



My Last Campfire Post

Posted by [Jason Bradford](#) on September 6, 2013 - 9:13pm

I checked my user profile for this site and discovered that as of today I have been a member for 7 years and 37 weeks. Wow! So much has happened to me and my family over those years and a lot of it was shared on The Oil Drum. For reasons I'll explain, I haven't been around much lately. My most recent article was over three years ago.

My first writings for The Oil Drum were over six years ago as guest posts through Nate Hagens, and then as a staff contributor for the "Campfire" section of the site. I am not an energy expert so my role wasn't about modeling depletion or providing context to the energy news of the week. What I did was consider the broader relationships between energy, resources and society, and explore the implications of more expensive and less energy to our consumer-oriented economy and culture. The most complete and succinct example of this role is probably my "[Beware the Hungry Ghosts](#)" piece, which includes this passage:

Several religious traditions describe what are termed "hungry ghosts." These sad beings have insatiable appetites, with tiny mouths and huge stomachs. Modern society creates hungry ghosts among the living. We "have" more than ever, but are constantly bombarded with messages that it is never enough. The poor go to dollar stores, the middle class spend hours at Bed Bath and Beyond, the rich buy ever larger yachts, and city planners are always looking for more land and water in which to expand their urban sphere. Wants have become indistinguishable from needs. I anxiously walk among our nation of hungry ghosts, asking myself what these addicts will do when they can't get their fix?

What many of us found at The Oil Drum was a place to share our anxieties with those who share our anxieties. I am not being dismissive of this at all! Many here have points of view that place us outside of conventional wisdom, and this can be socially difficult. Where else can we go to have conversations that may be impolite, misunderstood and dismissed by the hungry ghosts we live among?

A fine example of thinking profoundly differently is in Kurt Cobb's essay "[Upside Down Economics](#)" in which he gives a visual representation of U.S. GDP from the perspective of an Ecological Economist:

