



Rob Hopkins

# POWERDOWN & PERMACULTURE At the Cusp of Transition

Rob Hopkins asks whether the permaculture movement is capable of influencing society as a whole when the coming peak oil energy crisis bites. Or should we just head for the hills.

Permaculture has achieved many great things since its inception in the mid-1970s. It has spread around the world, and informs the day-to-day decisions and thinking of millions of people. It has also often acted as the invisible motivator behind many sustainability initiatives, which although not in themselves strictly permacultural, are informed by its principles.

Readers of *PM* will know the joy of applying permaculture design to their own lives and experiencing the benefits of applied common sense, whether it be in the form of fresh salad or a co-housing project. We find ourselves as a movement, however, on the edge of a global transition of unprecedented

proportions. In this article, I am asking, “Is the permaculture movement ready for the scale of changes ahead?”

## PEAK OIL – THE GREAT OVERSIGHT OF OUR TIMES

Peak oil is a term increasingly mentioned in *PM*, but what does it actually mean? In brief, it is the point in world oil production at which supply begins to dictate demand, rather than demand driving supply, which has been the situation for the past 150 years. In other words, we go from having as much oil as we can use, to using as much oil as we can have.

It is a pivotal point in human history,

and while it does not mean that we are ‘running out’ of oil, it does mean that the Age of Cheap Oil, and all that cheap oil has made possible, is coming to a close. The price of oil is rising steadily, we only discover one new barrel of oil for every six we consume, and many of the oil producing nations we rely on to power our lifestyles are either in decline, or are so secretive about their reserves that we have no reasons to feel complacent that they are not also declining.

### Above:

Totnes in Devon is the first town in Britain to have an Energy Descent Action Plan.



We live in a Fool's Paradise, surrounded by iPods, well-stacked supermarket shelves and *Celebrity Love Island*, believing it to be the 'real world'. In reality, it is an extremely fragile illusion, which, as the 2000 truck drivers' strike exposed when the supermarket shelves nearly emptied, is utterly dependent on centralised transport. The UK has almost no food security, we no longer make anything, our living arrangements have made us believe that life without a car is impossible, and we have largely forgotten the skills that enabled our ancestors to see out hard times in the past. We are dependent for everything on a globalised economy, which in turn is utterly dependent on cheap oil.

Experts place the peak in world oil production some time between 2008 and 2010, and a recent study in the US, known as the Hirsch Report, concluded that any 'crash programme' of preparation for life beyond the peak, would need at least 10 years, preferably 20, to have any chance of success. With no sign of such a 'crash programme' coming from national government, what role might the permaculture movement have to play in this transition?

#### CHALLENGING PERMACULTURE

Permaculture, as it has been reframed by David Holmgren in *Permaculture – Principles & Pathways Beyond Sustainability*,<sup>1</sup> is nothing less than the design system for a post-peak society. He writes that "permaculture is the wholehearted and positive acceptance of energy descent, as not only

*Above:*  
Market selling local produce in Totnes.

*Right:*  
Permaculture design course, Kinsale, Eire.

inevitable but as a desired reality". Yet, as Eric Stewart wrote last year in a piece in *Permaculture Activist* called 'A Second Challenge to the Movement',<sup>2</sup> permaculture, as it stands on the verge of its 'call to power', appears to have a built-in flaw.

"It seems to me", he wrote, "that permaculture houses two virtually polar impulses: one involves removal from larger society; the other involves working for the transformation of society. While the case can be made that removal from the larger society represents action that is transformative of society, I believe that there is an imbalance within the cultural manifestation of permaculture that has favoured isolation

over interaction. The cultural shift we need depends on increasing interaction to increase the availability of the resources permaculture offers".

Are we thinking big enough? Are we in danger of becoming irrelevant just at the time when permaculture is at its most relevant? We need to ramp our game up, so how might we do that?

#### MY OWN EXPERIENCE

To illustrate this, I'd like to tell you my own story. Since I did my Permaculture Design Course in 1992, I have tried to dedicate my life to implementing its principles. I was driven by Mollison's assertion that the best thing we can do in the face of ecological crisis is to buy some land with like minded friends, build a house, grow your food, harvest your timber and so on. This vision of 'fetching wood, carrying water' and living by example was very powerful for me.

