

The Post Carbon Reader Series: Building Resilience

What Can Communities Do?

By Rob Hopkins



About the Author

Rob Hopkins is the originator of the Transition Town concept, which promotes community-driven responses to peak oil that focus on cooperative effort to meet basic needs as sustainably and close to home as possible; in just a few years, his work has inspired an international movement of hundreds of communities. He is co-founder of the Transition Network and author of *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience* (2008). He is a trustee of the Soil Association (U.K.), the winner of the 2008 Schumacher Award, and a Fellow of Ashoka International. Hopkins is a Fellow of Post Carbon Institute.



post carbon institute

Post Carbon Institute

© 2010

613 4th Street, Suite 208

Santa Rosa, California 95404 USA



This publication is an excerpted chapter from *The Post Carbon Reader: Managing the 21st Century's Sustainability Crises*, Richard Heinberg and Daniel Lerch, eds. (Healdsburg, CA: Watershed Media, 2010). For other book excerpts, permission to reprint, and purchasing visit <http://www.postcarbonreader.com>.

An Evening at the Brixton Pound Launch

It's mid-September 2009, and I am standing in Lambeth Town Hall in Brixton, London. The hall is packed, the audience reflecting the area's rich cultural diversity. We are all there for the launch of the Brixton pound, an initiative of Transition Town Brixton (TTB), itself part of a quickly growing worldwide network of grassroots groups called the Transition movement. TTB was the first urban Transition initiative, starting in 2007, and has done amazing work in pioneering Transition in an urban context. They also host great events. This was no exception.

The Brixton pound is a printed local currency, specific to the Brixton area. It is a brave and bold idea; no one in this part of the world has ever done it before, and the context of the worst financial crisis the United Kingdom has faced since the 1930s adds an impetus and sense of urgency to the proceedings. One of the evening's speakers is the leader of the local council, who tells the audience, "I want this to become the currency of choice for Brixton," and later tells me that, of course, people will be able to pay their council tax in it, a national first. The notes, Brixton's best-kept secret until that point, are unveiled to rapturous applause; they feature notable former Brixtonians such as Vincent van Gogh, James Lovelock, journalist and historian C. L. R. James, and Olive Morris, who set up the Brixton Black Women's Group and who died aged only twenty-seven. (Brixtonians David Bowie and local dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson had both declined to grace the notes.)

What comes through stronger than anything else is that this is a large group of people not waiting for permission to begin their responses to peak oil and climate change, and not waiting for distant economic forces to lay waste to their local economy. They are not assuming that central government will do everything for them, but are initiating change from the bottom up, in a way that is creative and even playful, that is not trying to



Duncan Law of Transition Town Brixton and Mayor Christopher Wellbelove unveil the new Brixton pound notes.

place blame, and which feels historic. They are not seeing these challenges as disastrous calamities, but rather as the opportunity for a rethink of many basic assumptions about how their society and economy function. They recognize that the future of fossil-fuel scarcity and a changing climate will require us to think ever more locally, and they are starting to make it happen. Welcome to the world of Transition.

Why Community Matters

Given the scale of the challenges humanity faces in the early-twenty-first century, already outlined in great detail in earlier sections of this book, it is clear that a range of responses is required. Government is part of the solution, but it tends to be reactive rather than proactive. Local government is often so focused on meeting immediate needs with limited resources that it doesn't feel it can be imaginative or take much initiative. Local citizens often feel disempowered after years of being ignored in the decisions made about their community.

However, any sufficient response to these challenges requires all of the levels of response working together, driven by the twin objectives of massively

If we see climate change and peak oil as purely environmental and energy problems that someone else will fix, we give away our potential to create change.

reducing carbon emissions and building resilience. The Transition movement embodies this approach with an attitude that might be summarized this way: “If we try and do it on our own it will be too little, if we wait for government to do it it will be too late, but if we can gather together those around us—our street, our neighborhood, our community—it might just be enough, and it might just be in time.”

Community matters when we are looking for responses to peak oil and climate change because of the power that emerges from working together and creating meaningful change through shared action. In a world where social capital and a sense of connection to community are in decline, it is the taking of practical action that enables us to rediscover meaningfulness and community. It is my observation, through seeing what groups inspired by Transition have done, that happiness and fulfillment are achieved through meaningful activity, and meaningful activity needs to happen with other people. If we see climate change and peak oil as purely environmental and energy problems that someone else will fix, we give away our potential to create change, and we close ourselves away and feel powerless—and the last thing we need at this point in history is people feeling powerless.

