

# The Transition Movement

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## Geography Capstone

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## The Transition Movement

In the rising times of oil dependency and globalization, there has been a never-ending discussion on what the people of this planet could do to minimize the effects of anthropogenic climate change and live a more sustainable lifestyle assuming that the theory of climate change is correct. One solution to the debate is a movement called Transition Towns. A Transition Initiative (which could be a town, village, university, or island etc.) is a community-led response to the pressures of climate change, fossil fuel depletion and increasingly, economic contraction.<sup>1</sup> It focuses on bringing a community together and compiling all local resources to minimize the dependency on current resources which due to globalization and population growth, come from thousands of miles away and even across oceans to reach local businesses and homes.

Rob Hopkins is the creator of the idea of Transition Towns which originated in Ireland. He is currently a member of the Transition Town Totnes, England which was the first official Initiative in the Transitional Movement.<sup>2</sup> The idea for the movement sprang from the concept of permacultures pioneered by David Holmgren. His book, *Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability*, defines permaculture as a design system for sustainable living and land use.<sup>3</sup> “When designing the transition that our settlements and communities will inevitably have to undertake, we need a design template with which we can successfully assemble its various components – social, economic, cultural and technical – in the most efficient way possible.”<sup>4</sup> The theories of Transition Towns and permacultures propose creating a sustainable community-based environment with its own agricultural system to eliminate outside aide. The focus of the online website *transitionnetwork.org* is to showcase specific transition town projects and to map the spread of the movement. If a town wishes to become a part of the Transition Movement they

may first enter a *mulling* process in which they are just starting out and building up the community and its resources. Once they have successfully become a Transition Town they are termed an *initiative*. The process of becoming a *muller initiative* or an *official initiative* is conducted online on the *transitionnetwork.org* website through a series of steps. First you must register to the site as an individual by simply creating a username and password. Then once you have registered, you will have access to the entire website which includes a section where you can “Add your Initiative Profile.” When adding your initiative, you have to fill out a series of forms to provide information on your Transition Town as well as provide a link to your transition’s website and its projects. Below is a map of the world showing all of the *official initiatives* and *mulling initiatives*.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 1: Transition Initiatives and Mulling Communities of the World

The movement has become so popular that Rob Hopkins wrote a book called *The Transition Handbook* to help communities and individuals in transitioning to local resilience. In his handbook he outlines four key assumptions that Transition Initiatives are based on:<sup>6</sup>

1. That life with dramatically lower energy consumption is inevitable, and that it's better to plan for it than to be taken by surprise.
2. That our settlements and communities presently lack the resilience to enable them to weather the severe energy shocks that will accompany peak oil.
3. That we have to act collectively, and we have to act now.
4. That by unleashing the collective genius of those around us to creatively and proactively design our energy descent, we can build ways of living that are more connected, more enriching and that recognize the biological limits of our planet.

These concepts help explain the reasoning for the movement and the future problems that our societies and planet may experience. Even without the added increase in climate change due to anthropogenic forces, there may be a dramatic change in the way the people of this Earth live their everyday lives and how our energy consumption and resource management will be the primary focus in the coming years. "Since the dawn of the industrial era, the atmospheric concentrations of several radiatively active gases have been increasing as a result of human activities."<sup>7</sup> There is a big concern that we cannot continue "business as usual" unless we are willing to face catastrophic events that are highly unpredictable. Overpopulation, energy management, and oil dependency are running our lives and we are running out of these resources and options for replacing them. The planet may not be made to support this many human beings and the amount of energy we use and CO<sub>2</sub> we emit each year that are causing a rapid increase in climate change.

For those who are unaware of the issues of climate change and peak oil, here is an attempt to summarize the severity of these topics:

*Climate Change*- Any long-term significant change in the weather patterns of an area, can be caused by changes people have made to the land or atmosphere.<sup>8</sup> The theory of climate change is

that it is always occurring as a natural process of the Earth but with the increase of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere due to the burning of fossil fuels, the surface temperature of the planet is increasing at a more rapid rate. There is still some debate that the rapid increase is only linked to anthropogenic forces but overwhelming amounts of scientific data prove otherwise. “During the course of this century the resilience of many ecosystems (their ability to adapt naturally) is likely to be exceeded by an unprecedented combination of change in climate, associated disturbances (e.g., flooding, drought, wildfire, insects, ocean acidification) and in other global change drivers (especially land-use change, pollution and over-exploitation of resources), if greenhouse gas emissions and other changes continue at or above current rates (high confidence).”<sup>9</sup> Change in temperature means a change in all of Earth’s systems such as water cycles (evaporation, condensation, etc.), floral and faunal migration and/or extinction, and environmental and ecosystem changes. This also means an increase in natural hazards that will disrupt societies more frequently. If human activities are causing an increase in global temperature, there may be an alternative way of life to minimize the effects.

