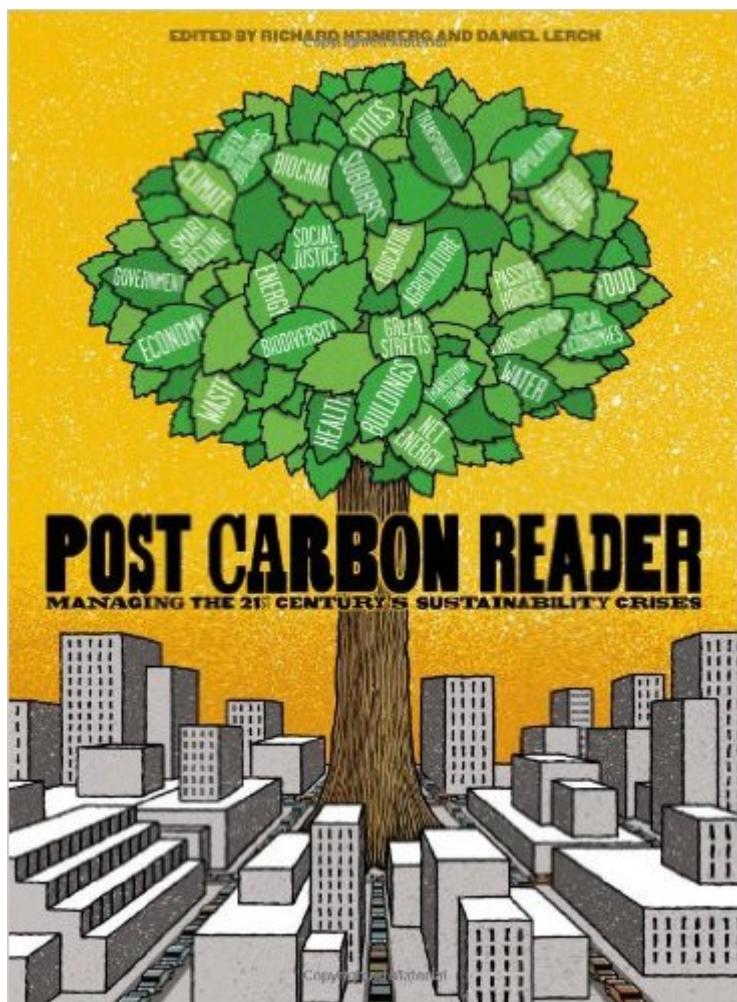


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# The Post Carbon Reader: Managing The 21st Century's Sustainability Crises



## **Synopsis**

In the 20th century, cheap and abundant energy brought previously unimaginable advances in health, wealth, and technology, and fed an explosion in population and consumption. But this growth came at an incredible cost. Climate change, peak oil, freshwater depletion, species extinction, and a host of economic and social problems now challenge us as never before. The Post Carbon Reader features articles by some of the world's most provocative thinkers on the key drivers shaping this new century, from renewable energy and urban agriculture to social justice and systems resilience. This unprecedented collection takes a hard-nosed look at the interconnected threats of our global sustainability quandary--as well as the most promising responses. The Post Carbon Reader is a valuable resource for policymakers, college classrooms, and concerned citizens. **WINNER MAY 2011: GOLD MEDAL Independent Publisher Book Award in Environment/Ecology/Nature category.**

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

The compendium goes a long way towards educating the reader to the unpleasant truth of our global situation; it really gets us out of denial. But it does something else which, in my view, is much more valuable. It gives us things WE can do to ameliorate our circumstance. While the situation is dire, and we cannot ignore what is coming, we CAN be proactive with this situation. There are many excellent pieces in this work. Thought-provoking and penetrating in scope, the authors look at population growth, food, water, sustainability, ecological economics, peak oil and a variety of other

related subjects. I highly recommend this work as THE definitive primer for those who really want to understand where we are and how we might do something positive about it. David K. Banner, PhD Mentor in Leadership and Organizational ChangeWalden University Minneapolis, MN

The chapters in Post Carbon Reader represent the best thinking on our low-carbon future that is presently available. I've gotten a lot of books about peak oil and the unsustainability of industrial civilization, and this one is clearly the most well informed and the most thorough reference I've found. Hah - it's the best "resource" on our dwindling "resources". It's basically a manual on understanding the complex set of converging consequences of our modern times. Read the chapter list to get a sense of the wide-ranging places this book goes. And then read the book. Thoughtful people need to read this book. And those who don't read it need to get the messages that are in the book now, because learning them through the school of hard knocks is going to be tough, to say the least. Lots of books show how our petroleum - soaked way of life is ending, but this book goes way beyond one or two aspects of the problem - it successfully characterizes the myriad interrelated components of the system that has brought us to our current precarious position. While we can't avoid the coming powerdown, we can at least try to mitigate it. What we do now and in the next few years can make a big difference to our grandchildren. This book helps one understand the problem and it clearly points out the directions in which we need to be headed.