The Transition movement is, in effect, about the application of engaged optimism to the challenges we face. What does it look like if we use Transition to create

what social entrepreneur Jeremy Leggett calls “scalable microcosms of hope”? How might it be if the energy that propels people into action isn’t distress, fear, and despair, but the things that they are passionate about? That sense of optimism and “can-do” activism that was so palpable at the launch of the Brixton pound is being felt around the world by communities who are deciding that they want to be a part of shaping the future.

In the United Kingdom, where central government still dismisses the concept of peak oil, Transition initiatives are doing hugely valuable work in asking the questions and doing the thinking that government agencies are still unable to do. However, by doing so in a way that focuses on opportunities and possibilities rather than crises, this work is increasingly engaging organizations, businesses, and local government in exploring the potential that, when looked at through Transition glasses, offers an economic, social, and cultural renaissance the likes of which we have never seen. Part of that work is about shifting the scale on which we implement solutions from the global to the local.

Localization

The age of cheap energy, which we are now leaving behind, made many things possible, one of the most impactful being economic globalization. The ability to cheaply transport people and goods over huge distances

has massively changed how the world does business. Western nations have dispensed with the quaint idea that they might actually make anything, specializing instead in ideas and services. The U.K. government's definition of "resilience" in terms of food is that it is gotten from as wide a range of sources as possible, rather than as locally as possible. Comedian David Mitchell once described the U.K. economy as now being based on "ringtones and lattes."¹ A recent report suggested that the three main areas of economic activity that were predicted to pull the United Kingdom out of recession are offshore wind farms, yacht building, and ... cheese.² The age of a dynamic manufacturing sector has passed.

While economic globalization has brought huge benefits (albeit inequitably distributed ones), its key flaw is its vulnerability to high fuel prices. During the age of cheap energy, our economic success and our individual sense of prowess and well-being have been directly linked to how much oil and energy we consume. We are now rapidly moving into a time where our degree of oil dependency is equal to our degree of vulnerability.

The concept of localization suggests that the move away from globalized distribution systems is not a choice but an inevitable change in direction for humanity. The rebuilding of local economies offers a response to the challenges presented by peak oil, as well as a tremendous opportunity to rethink and reinvent local economies. Localization is not, as Michael Shuman puts it, about "walling off the outside world"; rather it is about meeting needs that can be met locally, locally.³ David Fleming sums up the case for relocalization nicely when he writes: "Localization stands, at best, at the limits of practical possibility, but it has the decisive argument in its favor that there will be no alternative."⁴

The Transition Concept

The Transition response to peak oil and climate change is based on the following assumptions:

1. Life with dramatically lower energy consumption is inevitable, and it is better to plan for it than to be taken by surprise.
2. Our settlements and communities presently lack the resilience to enable them to weather the severe energy shocks that will accompany peak oil.
3. We have to act collectively, and we have to act now.
4. By unleashing the collective genius of those around us to creatively and proactively design our energy descent, we can build ways of living that are more connected and more enriching and that recognize the biological limits of our planet.

From its beginnings in Kinsale in Ireland, then Totnes in England, and now globally, Transition has emerged as a process that acts as a catalyst, creating enthusiasm in communities to begin exploring and implementing the practicalities of rebuilding local economies in all their aspects. It is a process that has several qualities. It is:

- *Viral*: It spreads rapidly and pops up in the most unexpected places.
- *Open source*: It is a model that people shape and take ownership of and is made available freely.
- *Self-organizing*: It is not centrally controlled; rather it is something people take ownership of and make their own.
- *Solutions focused*: It is inherently positive, not campaigning against things, but rather setting out a positive vision of a world that has embraced its limitations.
- *Iterative*: It is continually learning from its successes and its failures and is continually redefining itself, trying to research what is working and what isn't.
- *Clarifying*: It offers a clear explanation of where humanity finds itself based on the best science available.
- *Sensitive to place and scale*: It looks different wherever it goes.