*Peak Oil-* When oil production reaches a maximum and will subsequently begin to decline until full depletion is ultimately reached.<sup>10</sup> Oil is not a renewable resource and there is a limit to the amount and rate at which we can extract it from the Earth. In the current world we live in, everything is powered by “cheap” oil. Oil was initially a great resource for human beings to use and was easy to extract; however with the threat of declining oil supply, the demand for it has increased which ultimately will make it more difficult to obtain and more expensive. Some argue that we have already reached peak oil and other projections state that it will happen very soon, possibly within a decade. The International Energy Agency states that conventional crude oil production has already peaked in 2006.<sup>11</sup> The globalized market is fueled by the use of oil to

manufacture produce and products and to ship or truck materials around the world. With the possibility of oil supplies becoming unreliable and global population larger than ever, the world must look to alternate energy sources and/or a lower energy consumption rate. Living sustainably and locally may combat the issue of peak oil.

There are many solutions and alternatives that have been proposed by governments and nations but no significant worldwide consensus for changes to be implemented. The Transition Movement seeks to address these problems from a local standpoint so that the average individual can actively make his or her own changes to their lifestyle instead of waiting for governments to make the change. Hopkins also outlines six principles that define what is unique about the Transition Movement:

1. **Visioning** - Transition approach has the belief that we can only move towards something if we can imagine what it will be like when we get there.
2. **Inclusion** - Transition approach seeks to facilitate a degree of dialogue and inclusion that has rarely been achieved before, and has begun to develop some innovative ways of bringing this about.
3. **Awareness-raising** - Transition approach assumes no prior knowledge, and sets out the case as clearly, accessibly and entertainingly as possible, giving people the key arguments in order to let them formulate their own responses.
4. **Resilience** - Transition approach is that the rebuilding of resilience is, alongside the need to move rapidly to a zero carbon society, central to the Transition concept.
5. **Psychological Insights** - Transition approach uses insights firstly through the creation of a positive vision, secondly by creating safe spaces where people can talk, digest and feel how these issues affect them, and thirdly by affirming the steps and actions that people have taken, and by designing into the process as many opportunities to celebrate successes as possible.
6. **Credible and Appropriate Solutions** - Transition approach lays out the peak oil and climate change arguments, enables people to explore solutions of a credible scale (national and community).<sup>12</sup>

These principles are important for understanding that there is something that we as societies can do about climate change and peak oil. It is inevitable that changes in ecosystems and lifestyles will occur in the future and that we may have to live without oil. Energy will only become increasingly more expensive with the growth of global population every year as there will be more people to provide resources for. “Problems of population size and growth, resource utilization and depletion, and environmental deterioration must be considered jointly and on a global basis.”<sup>13</sup> We are going to have to adapt to these changes in a positive manner.

The issues of peak oil and climate change are problems of epic proportion. At times it may seem almost impossible to accomplish solutions to these issues with the number of people, varying opinions, and lack of funding that one has to factor in. One popular “solution” that has been portrayed by the media is the Green Movement or “going green”.<sup>14</sup> The Green Movement has been showing its face in corporations and businesses that promote such things like the use of reusable grocery and shopping bags, fluorescent lights that are more energy efficient, and recycled materials to make new products. While these are all good for the environment, it sends the wrong message to the common person. That message is that we can solve climate change by simply going greener. It’s an easy fix and one that is certainly appealing to the average person who is accustomed to an easy access lifestyle fueled by cheap oil. Doing your part to protect the environment is just one component to the overall solution. As Hopkins states in *The Transition Handbook*, it is important to combat the issue of climate change AND peak oil together.<sup>15</sup> One of the best examples he uses is of the city of New York.

“...recently emerged in a study as having one of the lowest per capita CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of any large Western city, less than a third of the per capita US average. This is due to the density of living, the walk-ability, good public transport, and the low heating requirements of apartment living. So, from a climate change perspective we can argue that New York is a good model of low carbon living we would all do well to emulate. Now let’s weave peak oil into that mix. What happens to New York in the event of a

power shortage, or when the price of importing food starts to rise sharply? New York experienced such a power cut in August 2003, and although it only lasted for a day, its impact was keenly felt. While New York may have a small carbon footprint, it has little or no resilience to declining oil supplies.”

