



FREEWHEELER NEWS

Newsletter of the Morris Area Freewheelers Bicycle Club

September 12, 2009 Special Edition

Bicycling Today - The Eco/Environment Factor

By John Tetz

We are now in an era in which we're increasingly aware of excessive energy consumption, pollution, and environmental degradation. There are thousands of researchers looking at the air, soil, and water and seeing evidence of serious changes to our planet due to humans.

Individuals as well as researchers are seeing the undesirable changes that stem from human activity. For example, I have lived on a lake for 49 years, surrounded by a fair amount of land that could and did support wildlife. When I first moved here, there were many varieties of fish. Now we have only some bass and sun fish. In the evening when the lake became calm, the fish would feed on the surface each making splash rings. I used to see these rings appearing all over the lake – now this activity is essentially gone.

In the same lake, there were hundreds and hundreds of small frogs, their throats bloating outward as they sang their songs in the evening. The noise level was incredibly loud and wonderful. All are gone now. Where there used to be a dozen big bullfrogs croaking through the night, there are just a few. There were many turtles; painted, mud and snapping types. Turtles have a history of being hearty and long-lasting, but there are only a few left. The same is the case for snakes. Dragon flies used to flit about; but like the others only a few remain today.

Lake weeds have also stopped growing so vigorously which may seem to be an advantage, but this is indicating the lake is becoming more acidic – a serious problem. .

Song birds have also decreased in number. Years ago in an early summer morning around 5 am, one bird would wake up and make one chirp, then a second, and another, and another building into a cacophony of sound over a 15 minute period of time. Now there are just a few remaining song birds.

All this represents the Canary in the mine shaft providing a warning message to those aware enough to listen.

People living in apartments or on small development plots, or those who haven't been in one place for a long time, may not notice these local changes and therefore have no incentive to change their present life style choices. They may even doubt that humans are affecting the planet.

Researchers around the world, however, are seeing disturbing trends: the planet is changing faster than had been anticipated. Carbon Dioxide is being pumped into the air some ten thousand times faster than natural processes can remove it. Global warming signals have emerged from the noise of natural climate variability. The planet could be committed to a change on a scale which society won't be able to cope.

Continued Page 2

We humans are at a disadvantage. We are a big creature - 95% of all creatures are smaller than us. That means we require greater quantities of food and water; and generate more waste and convert more oxygen into carbon dioxide. And our effects go well beyond our basic body needs. In the decades after the Second World War the cultural emphasis shifted to 'super sizing': our homes are huge, we invent large automobiles, trucks, busses, airplanes, big buildings, and continue to have unchecked population growths.

High-consumption lifestyles may have been doable in the past, but given the current rate of world population growth, all of us simply need to use much less of the Earth's energy in our daily lives.

Here is a video of Paul MacCready: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fu-IhoOsjkU&feature=channel>
He is known for developing the first successful human powered aircraft (and many many other outstanding accomplishments). In this talk he shows a very important graph of human population and what this could possibly mean to the planet. Kind of scary.

There is no precedent for this. Never before has there been a period where the Earth's human population generated enough green house gas to be able to raise the temperature of the whole globe.

"Plastics" was the advice given to the protagonist in the film "The Graduate," that popular 1960's movie starring Dustin Hoffman. Today the words of advice are "Efficiency", "Reduced Eco-Footprint", and "Green." As we get more and more information on the need to change our ways, we must also change what we appreciate: Small is Beautiful, and Less is More.

The Bicycle - Eco-Friendly Transportation

There is much press about needing new Hi-Tech, environmentally friendly 'green' technologies. The bicycle is one such technology that we already have. Yet, because of the old Industrial Age world views, the bicycle has been pretty much ignored (as it has over the last 75 years).

The concept of using human power has become so foreign that has been eliminated from our community consciousness. In contrast, we have all kinds of 'labor saving' devices such as leaf blowers, snow blowers, riding lawn mowers – and some drive their cars to the gym to work out to stay in shape. The list could go on. As a consequence, our life style leads to obesity, high healthcare costs, and a long list of ailments that riding a bike could help reduce or even negate. As was stated back in the late 1800s, "Cycling was definitely recommended as a means of improving circulation, strengthening the lungs and building good muscle tone."

Bike riding was in my blood as a kid and continues today. I stopped riding after being drafted for the Korean War, finding a job, and starting a family. I resumed riding in the early 1980's after meeting fellow workers who taught me how to properly ride a 10-speed and it changed my life.