I moved to rural Ireland, taught permaculture, did consultancy for people, developed an ecovillage project, raised financing, spent four years trying to get planning permission which eventually we did, grew my food, kept a cow, planted trees and composted my family's waste. I built my family's home, a very energy efficient cob house using local subsoil, local timber, straw, stone, gravel and so on. I was making steps towards the rural self-reliant version of permaculture living.

Then everything was tipped on its head. I saw a film called 'The End of Suburbia'<sup>3</sup> which set out in the starkest terms the reality of peak oil and our societal dependence on oil, something which, extraordinarily, I hadn't ever thought of until then. I also met Dr. Colin Campbell, the world authority on the subject, who lived near to me





Andy Goldring

in West Cork. Peak oil arrived in my life with a bang, and led me to deeply question everything.

I came to see that although I lived in rural Ireland, I too was living in the suburbia that the film had so ruthlessly deconstructed. I relied on the car to drive to work at the college where I taught permaculture, to take my kids to school, to visit friends, to get to the shops. If I had no car, would I actually want to live there? It was an unsettling question.

Then, about a month later, an unknown arsonist burnt my nearly-finished cob house to the ground. A deeply traumatic experience, which left us in a position of being able to completely rethink where we lived and what we were doing. I came to question the notion of living in isolation from society, and to see in myself the polar impulses that Stewart referred to. I came to feel that peak oil and the 'wartime mobilisation' scale of response that writers such as Lester Brown call for requires us to be where people are, to be speaking their language. I began to feel that what we might call The Great Turning had begun, and that I wanted to be a part of it. In short, we need to be where people are, rather than expecting them to come to us. People out there are desperately hungry for this stuff, but we can be seen as 'holier than thou', as separate and aloof (or so I am reliably informed by eco-sceptic friends). A plan began to emerge.

**Above:**

A vision of the future? Car used as a stall to sell garlic.

**Right:**

Participants at an energy descent planning meeting in Kinsale.

**ENERGY DESCENT PLANNING**

I observed that although I had taught the permaculture course at Kinsale Further Education College in Ireland for four years to nearly 150 students, there were only perhaps two food gardens in the town of Kinsale that weren't there before the course had begun, not a great post-peak resource to fall back on. I began to think about how we might begin to apply permaculture on a town scale, how we might pull in the various elements of the community in a process of mutual design and visioning. Together with second year students from Kinsale FEC, I developed the Kinsale Energy Descent Action Plan (detailed in *PM45*).

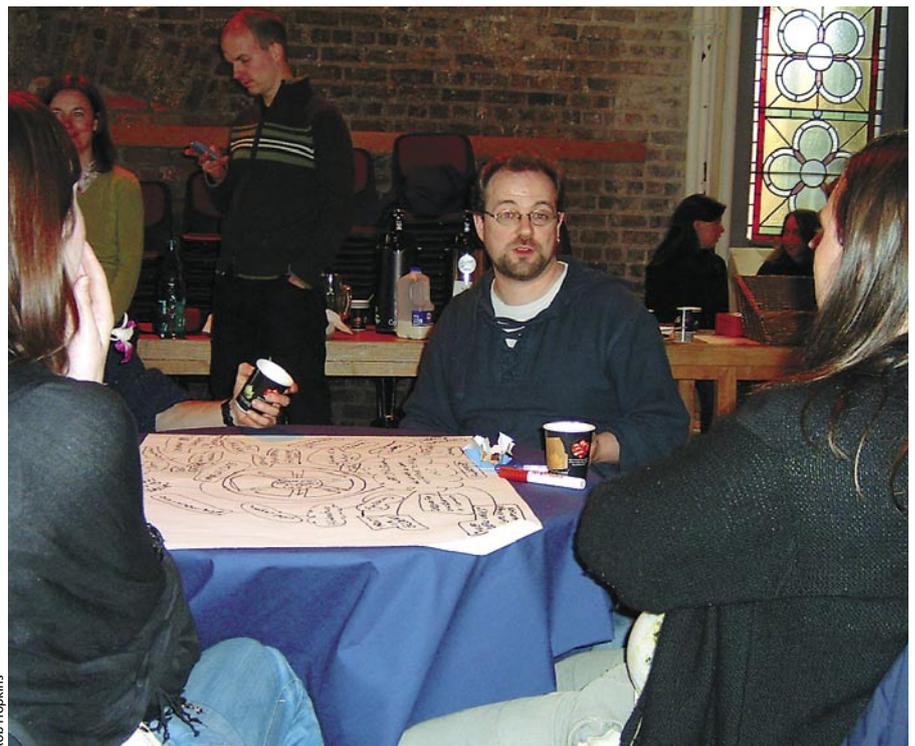
The approach we developed to localise Kinsale's economy in response to peak oil was endorsed by Kinsale Town Council. It has since been downloaded many thousands of times from my website and has been used by communities all around the world. The basic idea is that life with less oil could, if properly planned for and designed, be far preferable to the present. It is a simple idea, yet hugely powerful, and seems to have really engaged peoples' imaginations.

