

Ride a Bike and Save the World

By: David Suzuki with Faisal Moola

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"Every time I see an adult on a bicycle, I no longer despair for the future of the human race." - H.G. Wells

Science has had a tremendous impact on the planet in an incredibly short time. In just the past few hundred of our 150,000 years on Earth, we have invented everything from steam engines, cars, and airplanes to sophisticated weapons and supercomputers. And the pace at which we keep inventing more complex and fascinating machines is increasing. Some of our inventions have been a great boon, some have been harmful, and some, such as cars, have turned out to be a mixed blessing.

But one invention is so efficient, beneficial, and simple that it may be the best thing we've ever made. People across the land will celebrate that invention as we ride into June, Bike Month. The "modern" version of the bicycle with pedals and cranks was invented by French carriage-maker [Ernest Michaux](#) in 1861. It's come a long way since then, but whether it's a high-tech racing bike or a one-gear street cruiser, the bike is still a marvel of ingenuity. In fact, it may well be the most efficient form of transportation yet invented.

The best part of the bike is that you, the rider, are the engine. The fuel is what you eat and drink. Putting the human engine together with the gears, wheels, and frame of a bike gives you a mode of transportation that uses less energy even than walking. As for our most popular method of getting around, the automobile, there's no comparison. According to the [WorldWatch Institute](#), a bicycle needs 35 calories per passenger mile, while a car uses 1,860. Buses and trains are somewhere in between.

During Bike Month, it's worth thinking about the potential this amazing invention offers. With oil prices climbing and environmental damage from car emissions increasing, bikes are becoming a more attractive form of urban transportation every day. Cleaner air, reduced congestion, safer streets, and lower noise levels are just a few of the benefits. As more people get out of their cars and onto their bikes, they'll also become fitter, leading to lower health-care spending. The money that could be saved nationally on things like health care - not to mention the infrastructure required to keep so many cars on the road - reaches into the billions, but the money an individual can save on fuel, insurance, and maintenance costs alone is also substantial. And because biking is a lot of fun, it will probably increase what the people of Bhutan call "gross national happiness"!

But we still have a ways to go. Canadians and Americans use bikes for fewer than one in a hundred trips - although in Vancouver where I live, it's a bit higher, at about 2.3 per cent. Compare that to the 20 to 35 per cent of trips taken by bike in the European Union and 50 per cent in China. (Unfortunately, the trend is reversing in China as the country embraces car

culture.)

Shifting from car dependence will take action at the individual level, with more people simply deciding to get on their bikes, but governments must also do more to make it easier for people to ride bikes. And they can. In just three years, from 1998 to 2001, Mayor Enrique Peñalosa of [Bogotá](#), Colombia, turned his city of 6.5 million from a gridlocked parking lot into a city where public spaces live up to their name. He did this by restricting car use, increasing gas taxes, and building hundreds of kilometres of bike and pedestrian paths, as well as investing in buses.

Making our streets safer for cyclists by giving them space to ride is an essential first step. The investment required is far less than that required for infrastructure for cars. Tax breaks for cyclists also help. Last year in Ontario, Premier Dalton McGuinty removed the provincial sales tax on bike helmets and bikes costing less than \$1,000. Bikes are also exempt from PST in B.C., and the province's \$100 carbon-tax rebate could be put toward buying a bike or tuning up your old bike.

Employers can also help out by offering secure bike parking and showers for those who work up a sweat on the way to work.

Of course, cycling isn't a panacea. In parts of Canada, the weather isn't always conducive to cycling. And not everyone has the strength to ride up the hills in some of our cities. But if more of us choose bikes whenever possible, using public transport or at least energy-efficient vehicles when we can't ride, we'd all be much better off.

So, get on your bike in June, and maybe you'll like it enough to make it your preferred method of transportation year-round.

Take David Suzuki's Nature Challenge and learn more at www.davidsuzuki.org.