I particularly like this book because I can pick and choose the area that interests me at anytime and then delve into the erudite and very readable texts - which frequently come up with perspectives I've encountered before. Climate change and fossil fuel depletion mean that just about all the critical systems we rely upon, particularly in industrialised nations, are going to change. It's imperative in order to control CO2 emissions and inevitable because of peak oil. This book does a really good job of looking at all the key areas and exploring what that future might look like and the paths we might take. Although the authors are predominantly american, the book feels very applicable to the UK and Europe generally. In a few years, this'll become one of the best-thumbed reference volumes I've got on my shelf.

Originally published in Transition Voice online [...] When I grew up in the Windy City in the seventies and eighties, the University of Chicago had the reputation as a school for grinds. After high school, I did not go there, but opted instead for a liberal arts college in a Southern state that offered what I felt was a superior book-to-beer balance. I had a childhood friend who did go to the U

of C though. She had always been a bit of a free spirit, with straight blond hair down to her waist and an obsession with animals of all sorts. I could never figure out how such a gentle soul wound up at such a high-pressure, bookish school. But there it was. One year, I came home on break and paid her a visit. It was a midweek evening in her dorm room, with half a dozen of her friends.

Conversation turned to the loads of homework each student had due that week. Each undergrad claimed to have to read three or four Great Books by morning. And we're not talking about one dialogue by Plato or a play by Moliere. No, each student had a pile of four- to eight-hundred page tomes due for discussion in class the next day: *Ulysses*, the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas, *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Rather than quaking in sheer panic, I noticed that these Chicago grinds had all developed a kind of battlefield nonchalance. Maybe even a bit of a macho swagger. Sure, they'd skim the books. They'd be up all night doing it. But it was no big deal. They could catch up on sleep over the weekend. *The Chicago Book of Style* *The Post Carbon Reader* feels like a Chicago book. I know that it's really a West Coast production, with its eponymous institute located north of the San Francisco Bay area. But this book forsakes the Cassandra cry of a Berkeley activist at a giant redwood tree-sit. Likewise missing is the smooth scenario-spinning of a Silicon Valley venture capitalist at a TED conference. Instead, the 500-page volume shows an outsized ambition to present all areas of practical human knowledge from the viewpoint of peak oil. It's an encyclopedia that seems more at home among the leering gargoyles and faux-Gothic spires of Hyde Park than on the sun-kissed lanes of Sonoma wine country. Co-editor Daniel Lerch apologizes for what the volume had to leave out, namely "chapters on media and communications, for example, to explore how action on even 'no brainer' issues like climate change and peak fossil fuels all too often lives or dies by money and politics, not science and the common good." Curiously, Lerch says he also misses a chapter on local post-carbon transportation including walking and biking, though Richard Gilbert and Anthony Perl stand up nicely for rail and electric vehicles in their piece "Transportation in the Post-Carbon World." In any event, this volume should not make any apologies for being too short or lacking in scope. Its 34 essays by two dozen authors impressively cover subjects likely to be both old and new to readers who follow peak oil, climate change and the economic crisis. Finishing *The Post Carbon Reader* can give you the same sense of accomplishment as if you'd polished off Aristotle's *Poetics*, *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* and the *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* between dinner and bedtime. It's like graduating from Post-Carbon University. And all without the student loans. Essays by Richard Heinberg on the limits to growth, David Orr on the economy's "ecological deficit" and a selection from Bill McKibben's *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* summarize well the dilemmas that face industrial

society today. Wes Jackson's proposal to replace most annual crops with perennial varieties is a new take on the oft-discussed topic of sustainable farming. Gloria Flora's "Remapping Relationships: Humans in Nature," encourages a healthy sense of humility before the ability of nature to provide our basic needs better than industrial society can. These essays can serve as both excellent introductions to newcomers and helpful refreshers for people more familiar with energy and the environment. Peak-thinking on new subjects For me, most exciting were the essays that traveled beyond the well worn sustainability paths of wildlife, food, water and energy. "Climate Change, Peak Oil, and The End of Waste," is the best thing I've seen on garbage outside of Annie Leonard's web video "The Story of Stuff", to which the essay's authors, both recycling activists, rightly pay homage. Like any skilled essayists, they show how their subject is central to some bigger issues that you may never have thought about. In this case, it turns out that products and packaging are bigger contributors to global warming than the two next sources of greenhouse-gas emissions, buildings and transportation, combined. And next time I hear some municipal waste manager beaming about how the local landfill is "green" because it harnesses methane, I'll know the real story: most of that methane isn't even burned, but still escapes into the atmosphere. Even worse, the false promise of turning landfill gas into fuel causes cities to make bad decisions such as diverting food scraps from promising new composting programs back into landfills to get a methane payback that may never come. "Human Health and Well-being in an Era of Energy Scarcity and Climate Change" by Cindy Parker and Brian Schwartz, two public health physicians at Johns Hopkins, may be old hat to people with a background in the field. But for those of us whose experience with healthcare has been limited to private physicians, hospitals, pharmacies and their billing departments, the authors' holistic discussion of sustainable well-being will probably be eye-opening. I always suspected that human health went beyond prescriptions and MRIs. Now I feel that the authors have given me permission to see factors ranging from employment and income to justice and the law to soils and mineral resources as factors in keeping people well or making them sick. The two essays on education are thought-provoking. In "Smart by Nature" Michael Stone and Zenobia Barlow talk about how introducing students to hands-on farming and community activism elevated a neglected inner-city elementary school in Burlington, VT into a magnet for kids from around the city. Nancy Lee Wood shows how community colleges could be more relevant than Harvard (or, for that matter, Chicago) in a world that requires fewer investment bankers and drug company sales reps and more organic farmers, solar-panel installers and managers of small-scale local factories. Appropriately to a volume that wants to leave its reader in a hopeful port after voyaging on a sea of troubles, the book ends with action-oriented essays by Chris Martenson and

