to obtain both nutrition and variety in the diet early in the cropping cycle while the corn is ripening. Also, Evido is able to generate some income

before the main crop is harvested.

As newcomers to an area, let's assume that the Prime Directive—that of non-interference—as mandated by the United Federation in Star Trek, does not bind us. Let's assume we have scouted, identified what is here and what tendencies we want to strengthen. What do we do?

First, make sure you are paying the same price as the locals so as not to distort their market. Second, become a steady customer and spread the word—in my case to the local ex-pat population who generally don't have a clue about sourcing local food. And third, I verified that Evido uses seeds from traditional varieties and not GMO hybrid corn seed. I make sure that he knows that I know, and that our business depends on that continuing to be the case.

A recent article in Forbes disputed the 'locavore myth' and argued that the carbon footprint of far-off food production may actually be lower. 'Food miles' is not the only yardstick in charting out a transition to a more sustainable future. As Richard Heinberg and others have pointed out, we need millions of farmers, and we need them everywhere. In an area like Guanacaste, where I live, the local traditions are like the seeds and sprouts that lie dormant in the forest, ready to spring into action to fill gaps when a big tree falls--the process known as 'succession.' My shopping helps to keep the 'seed bank' viable and ready to spread out and take over when the right conditions present themselves.

As an outsider in this setting my original goal of self-sufficiency has evolved to an active participation in local networks of production and exchange. If you think the past holds keys to the future, you can also find out about what crops or food from the wild people used to eat but which are fading away with time. These foods are unlikely to be found in markets. They were never commercialized, which is precisely why they are disappearing from use, just like so many heirloom varieties of apples and other crops in the States and Europe.

One possibility for immigrants with a gardening bent is to source these crops, multiply them up via seeds or cuttings and make them available locally. In my area, pardon the expression; we are 'killing two birds with one stone.' Foreigners here are considered the people who embody all that is smart and successful about the 'future'. When instead, our efforts are seen as striving to reclaim the some aspects of the past, it imbues the traditional practices and heirloom varieties with more than just a sense of nostalgia about 'tradition', but with an extra dose of validity.





*This is a more sophisticated technique of contour water spreading in a flood plain with a "fertility building trench" on the upstream side. Note all work done by hand, not backhoe. 2 men 2 days*

Larger scale technical interventions, from rearranging fence lines on contours to preparation and application of massive amounts of compost for field crops like corn, need to be thoroughly considered within the context of the limitations of time, resources and labor power. What appears as a simple line on your permaculture design may be an investment beyond the capacities of nearby smallholders. And remember that small farmers are 'risk adverse', they can't afford investments that don't pay off or they go under.

Once you have proven things that work on your own site, you might want to simply invite some neighbors over to share the results. That is one way to gauge interest in new crops or varieties. My experience is that new crops are much less likely to generate enthusiasm than new varieties of crops which are known and used. The ten different shapes and colors of 'cherry' tomatoes that I grow are a big hit in my surroundings but eggplant and arrugala are hardly destined to play a role in local cuisine. Exotic banana varieties with different flavors and textures are eagerly sought and planted. But getting people to switch from rice to millet or amaranth is a lost cause—even though it might make 'sense' in agro-ecological terms.

A more complete list of the 'comparative advantage of backward areas' would include the capacity for arduous physical labor, the encyclopedic knowledge base of the elders, the level of expectations about the future, the role of extended family support systems and many more points which I may have overlooked, but will perhaps be offered up by readers.

There is a take home message here for individuals and families who are considering emigration as

key to their strategy for “transition’. I have tried to indicate some of the nuances in choosing the steps backwards in time towards a more sustainable future.

After thousands of hours of conversations with my neighbors here in Guanacaste, I am convinced that the approach outlined above is more effective than trying to explain the complexities of petroleum depletion, EROEI and building a transition movement on the basis of abstractions which are likely beyond the grasp of people who are grounded in local realities and real time. Ironically, few of my neighbors realize just how well positioned they are for the challenges to come. From my perspective, however, there is little doubt that being firmly enmeshed in a tradition of self-sufficiency is a giant step towards a livable future.

Tom Peifer

<http://www.elcentroverde.org>

<http://www.puebloverde.org>

*Afterword: Recent posts in the Campfire series—and the accompanying lively discussions—have delved into various aspects of the enormity of changes which lie ahead. As perhaps the most (energy and affluence) spoiled children in the history of human existence we can expect more than a modicum of whining when reality begins to deliver a double dose of strong medicine and the occasional spanking. Nonetheless, it is extremely helpful to try to objectively consider a range of opinions and experiences and strive to avoid the extremes of crushing pessimism or false optimism when choosing options to pursue.*

*The ‘go it alone’ option may well work better for some than it did for the family of Harrison Ford in the movie Mosquito Coast. At the same time the human experience on this planet has been a social construct from day one. Building and balancing relationships in production and exchange will prove to be as or more important than the tools and techniques of scratching our sustenance from the soil. As the ‘top omnivore’ in the global ecosystem, homo sapiens var. transitionens has a fascinating, if daunting, journey ahead—in whatever geographical and cultural context we choose to sink our roots*



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