

Post Carbon Research: the Transition Towns

Monday 9 November 2009, by [quattrolibri](#)



If not now, when? If not here, where? If not us, who?

These questions sum up the drive behind the [Transition Town movement](#). The movement initiated by [Rob Hopkins](#) has spurred a wide range of local initiatives, rooted in communities.

Communities is the key word. The point is not to prove oneself right over others, on how to fight climate change. The point is not to prove governments or big corporations wrong either. The point is not being right. The point is to engage communities, to bring everyone on board in addressing the climate crisis.

Hear Rob present the Transition Towns at TED Global in Oxford. [Here](#) are his commented slides.



Transition away from hydrocarbons.

The rationale behind Transition Towns is that our current system is heavily dependent on fossil fuels and hydrocarbons, and that there are three good reasons to transition away from this dependence:

oil reserves are not infinite, and the less conventional ones are being extracted at a greater cost to ecosystems (tar sands, arctic drilling...).

oil rarefaction is structurally pushing prices upwards, so reducing consumption will limit the drain on local finances (cf the "[multiplier](#)" effect)

oil consumption is a major source of Greenhouse Gas emissions, which have

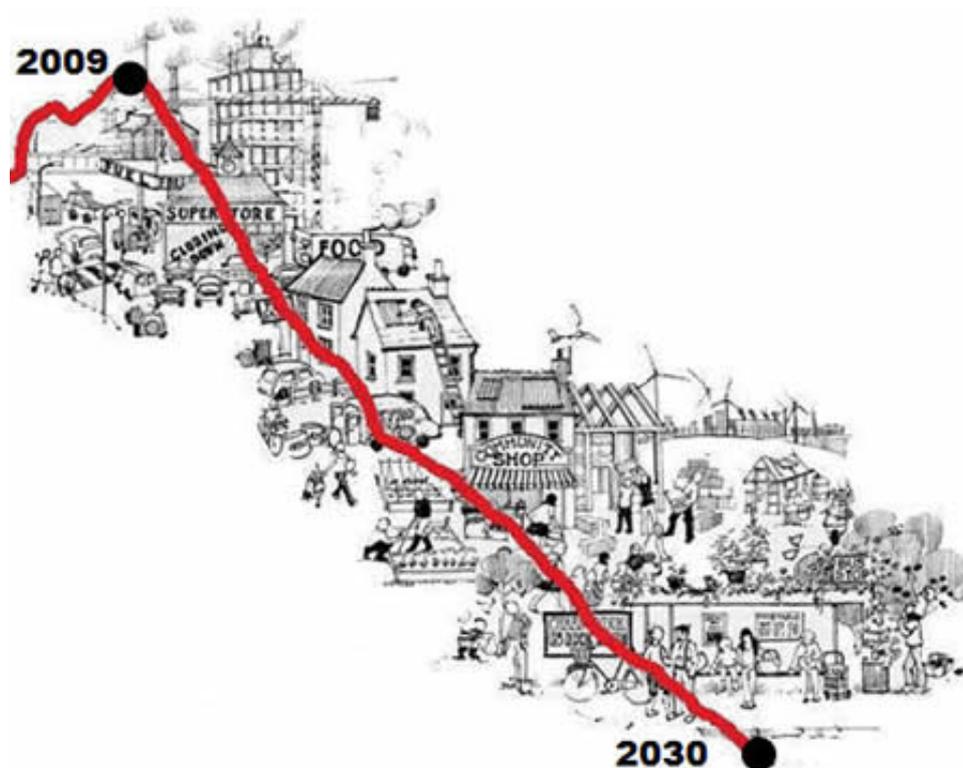
already accumulated beyond safe levels in the atmosphere (387 vs 350 ppm), and needs at least to depart from the “business as usual” scenario, to reduce the risk of catastrophic climate change by 2050 (ie: reminder for Copenhagen: the priority is from shying away from catastrophic levels, down to safer but still risky levels).



If the rational conclusion of these three factors is to reduce the consumption of oil, where does this leave us?

74% of oil used in the UK is used to transport passengers and freight. This sets a priority to short circuits and supply chains. This means that territories dependent on long haul food supplies, on commuter journeys to work, on flights to holidays need to adapt and find an alternative model.