It could be argued that one of the reasons for the environmental movement's failure to mobilize more than a small section of society is that it has failed to offer a cohesive and tangible vision of a sustainable society in such a way that people can smell it, feel it, touch it. Creating such a vision is extremely powerful, and allows us then to design step-by-step pathways to it. Energy Descent Planning allows us to do this. It provides, I would argue, a way by which permaculture can ramp up its game and its perceived relevance in this hour of profound need.

**TRANSITION TOWN TOTNES**

Last September I moved to Totnes in Devon, and began planning a larger initiative, based on the lessons learned in Kinsale. This planning work and research has resulted in Transition Town Totnes, which will aim, over the next 18 months, to produce an exemplary Energy Descent Action Plan for Totnes, setting out the practical steps to a lower energy, more localized Totnes. It will aim to develop an approach and a set of principles that can be applied in other settlements. This will make it the first town taking practical steps to look at how it responds to peak oil.

It was launched on 6th September 2006



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in the Civic Hall in Totnes, on an evening billed as 'The Official Unleashing of Transition Town Totnes', which was attended by over 350 people. The evening was introduced by the Mayor of Totnes, and featured talks by Dr. Chris Johnstone, author of *Find Your Power*,<sup>4</sup> and myself. The enthusiasm for the process was amazing, boding very well for the next few months.

The programme for TTT includes visits by speakers such as Richard Heinberg, David Fleming and Paul Mobbs, and Open Space think tank days on topics such as housing, energy and food, evening talks, film screenings and an evening class called 'Skillling Up for Powerdown'. A website has been set up which will act as a public face and also has a Wiki aspect, allowing people to collaboratively build ideas online. I am also doing oral history interviews with old people about their memories of life before cheap oil, how the local economy functioned, and what skills they have.

Working groups focusing on each of the areas to be covered in the plan will be set up, and will invite people with knowledge on those areas to come and talk with them. Local artists will be involved, to explore the role the arts have to play. One of the groups set up will explore the Psychology of Change, how insights from eco-psychology and related disciplines can inform this process. How can a community be helped through the various emotions and unconscious obstacles that are thrown in the way of such a transition?

