



richardheinberg.com

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Post Carbon Institute: Looking Back, Looking Forward

This year Post Carbon Institute turns 20, so it's a good time to take stock. What have we done, what's left to do?

Our strong suit has been research and communication. And, given that focus, there are some things to be proud of. With a small but consistent budget and dedicated staff, we produced a slew of products—including [dozens of reports](#), roughly 20 [books](#), some clever award-winning [videos](#), three [podcasts](#), a self-directed [video course](#), and a few highly engaging [websites](#). We've delivered hundreds of lectures on six continents, and hundreds more interviews for TV, radio, documentary films, and podcasts. Our articles have appeared in scores of publications, from *Nature* to *The Wall Street Journal*.

What's significant is that all these communications reinforced a systems view of the human predicament in the 21st century. Rather than focusing on one issue, such as climate change, we sought to show why many existential threats (resource depletion, biodiversity loss, pollution, economic inequality, financial precarity, climate change, and more) are converging. These problems, as well as a heap of temporary benefits (immense wealth for the few, easy mobility, cheap food, a burgeoning urban middle class, and a dizzying array of consumer goods), have issued from a single historically recent development—exploitation of fossil fuels.

To be sure, climate change is the biggest environmental problem humanity has ever faced, and carbon emissions are to blame. We need alternative sources of electricity in order to keep slimmed-down power grids working so that we don't lose hard-won scientific and cultural information. But [our analysis shows](#) that solar and wind power cannot realistically be scaled up to provide all the energy services we currently get from fossil fuels. And even if they could, it's the sheer magnitude of our current population and consumption that is the biggest driver of our other ecological dilemmas. Humanity's main strategy going forward must be to cooperate in using less energy, materials, and land, with a focus on justice for humans and non-humans alike, while restoring ecosystems to protect biodiversity.

Our goal has been to broaden the public's understanding of an emerging mega-event that various groups of researchers are calling the Metacrisis, the Polycrisis, the Great Simplification, or the Great Unraveling. Unless a significant portion of the general populace grasps why things are falling apart, we will continue to pursue "solutions" that don't really solve anything

(such as carbon capture technologies), or we'll blame perceived villains (whether the “woke” or MAGAites) rather than engaging in the hard work of building more resilience into our basic societal support systems. Humanity is approaching a bottleneck, and the only way through involves shared sacrifice. But nobody will want to make that sacrifice if they don't understand why it's needed, and why those with wealth and power must sacrifice the most. Without that understanding, we're likely to see more political polarization, more scapegoating, and reduced odds of working collaboratively to respond effectively to the crises in front of us.

PCI was one of several Peak Oil-focused organizations to appear in the early 2000s; nearly all the others have faded away as a result of the fracking boom that started around 2010. When US drillers began producing enormous amounts of tight oil and shale gas thanks to cheap credit and quantitative easing, most people lost interest in the Peak Oil narrative. We didn't give up so easily. We [analyzed](#) drilling and fracking data, showing that the shale revolution would be only a short reprieve from the peak ([recent evidence](#) is supporting us), and we put pressure on the federal government to make more realistic projections of shale potential—as we did in the case of California, before the EIA downgraded its estimates for that state's tight oil by a whopping 96 percent. We focused on helping our audience grasp basic principles and metrics, such as the low-hanging-fruit method of resource extraction and energy return on investment (EROI). We saw resource depletion as part of a larger sustainability crisis brought on by cheap energy, population growth, and exponential economic expansion. From that perspective, finding a new treasure chest of exploitable hydrocarbon resources in the form of shale oil and gas doesn't solve our problems; if anything, it makes the overall picture that much worse.

With so much focus on threats, our organization might appear to some as negative. But that's a liability common to most environmental orgs. Humanity really is skating on thin ice, and it's our job to sound the warning. Our team has managed to maintain psychological equilibrium by keeping a healthy sense of [humor](#). And we have plenty of suggestions for how the future could be made much better.

One of our consistent sources of pride is Resilience.org, a beacon for those already aware, and for those just finding out about the Great Unraveling. Over the years, this plucky website has published everything from big-picture articles on global energy to advice on gardening and chicken keeping. This year, we're giving the site a sprucing-up to make it even more user-friendly; we're also investing a lot more attention to providing visitors with the informational, emotional, and practical resources they need to navigate the Great Unraveling of societal and environmental systems that's now well underway.

All of our work depends on the generosity of a small but growing cadre of steadfast supporters who have provided us with the resources and freedom to tell the truth, to follow our nose about emerging trends or under-explored issues, and to engage in a lot of behind-the-scenes work to build networks of aware and capable resilience practitioners in many places and with divergent backgrounds. Our deep and abiding thanks to all who have contributed.

We've reached well over 10 million readers and viewers in the past two

decades. That's a fair achievement for our nonprofit org, but not nearly enough in the larger scheme of things. The great majority of the world's people don't see what we see. They assume that fossil fuels are practically endless, that climate change is a technical issue that can be solved with machines, that energy is just a replaceable input to the economy, and that economic growth is normal and essential.

Meanwhile, the global context is changing rapidly. The fracking revolution is running on fumes, democracy is fraying, and the global climate is shifting faster than the experts had predicted. In short, The Great Unraveling is upon us. In the months ahead, PCI will be reflecting this momentous development in a shift in our communications. The time for warnings is running out; increasingly we need responses. Stay tuned.