



FREEWHEELER NEWS

Newsletter of the Morris Area Freewheelers Bicycle Club

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Learning from Bicycle Cultures

By John Tetz

*The bicycle is the most civilized conveyance
known to man. Other forms of transport grow
daily more nightmarish. Only the bicycle
remains pure in heart.*

~ Iris Murdoch

In most places in the United States, there is along list of reasons not to ride:

- ♦ No bike lane infrastructure
- ♦ Not enough time
- ♦ It requires too much effort
- ♦ Can't carry much on a bike
- ♦ Weather issues (too cold, too hot, too wet)
- ♦ Lack of bike racks

Driving everywhere is the norm, even the short distance to the mall.



In contrast, bikes are used for local transportation throughout Europe. When I was in Copenhagen a few years ago giving a talk during the Car Free Cities convention week, I stayed with a couple and their teenager a few miles outside of the city. They did not own a car. Instead, they had four bikes. I used one of their bikes to commute. Copenhagen has an exemplary community consciousness and therefore bike-lane system. The bike lanes were full with commuters each day. They claim that approximately 40% of the citizens use bikes for transport. One day it rained, and the same number were riding, all wearing their slickers. For those who lived further out of the cities, the train was equipped with a bicycle symbol painted on the car that the bike commuters use.



Other bike trips throughout Belgium and Holland showed similar trends. I saw mothers doing their shopping with a small child on a top tube seat, their little hands holding on to the handlebars (can you imagine the imprinting these children are getting). I saw many grandmothers proudly doing their errands by bike. The bike lane systems were not as good in other parts of Europe, such as Switzerland or England, but there still were many bikes used as transportation.



In cultures where bikes are used as transit options, they're equipped with fenders, luggage rack, panniers, lights, and fat tires at low pressure to smooth out the rough surfaces like cobblestones. On rare occasions, there would be a road bike passing by, but far more bikes were used for transit than as toys.

Here is a URL of photos of Amsterdam bike riders: http://www.ski-epic.com/amsterdam_bicycles/

Here is a Dutch promotional on their bike system. We have a loooooong way to go.
<http://hembrow.eu/cycling/photos.html>

Here is one on Copenhagen: <http://www.copenhagenize.com/>

Here is Oregon's bike system:
<http://www.oregon.gov/ODOT/HWY/BIKEPED/>

Oregon actually spends the 3% of transportation money the government gives each state for pedestrian and bike systems.

In cultures where bikes are used for local transportation, performance riding is not the issue. Bikes are selected for their effectiveness in getting around, and the type of vehicles used shows that mind set.

The only disappointment from these European trips is landing in Newark airport and immediately noticing how overweight we Americans are in contrast to the people in Europe. When taking the train home, I didn't see a single bicycle rider in any of the towns the train passed through.

The Bicycle as a Teacher

The use of a bicycle for local transportation can not only reduce energy consumption, but it can teach us to become more aware of energy in general. It starts, of course, by helping us to become aware of our own energy capacity - we notice how sensitive we are to any increase in power demand such as climbing even a slight grade vs. going down a slight grade.

Understanding how much energy it takes to move ourselves and our bicycles, makes us aware of the energy required to propel 3,000 pound cars often carrying only a single person to do local errands. And you say to yourself, 'This does not make sense in today's world'. Mall parking lots fill with tons of the Earth's resources in the form of big cars. A bike weighs 30 pounds or less and it carries one person .

Riding at night I see many rooms in homes lit up. And many have continuously operated outdoor lighting. I used to sit by my lake and see the Milky Way, the view of which is now obliterated with the increase in light pollution. Did you ever see the satellite night photos of the US and wonder about the energy consumption required to generate all that light? They say the lightning bugs need darkness for their signaling to work. I'm lucky that where I live, there are no street lights and the neighbors generally have little or no outdoor lighting. So I do have decent lightning bug activities.

Growing up in the 1930s depression era, the idea of leaving a light burning was inconceivable. It's easy for me to be conscious of excess energy use. There is something to be learned from living in scarce times. We have to change our thinking from 'It's what the individual can afford' to 'It's what the Earth can afford.'

"While people have begun to accept ecological limits on maximum per capita energy use as a condition for physical survival, they do not yet think about the use of minimal feasible power as a foundation of any of various social orders that would be both modern and desirable" - Ivan Illich on the Energy Crisis
(<http://www.hubbertpeak.com/illich/>)

Can bikes help lead us into a sense of having both a modern and a desirable way of life? I think so.

Using bike to learn about your own energy expenditure and develop a sensitivity towards other energies, can give us a much needed grounding. This point of view could help in changing our fundamental consciousness about living on this finite Earth. Science is pointing to the problems; the bike is in the correct direction of change.

I know there is a lot to learn in order to successfully use a bike as local transportation and the road conditions out there are not very conducive to riding bikes, but I am looking for pioneering-spirited people to get out there and set examples, and to encourage others to ride. Yes, you too can be a pioneer in the 21st century.

The Morris Area Freewheelers Club has a large, active and potentially influential membership. If its members were to adopt usage of a bike for local transportation, it would have an important effect on encouraging others to ride, eventually leading to allocated space for cycle traffic, greater cycling safety, more people adopting this eco-friendly transit option, an increased sense of community, and connection to the planet.

Our present day bicycle can become as important as it was in the 1890s.

Please communicate with me via the **Alternative Transportation Vehicles** Forum accessible after you login on www.mafw.org. Contact membership@mafw.org if you have trouble with your login credentials.

Related web sites:

<http://www.ibike.org/encouragement/>