The word “transition” is particularly well chosen: it focuses on the path towards a sustainable modus operandi, and on the gradual steps that need to take place, starting now. The core part of this strategy is the Energy Descent Action Plan (initially developed in Kinsale), which is illustrated and developed in the transition timeline ([cf book here](#))



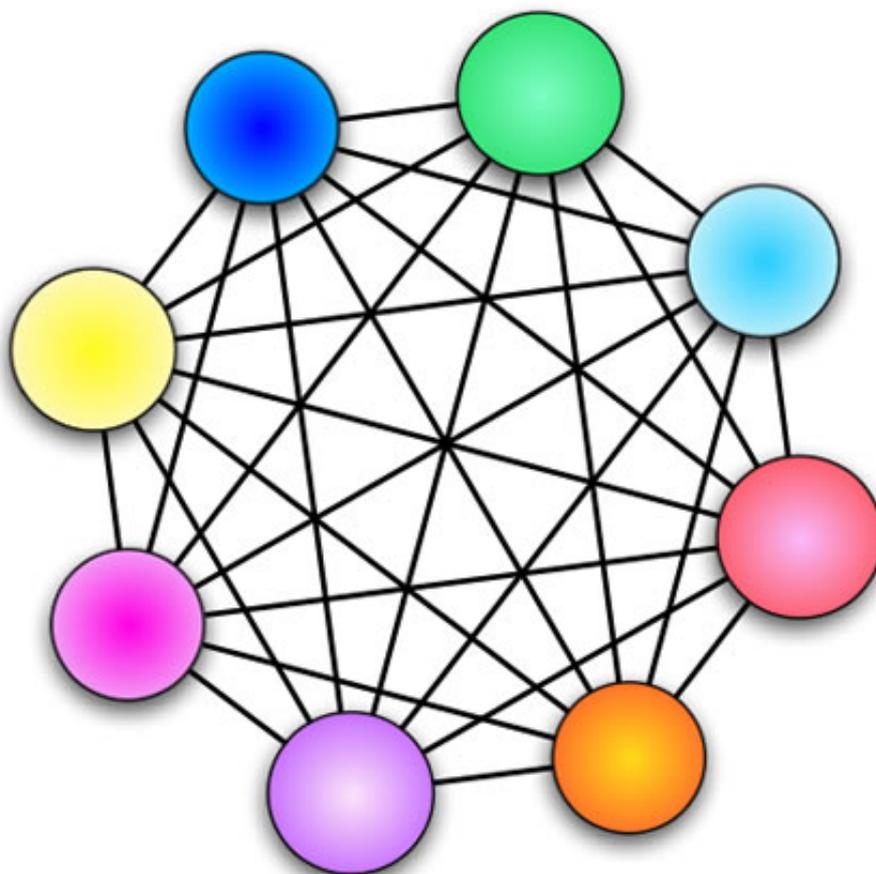
Build local resilience.

Local resilience makes a territory better able to withstand shocks and adapt. The closure of a mine pit, of a steel plant, of a car factory often means despair for cities dependent on a mono-industry. Resilient cities will have sustained their potential to grow their own food locally, to build houses with local materials (timber, clay, hay, stone...), to provide a diverse set of jobs and activities to younger as well as older inhabitants.

We can here draw a parallel between economic and biological diversity.

Take a biological ecosystem, identify the relationships between species (predator / prey; supplier / user; symbiotic partner...). You will spot a few, critical species,

with the most dense network of links with the other species. Should these species disappear, their entire network would have to adapt. Or not. Take the collapse of Easter Island when trees disappeared.

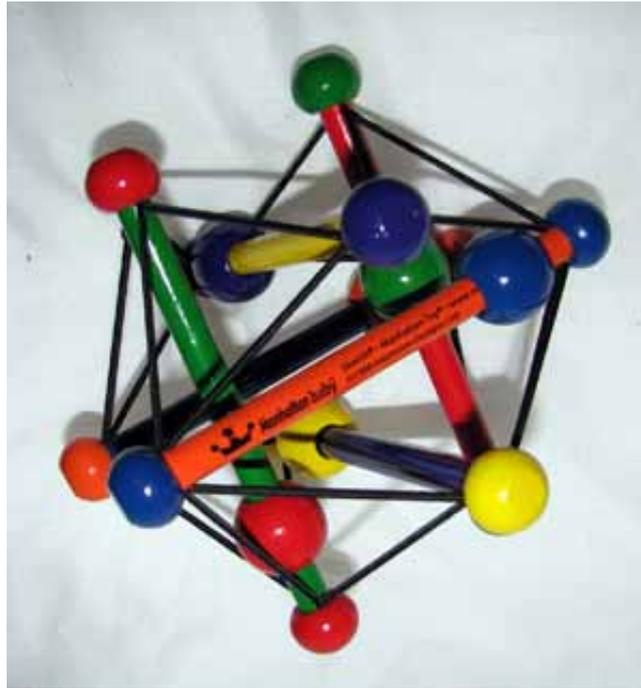


(source: Appleseed permaculture)

Similarly, take a city as an economic ecosystem, identify the relationships between actors (producer / consumer; supplier / user; isolated / central figure...). In the same vein, we will identify key activities, each with a dense network of links with other actors: bakers, butchers, grocers, bankers, schools, cafes and restaurants etc. Certain activities are “tipping points” in the life of the community. In France and in Britain, hot debates are raging about the role of post offices in rural communities.