TABLE 33.1

Formal Transition Initiatives as of Spring 2010

United Kingdom				
Andover	Dorchester	Horsham	Marsden and Slaithwaite	South Petherton
Arran and Holy Isle	Dorking	Hull	Matlock	Southwell Area
Ashburton	Downham Market	Ipswich	Mayfield	St Albans
Ashtead	Downton	Isle of Man	Melrose	Stafford
Bangor	Dunbar	Isle of Wight	Mersea Island	Stamford
Bassingbourn	Ely	Isles of Scilly	Minehead and Alcombe	Stoke Newington
Bath	Evesham Vale	Ivybridge	Moffat	Stratford
Bedford	Exeter	Kendal and South Lakes	Monmouth	Stroud
Belsize	Exmouth	Kensal to Kilburn	Nayland	Taunton
Berkhamsted	Eynsham Area	Kingston-upon-Thames	New Forest Transition	Tavistock
BH Hub	Falmouth	Kirkbymoorside	Newent	Tayport
Biggar	Farnham	Ladock and Grampound Road	Newton Abbot	Thornbury
Black Isle	Faversham	Lampeter	North Howe	Thorncombe
Brampton	Finsbury Park	Lancaster	North Queensferry	Tooting
Brighton & Hove	Forest of Dean	Lancaster	Norwich	Totnes
Bristol	Forest Row	Langport	Nottingham	Wivenhoe
Bro Ddyfi	Forres	Lavenham	Omagh	Tring
Bro Festiniog	Frome	Leamington Spa	Otterly St Mary	Tunbridge Wells
Bro Gwaun	Glastonbury	Leek	Oxford	Tynedale
Bungay	Groningen	Leicester	Penwith	Wandsworth
Buxton	Haslemere	Letchworth	Portobello (Edinburgh)	West Kilbride
Calon Teifi	Hastings	Lewes	Presteigne	West Kirby
Cambridge	Hawick	Liskeard	Redland	Westcliff-on-Sea
Canterbury	Haywards Heath	Liverpool - South	Rhayader	Weymouth and Portland
Chepstow	Helston & District	Llandeilo	Richmond	Whitstable
Chester	Hemel Hempstead	Llantwit Major	Saltash	Wigan
Chesterfield	Henley on Thames	London - Brixton	Sampford Peverell	Wolverton
Chichester	Hereford	Lostwithiel	Seaton	Woodbridge
Clitheroe	Hertford	Louth	Sevenoaks	Worthing
Coventry	High Wycombe	Maidenhead	Sheffield	Wroughton
Crediton	Highbury	Malvern Hills	Sherborne	York
Derby	Holywood	Market Harborough	Shoreham-by-Sea	
Diss	Horncastle	Marlow	Sidmouth	
United States				
Albany, CA	Denver, CO	Media, PA	Portland, ME	Shelburne, VT
Anderson, OH	New Haven, CT	Micanopy, FL	Portland (PDX), OR	Staunton Augusta, VA
Ann Arbor, MI	Hancock Cty., ME	Monterey, CA	Portland (Sunnyside), OR	Stelle, IL
Ashland, OR	Hardwick, VT	Montpelier, VT	Putney, VT	Seattle (Northeast), WA
Austin, TX	Houston, TX	Newburyport, MA	Reno, NV	Transition Colorado
Berea, KY	Keene, NH	Northfield, MN	Richmond, CA	Tucson, AZ
Bloomington, IN	Ketchum, ID	Oklahoma City, OK	San Francisco, CA	Van Buren-Allegan, MI
Carrboro / Chapel Hill, NC	Laguna Beach, CA	Olympia, WA	San Luis Obispo, CA	West Marin, CA
Chelsea, MI	Los Angeles, CA	Paso Robles, CA	Sandpoint, ID	Westminster, CO
Cotati, CA	Louisville, CO	Pittsburgh, PA	Santa Barbara, CA	Whatcom, WA
Culver City, CA	Louisville, KY	Pima, AZ	Santa Cruz, CA	Whidbey, WA
	Lyons, CO	Pine Mountain, CA	Sebastopol, CA	
Australia				
Adelaide West, SA	Bellingen, NSW	Eumundi Markets, QLD	Maleny, QLD	Sydney Epping, NSW
Anglesea, VIC	Blue Mountains, NSW	Far North Queensland, QLD	Newcastle, NSW	Tamborine Mtn., QLD
Armidaale, NSW	Cooran, QLD		North Sydney, NSW	Torquay, VIC
Banyule, VIC	Darebin, VIC	Hervey Bay, QLD	South Barwon, VIC	Transition East, QLD
Barraba, NSW	Denmark, WA	Kenmore, QLD	Sunshine Coast, QLD	Wingecarribee, NSW
Bell, VIC	Eudlo, QLD	Kurilpa, QLD	Sydney, NSW	
Canada				
Barrie, ON	Guelph, ON	Ottawa, ON	Poplar Hill / Coldstream, ON	Salt Spring Island, BC
Cocagne, NB	London, ON	Peterborough, ON		Vancouver, BC
Dundas, ON	Nelson, BC		Powell River, BC	Victoria, BC
New Zealand		Elsewhere		
Brooklyn	Waiheke Island	El Manzano, Chile	Witzenhausen, Germany	Fujino, Japan
Kapiti	Whanganui	Syltmae, Denmark	Kildare Town, Ireland	Hayama, Japan
Nelson		Siirtymälike, Finland	Kilkenny, Ireland	Deventer, Netherlands
Opotiki		Bielefeld, Germany	Kinsale, Ireland	
Orewa		Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg, Germany	Monteveglia Città di Transizione, Italy	
Timaru				

