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WORLD NAKED BIKE RIDE | INTERVIEW: J. HARRY WRAY
TOWARDS CARFREE CITIES CONFERENCE VIII



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In Europe, and the UK especially, drivers are slowing down. British bus and train drivers are being re-trained to drive more smoothly, and efficiently; EasyJet and BMI – the first of several airlines – are reducing flying speeds on some routes by 2%, while the journey times of cross-channel ferries will be increased – both measures implemented to reduce fuel consumption. In America, public transport use has risen dramatically, and as J. Harry Wray mentions in his interview on page 26, “the car is in the decline.” Bicycle sales are sky-rocketing, while the automobile industry has suffered one of the most financially crippling years on record: Ford recorded a quarterly loss of US\$8.7 billion, while GM will close four Hummer factories, resulting in decisions to switch production from gas-guzzlers to more efficient models.

All fantastic news, but are we actually witnessing a minor revolution in the public’s attitude towards transportation and the environment?

“Every time we lift our feet off the accelerator, we are improving GDP and employment,” stated Miguel Sebastián, Spain’s minister for industry, after the Spanish government proposed a plan to cut the speed limit on dual carriageways to 80 km/h as part of a bid to save €4.14 billion on oil imports. Whether the plans succeed is yet to be seen, but Sebastián encapsulates the thought behind the growing trend that we’ve seen over the last three months: slow down, use less oil, and you’ll save money.

It’s undoubtedly sound advice, but is it being given for the wrong reasons? Any environmental benefit seems to be merely a by-product of the economic equation. Are we simply witnessing a global cost cutting exercise? With relation to the automobile, Roger Bysouth asks on page 22, “is this just car culture adapting to survive?” It’s

maybe too soon to tell, but one certainty is that these are the first tentative steps of an inevitable post-peak-oil behavioural shift; a shift currently led by the public’s wallets, if not their hearts.

However, as successfully demonstrated by Lund Municipality on page 10, behavioural changes are often followed by attitude changes. So, maybe we should be asking what attitude changes could follow this behavioural shift, and where they could lead. Could we see a return to the unsustainable past? Could car culture simply evolve? It’s a possibility: crude oil excreting bacteria, bio-diesel from algae, and the British International Motor Show’s “Green Village” centrepiece – filled with electric cars and the new Lotus Eco Elise (with hemp interior) – offer convincing evidence. After all, some people are deeply entrenched in car culture. Or, could it lead to a sustainable future, with public attitudes towards the environment changing for the better?

Anything’s possible, and whatever the reason may be for this current change in behaviour, it’s clear that now is the time to ensure that these changes continue to develop in a sustainable direction, and to do so people must develop the right attitude towards transportation and the environment. So, it’s never been more necessary to provide an example of the trend’s logical conclusion; something this year’s Towards Carfree Cities Conference in Portland (page 16) attempts. It’s time to be more active than ever: to provide the philosophy, thought and economic structures, frameworks and impetus to stop unsustainable attitudes simply adapting and to help them develop sustainably, to ensure that we progress towards a sustainable future. Which also, thankfully, means there’s never been a better time to get (naked?) on your bike...

Sam Fleet

Editorial Collective:

Chris Coleman, Sam Fleet,
Theo Haris

Other World Carfree Network Staff:

Tanja Eskola, Justin Hyatt

Graphic Design: Başak Çiğdem Çevrim and Sam Fleet

Contributors:

Syed Saiful Alam, Andrew Bedno, Elly Blue, Nes Brierley, Roger Bysouth, Brian Carson, Başak Çiğdem Çevrim, Philippe Colomb, Jane Fleet, Ziaur Rahman Litu, Lund Municipality, Jonathan Maus, Luis Patricio, Maruf Rahman, Conrad Schmidt, Jesse Schust, Anna Semlyen, Dan Sharpe, Andy Singer, Sara Stout, Streets are for People!, Pete Taylor, Titom, J. Harry Wray,

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Education and Culture DG

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10

Lund: City of [Transportation] Ideas

A ride through Sweden's transportation paradise.



12

Bare as You Dare!

An in-depth look into the World Naked Bike Ride. Including an interview with the 'founder' Conrad Schmidt (pictured).



16

Towards Carfree Cities VIII

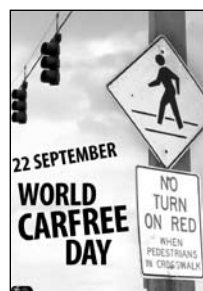
The winners of the Postcard Art Show and a behind the scenes account of the conference.



