

# Mui Wo's Brave New World

A Lantau man says a lack of oil will doom our way of life. He wants the village to be ready. **Annemarie Evans** reports

**T**here was a time a few hundred years ago when the world was regarded as flat. As sailors made for the mysterious horizon, they worried that their ships would fall off the edge of the world. There is still a Flat Earth Society today that insists the astronomers, Apollo astronauts and satellite photographs are all wrong.

Then there was Italian astronomer Galileo, who got into frightful trouble with the Vatican for defending the controversial theory that the Earth was going around the Sun and that the Sun – not us – was at the centre of the solar system.

In 1796, British physician Edward Jenner discovered that immunity to smallpox could be produced by inoculating a person with material from a cowpox lesion. This resulted in scaremongering cartoons in newspapers of people turning half bovine.

Pioneers with unpopular ideas always struggle at the outset. In April 2008, James Hansen, head of the Nasa Goddard Institute for Space Studies in New York, said that contrary to previous estimates and international targets, the world would change drastically unless over the next few – not 50 – years, we get carbon dioxide parts per million down to 350. The European Union target – which is regarded as stringent – is only 550 ppm.

In Mui Wo, on Lantau, a British teacher is concerned for the future of his two young daughters in an uncertain world. Donald Latter would like to see the 3,000-strong community become a “transition town”. It would be one where the population reduces its carbon emissions, produces its food locally and even creates its own currency. It would have the skills to withstand an energy shortage, which he believes could come in the next few years as a result of both global warming and “peak oil”.

His idea is at the conception stage, with about 15 to 20 supporters on Lantau and around Hong Kong.

“It’s important to keep ourselves educated about peak oil and global warming, so I’ve held a couple of evenings showing DVDs about those two issues,” says Mr Latter, who has lived in Hong Kong for the past six years and teaches at St Clare’s Girls’ School.

He is also organising workshops on a variety of environmental issues, and is setting up a small-scale initiative where people borrow books from one another, rather than buying them.

Oil production has already peaked, says Mr Latter and the human race is facing the next stage – in which there is still an oil supply, but it costs a fortune to drill.

“We’ve really got to reduce our reliance on oil. When people talk about oil, they think about transport. But oil is used for everything – plastics, pesticides, everything. Every day, virtually everything

you use, oil will play a role. I really don’t think that most people get how their lives will have to change for a life without oil.”

Mr Latter’s transition town concept goes back to Briton Rob Hopkins, an academic, who with students at a further-education college in Kinsale, Ireland, put together an “energy descent” action plan. It was adopted by the town and is now popular elsewhere. Mr Hopkins says that an oil shortage need not be a disaster for people, but we do need to adapt.

“One important thing is, as much as possible, to grow your food locally.”

“In Mui Wo, there used to be farming communities before we imported our fruit and vegetables from across the border and all around the world. We need to interview the older residents and find out how they grew things. Another reason why Mui Wo would make a possible transition town is that hundreds of people already use bicycles as their means of transport every day.”

Mr Hopkins and co-founder Ben Brangwyn have now adopted some of the concepts of Kinsale and taken them a step further in Mr Hopkins’ hometown of Totnes in Devon, which in 2005 became the world’s first transition town. There are now 50 officially recognised such towns and villages in Britain, with others sprouting in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere.

“We were recently asked if the transition town material on the web could be translated into Italian,” says Mr Brangwyn.

In the village of Martin, in Hampshire, England, there is no supermarket. Instead, the villagers have chickens and market gardens and each Saturday sell their produce.

A transition town works towards energy independence, through community gardens, business waste exchange – which seeks to match the waste of one industry with another industry that uses this waste – and even simply repairing old items rather than throwing them away.

“There was a time when in Saudi Arabia, you could stick a straw in the ground and it would gush oil,” says Mr Brangwyn. “Now in Alberta, it requires natural gas to heat the rock and huge amounts of water just to get the oil out. The cheap and abundant energy is drying up.”

Mr Latter cites Cuba as an example of what happens to a country that suddenly had to cope without oil.

“When the Soviet Union stopped supplying Cuba with its oil in the early 1990s, it could no longer do industrial agriculture. It really changed society” as many more people returned to the fields.

One of the problems at a national level, says Mr Brangwyn, is that many policies required to get countries down to 350 ppm are currently unpopular. “We need tradeable energy quotas in the UK. Energy rationing is a crucial national priority.”

Economically, countries would have to get accustomed to 5 per cent negative growth, says Mr Brangwyn. All three men



Donald Latter is preparing on Lantau for a world in which he thinks an energy shortage will force people to live drastically simpler, more localised lives. Photo: Jonathan Wong

say the world is at a stage where people will have to learn they can no longer be consumers in the same way as before. But that doesn’t have to be a negative thing.

Both Mr Hopkins and Mr Brangwyn argue that in a so-called globalised world, many people are not leading satisfying lives. They say fulfilment would come from an active lifestyle where people grow their own food and go back to basics in an active, vibrant community.