Transition has grown exponentially, from just a handful of initiatives in 2007 to more than 300 official groups in 13 countries in 2010.

- *Historic*: It tries to create a sense of this moment as being a historic opportunity to do something extraordinary—and perhaps most important of all.
- *Joyful*: If it's not fun, you're not doing it right.

A model known as the “12 Steps (or Ingredients) of Transition” has emerged from the experience of early Transition initiatives. This model supports Transition initiatives through the process of forming their groups, engaging their community, and working toward the creation of an “Energy Descent Action Plan” (EDAP), a kind of Plan B for the community that sets out how it could move toward a lower-carbon, resilient future. The term “viral” is not used lightly. Transition has grown exponentially, from just a handful of initiatives in 2007 to more than 300 official groups in 2010 (table 33.1). There are national Transition organizations in Sweden, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, Japan, and the United States, and individual initiatives (including “mullers” considering becoming official) number in the thousands. But what inspires them, and what tangible outcomes have emerged from their work thus far?

Is Resilience the New Sustainability?

The study of resilience has been covered elsewhere in this book. It is most often explained as referring to the ability of a system to withstand a shock and return to its original functions. It is a lens through which many

disciplines—disaster management, human development, psychology, and organizational development—explore the implications of shock. An emerging area within resilience thinking is known as adaptive or transformational resilience, which argues (as does the Transition movement) that change offers huge potential to rethink assumptions and build new systems.

Human communities differ from ecological communities in that they are able to see change coming, and to anticipate and plan for that change. Brigit Maguire and Sophie Cartwright articulate how social resilience is different from ecological resilience, describing resilience as “the ability of a community to respond to change *adaptively*. Rather than simply returning to a pre-existing state, this can mean transforming to a new state that is more sustainable in the current environment.”⁵

For Transition, when peak oil and climate change are overlapped and looked at together, it becomes clear that resilience is, alongside the drastic reduction in carbon emissions, a dynamic and useful way of looking at the way forward from here. One of the questions explored in Transition is whether or not resilience can be measured. In Totnes, the process of creating an Energy Descent Action Plan also involved the creation of some “resilience indicators,” measures that could be revisited regularly to check that the community is moving in the right direction. These measures might include things

like the percentage of food consumed locally that was produced locally, the percentage of trading done using local currencies, the degree to which people felt involved in community activities, and so on.

Where Transition Starts and Where It Needs to Go

Transition initiatives often start with food projects, as they offer (excuse the pun) the low-hanging fruit—the projects that can get under way the fastest.⁶ These take many forms, from community-supported agriculture to urban fruit and nut tree plantings, from community gardens to re-skilling workshops around food production.

Some of the more mature initiatives in the United Kingdom are starting to broaden out and step up to larger-scale projects:

- Totnes, Lewes, Stroud, and Brixton have launched Transition currencies. The Brixton pound, launched in September 2009, issued more than £30,000 worth of notes into circulation in the first month, and became the first local currency to be accepted by its local council to pay council tax.
- Transition Taunton Deane in Somerset worked with its local council and ran a weeklong visioning process with its city planners, producing *Towards a Resilient Taunton Deane*, an extraordinary document.⁷
- Transition Stroud worked with its local authority and produced *Food Availability in Stroud District*,⁸ a report that went on to underpin the council's food policy. The deputy leader of the council said, "If Transition Stroud didn't exist we'd have to make [the policy] up."
- Transition Town Totnes just published its Energy Descent Action Plan, the first community-generated "Plan B," based on a year-long community consultation process.⁹



Members of Sustainable NE Seattle, one of the first neighborhood-level Transition groups, convert a lawn into a garden.