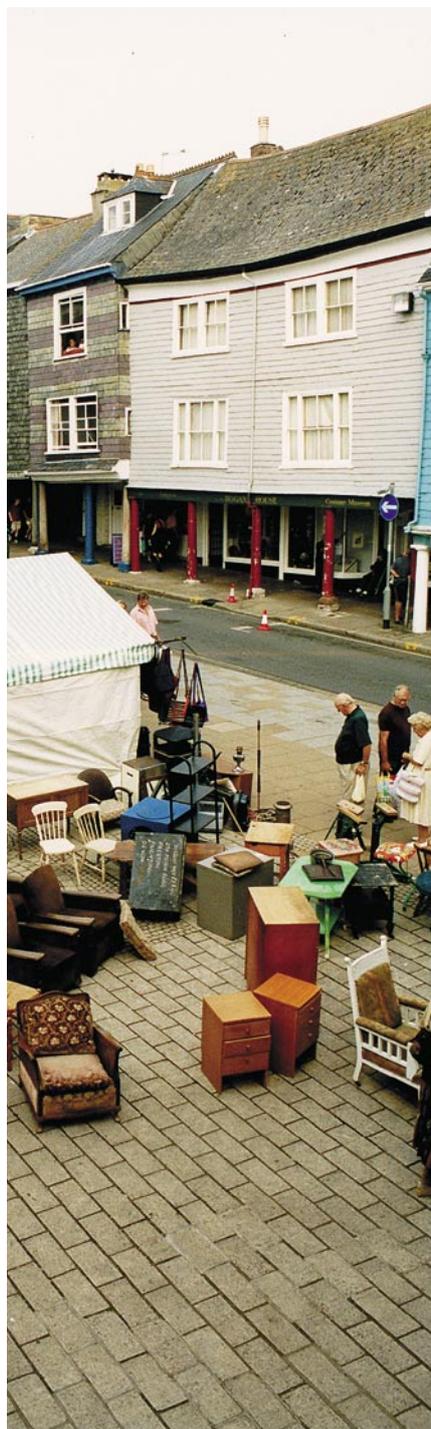
#### TRANSITIONARY TIMES

David Holmgren, in *Permaculture – Principles & Pathways Beyond Sustainability*, writes about the 'Four-Phase Model of Ecological Change', which is observed in ecosystems when change occurs. The four stages are *conservation*, the steady state prior to the change; *release*, which is the pulse of disturbance (usually very short in duration); *reorganization*, which is essentially when everything is up for grabs and the outcome is uncertain; and *exploitation*, where the pioneers colonise the ground and start building towards a new conservation phase.

My sense is that we are so near to the peak that its effects are being widely felt, and this is having knock on effects on all our institutions. By my reading, we are now entering the reorganization phase, where everything is up for grabs. The ideas generated by the permaculture/energy descent movement have as much chance as anyone else's of becoming reality. While governments may propose nuclear power, tar sands and coal to liquids as solutions, these 'solutions' are unworkable and unfeasible. The energy descent approach of relocalisation and self reliance has the edge over the competition in that it actually works and answers the challenge raised.

**Right:**  
Secondhand furniture for sale in Totnes.

**PERMACULTURE FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**  
Permaculture, especially in David Holmgren's reworked principles developed from an energy descent perspective, is the most important tool we have as we enter the uncertain times of energy descent. It allows us to design new systems to replace the soon-to-be obsolete oil dependent ones. It enables us to apply common sense and ingenuity, and to bring beauty and diversity back into our impoverished lives. Energy Descent Action Planning offers a way of pulling in those in our area with the hands-on expertise in building, energy, food growing and so on, while using what we do best, our design and networking skills, our assembling of random elements.



It allows us to more coherently and effectively rise to the opportunity of peak oil and climate change. It puts us back at the forefront of creative thinking on sustainability. I for one find it tremendously exciting that permaculture could be at the driving edge of this shift. We need to move up a few gears and by doing so we will find more resourcefulness and brilliance in each other and in our work than we ever dreamt possible. Do we as a movement have what it takes to step up to the challenge before us and accept our pivotal role in this historic transition?

When Nelson Mandela left prison he quoted Marianne Williamson, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us". These extraordinary times require an extraordinary response, and it is my hope that Energy Descent Action Plans offer a mechanism for this response. I hope it is a tool that permaculturists will find useful for taking their work to a new level 🌱

*Rob Hopkins is a permaculture teacher and designer based in Totnes. He runs [www.TransitionCulture.org](http://www.TransitionCulture.org), an evolving exploration of the head, heart and hands of energy descent. He created the full time Practical Sustainability course at Kinsale Further Education College in Ireland and is now co-ordinating the Transition Town Totnes initiative. He is the author of the recently published *Energy Descent Pathways – evaluating potential responses to peak oil*, reviewed on page 54 and available from Transition Culture, The Coach House, Longcause, Dartington, Totnes, Devon TQ9 6DQ. [robjhopkins@gmail.com](mailto:robjhopkins@gmail.com). Printed copies £12, and electronic downloads available for £10 from [www.transitionculture.org](http://www.transitionculture.org). See 'Reviews' on page 54.*

*Rob Hopkins will be teaching on 'Life After Oil: Breaking the Habit', a residential course at Schumacher College running from November 12 to 24, 2006. Other teachers include Richard Heinberg, David Fleming, Ron Oxburgh and Michael Meacher. Rob will be discussing the work he is currently doing in Totnes.*

#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> *Permaculture – Principles & Pathways Beyond Sustainability*; David Holmgren; price £19.95 / *Subscribers' price* £17.95.
- <sup>2</sup> 'A Second Challenge To The Movement'; Eric Stewart; *Permaculture Activist* no. 57.
- <sup>3</sup> 'The End Of Suburbia – Oil Depletion & The Collapse Of The American Dream'; DVD; price £12.95.
- <sup>4</sup> *Find Your Power*; Chris Johnstone; price £12.99.

All available from *The Green Shopping Catalogue*, [www.green-shopping.co.uk](http://www.green-shopping.co.uk)