23

Interview: Brian Carson

The King of Crash talks about his life, cars and career.



Regulars

4 Letters; Contributors

5 Announcements

6 Car Cult Review

8 Action!

15 Member Group Profile: WBB Trust

24 Studies and Reports; World News

25 Cutting Your Car-Use: Leisure Travel

26 Book Club; Interview with J. H. Wray

28 Resources

Features

10 Lund: City of [Transportation] Ideas

12 Bare as You Dare!

14 Interview: Conrad Schmidt

16 Towards Carfree Cities VIII

-Postcard Art Show

18 Towards Carfree Cities VIII

-Behind the Scenes

20 The Cyclists' Touring Club

21 Getting Covered for Free: Media Tips

22 A Postcard from Manchester

23 Interview: Brian Carson

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Bare as You Dare!

World Naked Bike Ride: A cheerful celebration that would make Lady Godiva proud... By Theo Haris

What began as a restless bike-ride formed of strange 'hippies' has evolved into an international movement that has swept over the world – and its momentum is constantly growing. People of both sexes and all (adult) ages “bare as they dare” to protest against car culture and oil dependency, promote human-powered transport and display in its full glory the uniqueness and fragility of the human body. The result is a joyous fiesta with a very strong message that, although quite controversial, surely catches the eyes of passers-by.

History of the Movement

As Conrad Schmidt, ‘founder’ of the World Naked Bike Ride (WNBR), shares in our interview, people have been riding naked ever since the bicycle was invented. The first naked demonstration, however, precedes the bicycle, when Lady Godiva rode naked on her horse across 10th century Coventry to protest against oppressive taxation (as the legend goes). Andrew Bedno, organiser of the Chicago ride, explains that it is this principle of “unabashedly using nudity to attract attention” for the cause that forms the backbone of every naked bike ride. A technique that “especially years ago, when people were ignoring the message, was brilliant.”

When brave naked cyclists who wanted to demonstrate in such a way started appearing *impromptu* at critical masses around the world, they were a minority and a joyous attraction. But soon these same people started

to grow in number and decided to get serious. The first naked bike rides took place in Canada and Spain in 2001, organised by the groups Artists for Peace, and Manifestación Ciclonudista respectively. Then, in 2003 the idea was conceived to have a concurrent international bike ride, and in June 2004 the first international naked bike ride took place. Ever since, the movement has spread and can quite confidently claim the title of World Naked Bike Ride: in just five years it has touched 70 cities and 16 countries around the world.

Why Naked?

The main – and obvious – message that the riders wish to convey is freedom from oil dependency and car culture. Added to that is a protest against the hijacking of the human body that has been sneakily conducted mostly by the entertainment industry. As Jesse Schust, organiser of the London ride and co-ordinator of UK rides for years, explains, “it’s time to resist the sexualisation and commodification of our bodies and lives; this is part of the message of the ride.” The ride indeed wishes to make a strong statement that each human body is unique and beautiful and that the “mass production” of identical bodies is just another aspect of loss of personal identity. Philippe Colomb, organiser of the Paris ride, discusses how “the car culture tries to make us behave like machines and forget what we are: living beings.” The ride wishes to act as a reminder of what is essentially human: freedom, respect, solidarity – and nudity. As Schust says, “one of

our hopes is that participants in the ride will learn to separate sex from nudity. Nudity can be harmless, fun and social.”

There has been considerable criticism concerning the choice to have a naked ride, not only from the ‘usual suspects’ (i.e. conservative and puritan parts of society), but also by cycling advocates who state that the goal of promoting human-powered transport falters behind the focus on nudity. However, there are many other convincing reasons why the organisers consciously chose to use nudity as a weapon. Colomb underlined the importance of showing the vulnerability of the human body while on the road. Riding naked also shows a commitment to the political message of the ride. Another angle is to challenge the established ideas and taboos of our society – and isn’t human-powered transport, along with nudity, a strong taboo? As Colomb puts it, “why are raw living bodies such a big deal since death machines [cars] everywhere are not?”

But mostly, the idea is to create a happy and merry celebration that will carry people along its flow. According to Schust, “the public appreciates the humour and joy that the ride brings. Everyone seems to smile when we go past, and they take notice of our protest messages.” Bedno agrees, “the bottom line is that when we pass throngs of onlookers, waving joyfully with free spirits and little shame, shouting things like ‘come bike with us’, I can tell by the faces (and stories I’ve heard later first hand) that many people will start riding more the next day; even people

who hadn't thought about riding their dusty bike for years. So the goal is met."