In the United States, the organization Transition US is sponsoring initiatives, supplying materials, and providing technical assistance for groups nationwide. Launched in 2008, Transition US had more than sixty-five formally recognized Transition initiatives in twenty-four states by mid-2010—and for every official Transition initiative there were at least four groups mulling over whether to become official. The number of formal initiatives, as well as the number of people completing the "Training for Transition" course, is expected to increase significantly in the next few years.

Transition initiatives are under way in all regions of the country:

- The San Francisco Bay Area is home to six official Transition initiatives (with more on the way), several of which are collaborating to build diverse leadership and establish an area-wide convergence. The Los Angeles region has a city hub coordinating support, mentoring, and collaboration with seven initiatives throughout the area.
- A bioregional Transition hub is emerging in the Puget Sound/Salish Sea region, with initiatives in Olympia, Seattle, and Whidbey Island (Washington) collaborating across the border with initiatives

in Victoria and Vancouver (British Columbia). Portland, Oregon has both a citywide initiative and one of the first official neighborhood-level groups.

- The western mountain states are home to the three earliest U.S. initiatives, in Boulder, Colorado, and Sandpoint and Ketchum, Idaho. The Great Plains and Texas are seeing initiatives emerge in rural, suburban, and urban settings, with official groups in Austin, Houston, and Oklahoma City.
- The Ohio River Valley has official initiatives in four cities, and groups have formed in Tennessee, North Carolina, and Florida. The Northeast has only a handful of official initiatives, but more than thirty groups are beginning to form.

Wherever they are located, it is hoped that Transition initiatives will grow to become agents of relocation, social enterprises dedicated to guiding their communities through the decline of fossil fuels.

A Vision of Where This Could All Go

The age of cheap energy led to the idea that our economies can grow indefinitely, forever, in complete contradiction to any notion of ecological or energy limits. Increasingly, though, the awareness has been growing that economic growth has not been accompanied by social growth; that is, it has not led to our being happier, more relaxed, less indebted, more skilled, and better connected with a stronger sense of community. As the global economy now enters a period where any degree of economic growth is becoming infeasible, it is clear there is a choice: either to try to use the same thinking that got us into this situation to get us back out again or to replace the idea of growth—as Tim Jackson sets out in *Prosperity without Growth*¹⁰—with the idea of prosperity in the widest sense of the word.

In scaling up the Transition movement, we hope to see the allied and inseparable concepts of drastic carbon reduction and resilience building underpin policy-making, business planning, and community development.

We also hope to see many more communities themselves taking ownership of their development, becoming their own banks, developers, energy companies, and so on.

One day when I was eighteen, I went with my friends to collect our final exam results from school. I remember sitting in the sunshine on the school steps and looking round at my friends, who had just received grades of varying quality, and thinking what a useless lot we were. None of us knew how to garden, build, repair, or do anything of any great value. If we had washed up on a desert island together, we wouldn't even have known how to feed each other.


In the same way, I think that when two people, two communities, two regions, or two nations meet each other and interact from positions of mutual dependency, mutual need, a lack of real skills, and an inability to turn their hands to anything, it is a very different quality of relationship than when both are able, adaptable, and resilient. We cannot respond to peak oil and climate change by putting up fences, drawing up drawbridges, and retreating into survivalism and a rejection of society. The Transition approach argues, and indeed is actively demonstrating, that the solutions we need will, in large part, emerge from those around us, from the networks and relationships we build, and from the sense of “engaged optimism” that we are able to generate. That will be the dynamic free energy source that will actually sustain us long into the future.

