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Book Review

The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil

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The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil [2006 Community Service Inc: The Community Solution program, DVD 53 Min, ISBN 0-910420-32-7] is a marvelous film that provides a welcome contrast to the abundance of toxic, depressing predictions for the future in the world of post-Peak Oil. All who have been demoralized by the succession of books foretelling societal disaster post-Peak Oil can take hope and learn from the experience of Cuba following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Cuba's Peak Oil preceded the world's by ten years or more. In the early 1990s, Cuba's curtailed supply of Soviet oil resulted in major challenges: both how to feed the nation and how to sustain an economy on much less readily available energy. Hunger and a paralyzed transportation and industrial system were imminent. Initially the Cuban government imposed rationing to assure everyone had access to the basic necessities, as some of us will recall was done in the US during WWII. But that only managed the severe shortages. The Cuban people responded to the food crisis by largely abandoning their large scale agricultural system based on fluid fossil fuels and by developing a system of locally managed and operated farms and urban plots worked sustainably. Virtually ever arable acre of land has been employed. Farmland that for years had been poisoned by over-reliance on oil-based pesticides and gas-based fertilizers and degraded by mechanized cultivation has been regenerated and replenished with soil-enriching organic farming techniques that require more individual labor but much less fossil fuels.

Rather than degenerating into factional, fratricidal conflict over the diminishing food supply, Cuba's Peak Oil necessitated societal changes that resulted in more and better cooperation among neighbors for the local good of communities. Jobs that formerly required heavy industrialization are now managed on a much smaller scale using human or animal power in place of mechanization. Transportation has altered radically. Initially the Cuban government obtained millions of bicycles from China to supplant the fleet of private motor vehicles. Now, fuel remains scarce, and is used largely for an enhanced public transportation system that includes buses carrying up to three hundred passengers.

Obviously the innovations and techniques applicable to subtropical Cuba may not be suitable in specific detail for adoption in Eurasia or North America. But the spirit of resourcefulness and return to personal and cooperative group effort is hopeful and inspiring.

Although this film appropriately indicts the United States for its long-term, ongoing embargo of Cuba, its principal message is the ingenuity, perseverance and ultimate triumph of the Cuban people over unanticipated crises. As, decades too late, the reality of world Peak Oil dawns on the rest of the planet, it is deliciously ironic that Cuba not only has

survived the enmity of its northern neighbor, but - perforce of its own misguided reliance on a transient foreign source of energy - has shown a way to persist and survive sustainably. The keys are three C's: community, conservation and cooperation.

As one speaker put it: "Work with the planet, not against it!" For millions of years life on Earth has persisted and evolved in concert with the chemical, physical and biological processes in the environment. The advent of the Age of Liquid Fossil Fuels brought humanity the ability to jump start and force-march many of these processes at terrible cost to the planet's environmental viability. In the waning days of the Oil Age, it is time for humanity to relearn the lessons of the past tens of thousands of years of civilization: life, human and otherwise, on Planet Earth can recover and maintain its viability and sustainability only as we rediscover working WITH this planet's environment, animate and inanimate, not against it!

There are many lessons for America and the rest of inhabited Earth to learn, adapt and employ from the successful experience of Cuba, a bellwether and stalking horse in the quest for viable ways to continue to occupy this planet sustainably. If only we will but do so!

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