It is our way of life that ultimately will have to shift in order to secure our communities; hence the idea of a *transitional* community.

One of the greatest advantages of the Transition Movement is its accessibility to a large number of the global population. While climate change and peak oil will affect everyone on this planet, it will happen in different ways in different regions of the world. In order to explain the next key point, one must first define the concept of the Core, Semi-Peripheral, and Peripheral countries:

*Core-* The advanced industrial societies of America, Western Europe and Japan are often referred to as core countries because of their central position on the world stage<sup>16</sup>

*Semi-Peripheral-* Countries that are in the initial stages of industrialism which provide labor and raw materials to the core countries<sup>17</sup>

*Peripheral-* The term refers to countries which have a marginal role in the world economy and are dependent on 'core' countries in their trading relationships<sup>18</sup>

Peripheral and Semi-Peripheral, while dependent on the Core and globalized market systems to provide some economic stability, are already living in the conditions of scarce resources. For some poor countries, populations are surviving off their local agriculture and markets and could possibly live more sustainably than some in the Core countries (without taking costs of population and disease control into consideration). In Core countries such as the United States, people are accustomed to an easy access lifestyle with little thought to where and how products and produce end up in their homes. This ambivalence is probably the biggest hindrance to a community to adopt a more sustainable, local lifestyle. Children grow up learning to shop and consume, and in the American culture getting your driver's license and first car in high school is

a rite of passage. From childhood, Americans are taught the complete opposite of a sustainable lifestyle, so transitioning into anything else may be viewed as a threat to their way of life. This is especially the case given the fact that many people cannot see an imminent danger that would inspire them to change the way they have always lived. In an interview with Juliet Schor, an economist who has taught at Harvard University, about the *Overspent American* she states that, “People are spending more than is fiscally prudent, more than they did in the past and more than they realize.”<sup>19</sup> It is hard for people to realize the severity of this issue because the effects of climate change and peak oil are gradual and do not happen overnight.

*The Transition Handbook* outlines some “surprising” facts about societies in the UK from The New Economics Foundation that show:

- Increased income stopped making us any happier sometime around 1961
- When asked which decade from the 1950s onwards respondents would most like to have lived in, the 1960s emerged as most popular
- 62% of people in the UK have jobs they find uninteresting or stressful
- 87% of Britons agree with the statement ‘Society has become too materialistic, with too much emphasis on money and not enough on the things that really matter.’
- The degree to which we trust each other has fallen by half since the 1950s<sup>20</sup>

These facts are actually not surprising given the growth in global population accompanied by the growth in economy and markets that has occurred since the Industrial Revolution. Everything in this world has become increasingly more accessible with technological advances and mass production, leaving little room for locally skilled individuals to keep practicing their crafts when their competitors can sell much more at a much lower cost. In the long run, societies may see that it has actually come at a great cost, with the loss of a localized and resilient economy and lifestyle. There has been an emphasis placed on increasing production speed and output, and

globalization has only fueled this concept with markets spreading across the world.

Unfortunately some societies are starting to realize that this way of life is not only unsustainable but also unfulfilling. Hopkins frequently states that it is naïve to think that the same brilliance and creativity and adaptability that got us to the top of that energy mountain in the first place will not somehow mysteriously evaporate when we have to design a creative way back down the other side.<sup>21</sup> We have to work together in order create the future that we all want to live in.

It is important to see that climate change and peak oil will affect ALL areas of the world in some way. In the United States in the Pacific Northwest, there are already major changes in the ecosystems and water systems. Climate change is melting glaciers and restructuring temperatures, weather patterns, and land cover. According to Daniel Glick, a writer for the

