



TRANSITION TOWNS

A new initiative is pioneering an alternative lifestyle that can sustain itself without the black stuff. **Luke Bell** investigates this growing phenomenon.



As the era of cheap oil nears its end, people are rethinking the way they live and transition projects are sweeping the globe. Working on changing communities from high-energy consumers to low-energy consumers, these initiatives are providing a new way of living.

At the last count (October 2008), there were 79 official transition initiatives under way in the UK, from Falmouth on the south coast, to Forres all the way up in the north of Scotland. And there are 30 or so projects in progress worldwide, from Lyons and Santa Cruz in the US to Fujino in Japan and El Manzano in Chile. Considering that the idea was conceived just five years ago, that's a phenomenal growth rate. Transition towns epitomize the need and desire for community action in addressing the challenge of climate change and peak oil.

In the beginning

While transition towns are now a global phenomenon, the movement started among a group of permaculture students at Kinsale Further Education College in west Cork, Ireland. The students met peak oil expert Colin Campbell on the first day of the course and were treated to *The End of Suburbia* – a cult film among environmentalists. Left reeling at this imminent

our homes and generates electricity, and it is used in industry to make cement and plastic.

Cheap oil has allowed our economies to grow; to manufacture less and import more. Why buy apples from a local farm when it costs half as much to ship them across from the cheapest seller worldwide? Yet, this system is not sustainable and cannot last since it relies on oil prices remaining stable.

The global economy is expected to reach a peak in oil production around 2012. At this point the era of cheap oil, which began back in the 1950s, will reach its end and a new era will begin. When driving your car, you hit crisis point when the fuel gauge reads empty. With economies, it is the halfway point in oil supply that spells danger. From that point on, oil prices will rise as it becomes increasingly more expensive and time consuming to extract oil.

It is in response to peak oil and climate change that a growing number of pioneering communities are taking steps to reduce their carbon emissions and increase their ability to deal with the lifestyle shift that will accompany peak oil.

Rob Hopkins left Kinsale in 2005 and moved to Totnes to set up



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and significant issue of oil running low, the students began to think about how peak oil would affect the small town of Kinsale and how they might be able to prepare for the consequences. Under the tutelage of Rob Hopkins they produced *The Kinsale Energy Descent Action Plan*, completed back in 2005. It set out how the small town of Kinsale could make the transition from a high-energy-consumption town to a low-energy-consumption town. It was the start of a transition movement that has inspired individuals and communities worldwide to start taking action.

The challenge

The threat of climate change is well documented and widely recognized. Temperatures increase, ice caps melt, sea levels rise, natural disasters become more frequent and extreme. Some still debate how much humans are to blame for rising global temperatures and how much is simply a naturally occurring change. Yet, the threat is apparent and imminent, regardless of cause.

The global economy's dependence on oil, however, is subject to no debate. Oil powers our aeroplanes, cars, lorries, it heats

the UK's first transition town. The project began with a year of raising awareness through lectures and talks, film screenings, public debates, interviews and fêtes. All of which gathered steam for the cause and encouraged more and more people to get involved in the initiative.

Rob explains: “For me, peak oil is a much more powerful tool for engaging people in the environmental challenges that face us than climate change.” Richard Heinberg, *Peak Everything* author, concurs: “People are more instinctively interested in what's going into their car rather than what's coming out of the exhaust pipe.”

The official public launch of the project was in September 2006. After a memorable launch, the next stage of any transition project is to get stuck into tackling energy consumption within the community. This involves looking at all aspects of life that are required for a community to sustain itself and thrive: food, waste, energy, education, youth, economics, transport, water, local government. Sub-groups are formed to manage and focus on each specific area, trying to determine the best ways to build community resilience to climate change and reduce the carbon



footprint. The solutions proposed by each sub-group help to form the energy decent action plan for that community – a step-by-step programme of initiatives that will help convert the community into a resilient, sustainable and energy-efficient haven.

Transition Town Totnes is currently in the process of drawing up its energy decent action plan. They have 10 sub-groups and around 20 projects currently on the go. These include Totnes Healthy Futures – an initiative to create a community food and wellbeing garden in Totnes; Energy Efficient Lighting for Business – helping high street retailers make the switch to low-energy lighting; Totnes Pound – developing a local currency, which is already accepted in more than 70 shops throughout the town; plus a whole range of other projects that are helping the community to reduce its carbon footprint.

Since Transition Town Totnes officially begun, the transition process has been employed and replicated in more than 100 communities worldwide. It's come a long way in a very short time and the movement is gathering momentum year on year.

Rob and his colleagues have since set up the Transition Network, which offers guidance, training and support for others wanting to set up a transition initiative in their area. Through the challenges faced and the experience gained so far in setting up transition towns around the country, a set of guidelines has been drawn up to help anyone else looking to start a similar project. There are no rules and no set framework, just a guide as to what methods have been successful in the past and what challenges have been faced. The network also provides training days and workshops to offer advice and ideas. It also gives individuals wanting to start a transition project, or already involved in one, the opportunity to meet like-minded souls facing similar challenges.

