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# Peak Oil Doomsday: Ahead Of Schedule

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When we try to predict the effects of oil decline, we may assume that human "die-off" will follow a gradual but steady curve from about the year 2000 or 2010 to about 2030, which will then flatten out toward about 2050. But such events will probably happen much more quickly than that, because there is a "synergistic" effect due to the fact that the two forces of oil depletion and human population are now heading in opposite directions.

In other words, we may have been assuming that the the curve of die-off (the involuntary decline in human population) will resemble the right-hand-side of the bell curve of oil production. We are then further led to believe that those of us who are now middle-aged can look upon the apocalyptic future with a calmly academic and dispassionate eye, thinking it is only future generations who will have to suffer. That may not be the case.

Actually, when combine the figures for oil depletion and population, using simple arithmetic, what we end up with is a decline in population, over the years, that is not "hill-shaped," so to speak, but "valley-shaped." The curve, in other words, does not begin as a plateau and then gradually steepen, but rather the reverse: there is a sudden plunge, which then smooths out at the end. (In a larger time-frame, some of these figures have been discussed in "Peak Oil and Famine: Four Billion Deaths.")

The equation (in billions) is simple: (A) the "initial population" of a given year is subtracted from (B) the "carrying capacity" (which itself is taken from a table of earlier years, showing oil production and the population of the time). The final figure is (C), the number of "famine deaths."

2008 (oil 27.3G bbl) (A) 6.6 minus (B) 6.1 equals (C) 0.5

2009 (oil 26.1G bbl) (A) 6.1 minus (B) 5.8 equals (C) 0.3

2010 (oil 25.0G bbl) (A) 5.8 minus (B) 5.6 equals (C) 0.2

2011 (oil 24.4G bbl) (A) 5.6 minus (B) 5.4 equals (C) 0.2

2012 (oil 23.9G bbl) (A) 5.4 minus (B) 5.2 equals (C) 0.2

The term "carrying capacity," as used here, incidentally, is not entirely synonymous with the term as used by William R. Catton. A more-appropriate but lengthier and clumsier term might be something like "temporary feeding capacity." Such a distinction largely follows the terminology of Paul Chefurka, who refers to "temporary carrying capacity" versus "sustainable carrying capacity" ([www.chefurka.ca](http://www.chefurka.ca)). For the last 50 years or so, human population has always expanded to press against the very limits of what is possible for the oil-production level of any particular year - although in recent years even that tight correspondence has started to collapse.

The figures in the above list can only be approximate, of course, and even the most esoteric mathematics will not entirely help us to deal with the great number of interacting factors. We need to swing toward a more "pessimistic" figure if we include the effects of war, disease, topsoil degradation, climate change, and so on.

An even more serious, though seemingly trivial, "pessimistic" factor will be largely sociological: To what extent can

the oil industry maintain the advanced technology required for drilling ever-deeper wells in ever-more-remote places, when that industry will be struggling to survive in a milieu of social chaos, an anarchistic world in which intricate division of labor, large-scale government, and high-level education no longer exist?

On the other hand, there are elements of "optimism" that may need to be plugged in. For one thing, there is what might be called the "inertia factor": the planet Earth is so big that even the most catastrophic events take time for their ripples to finish spreading. An asteroid fragment 10 kilometers wide hit eastern Mexico 65 million years ago, but we are alive today to tell the story.

Somewhat related, among "optimistic" factors, is the sheer tenacity of the human species: we are intelligent social creatures living at the top of the food chain, in the manner of wolves, yet we outnumber wolves worldwide by about a million to one; we are as populous as rats or mice. We can outrace a horse over long distances. And even with Stone-Age technology, we can inhabit almost every environment on Earth (but most of those survival skills have been lost, of course).

If our figures are correct, however, then we are certainly ill-prepared for the next few years. The problem of oil depletion turns out to be something other than a bit of macabre speculation for people of the distant future to deal with, but rather a sudden catastrophe that will only be studied "dispassionately" long after the event itself has occurred. Doomsday will probably be upon us before we have time to look at it carefully.

Nevertheless, some sort of preview may be possible. To begin with, let us repeat the well-known formula that we live in a world in which "oil is everything." That is to say, everything in the modern world is dependent on oil. >From oil and other hydrocarbons we get fuel, lubricants, plastic, paint, synthetic fabrics, asphalt, pharmaceuticals, and many other things. On a more abstract level, we are dependent on oil and other hydrocarbons for manufacturing, for transportation, for agriculture, for mining, and for electricity. ("Alternative energy" is just science fiction.) When oil goes, our entire industrial society will go with it. There will be no means of supporting the billions of people who now live on this planet. Above all, there will be insufficient food.

The world has certainly known some terrible famines in the past. In recent centuries, the worst may have been that of North China in 1876-79, when between 9 and 13 million died, but India had a famine at the same time, with perhaps 5 million deaths. The Soviet Union had famine deaths of about 5 million in 1932-34, purely because of misguided political policies.

A closer analogy to "petroleum famine" may be Ireland's potato famine of the 1840s, since - like petroleum - it was a single commodity that caused such devastation. Cecil Woodham-Smith describes the Irish tragedy in "The Great Hunger." The response of the British government can be summarized as a jumble of incompetence, frustration, and indecision. The first official response was disbelief: "It was . . . the habitual policy of British governments to discount the veracity of news from Ireland: 'there is such a tendency to exaggeration and inaccuracy in Irish reports that delay in acting on them is always desirable', wrote Sir Robert Peel on October 13, 1845" (Woodham-Smith, pp. 40-41). By 1847 the image had changed: "Bodies half-eaten by rats were an ordinary sight; 'two dogs were shot while tearing a body to pieces.' 'Never in my life,' wrote Commander Caffyn, 'have I seen such wholesale misery'" (Ibid., pp. 182-83).

Surely what matters, though, is that we keep refining our understanding of the matter, so that at least a few can escape the tribulation. Neither the present nor future generations should have to say, "We were never warned."

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