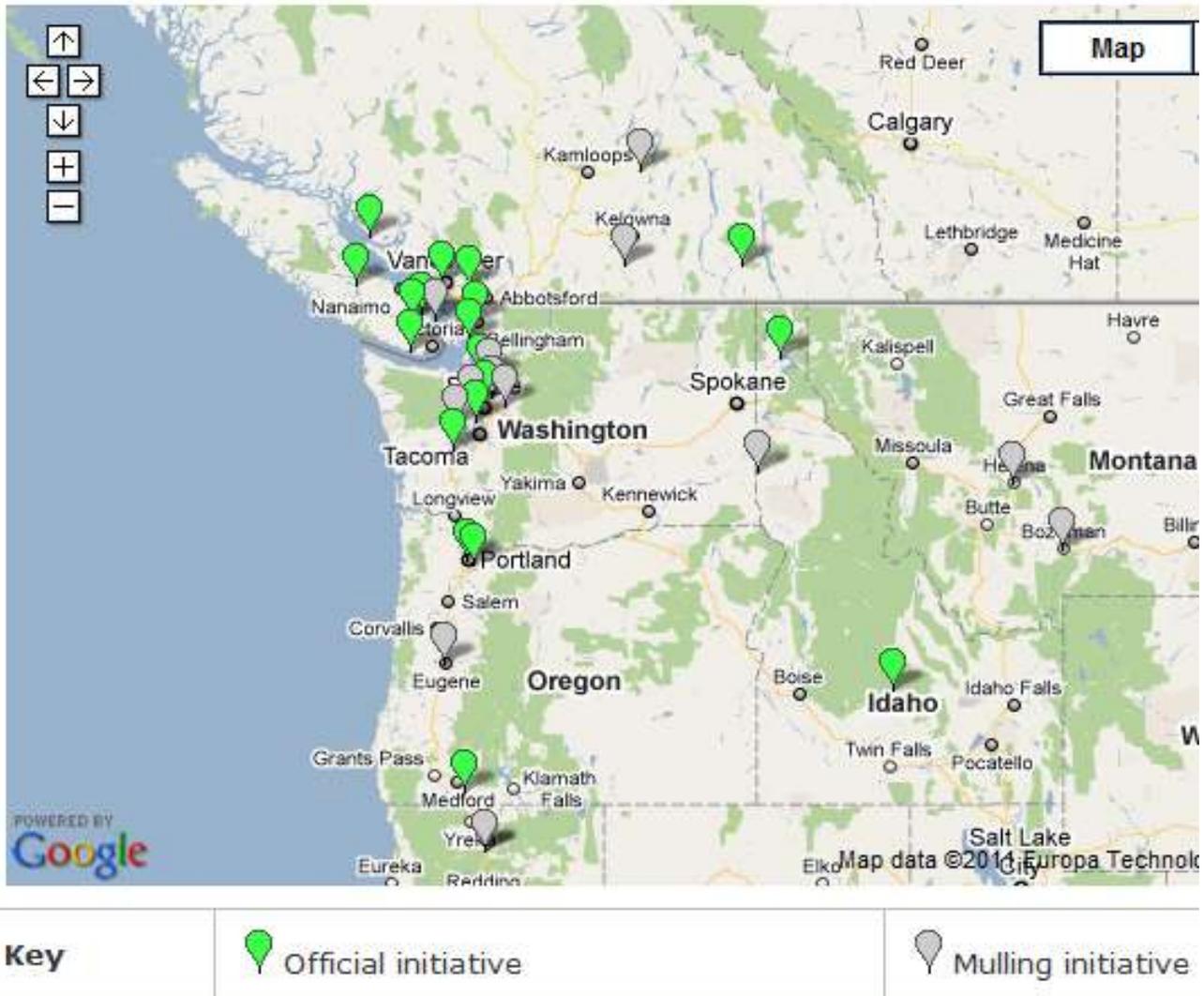
*National Geographic:*

“Scientists who assess the planet's health see indisputable evidence that Earth has been getting warmer, in some cases rapidly. Most believe that human activity, in particular the burning of fossil fuels and the resulting buildup of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, have influenced this warming trend. In the past decade scientists have documented record-high average annual surface temperatures and have been observing other signs of change all over the planet: in the distribution of ice, and in the salinity, levels, and temperatures of the oceans.”<sup>22</sup>

In an area where hydropower is a top energy source, the redistribution and/or depletion of our water resources may significantly affect our energy and electrical output. Agriculture and livestock feed are other economic resources that the area possesses and will feel the effects of climate change in relation to shifting crop yields and irrigation systems. Additionally, the effects of peak oil will be felt in the mass production and harvest of food resources, which are currently driven by the need for oil to carry out the process. From large cities to small towns to ranches across the Pacific Northwest, all areas will have to adapt to a changing economy and environment. While the ideals of the Transition Movement started in Europe, the same

framework and options can be explored in all regions across the globe. The Pacific Northwest in the United States is just example of how the movement is starting to catch on.

