

A book report by Cindy Steensby on
Depletion and Abundance: Life on the New Home Front¹

About the author: Sharon is a writer and small farmer in rural upstate New York. She is a former academic and lives with her husband and four children.

The problem

The impacts of climate change is already here but we need to reduce our use of energy if the worse impacts are to be averted. In addition, life for many, is becoming increasingly insecure as climate change and peak energy effect the economy. Jobs are less secure with an increasing proportion being low pay and/or part-time. As a result individuals are having an increasingly difficult time in making ends meet (35 million Americans are suffering food insecurity) and governments are not able to adequately deal with crises such as Hurricane Katrina.

Background information on the economy

The book defines the real economy as being made up of the *formal* economy and the *informal* economy. The formal economy is that which is measured by GDP. The informal economy is everything else and includes: volunteer work; work we do in our home; bartering and the criminal economy. Unfortunately, staying home and raising the children and undertaking actions that reduce the household's overall expense and impact on the world's resources are not considered as valuable as working for an employer.

The formal economy cannot function without the informal economy. The book estimates that $\frac{3}{4}$ of the global workforce are employed in the informal economy. In developing countries and countries suffering economic collapse the informal economy is extremely important. In these countries some people supplement their income with earnings from the informal economy but many are living totally in the informal economy. It is likely that as the impact of peak oil and climate change continue to negatively impact our formal economies that it will become increasingly hard to make a living in the formal economy and more and more people will need to rely on the informal economy to survive.

What should you do

The book is not advocating that everyone buys a small farm and becomes self-sufficient as the author did. It *does* advocate that we:

- get out of debt;
- work toward reducing energy use to our fair share of the world's resources;
- look at ways of supplementing our income by participating in the informal economy (ie setting up a cottage industry);
- learn how to make do with what we have;

¹ Sharon Astyk, *Depletion and Abundance: Life on the New Home Front*, New Society Publishers, Canada, 2008

- reduce dependence on the formal economy by reducing expenses through growing own food; and
- work to build resilient communities

The book refers to the 'New Home Front' and compares the current situation with World War II. In World War II, due to a national unity of purpose, those on the 'home front' pulled together to help in the war effort through rationing, victory gardens and women working in factories.

A major obstacle to simplifying your life — including using less labor saving devices — will be the perceived lack of time. However, there will also be gains in that some actions such as buying in bulk will result in less time spent shopping. In some cases, we have to work the number of hours we do because of the high cost of maintaining our lifestyle. For example, it has been estimated that it takes 2 months' per year work to fund your car.

Making Home

The book considers that it may be appropriate for some people to move but for most people the best option will be for them to stay where they currently live and adapt their homes. Reasons for moving include: a desire to buy a small farm and become as self-sufficient as possible; to be closer to family or other support networks; and because where you are living will become unviable due to climate change. Another possible reason is minimise the environmental impact of travel to jobs or shops. However, moving closer may not be a sufficient reason since jobs are likely to become more insecure. Other options for reducing impact of transport are to consider car pooling/car sharing, bicycle (including electrical assist) and minimising shopping trips through buying in bulk.

Currently, our homes are a costly expression of our lives and are designed to keep us spending. Whether you decide to move or stay put you will need to adapt your home to make it appropriate for an energy restricted and financially insecure future. A home needs to have space for money-making cottage industries and money-saving projects such as storing food and sewing. If it doesn't then it should be small and cheap so that you can afford to get these resources from other places. Many people will not have the money to purchase high technological tools.

The house will need to be kept at a liveable temperature. Improving insulation may be the most cost efficient way to efficiently keep the home warm or cool. It is important to remember that in the winter we can cope with cooler houses than we are used to by putting on additional sweaters and using additional blankets.

We should look at alternatives to electrical appliances as electricity may be cut off because the grid cannot cope with demand, or natural disasters happen or because you cannot afford to pay the bill! Most homes in urban areas have their solar panels connected to the grid and therefore can only be used when the grid is operating. Back-up electricity is going to be too expensive for most people. Therefore you should look at ways of covering

your basic needs during the periods without electricity with non-electric, human-powered solutions and stand-alone renewables (solar calculators, solar battery chargers, solar radios)

Food

According to the book, the average meal covers 1500 miles and it takes about 10 calories of fossil fuels to produce a single calorie of food. While these figures relate to the USA it would be similar in Australia. Modern agriculture is dependent on fossil fuels and we are becoming increasingly food insecure due to a combination of soil and resource depletion, growth in biofuel production at the expense of food production, climate change and rising energy prices.