Recently, with the heavy rains on Lantau, the allotments where Mr Latter and friends, neighbours and students have been growing fruit and vegetables have become a quagmire.

“It’s very much at the early stages, but what we would like to do is get it to the point where it’s sustainable and we can sell what we don’t need ourselves,” he said.

The allotment, with its organic produce, is a pilot project. “There are methods where on your roof or on your balcony you could be growing 10 different types of vegetables by dividing the areas into squares,” he says. “I’m planning to bring my students over. Even in the classroom, they are amazed watching a plant grow from seed. What we need to do is relearn some of the skills that people had when there was less reliance on energy,” Mr Latter says. “We need to talk to the older people in villages, some of whom do still farm, but the majority don’t. We need to learn how they did grow things.”

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Donald Latter, a Hong Kong teacher

Having completed a master’s degree in environmental science, Mr Latter lived in Australia with his Australian wife, hoping to work in the environmental field. “Oh, there’s plenty of work,” he says. “As long as you’re happy to work for no money and be a volunteer.”

“I’m 50,” says Mr Brangwyn. “The life expectancy of men in Afghanistan is 47. I come from the most useless generation that has walked this planet. I can do programmes on a computer and work out pixels, but what we need to do is actively engage the universities for the ‘great reskilling’, having syllabuses that equip people with those skills.”

Mr Brangwyn is a local-currency team member in transition town Totnes. The former accountant works full-time for the project. Totnes, with the go-ahead of the Financial Services Authority, has created its own currency for Totnes – supporting local business and ensuring that money stays local. “I’m not sure that the Chinese restaurant is doing it yet,” Mr Brangwyn says. “I’ll go and talk to them.”

Two weeks ago, Mr Latter organised a workshop with a compost expert. Among his supporters are a Chinese neighbour who helps him grow the vegetables and a woman who runs an organic clothing business. “One thing I need to do is get more local Chinese residents involved.”

Mr Latter has his detractors. “It’s unbelievable. At a stage where you have all

this scientific evidence, I’m still arguing with people on e-mail who question whether global warming is even happening,” he says.

Some salient advice from Mr Brangwyn is to leave what he calls the “laggards”. “You can split people up into three categories. The laggards, the middle group of fence-sitters and what I call the early adopters who constitute 5 per cent.”

Mr Latter says he needs to build a group of early adopters who all think similarly.

“And there are so many areas to work in,” he says. “We need to form groups.”

The recent summit of the Group of Eight nations resulted in watered-down initiatives to reduce emissions by 2050, which Greenpeace classed as “just flower words”, the conservation group WWF called pathetic, and Oxfam International said would endanger the world’s poor.

“Most people are in denial,” says Mr Brangwyn, a co-founder of the Transition Network. “But I take comfort from an old fella I met. He said in 1939, when Hitler invaded Poland, most people in Britain went to the beach and didn’t pay any attention.”

“There were only 5 per cent of people who looked the problem squarely in the eye. And we have that 5 per cent of early adopters.”

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# Asylum seekers pray for extra time in Italy

A threat of deportation hangs over a football team of refugees from strife-torn nations, writes **Lorenzo Tondo**

**K**arim kicks a football in a rectangle of earth a few kilometres away from the highway on the edge of Rome. He comes from Ghazni, a city in Afghanistan that was destroyed by US firepower. He has no house and no job, and lives in a welcoming centre in Rome.

At this training session, he seems desperate to impress, stealing the ball in midfield, dribbling elegantly past an opponent and delivering a long pass to Mamadi, a 19-year-old from Guinea.

Like Karim, Mamadi has been unable to find a job and passes a significant part of his week waiting at police headquarters in Rome in the hope of obtaining a permit to stay. He centres the ball to his teammate Ismaila, who frees himself from the defence and slots the ball into the net. Ismaila comes from Togo, and the authorities have just rejected his first request for asylum.

From the rickety stands behind the bench, someone applauds Ismaila’s goal while the players congratulate each other. Ismaila, Karim and Mamadi play for Liberi Nantes, who this year will compete in the third division of Italy’s semi-professional lower league. That is where the similarity with others in the league ends, however.

Ismaila, Karim and Mamadi are not their real names, and Liberi Nantes is no

ordinary team. The 25-man squad is made up of players from the world’s trouble spots – Afghanistan, Eritrea, Guinea, Iraq, Nigeria, Sudan, Togo and the Democratic Republic of Congo – and all are refugees.

These players will never have their real names and pictures on trading cards because the authorities in their home countries believe they are dead – and if they knew the truth, their families would be in grave danger. And because their asylum claims are in doubt, they cannot be registered and get a contract. Most of them are recent arrivals, live in welcoming centres for refugees and are dependent on the welfare services that Rome provides.

The name Liberi Nantes comes from the 118th verse of Book 1 of *The Aeneid*, in which the exiled Trojans fleeing their burning city are shipwrecked, and only a few – “*rari nantes*” – are able to reach shore. The Trojans were refugees, too, and like the players of the Liberi Nantes, they crossed the Mediterranean in search of a place to start afresh. According to Greco-Roman mythology, Aeneas found that place and built Rome there.