The issue is not so much which is the last economic activity to preserve in a declining community, next to its collapse, but to nurture and develop local economic diversity. There is a strong case for linking both lines of thinking ahead of next year’s International Year of Biodiversity.

And, if you want a “first hand” feeling of a resilient system, try:



-

You will clearly feel the interdependence of the “actors” (the connected ends of the wood sticks). And you may get a good laugh from your 2yr old.

You may also want to find out more about Buckminster Fuller. See for instance how his picture of “Spaceship Earth” was used to plot a global high voltage network to connect renewable energy sources:

-



Source: www.maximizingprogress.org [http://www.maximizingprogress.org]

(more on this in upcoming posts: the importance of seed diversity, permaculture and permadesign, yield management, industrial ecology models)

Action!

So, what does a transition town look like? Er. a normal city. At least, a city which could be yours, or the next one around the corner.



Take Forest Row, Sussex, England, Great Britain, Europe, a town of 5 000. Transition Forest Row was launched on March 2008, with Rob Hopkins attending.

The official launch was the result of a year long of community building, planning, and features as a historic marker for the city:

organising talks, film screenings and other events, and the Unleashing was the culmination of that, being the point at which the process is thrown open to the community to take it and make it theirs.

The community has engaged with a wide range of issues, as listed on the local

transition website.

-

	<p>Car Club 10 members Latest Activity: Aug 4 This group is looking at setting up a car club in Forest Row.</p>		<p>Energy 21 members Latest Activity: Oct 9 The energy group</p>
	<p>EDAP 14 members Latest Activity: Jul 15 Planning and developing the Energy Descent Action Pathway for publication spring 2009.</p>		<p>Health 10 members Latest Activity: Aug 25 Creating and sustaining Health in the community through transition in Forest Row.</p>
	<p>Housing & Building 8 members Latest Activity: Sep 28 Our houses and the construction industry consume lots of energy and the materials often coming from far away. This group is looking at what we can do...</p>		<p>Heart of Change 18 members Latest Activity: Aug 18</p>
	<p>Education and Skills 16 members Latest Activity: Jul 19 Education and skills for sustainable living</p>		<p>Pedal Power 3 members Latest Activity: Oct 14 bikes, cycling, pedal powered devices</p>
	<p>Resources 12 members Latest Activity: Sep 24 A group to share our resources such as books, DVDs, tools, skills, land and all other passions!</p>		<p>Food & Land 26 members Latest Activity: Aug 14 The Food, land & Farming Group</p>
	<p>Storytelling 9 members Latest Activity: May 24 Creating, crafting and telling stories of transition and visions of how we get there. New and experienced storytellers come join us in dreaming, explo...</p>		<p>Local Living Economy 10 members Latest Activity: Sep 30 This group is looking at ways to strengthen the local economy to help the community become more resilient.</p>
	<p>Transport 7 members Latest Activity: Oct 27 As a major consumer of fossil fuel, transport is already being affected by fuel increases. What options are there to reduce consumption and alternativ...</p>		<p>EDAP Distribution 7 members Latest Activity: Apr 27 Planning and delivering the published EDAP to every home in the village</p>
	<p>Business & Finance Information 4 members Latest Activity: Jul 24 Oil Vulnerability Auditing, Financing Transition, Rethinking For Energy Efficiency. Share information here and comments in other groups.</p>		<p>Local Food Week 9 members Latest Activity: Sep 11 The team preparing a Eat Local Food week</p>
	<p>Low Carbon Community Challenge 14 members Latest Activity: Nov 6 Responding to the Low Carbon Community Challenge</p>		

We had the chance to stay with Flora and Vasile, and their vibrant household, who are actively involved in the local initiative.

The week end provided a rich programme, allowing us to see the movement in action. The best part of it was that this programme was very spontaneous, showing how tightly connected all these initiatives are:

a visit to the **Plaw Hatch Farm**, its food shop selling its own production (it also sold some “organic chestnuts from France”, a surprise). The Farm is an example of permaculture, with a broad range of activities supporting each other (we saw pigs rummaging in an open field as a way to “work the soil”). Vasile gave us a tour of the **Pericles** workshops, where he welcomes and trains young adults with learning difficulties.