Studies have found that smaller more intensively managed land can be more productive than a conventional farmer's use of land. Instead of defining farming as "efficient if it uses less labour" we need to look at *productivity per area*. If we make better use of the land we have then we can keep sufficient land for wildlife habitat.

Dependence on cheap foreign crops can result in destructive land clearing in the exporting nations and leave many of the poorer people in those countries less food secure. In addition, relying on food from overseas leaves the importing nation vulnerable to disruptions to the transport system.

In order to develop a resilient local food system we need:

1. At home: grow as much food as practical. Some people may be only able to grow a few sprouts and plants in containers on their window sills. If you can't plant a vegetable garden in your front yard then consider planting fruit trees and other edible ornamentals. Some people may be able to have chickens. Growing your own food may seem of little importance but collectively it can make a big difference. During World War II, both the US and Britain grew more than 40 percent of their produce in home and urban gardens.
2. In the neighborhood:
 - Encourage others to garden. Is there a community garden? If not, can you create one?
 - Work together, it may be possible to use a neighbor's yard for a garden and then split the produce with them.
 - Forage for weeds (there are books available on edible weeds).
3. Wider local area: The goal is to limit purchases to local sustainable sources that are as close as possible. In doing this you will help support/build local food systems and become less vulnerable to glitches in the supply chain.
4. Non-local food: Should be limited and be fair-trade when possible.
5. Storing and preserving food (it is recommended to store 6 months of food):
 - Buy staples in bulk;
 - Learn how to store and preserve fruits and vegetables.
 - Rotate stock and eat from stores.

Eating local and from your stores will necessitate a change in diet. Use whole

rather than processed foods which means learning how to cook with them. It is recommended to begin incorporating any unfamiliar foods into your family's diet immediately. A gradual change is better than trying to cope with major changes in the middle of a crisis.

Grains and dried beans and lentils and are useful if you are on tight budget. If you can afford to buy in bulk. Recommend eating less but better quality meat. Intensively farmed meat is not recommended.

Preserving, growing and buying local food reduces our dependence on large corporations. We cannot call for an end to multinationals while we pay them to provide our basic needs. We need to declare food independence and meet as many of our needs ourselves and through small, sustainable farms.

Our food storage should not be viewed selfishly but as a collective that enriches the community. We should plan for sharing with others during hard times. Thrift should enable generosity.

Getting children involved

It helps if you keep your children involved in what you are doing. Encourage them be involved in growing food. Cutting back in expenditures will mean that they will get fewer toys. However, this isn't necessarily a bad thing as it is hard to appreciate things if you have too many. Provide toys that encourage them to use their imagination and are made from natural materials that are demonstrably non-toxic.

Children need to be encouraged to play outside and to connect with their environment and see us valuing the environment over our convenience.

Sharon home schools but acknowledges this is not for everyone. In her case, she finds it preferable because she can tailor the education to each child's strengths and weakness and minimises their environmental impact as they live a long distance from school.

Health Care

It is important in an energy restricted world to maintain a focus on health care and looking after the vulnerable. We need to find a model that makes the best use of both the high tech and low tech solutions for health care. Although the main focus will necessarily change to maintaining health instead of treating sickness. Good nutrition, clean water and hygiene are an important part of public health and can still be delivered in a low energy world. Cuba after the fall of Russia is a good example of a country that elected to preserve health care in the face of severe economic hardship. However, if our government's do not then this will have to be done at the community level with neighbor helping neighbor

Final Chapter

The last chapter is a call to arms showing that we all need to stand up for what is right and to speak out for a more equitable and fair society that only uses its share of the world's resources and does not borrow from the future.

We must do what we can *now* to reduce our own usage and to set an example to everyone else that it can be done, that it is possible to have a fulfilling life living on less. None of us will do it perfectly but we need to start.

Other Books written by Sharon Astyk:

Independence Days: A Guide to Sustainable Food Storage & Preservation, New Society Publishers, Canada 2009.

A practical guide to storing and preserving food It provides information on: storing grains and water; root cellaring and season extension; dehydration; fermentation; and seed saving. It also provides tips on replenishing and maintaining your stores.

Making Home: Adapting Our Homes and Our Lives to Settle in Place, New Society Publishers, Canada 2012

The book follows on from *Depletion and Abundance* and includes more detailed information on how to prepare your home and your community for tough times.