Ecological Economist's View of U. S. GDP

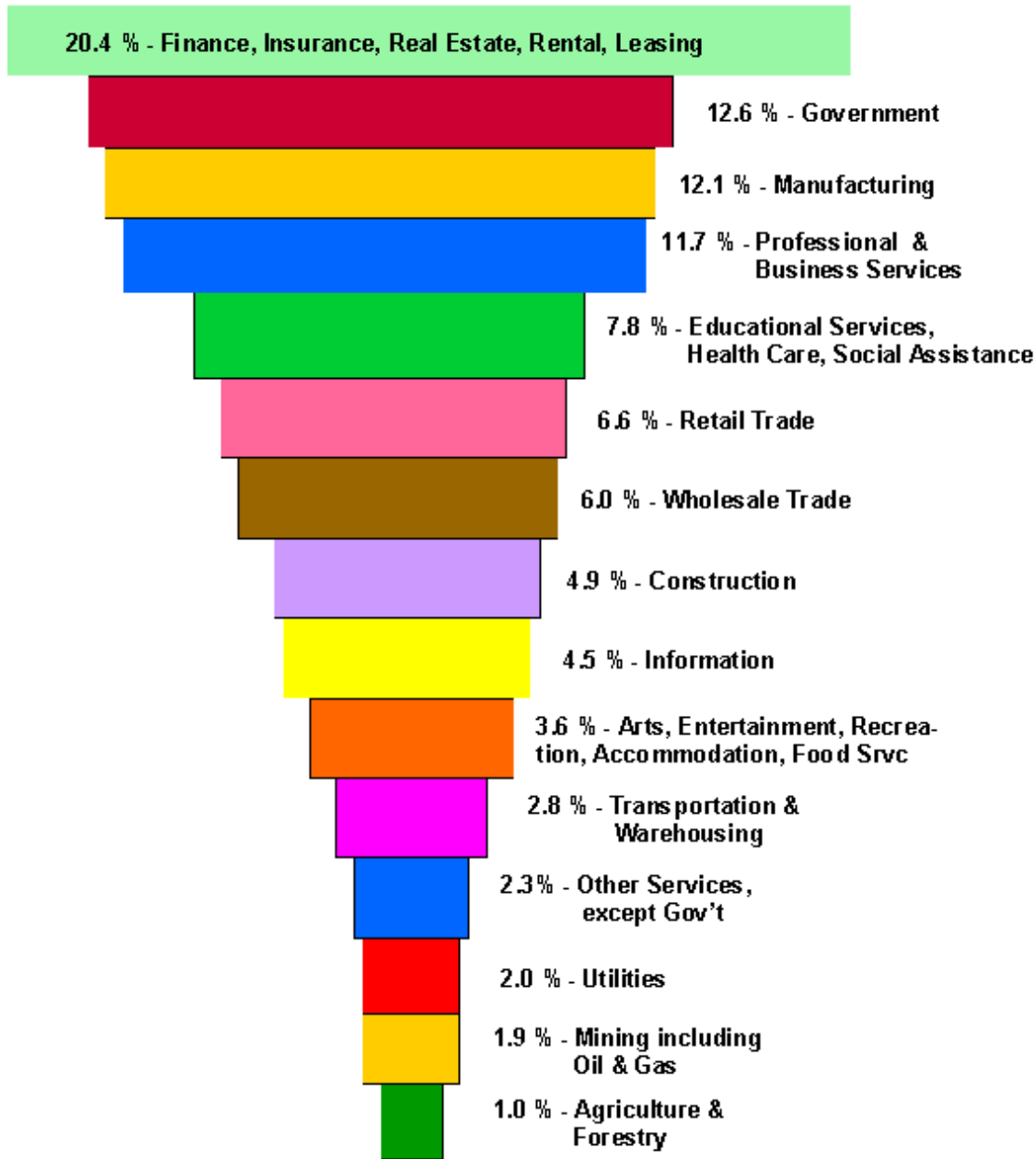


Figure 1

Many of my articles framed topics from an Ecological Economics perspective, where the economy is a subsidiary of the planet and functions by extracting resources and depositing wastes. Essential resources like energy, mineral ores, food and fiber can only be easily ignored when they are inexpensive to buy and reliably available. Many of us are alarmed because we see existential threats to the bottom of a top heavy pyramid and would like those situated higher up to pay attention and look below.

At the bottom of Cobb's chart you see the economic sector "Agriculture & Forestry." That is where I currently work, and where much of my writing here was about. I didn't just explore the food growing sector, but also the so-called Food System, that includes transportation, processing and warehousing, retailing and end-use. Classic statistics discussed, and that devoted readers of

The Oil Drum can probably rattle off at any cocktail party, include:

The U.S. Food System consumes several fossil fuel calories for each food calorie eaten.

The typical grocery store has about three days supply of goods on its shelves.

Each U.S. farmer (plus machines with fuel) feeds 100 people.

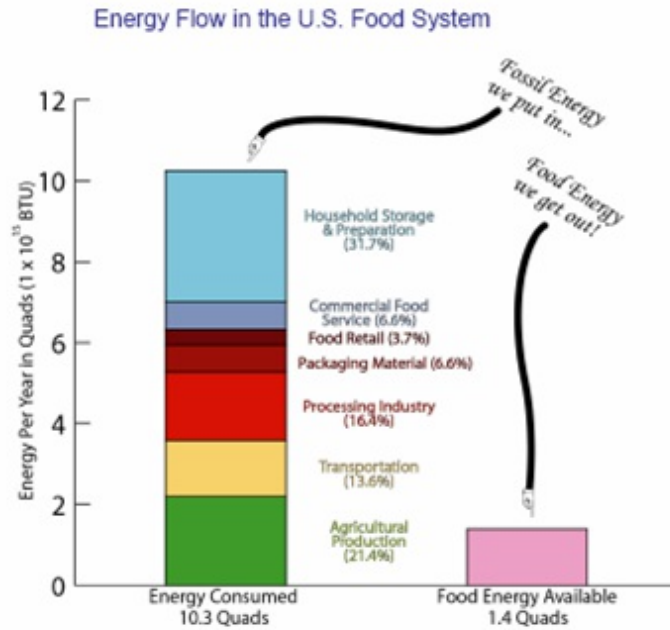


Figure 2. Graphic used in the post [“Ecological Economics and the Food System”](#)

Two additional posts, [“Save it for the Combine”](#) and [“Energy Descent and Agricultural Population”](#) perhaps best capture the sense of the transformative change fossil fuels made in agricultural production and labor inputs, and offer some perspectives on adaptation to lower fossil fuel availability.

