

# Riding the wave – How Transition Towns are changing the world and having fun

Teresa Anderson

What happened when a small town in rural England decided that it couldn't rely on the government or the United Nations to address climate change? What happened when hundreds of townsfolk realised that they could pull together to build their own resilience to the climate and economic challenges ahead?

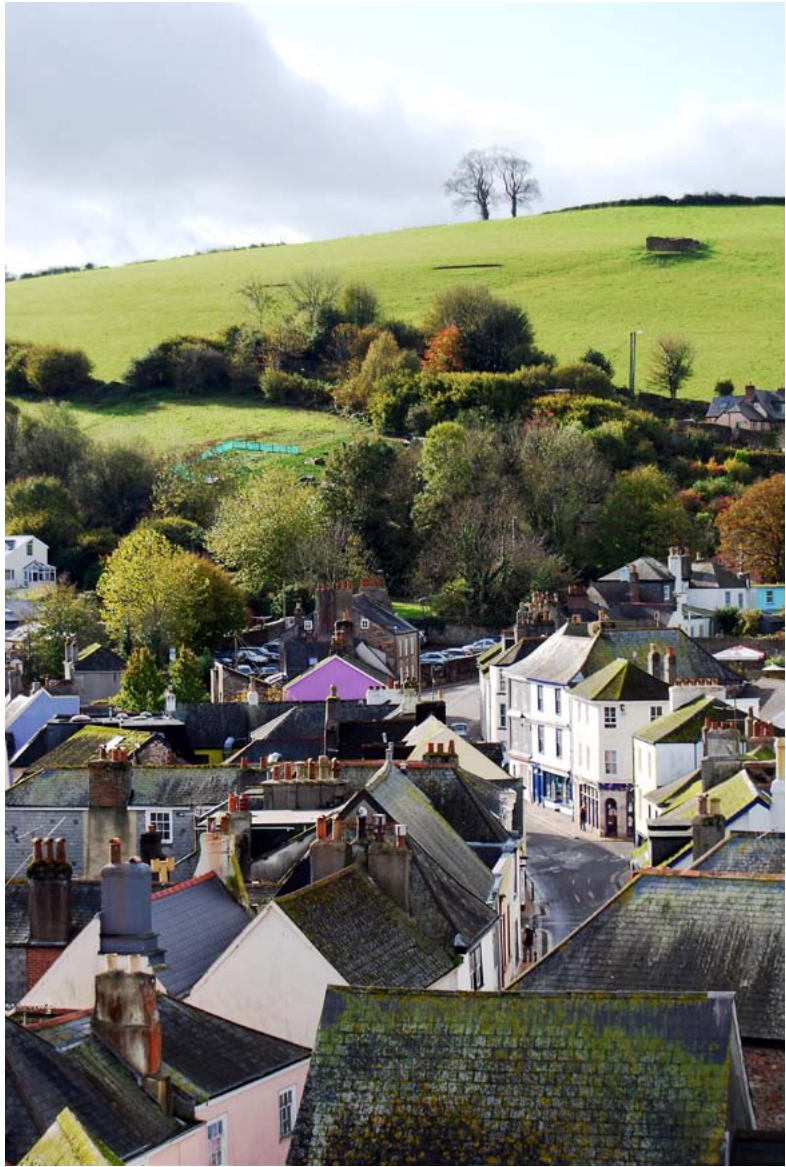
The Transition Town movement has been heralded as one of the most important social movements of our time. Its success is based on the recognition that there is energy, vision and passion in every one of us, and that with the right framework we can harness our combined efforts to create the future we want in our own homes and towns.

Five years ago when Totnes, a small market town of 7,000 people in the picturesque southwest of England, became the first Transition Town, many of us hoped it would become a useful model for others to follow. But not many foresaw that there would come to be over 1,000 Transition towns, villages, boroughs, islands, peninsulas, initiatives and projects in the UK, and 1,000 more across Europe, North, Central and South America, Asia, Africa, Australia and New Zealand today.

Transition is clearly an idea that has come at the right time; that speaks to all types of people; and that shows no sign of slowing. As the window for meaningful action in the UN climate negotiations gets smaller; as nations retreat into selfish and suicidal obstinacy, offering only commodification and blame; the importance of the Transition Town movement is more apparent than ever.