I ride almost every day, with short runs to do a variety of errands, such as stopping by the recycle center, library, hardware store, food markets, restaurants, and visiting friends. It's easy to do 10 miles on each run adding up to 3,000 miles a year. That adds up to 3,000 fewer miles and pollution from a car, and the money I save easily pays for the bike. Using my bike in this way does wonders for the health of my body, and in doing my part for the health of the Earth.

I also benefit from being out in the elements and experiencing the earth more fully – is a big part of why I love riding bicycles. The bike gives me the leg and aerobic conditioning. For the upper body I shovel snow, rake leaves, dig in the garden, use a scythe to cut tall grass, and cut fire wood with hand tools - eco-friendly habits that provide personal benefits while helping the Earth.

Bicycles - a Key to the New Eco-Friendly Transit Movement

I thought of that while riding my bicycle.
~ Albert Einstein

Sadly, bicycles are not used as local alternate transportation in most places in America; though they are in other parts of the world where walking and biking are the norm. Here, the word 'bicycle' for the lay person immediately brings to mind kids and toys. Seldom are bicycles thought of as viable local alternate transportation.

I see this 'bikes-kids-toys' sentiment a lot. It is indirectly promoted by cycling enthusiasts who view bicycling only as leisure or sport. This mind set blocks thinking about the possibility of eco-friendly transportation alternatives. We cyclists have the opportunity to help change this consciousness and raise awareness by setting examples, e.g. by being seen doing errands on a bike.

Another example of how bikes get ignored can be seen in period movies depicting the late 1880's and early 1900's. The movies are exact in all details of housing, clothing, food, life styles, neighborhoods, horses and wagons, but often only show one bike. At the time, there were many bikes in each town. Bikes were a primary mode of transit, but this isn't depicted in the films, reflecting a more industrial, high-consumption bias of our culture and setting an internal consciousness tone.

Present-day news papers and most media will have articles on ways to reduce energy consumption yet only mention the bicycle in a short sentence or two, if at all. The media is missing a great opportunity in producing in-depth educational articles to help raise awareness and promote the cycling as a multi-benefit, eco-friendly transit option. Back in the late 1890s, when bikes were important, the newspapers had full pages devoted to bicycling. Recently, I tried contacting the Daily Record editor and proposed essentially the article you are reading now. He flatly refused claiming my insistence on promoting bikes as alternate transportation was too narrow a view.

What the public predominantly sees now are road bikes stripped of any carrying capacity, reinforcing the perception that bikes are toys used only for sport or leisure. While I think it is great that road riders are getting exercise that improves their health which helps to reduce health care costs, but riding only in this way does little to help change the perception of bicycles as a viable means of local transportation.

The popular bicycling magazines mention bikes as alternate transportation, yet 98-percent of the articles are devoted to promoting performance. Magazine advertising also reflects this bias. Unfortunately, this message does little to help our environmental problems. It's hard to buck this popular tide.

With greater numbers of people riding bikes for local transportation, an effective lobby would exist. In my town of Roxbury, for example, there are 20,000 people. If only 1% were to ride, that would be 200 people. To me, seeing 200 people using bikes as alternative transportation would be thrilling, as compared to the very few I see now. Two hundred riders would be enough to lobby for bike lanes and get them. And if 10% of this town's population were riding, those 2,000 cyclists would have some real clout and a positive effect on the environment. Automobiles would not be free to dominate the roads as much as they do. Auto drivers would be more used to cyclists and cyclists' safety would improve, encouraging more to ride.

Continued Page 4

A town's resistance to bike lanes is essentially encouraging (i.e. forcing) the reliance on automobiles and oil-and-gas dependency, and contributes actively to the degradation of the environment. Politicians respond to pressure from organized citizens, or maintain the status quo. Waiting for politicians to move on this issue is a lost cause. Advocacy and action must come from the voters as it did successfully in West Windsor, NJ. There a citizens group banded together and formed the West Windsor Bicycle & Pedestrian Alliance that have commanded town budget money to fund Alliance prioritized bike and walk path projects.

How do you stand on this issue?

Please post your comments on my Alternative Transportation Vehicles Forum on www.mafw.org website. You have to login to post. Contact membership@mafaw.org if you need your login credentials reset.