Almost 2,700 years later in the same city, Ibrahim is the man to whom Liberi Nantes have entrusted the position of goalkeeper. He is an imposing 27-year-old Togolese and the team captain. Before he steps onto the field, he kisses a picture of his son on his mobile phone. He hasn’t seen his son for almost a year, since before he was sent to a military prison in Togo for five months. “The government didn’t like me,” he explains, “because I was part of an opposition party.”

Ibrahim worked as an engineer before being arrested for participating in a protest against President Faure Gnassingbe, elected in 2005 among suspicions of vote-rigging. The protests were crushed with



Liberi Nantes players go through their paces last week near Rome. Photo: Liana Miuccio

extreme violence and many who survived were arrested. “They massacred thousands of people and the newspapers didn’t talk about it,” says Ibrahim, who had no choice but to escape. Today, he shares a room with seven others in a welcoming centre. He spends his days in the waiting room of a lawyer’s office. His first request for asylum was rejected and he is now waiting for his appeal to be heard.

The law on refugees in Italy is complicated. The right of asylum was modified last year by two legislative decrees issued by the government of former prime minister Romano Prodi, in accordance with European Union directives. They introduced important improvements, including the suspension of expulsions during the appeal process. These improvements did not last long.

Under security laws approved on May 21 by the government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, refugees may be deported without the right of appeal. Last year, 13,509 requests for asylum were examined by seven territorial commissions in Italy. Of these only 1,408 were approved. About 30 per cent of asylum requests are approved on appeal, so Ibrahim’s situation is precarious.

Almost all of Ibrahim’s teammates are fleeing a dangerous past and facing an uncertain future. The centre-back, a Guinean, was tortured in prison before coming to Italy. The 25-year-old full-back, also from Guinea, spent four months in a military prison after participating in a union protest. Thousands of his fellow citizens gathered in a public square to protest against the president, General

Lansana Conte, for his lengthy mandate – he has been in power since 1984 – and false promises of democracy. Clashes between protesters and authorities left 90 people dead and 300 wounded.

“I would like to return to my family, but I can’t,” says the Guinean full-back. “When I’m not training, I spend my days searching for a job, I haven’t found one yet. I am grateful to Italy because it welcomed me and it’s as if it saved my life, even if it often happens that I sit on a bench and see that the other people get up to get away from me. In the Liberi Nantes, however, I found other guys that are in the same situation as me, with the same problems. This has helped me a lot.”

Ghedam is a 23-year-old midfielder who stands accused of desertion in his home country of Eritrea. He had just begun studying accountancy when the government sent him to military camp a few kilometres from Asmara. With the Ethiopian army at the doors of his country, there is not much room for study. The sole Eritrean political party – the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice – needs soldiers, and conscientious objectors are not tolerated. “I hate war and I didn’t want to be a soldier,” says Ghedam. “I took advantage of my time off and I escaped.”

The choice that Ghedam made cost him US\$1,200 – his life savings. On a dinghy packed with 40 passengers, he braved a trip over rough waters to get from Tripoli to Lampedusa – a small island off the south coast of Sicily. “I didn’t have any other choice,” he says when asked about the risks involved. “I would have died of hunger or thirst, or been killed in any other country.” The trip took 35 hours. Two Sudanese passengers died on the way.

As with the others, Ghedam’s first request for asylum was rejected and he is

waiting for his appeal to be heard. He cannot go home, but if he remains in Italy he must make it on his own. If he and the other refugees do not find regular jobs within a year, they risk being pushed out of assistance centres and sent home.

Karim dreams of one day scoring a goal in Serie A – Italy’s premier league. In 2005, the Taleban killed his family, and US forces destroyed his house. To escape, he spent five days travelling through the Persian mountains in a truck with 50 people and the inescapable odour of urine. He doesn’t talk much, but says he was an expert shoemaker in his home country.

Karim’s story is like the others’ – he lives in a welcoming centre, cannot find work, and says he would never consider going back to Afghanistan. “A puppet,” he says of President Hamid Karzai, “put in power by the Americans.” He is no fan of the Taleban either. “They are like the mafia here in Italy – they destroy our fields, kill people, and steal the little that we have.”

Karim, who wears the centre-forward’s No 9 shirt, has been inconsistent, but Liberi Nantes depends on his goals.

“We will continue forward,” says Gianluca Di Girolami, the mastermind behind Liberi Nantes Football Club. “They, too, should be given the right to play, the right to have fun. If we offer these people a warm meal and a place to sleep without giving them the possibility to have fun, we have only done half a job. We want to give their lives a little bit of normalcy.”

Training is over. Only Karim remains on the field, sitting at the edge of it, touching his sore ankle. Tomorrow morning, he will look for work yet again, and in the coming months the authorities will examine his appeal. Someone runs up to him and shows him his new kit. Who knows if he will be able to stay long enough to wear it?