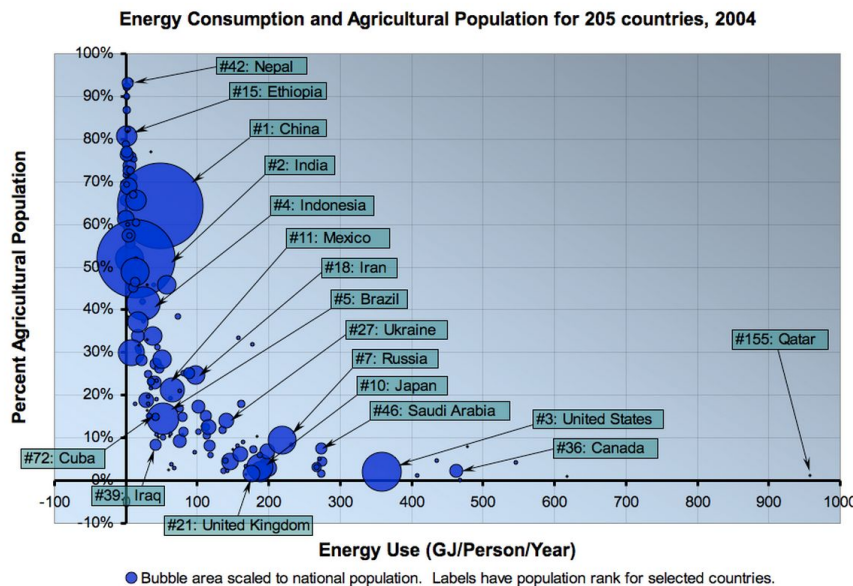


Figure 3. The percent agriculture population is plotted in relation to per capita energy use.

Nations with abundant use of exosomatic energy tend to have less of their population involved in agricultural production, presumably either because they can afford to import much of their food or employ labor saving devices in food production. For example, only about 1% of the US labor force is involved in farming. Data comes from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) and the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). Original article containing figure is [here](#).

The Campfire series was not only about exploring heterodox ideas, it was also meant to be a place where practical advice was shared. Many of us wanted to go beyond the talking stage and “do something” about the information and analyses presented on the site. This brings me to why I haven’t been writing here lately.

I went to the 2008 ASPO meetings in Sacramento not only to learn, but to network and hopefully meet someone who could help me with something. I wanted to farm at a significant scale to practice and demonstrate a form of agriculture that needs much fewer external inputs and is thus adaptive to our times. I met my eventual business partner (and TOD member) Craig Wichner in Sacramento. We were able to introduce our company, [Farmland LP](#), at ASPO 2009 in Denver, where I gave two talks that eventually became posts ([here](#) and [here](#)). Over the past four years Craig and I have taken a heterodox idea and turned it into something substantial: Farmland LP currently owns and manages 6300 acres of cropland in California and Oregon.

So, I’ve been pretty busy. I am [still writing](#) on my company website but most of my posts are news related to the business. On occasion I do develop articles that look at the big picture and do in-depth analyses, such as “[The Many Benefits of Multi-Year Crop Rotations](#)” and “Google Earth, Rotational Grazing and Mineralization, [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)” but I won’t have time for more of that sort of writing until we are done with planting this fall.

This brings me to the end of my last Campfire post. In customary fashion I will pose some questions and ask readers to share their experience, wisdom, frustrations, and final thoughts for The Oil Drum.

Did any of you follow similar paths to mine, whereby the information and critical thinking shared on this site led to significant changes in your life path? (I never thought I’d be a farmer when I grew up.)

What barriers to making the changes you wanted did you encounter? Did they stop you from going on or did you overcome them somehow? (My wife gave me the foundation I needed to do this work. She had the income-earning job and the patience to allow me time to explore. Thank you Kristin!)



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