Michael Hancock and his partner Sophie Graves recently launched a transition initiative in the small village of Thorncombe,



Dorset. Michael attended a training day put on by the Transition Network back in May. "It was a very positive experience, lots of group work and sharing of ideas," says Michael. "It was quite emotional at times as we were sharing our own personal transitions as well as discussing the transition project as a whole. It was just great to meet other people going through the same experiences and working towards the same goals."

Michael and Sophie launched Transition Village Thorncombe in September 2008. Sophie believes the key to engaging people is through community events and activities. They organized a Halloween soup kitchen in October, where a group of them made up big pots of soup using local organic vegetables and took them down to a local bus shelter to sell for 50p a bowl. They had a table at the school fête and arranged a swap shop in March. Sophie plans to do some nature walks to introduce residents

to the natural foods on their doorstep, and Michael is holding a permaculture introduction course.

Michael has a background in permaculture design, while Sophie used to be a community development worker in Bristol. The two of them are passionate about the project. "We have a son of five and I think what really fired us up was the thought that, whether we are successful or not, our son will be able to say, 'my parents were part of a movement that changed things' or at least tried to change things," says Michael. "We didn't just sit back and watch TV, we got out there and tried to do something about it."

They both emphasize that the transition movement is really upbeat and they have made a lot of new friends through the work they are doing.

Interaction is key

It is important and a real philosophy of the transition process that it isn't about forcing ideologies down people's throats, it is about interacting with the community and local government,



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networking with existing groups and finding out about what is already taking place. "The transition towns process is really about asking the right questions," re-iterates Rob Hopkins. "On the front of our flyer it reads: 'Can you imagine Totnes beyond oil?'. That's really the question this process is asking. Rather than breezing in with lots of experts who will design everything for everybody, it's a question of unleashing the collective genius of the community around you."

Ben Brangwyn has been involved in the Transition Network since its beginnings and believes the next year will be one of expansion abroad. "I think this will be the year in which we formalize arrangements with a significant number of national hubs around the world, particularly the US, Sweden, the Netherlands, perhaps Spain, Australia and New Zealand."

The Transition movement is no longer just a selection of communities with a common goal. It is a framework for dealing with climate change and peak oil. It is a model that can be observed and employed at government level too, as Ben illustrates: "We've started working with businesses and government organizations, helping them to understand the pressures ahead and helping them figure out what they need to do to build resilience and carbon reduction into their operations."

Retrofitting suburbia

One of the key principles underlying the transition movement is the need to look back to our society as it was before the cheap oil boom. While transition is clearly not about going backwards, it is important to learn about the days before cheap oil in order to move forward. Through talking with older members of the community and learning about life before cheap oil, it really highlights the resilience they had back in the 1940s and 1950s. Back then everybody had skills that they could use and took the initiative to make do with whatever they had.

Rob Hopkins laments the loss of those skills in today's society: "Nowadays if you said to people, 'Here's a spade, dig a hole,' you would have people who could design the hole; people who could quantity-survey the hole and spec' the hole for you; people who could put the hole digging out to tender; and insure the hole digging process against public indemnity...But there would be very few who would actually dig. We've really moved away from being a practical, hands-on society."

Another key principle in the transition process is making use

of what we already have. While the movement was in some ways inspired by the environmental film *End of Suburbia*, the transition process is more about re-thinking suburbia, rather than abandoning it completely. We don't have the luxury of knocking down all our current buildings and replacing them with new eco-friendly ones. The challenge is in adapting the buildings we already have, using natural and sustainable materials, to improve their energy efficiency. The same is true of our community space, none more so than in our urban communities.

"Urban agriculture is going to play a huge part in the future," Rob predicts. "It's really a luxury of cheap oil that we've been able to put food production off miles away in tidy little sheds where we don't have to see it. Our urban landscapes are [now] completely devoid of anything edible."

One of the many successful projects employed in Transition Town Totnes was the drive to plant nut trees throughout the town centre. Towns and cities in the UK are littered with trees, yet none of them produce fruit. Why? It seems such a wasted opportunity. Some nut trees, such as walnut and sweet chestnut, produce as much carbohydrate and protein per acre as wheat and barley!

"If you go to new developments like business parks and out-of-town shopping centres, we've developed this way of landscaping where we've bred plants specifically to be completely useless: low-maintenance, ground-cover shrubs. What is the point in a low maintenance ground-cover shrub?" asks Rob. "And flowering cherry trees that just produce flowers and no cherries! We've got so far away from common sense, it's terrifying."

Getting involved

If you are interested in joining the transition movement, take a look at the list of resources below for some guidance. With transition initiatives popping up everywhere at the moment, it is highly likely there will be a project near you that you can get involved with. And if there isn't, then why not start a transition project in your community? You'll meet plenty of new friends, get great personal reward for your efforts and help to create a better future. And when peak oil comes along, your community will be more than ready for the transition.

Resources

Transition Network: www.transitiontowns.org; peak oil: www.peakoil.net; climate change: www.carbondetox.org; energy efficiency: www.energysavingtrust.org.uk.