Transition Town originator Rob Hopkins. And interestingly, both authors eschew much talk of sustainability and instead focus on resilience. For Martenson, "we are more resilient when we have multiple sources and systems to supply a needed item, rather than being dependent on a single source...when we have a strong local community with deep connections...when we are in control of how our needs are met and when we can do things for ourselves." Accordingly, his advice for preparing your own family doesn't mention guns or gold at all, but talks instead about working with your neighbors to help everybody store food, insulate their homes and feel more confident about the future. Surely much of the appeal of Hopkins's Transition movement is that it helps people and communities get ready for some very scary futures by doing things that are basically pretty fun: making new friends, learning new skills and trades and doing a bit of old-time local politicking. More hip, more cool

At the session set aside to introduce *The Post Carbon Reader* at the ASPO-USA conference in October, Lerch presented the book as an example of how the Post Carbon Institute is trying to appeal to a wider public who may not yet be familiar with peak oil and its impacts on the economy, the environment and our culture. Even the book's cover was "designed to reach out beyond the policy-wonk audience" and to appeal to young people especially. But such missionary work is a pretty tall order for a book of essays, no matter how accessible some of the chapters may be. Take young people, for example. In my experience as a college teacher, the first and last time that most young people encounter the collection-of-essays genre is in a classroom. So I can imagine those University of Chicago grinds giving over a half hour or 45 minutes to ruthlessly skim *The Post Carbon Reader* if some professor assigned it for discussion the next day. But it is more difficult for me to picture those same young people, some of whom must be as curious as they are ambitious, slowly poring over the Reader on a lazy Saturday afternoon with a croissant and a tall latte. What I can imagine smart young people reading would be a full-length book by one of *The Post Carbon Reader*'s contributors, say Bill McKibben or Wes Jackson. In that way, the Reader may be a gateway for new audiences to discover the pleasures of important writing on peak oil. Let's do hope enough teachers assign the Reader in class to make sure that students are exposed to its contributors. As far as the Post Carbon Institute's branding, this volume has done its duty to establish the group's credibility. And I'm sure many other readers will be proud to join me in graduating from Post Carbon University. Next, I wonder if the PCI might consider a future publication more on the side of accessibility. How about short pamphlets on some of the key issues covered in this volume and not covered much elsewhere, such as post-peak education or healthcare? The Reader has shown off the great minds of the PCI's impressive stable of fellows. Now, let's see their warm hearts. These creative folks could give us fiction, poetry, photography and art to stimulate

creative thinking throughout our society. Their genius could help release the genius inside us all. So, to the Post Carbon Institute, I say fire us up with some Berkeley passion. Seduce us with some Silicon Valley vision. Intoxicate us with the fragrance of a Sonoma Valley vineyard in June. Whatever it is, I'd love to see their next big effort feel less Chicago and more California. And that's coming from a true-blue Chicagoan. For now, The Post Carbon Reader is a must-read for anyone who cares about how peak oil and climate change affect us all. And it could be a helpful tool to introduce someone who needs to learn about these issues. Why not buy a copy as a gift for your favorite Congressional staffer, city councilperson or local newspaper editor this holiday season?

The Post Carbon Reader is a must for people who are interested in the future their children and grandchildren will face. I am only half way through the book and have learn't a lot about the economic and environmental problems that America can expect to face within the next few decades. I expect the rest of the world will not be exempt from these problems either. The book is split up into sections, each written by highly qualified members of the Post Carbon Institute. My only regret is that politicians will either be too busy or too set in their ways to take the books conclusion on board and act upon them. All in all a well researched book and very frightening. PS Richard Heinburg (one of the authors) will be visiting Australia next month to lecture on the topic of his book "The end of Growth"

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