The Transition Movement as you can see from the map below has spread to the Pacific Northwest area:



(Pacific Northwest includes the states of: Idaho, Montana, Washington, and Oregon)

Towns with Official Initiative Communities:

- Sandpoint, ID
- Ketchum, ID
- Ashland, OR
- Portland, OR
- Portland Sunnyside, OR
- Olympia, WA

- Vashon Island, WA
- Northeast Seattle, WA
- Whidbey, WA
- Sooke, WA
- Anacortes, WA
- Whatcom, WA

Towns with Mulling Communities:

Moscow, ID\*  
Eugene, OR  
Everett, WA  
Woodinville, WA

Bainbridge, WA  
Snoqualmie Valley, WA  
Mason County, WA  
Bozeman, MT  
Helena, MT<sup>23</sup>

These are towns in which part of the community has decided to live a more sustainable lifestyle. There is only a handful but more communities and towns are joining each year. For the next part of this paper I will be focusing on the Transition communities in Idaho: Sandpoint (official), Ketchum (official), and Moscow (mulling).

The city of Sandpoint has a population of 6,835 with the majority being between the ages of 25 and 54.<sup>24</sup> In 2000 the highest percent (18.3) of people's household incomes was \$35,000 to \$49,999.<sup>25</sup> The Sandpoint Transition Initiative has over 100 members and became the second official initiative ever in the United States in June of 2008.<sup>26</sup> They put a considerable amount of

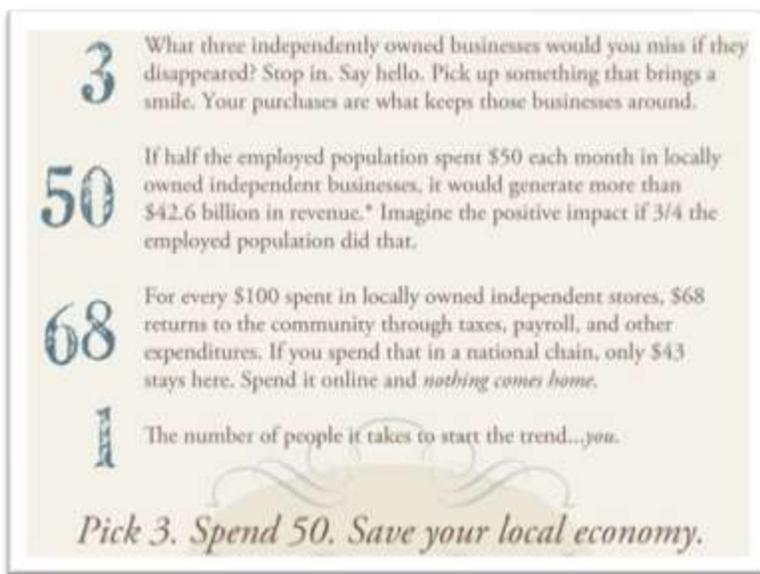


Figure 2: 3/50 Project Flyer

effort into programs and events by other agencies in order to bring the community together. One of the projects that they are currently working on is *The 3/50 Project* which is a project designed to promote buying from local independent businesses in order to strengthen the local economy of the

community.<sup>27</sup> Karen Lanphear, one of Sandpoint Transition Initiative's leaders, discusses the project and its difficulties:

“Our other project for this year is to try and get a Buy Local campaign going. We have the beginning of a great Women's Co op, we have 6 Rivers Co-op which is a cyber coop

for local food producers and consumers, and we have the Chamber of Commerce and the Holistic Chamber interested in working together on this.

The tricky part is working with the CC because they want to include Wal-Mart and Home Depot because they hire local folks and, well, that is not quite our definition of Buy Local so we have work to do. (www.the350project.org).”<sup>28</sup>

This is just one of many projects that the Sandpoint Transition Initiative (STI) is a part of. The community also has many classes and workshops on living sustainably that the public can attend. They have a community garden where local residents can have a 4x8 raised bed where they can grow their own food. STI is also planning on expanding the size of the community garden as well as hopefully providing a picnic table and a compost bin.<sup>29</sup>

Ketchum, Idaho has a population of 3,003 with the majority being between the ages of 25 and 54.<sup>30</sup> In 2000 the highest percent (16.8) of people’s household incomes was \$50,000 to \$74,999.<sup>31</sup> The Ketchum Community Rising transition movement has over 80 members and several local agency and program supporters. It became an official initiative in July of 2008 making it the 3<sup>rd</sup> official initiative in the United States.<sup>32</sup> One of the biggest areas of importance that Community Rising has been working on is local food. They encourage the community to buy locally, buy organic, start your own vegetable gardens, know where your food comes from, preserve food, and even eliminating your lawn.<sup>33</sup>