-
a visit to the **Tablehurst Farm**, its food shop, and its barbecue in the barn. The barn hosts a yearly dance evening, and weekly barbecues, a solid reward after a walk from the city centre under a light drizzle. Permaculture principles are applied, with hens free ranged (by rotation) in the orchard (among numerous other ideas).
-



a visit to Bramble Corner, a toy shop to dream of, with a vast majority of toys made of wood (the rest being books, clothing and a few kitchen utensils...). The range of products doesn't strike as cheap, but clearly has the potential to last longer in the hands of children. And the shop owners are very welcoming, which means that some of the pleasure is to play with the toys in the shop.



a meeting "à l'improviste" with Tristram Stuart, in the toy shop. Tristram lives in Forest Row and champions an overhaul of food waste management (among many other things). His latest book "WASTE, uncovering the global food scandal" was longlisted for the Goldman Sachs / FT business book of the year and for the John

Llewellyn Rhys prize. Hear him vividly make the case for stopping food waste on this BBC programme.

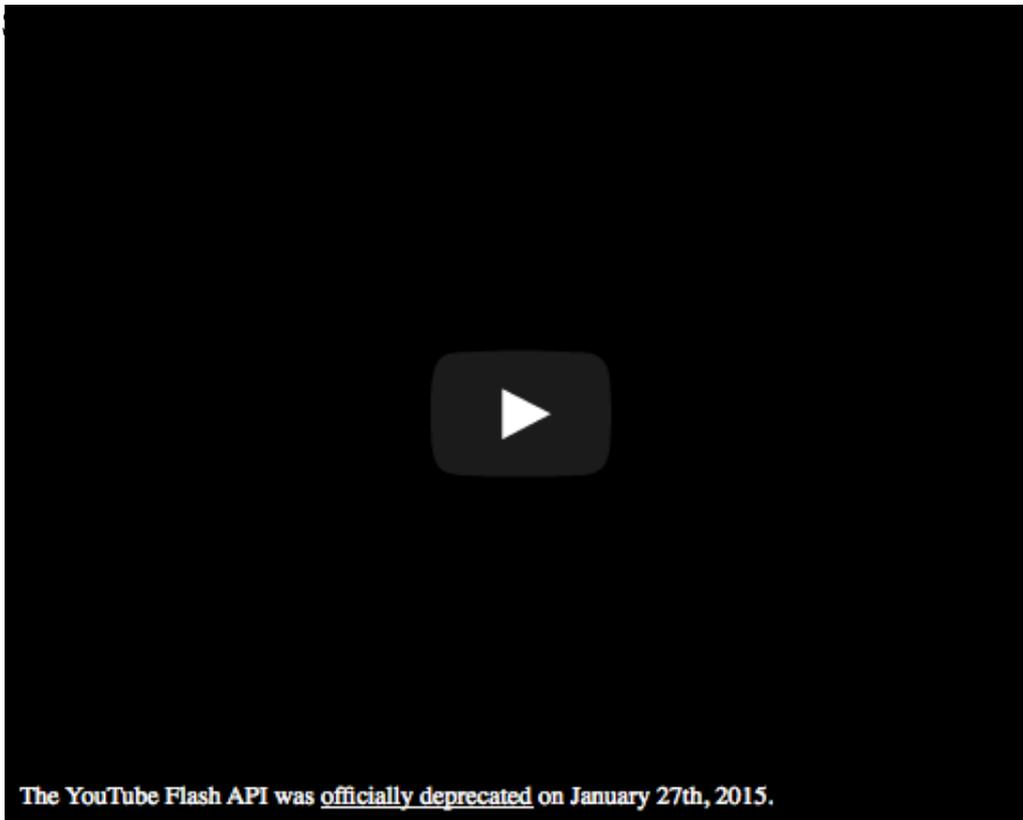


-
a visit to the family allotment, where Flora&co harvested some very ripe raspberries, and a rich mix of season veg for our evening soup. The allotment is a 10 min walk from Flora's place, which is too far for getting fresh herbs for a meal, but within reach for the ongoing gardening tasks.

a visit to a tree surgeon, a couple of Flora's friends building a yurt on a nearby estate, where we learned how to sit and whittle, and saw a modular construction technique being deployed.

a screening of "U-Carmen" at the town hall, scheduled by the Forest Row Film Society, winner of the award for "best film society in Britain". Check the programme of the Film Society [here](#). And take a minute to discover the film:

Safari Power
Click to Start



the [Forest Row Energy Descent Action plan](#) follows the tested Transition methodology of projecting a vision of “business as usual” in 2025, and contrasting it with the transition plan (and interim steps leading to it).

The resulting experience was...

...intensely motivating, needless to say.

The “lived in” experience more than matched the excitement spurred by the ideas, the books, the online resources and email exchanges... Particularly striking were the community feeling, the respect for each other and a comprehensive approach to tackling the climate crisis through empowering and socially inclusive actions. The climate crisis is daunting, but actions, shared and championed by willing individuals provide ample source for hope.

We exchanged ideas on transport, on funding local jobs with high “societal impact”, and looked for ways to expand shopping hours from the farm shops, thus widening their appeal to the inhabitants...

