

The Oil Drum: Campfire

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

Tricking and Treating the Future

Posted by [Nate Hagens](#) on November 1, 2009 - 7:50am in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

Topic: [Environment/Sustainability](#)



We live in some pretty incredible times. The realization that we have borrowed so much from the future (US current deficit is 41% of expenditures!!)that we'll likely not be able to pay it back using our current economic model and existing wealth distribution is slowly starting to dawn on people. At times the implications seem overwhelming. But this Halloween Campfire post is a quick reminder that despite our massive challenges, (and that we are human, imperfect, and mortal) - we can find joy, fun, meaning and satisfaction in many everyday, low throughput ways - we just have to decide to do so. That's both the trick and the treat.



Snap-Apple Night, painted by Irish artist Daniel Maclise in 1833. It was inspired by a Halloween party he attended in Blarney, Ireland, in 1832

On this Hallow's Eve, let's take a brief respite from brain spinning analysis. What is Halloween anyway? From Wikipedia:

The festival of Samhain celebrates the end of the "lighter half" of the year and beginning of the "darker half". The celebration has some elements of a festival of the dead. The ancient Celts believed that the border between this world and the Otherworld became thin on Samhain, allowing spirits (both harmless and harmful) to pass through. The family's ancestors were honoured and invited home whilst harmful spirits were warded off. It is believed that the need to ward off harmful spirits led to the wearing of costumes and masks. Their purpose was to disguise oneself as a harmful spirit and thus avoid harm. In Scotland the spirits were impersonated by young men dressed in white with masked, veiled or blackened faces. Samhain was also a time to take stock of food supplies and slaughter livestock for winter stores.

"Trick or treat?" The word "trick" refers to a (mostly idle) threat to perform mischief on the homeowners or their property if no treat is given. In some parts of Ireland and Scotland children still go guising. In this custom the child performs some sort of show, i.e. sings a song or tells a ghost story, in order to earn their treats.

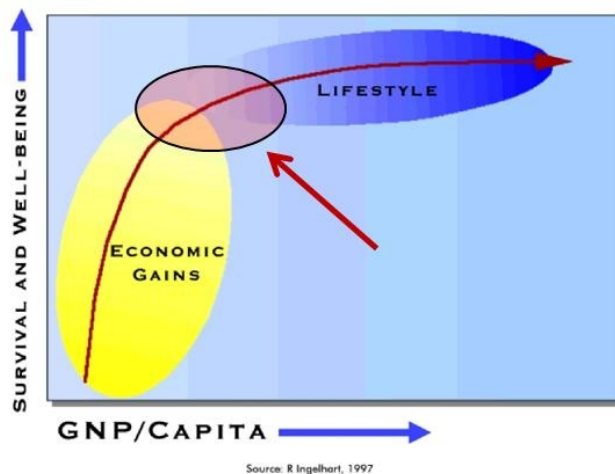
As we move into the 'darker half' of the limits to growth movie that we've all been watching and cataloguing, it is important to realize that a) we have the power to 'trick' our brains into obtaining meaning and satisfaction in unconventional ways and b) we can 'treat' ourselves to fun, laughter, and joy - even in the face of energy descent.



Adaptation executor

We actually still have plenty of energy. The main problems are not technology or BTUs but a misguided faith in a financial/economic system that will require at least 20 years for a viable lower energy quality/quantity transition and that must continually grow to keep society stable en masse. Despite micro-economic mantra that human agents are rational actors, the body of [research is growing](#) suggesting we are adaptation executors, in effect interacting with our cultural cues to perform activities that give us the cocktail of neurotransmitters that caused our ancestors to successfully be our ancestors. Ergo, we don't run around trying to increase the survival of our genes- but we respond to available cultural stimuli that pull us in the direction of matching historically parallel behaviors. It is important to note that pursuing economic fitness is a 'trick' of our evolutionary wiring - we (at least in America) live in a culture where monetary wealth is (perceived to be) correlated with social status, which is one of our core sub-cortical behavioral drivers. A carton of Haagen-dazs contains more fat and sugar than literally anything in the ancestral environment. No human with a purposeful goal of maximizing their alleles' inclusive fitness would ever eat a tub of ice cream unless they were starving. As such, individual organisms, after they are birthed, are best thought of as adaptation-executors, not fitness-maximizers. (I wrote a much lengthier description of the science underpinning this, in [The Evolutionary Origins of Resource Overconsumption](#).)

This will (hopefully) be a recurring theme in addressing resource source and sink constraints. As our assets and liabilities become better sorted out, it will be an open question what sort of skills/genes/assets portfolio will equate with social status in the future - I think it a virtual certainty that piles of virtual wealth in the next 20 years will have less impact than they have had in the last 20 years - suggesting to me that a) we must substitute quite a few lower entropy choices into our weekly routine activities once this cultural carrot begins to shift and b) we can play a role in what such a shift looks like.



Inglehart Curve - how do we get to the red circle? (voluntarily)

This can only be taken so far - no matter how we choose to get our enjoyment or status we still have to eat, stay warm, use energy. Sociological research suggests however that once these basic

needs are met we get very little incremental utility from increases in throughput. As such, to target the red circle in the above graphic might be a logical societal (and individual target). But how do we get there?



This concept not limited to hominids only

The USA has 4% of the world population but consumes 50% of the worlds prescription medicine annually. IOW we use 12.5 times the pills than the average non-American human. I suspect in many cases we can attain the same results from 'tricking' our brains into different behavior - we could do the same with energy and resource use. To use one example, the presence of a pet increases ones serotonin levels in similar ways to [eating chocolates or taking an antidepressant](#). For me personally, I spend a lot of time with animals, and nature, and feel fortunate to have the opportunity to do so. I now have 4 cats, 3 dogs, 4 horses and 11 chickens (lost 2 goats and 2 horses in last year). I enjoy watching the interactions of the different personalities and different species. All are friends, to varying degrees, though I'm well aware this comedy menagerie is subsidized by a ready, steady supply of kibbles in the cupboard and barn. And, actually, with exception of my flights to various concerts and the rare vacation, I use dramatically less energy than I used to - probably less than 1/3. It is important to note that I didn't make this shift to 'save the planet', but to improve my own life. We all want a better planet, but focusing behavioral change at the selfish/immediate bottom line will work much better than theoretical far-off 'facts'.



This week we attended a Halloween party at a friends farm. Kids were invited as well - it was a potluck. I decided my costume to be a deerskin Daniel Boone jacket with a buffalo horn hat, dog collar and leash, held by my girlfriend dressed as a dominatrix. Though funny in itself, it became even more so after arriving at the party - where roughly 40 adults and 80 kids were milling around - it turned out the 'costume' aspect of the party was *for the kids not the adults*. The hostess, upon seeing us said in a flat tone "nice costume - and only mildly scary" - after a couple 6 year olds stared at me and looked like they were about to cry, I removed the dog collar and leash and retreated to a corner with double fistfuls of beer. (In the future, I'll recall my brother's advice

that I could go to most Halloween parties as myself and folks would think I was wearing a costume).

Peak Credit and Peak Oil are a big deal. Let's work hard on ascertaining and mitigating our energy, resource and economic situation - but let's try to balance analysis with humor and levity from time to time. (I'm actually planning a trick to play on Rembrandt right now...)

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CAMPFIRE QUESTIONS

- 1) What sort of lower throughput activities are you pursuing in order to improve your life facing general resource decline?
- 2) How can society move towards the red circle in the Inglehart curve above? Top down decree or bottom up grassroots?
- 3) Any good tricks?



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