On the *transitionnetwork.org* website Moscow, ID was listed as a *mulling initiative* that started in March of 2010 with four members. In contacting the leader of the initiative, it was discovered that this person had since moved to Seattle, WA and has become a part of the Transition Seattle. This isn’t to say that there are no significant efforts of sustainable living that are going on in Moscow, ID and at the University of Idaho. Recently the City of Moscow has implemented a plan to start a community garden at the Hamilton Lowe Aquatic Center that will open in April of 2011.<sup>34</sup> There will be 44, 20x20 plot garden plots available at a \$50 deposit.<sup>35</sup>

While there are only a handful of Transitional communities in the Pacific Northwest, some components of the transition have manifested in many communities in the region. For example, Farmer's Markets, a cornerstone of the Transition Movement, can be found in 84 communities in Washington, 63 communities in Oregon, 49 communities in Idaho, and 43 communities in Montana.<sup>36</sup> Collaboratives promoting sustainable practices have also been established throughout the Pacific Northwest, including Sustainable Idaho, Sustainable Northwest, Sustainable Seattle, the Northwest Center for Sustainability and Innovation, and Local Governments for Sustainability, to name just a few. All have goals in strengthening their communities in becoming more sustainable.

One of the issues that may have stopped the transition in Moscow, ID, and other transitions as well, is the lack of interest and/or support. This is one of the biggest hindrances to the Transition Movement is not having enough people who are willing to work together to transition to a more sustainable lifestyle. Seemingly, the transition works best in smaller communities. It's a movement that starts out with a few interested people and grows on a small scale. With peak oil projected to happen any day (and even some that have said it has already occurred), there will come a time when all populations will have to take a look at their lifestyle and resource consumption and decide how to live more sustainably. And with climate change happening at a faster rate every year and the impacts of which are likely to affect the largely populated areas, something will need to change in order to secure societies.

Transitioning from a lifestyle societies have always known to a different (but not necessarily negative) lifestyle will be difficult for people to understand. Adaptation will have to occur in order to secure the resilience and sustainability of communities. The terms *resilience* and *sustainability* are naturally linked and while both are central to the Transition Movement,

there are subtle differences in the two. Sustainability is enduring or upholding a society. Resilience however, is the ability to take the hit and adapt to it accordingly. These characteristics are important for when disasters and shocks befall a community, so that the people have the tools and ability they need to survive. While the effects of climate change and peak oil are gradual, there will be a time when societies will see a noticeable change in their world. Core countries and globalization began and have been fueled by cheap oil but there will come a time when the world can no longer rely on a nonrenewable energy source. Simple easy access things may become luxuries for us in the future. And while the world cannot be fully sure where our planet is headed, it may be feasible to prepare for the worst case scenario. Living a more sustainable and resilient lifestyle could be beneficial in more than one way. It could help local towns deal with the potential shocks of energy-loss as well as provide a platform for communities and neighborhoods to come together to solve their problems as a whole. The Transition Movement seeks to ease communities into this change of decarbonization or energy descent by instilling skills and developing local resources to help their community's resilience. This is a positive outlook on the future rather than having individuals waiting around for some magic technology or governmental policy to save their cheap oil-fueled way of living. It seems better to be prepared and to have a plan for the changing world rather than going about business as usual and dealing with a shock to our systems that we are not ready for.

The ideals of the Transition Movement are a positive move for communities. Although there are many types of projects and programs happening all over the world to combat climate change effects and develop solutions for peak oil, the transition movement provides a great platform and support for action at a local level. It is a big, diverse planet we inhabit and the global population is not estimated to peak (at 9 billion) until 2070.<sup>37</sup> Trying to solve these

immense problems on a large scale through governmental agencies and/or corporate businesses seemingly has not been effective at the global, national, or local level. Action needs to start locally so communities and individuals may actually see the solutions in action and the benefits therein. As proven by such transition initiatives in the Pacific Northwest, change can happen while still maintaining a relatively similar lifestyle. Just by keeping food resources local, we are reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by not burning fossil fuels to transport produce and other products. There is time to do something about the state of our planet and the Transition Movement is a great step towards our future.

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