For many activists, frustrated and burned out by their efforts to limit ecological damage and the general failure to achieve positive policies, the Transition philosophy and approach has been a revelation, a joy. As Rob Hopkins, the founder of Transition points out:

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dachalan (flickr)

If you want someone to come on holiday with you, you have to tell them a story. If you ask them to go somewhere where the view from the hotel room is of a back alley dustbin, where the food is terrible and it rains all the time, they are not likely to want to go there. You have to paint a picture of a place they want to be, where the weather, food and scenery are amazing, where they'd be mad to miss such an adventure. (Pers. comm., 31 August 2012)

Rob's insight was that this is the same principle for creating the world we want to see. Many people instinctively – or eventually – turn away from stories that tell of doom and gloom, climate apocalypse, ecological collapse and their own inevitable suffering. But paint a picture in which the climate is stable; where we have reliable, nutritious and tasty local food supplies; where the local economy is thriving; where you have affordable and ecologically sound energy and heating; where you know and trust your community and those that provide your food and provisions – and you'll find that people realise this is not only something they want to see, but that they can create themselves.

But the drive and incentive for building this incredible new world – or town – around us is not just indulgent or artistic. There is also an element of self-interest and self-preservation driving many Transitioners, the 'stick' to the beautiful vision's 'carrot'. Where NGOs and community groups alike have been talking about climate change for years, for many ordinary people, living normal lives in towns and villages across the country, climate change still felt like a distant issue and one that would not necessarily affect them. The Transition view changed that, by making the links between climate change and peak oil abundantly clear.

The theory of peak oil, much like that of climate change, was resisted by oil companies, governments and vested interests for many years. However, it is now accepted as fact in almost all circles, unable to deny its inevitability and the abundance of data. Peak oil theory points out that the world's oil resources are not infinite. Discoveries of large deposits are dramatically slowing down and have become rare in recent years. In fact, world discovery of oil peaked in 1964 and has been declining ever since. In spite of improvements in technology, there is little prospect of significant new large discoveries.

However, our extraction and use of this resource is growing (in spite, or perhaps because of, agreements and compromises reached in the UNFCCC). We currently consume four barrels of oil for every one barrel discovered.

American geologist M.K. Hubbert coined the term 'peak oil' to define the point at which maximum extraction of oil is reached, after which extraction will decline. Analysing US oil well capacity and extraction, he correctly predicted that US reserves would peak in 1971. Production in the UK peaked in 1999. Taking into account the fact that 64 of the world's major oil producers have already peaked, the (un)likelihood of major new discoveries, and our insatiable rate of extraction, it is widely believed that we are now approaching world peak oil. And instead of

a slow and steady adaptation to this change, economic patterns suggest that once peak oil is reached and recognised, oil prices will rise and that they will do so dramatically.

Oil companies deny that we are running out of oil. And in a way, they are right. Globally, it is thought that half of the Earth's oil has been extracted. The problem is that it is the *cheap* oil, which is easy to extract, that is running out. The light sweet crude in accessible oil fields is now largely exhausted. Now the extractive industries are looking to inhospitable environments and low-quality inaccessible energy sources such as shale oil and gas, Arctic drilling and the Alberta tar sands. The fact is that these pose technical, ecological, political and many other challenges. We would not be exploring these options if there was anywhere else to go.

What does peak oil mean for us? Some might think it a cause for climate celebration if it means we use less oil. But it actually means that these difficult deposits release even more emissions in the extraction and processing of the oil. Furthermore, we live in the petroleum age, where almost everything in the modern world is dependent on oil. Getting food on to your plate requires fertilisers, tractors, shipping, aviation and road transport, processing, packaging and refrigeration. The average food item has travelled 1,000–1,500 miles before arriving on our plates. For every one calorie of food, on average 10 calories of fossil fuel energy have been used. Something as simple and basic as growing vegetables for food has been transformed into a distant and complex chain, each link of which is vulnerable to rising oil prices. Housing, heating, clothing and commodities – all of these are also vulnerable to peak oil shock. Look around you: what can you see in your home or office that was not, in some way, dependent on oil to reach you?