Endnotes

- 1 David Mitchell, "I've Always Wondered about Woolies," *Observer*, November 23, 2008.
- 2 BDaily Business News Network, "Wind Farm 'Driving Economy,'" November 9, 2009, <http://bdaily.info/news/technology-and-science/09-11-2009/wind-farm-driving-economy/>.
- 3 Michael H. Shuman, *Going Local: Creating Self-Reliant Communities in a Global Age* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
- 4 David Fleming, "Lean Logic: The Dictionary of Environmental Manners," 2007, unpublished.
- 5 Brigit Maguire and Sophie Cartwright, *Assessing a Community's Capacity to Manage Change: A Resilience Approach to Social Assessment* (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Rural Sciences, 2008).
- 6 Tamzin Pinkerton and Rob Hopkins, *Local Food: How to Make It Happen in Your Community* (Totnes, UK: Green Books/Transition Books, 2009). See <http://www.transitionbooks.net>.
- 7 Transition Culture, "Transition Taunton and Their Local Council Produce a Transition Vision for 2026," November 11, 2009, <http://transitionculture.org/2009/11/11/transition-taunton-town-and-their-local-council-produce-a-transition-vision-for-2026/>.
- 8 Fi Macmillan and Dave Cockcroft, *Food Availability in Stroud District*, Transition Stroud, December 16, 2008, http://community.stroud.gov.uk/_documents/34_Food_Availability_in_Stroud_District.pdf.
- 9 Transition Town Totnes, *Transition in Action: Totnes and District 2030: an Energy Descent Action Plan*, 2010, <http://www.totnes.transitionnetwork.org/edap/home>.
- 10 Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (London: Earthscan, 2009).

Photo Credits

Page 1, Brixton pounds unveiling, © Rob Hopkins.

Page 6, Lawn garden work party, © Leo Brodie / Transition US.

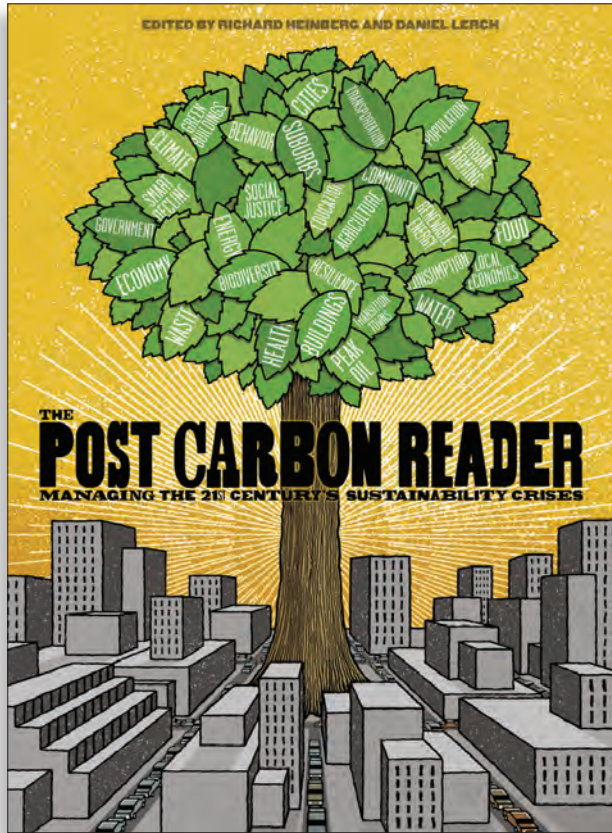
Images marked © are under a Creative Commons license. See <http://creativecommons.org>.

Acknowledgments

Cover art by Mike King. Design by Sean McGuire. Layout by Clare Rhineland.



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS



The Post Carbon Reader

Managing the 21st Century's Sustainability Crises

Edited by **RICHARD HEINBERG** and **DANIEL LERCH**

In the 20th century, cheap and abundant energy brought previously unimaginable advances in health, wealth, and technology, and fed an explosion in population and consumption. But this growth came at an incredible cost. Climate change, peak oil, freshwater depletion, species extinction, and a host of economic and social problems now challenge us as never before. *The Post Carbon Reader* features articles by some of the world's most provocative thinkers on the key drivers shaping this new century, from renewable energy and urban agriculture to social justice and systems resilience. This unprecedented collection takes a hard-nosed look at the interconnected threats of our global sustainability quandary—as well as the most promising responses. *The Post Carbon Reader* is a valuable resource for policymakers, college classrooms, and concerned citizens.

Richard Heinberg is Senior Fellow in Residence at Post Carbon Institute and the author of nine books, including *The Party's Over* and *Peak Everything*. **Daniel Lerch** is the author of *Post Carbon Cities*.

Published by Watershed Media

FORTHCOMING IN OCTOBER
440 pages, 6 x 9", 4 b/w photographs, 26 line illustrations
\$21.95 paper 978-0-9709500-6-2

To order online: www.ucpress.edu/9780970950062
FOR A 20% DISCOUNT USE THIS SOURCE CODE: 10M9071
(please enter this code in the special instructions box.)