The Challenges of Organising a Ride

According to Conrad Schmidt, organising a naked bike ride is as easy as spreading the word about time and location. Although fundamentally that is the essence, creating a successful ride requires more work. Andrew Bedno shared some of the "tricks" that made this year's Chicago ride the largest ever worldwide, with 1,700 participants. Bedno considers "a working critical mass to be a prerequisite to starting a successful WNBR," while teamwork and planning that centres around promoting the event is of vital importance. One must take into consideration things like planning the route, finding enthusiastic volunteers to help facilitate the ride and start work on making the event known. Schust agrees, sharing that the London ride has become so successful (attracting about 1,000 individuals yearly) due to three factors: it is "more fun than a standard protest event, carefully planned through five collective meetings annually, and it is legal, with the police accepting full nudity and providing traffic control."

Indeed, contact with the police is a critical aspect of organising a ride. While in many cases the police display (as usual) little sense of humour, it is important, as Bedno states, "to put considerable time and labour into earning tacit police non-interference," for instance through the help of volunteer lawyers. Paris, among other cities, has faced considerable difficulties with the police, which did not want to allow a naked ride. Colomb describes that a sort of compromise has to be reached, by "agreeing to have the ride and not to call for nudity, every rider doing what he or she wants at his or her own risk". As in many cases around the world, some people were arrested but released soon after with no charges.

Things like this indicate that the ride organisers have to be flexible and adjust accordingly to achieve the maximum result of getting the message across, avoiding unnecessary conflicts that deviate from the cause at hand. As Bedno puts it, "police were hard on us in the first years, then we worked with them; communication was impossible once the ride got big, then we added radios; cost was a problem, then we found donors,



Cheering up the London streets © Rod Currie

and so forth. Each year is an endless cycle of observing, taking feedback and adjusting." But perhaps the secret behind a successful ride is, in the words of Schust, "to ensure that all the riders are happy with the event."

Impact of the Ride

Since the WNBR is international in scale but affects localities much more, it is quite difficult to pinpoint the impact the event has had. In many places, it has simply led to more people riding bicycles – and that is quite an achievement! In others, it has made people look at cycling with different eyes, while in almost all of the cases it has created a day of fun and laughter. It certainly must be viewed as part of a general movement that advocates human-powered transport. Talking about Chicago, Bedno mentions how the city "was already gently on a gradual path to improved bike support, but the pace and quality of change has accelerated due to a number of bike advocacy groups locally, WNBR included. So our influence must at least help tip the scales a bit."

Moreover, the WNBR is a great example of a diffused movement with no hierarchies and a loose structure that is enabled by communication mostly through the Internet and a great wiki page. In fact, the success of each ride hinges on this viral campaigning which activists are so good at. Colomb explains the importance of creating "a good buzz weeks before the ride" so as to spread

the message and ensure its success. Among the things the Paris ride utilised were fliers on bikes, stickers on city signs, a good web site <www.cyclonudiste.fr>, a MySpace page, a Facebook profile etc. Such outreach facilitates a flowing contact with the media, which is one of the greatest aims of the ride, while creating favourable conditions for a continuous momentum of similar messages to be spread.

As mentioned in many other pages of this magazine, things have started to change and the forces that guide this shift are much greater than a ride, however big in scale and scope. The WNBR may perhaps be foremost an indicator, showing a different reaction people have to cycling (and nudity). In the words of Bedno, "five years ago we were stupid hippies: 'get lost, I'm gonna go buy an SUV'. Now we're a truism: a heralding party celebrating the end of the oil era."

For more information: www.worldnakedbikeride.org

Jesse Schust shared this story of what a WNBR can achieve:

"About a year after the 2005 ride, I met someone who I'll call Marc. Marc was in central London one day and unexpectedly was cornered by two people who demanded his mobile phone (and pulled out a knife). The phone wasn't very valuable, but it had lots of important contact details for friends. Marc was about to hand over his phone when the bike ride came by. The muggers were completely distracted and Marc knocked the knife out of the mugger's hand and ran off (at which point the muggers fled too). In a sense, the bike ride's presence managed to prevent a crime in central London. Perhaps we should replace the CCTV network with a daily schedule of naked bike rides?"



The Paris ride faced considerable problems with the police © Manuel Djamdjian manudjam@wanadoo.fr



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