Peak oil is not a cause for celebration – it is a terrifying possibility. But it is also an opportunity, a huge incentive for us to create the world we want to see. Because, as it happens, the solutions for creating resilience to peak oil are also the solutions that can prevent climate change.

The brilliance of Transition is to realise that a town using much less energy and fewer resources than we presently consume, could, if properly planned for and designed, be more resilient, more abundant and more pleasurable than the present. Totnes is not far from the South Devon coast, and many Totnesians are surfers. Thus, the metaphor we found most apt then when facing the challenges of peak oil and climate change was that it is better to ride the wave than to be engulfed by it.

And ride the wave we have. In Totnes, determined folk have set up a community company to provide wind energy. One hundred and fifty homes have bulk-bought solar panels. Hundreds of homes are retrofitting to reduce their energy use. The community has designed an Energy Descent Action Plan, which has been taken up by the local council. A local currency, the Totnes Pound, encourages shoppers to support locally owned businesses in order to keep money circulating in the community.



Terry Rook, CPRE

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The Transition Town Totnes (TTT) Food Group began by focusing within the town's environs and community. The group, run almost entirely by volunteers, has planted vegetable beds and hundreds of nut trees in public spaces for public consumption. Gardening courses have been hugely popular as everyone realises that the most immediate thing they can do for their own resilience is to grow food. A scheme has been set up that enables elderly people with gardens to share them with families who want to grow food. TTT was part of a successful local campaign for more allotment spaces for food growing. Seed swaps, plant swaps, glut swaps and seed saving training are now a regular feature of the local calendar.

The next phase of the work on food was to strengthen links to local food growers, and ensure that local grocers use as much locally sourced food as possible, in order to ensure minimal oil use and greater resilience in food supplies. Totnes was already proud of its plentiful access to local food, but Transitioners recognised there was still much more that could be done to strengthen these links. A local food directory therefore identifies the many shops and restaurants that use locally grown food. A local organic labelling scheme that is affordable for small-scale farmers was extended to the area. An online resource for small-scale producers to connect to local consumers is being developed. Meanwhile, the Totnes FoodLink project has worked to identify the products wanted by shops and restaurants, and to connect them to farmers who can grow them.

A recent study by the Council for the Protection of Rural England found that more than two-thirds of outlets in town now stock local food, and that Totnesians across all income brackets are buying local produce. Nine out of 10 shoppers interviewed buy local, even though over half of those interviewed reported earning less than £20,000 a year. Local food sales in Totnes amount to £4-8 million per year. Such a vibrant local food system supports over 300 jobs in outlets in town (approximately 10 per cent of the local residents in work) and over 700 jobs at suppliers in the wider area. This is especially important in an area of rural deprivation where job opportunities are typically few.



The great thing about food is that it is easy to get involved with at every level. By eating and buying local food, you are already supporting a local farmer and creating a more resilient food economy for the future. Supporters of Transition can commit to all stages: they can attend talks, they can volunteer to plant trees or weed in the community garden. They can grow their own food. They can save and swap seeds, or they can join one of the many groups, share ideas and volunteer to organise and coordinate activities.

In other Transition Towns around the world, activities include a plethora of community gardens, land and local food activities as well as a diversity of strategies to enable access to renewable energy. They also include eco-housing, retrofitting, draught-busting, energy saving, bike fixing, skills-sharing, linen and wool processing, transport hubs, local currencies, tree planting, and much, much, much more. Each activity that reduces oil use also reduces the impact on climate change and increases resilience to economic turbulence. Each Transition Town makes use of the people, their passion, their expertise and their dreams, to make the town more resilient to peak oil and climate change in different ways.

The Transition Town movement presents an irresistible opportunity to ride the turbulent waves ahead and create the change that we wish to see in the world.

Surf's up, people!



Tai Gray

## Further Reading

Council for the Protection of Rural England (2011), *From Field to Fork: Totnes*. <http://www.cpre.org.uk/resources/farming-and-food/local-foods/item/2042-from-field-to-fork-totnes>

Hopkins, R. (2008a), *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience*, Totnes: Green Books.

Hopkins, R. (2008b), *The Transition Companion: Making Your Community More Resilient in Uncertain Times*, Totnes: Green Books.

Pinkerton T. and R. Hopkins (2009), *Local Food: How to Make it Happen in Your Community*, Totnes: Green Books.