

The Oil Drum: Campfire

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

Will the post-oil future be bicycle-free?

Posted by [Gail the Actuary](#) on June 19, 2010 - 6:37pm in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

Topic: [Environment/Sustainability](#)

Tags: [bicycle](#), [kurt cobb](#), [paved roads](#) [[list all tags](#)]

This is guest post by Kurt Cobb.

U. S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood may soon be nominated for heresy-of-the-year award for [an impromptu speech](#) at the [2010 National Bike Summit](#) in March. In that speech he said federal transportation policy will no longer favor automobiles over bicyclists and walkers.

As anyone who regularly rides a bicycle knows, this change is big precisely because automobiles and bicycles share much of the same infrastructure. But this very fact may bode ill for the bicycle in a post-oil future.

This distressing line of thought occurred to me recently as I was finishing James Howard Kunstler's beautifully written post-oil novel, [A World Made by Hand](#). I spotted not a single bicycle in its 317 pages. Why? Because in the novel the roads upon which one might ride are crumbling beyond passable. These roads are navigable on foot or by horse, but not particularly by anything on wheels.

But, wait, you may say, bicycles don't need good roads! We'll use trail bikes instead. All well and good. Still, where will the rubber for the tires come from? What we use now is synthetic rubber made from oil. Perhaps we'll get latex from such places as Brazil and Malaysia, that is, unless world trade has broken down. And, the way in which bicycles are made today, we'll need aluminum smelting operations for all the aluminum parts, even if only for repairs.

As simple as a bicycle is compared to a car, there is much that ties it to the energy-intensive, global logistics chain. No doubt we could make bicycle frames out of something other than aluminum. But again, we must ultimately come back to the question of right-of-way. If we assume that there will not be sufficient resources to run a nationwide fleet of private automobiles and therefore neither the political will nor the financial capability to pay for the upkeep of our road system, then we must also assume that the bicycle as a widespread form of transportation will not be practical. Some locales may maintain a few bike trails. But it is hard to see highways being maintained just so bicycles can ride on them.

Let's go back a bit in history to understand why. Bicycles came of age in the latter half of the 19th century. As such they were manufactured on the industrial model. Bicycle owners became a potent force for the paving of roads upon which they could then ride. Ironically, the industrial methods for the manufacture of bicycles and the paved roads which bicycle owners championed became the basis for mass-produced automobiles--automobiles which ultimately usurped the roads from bicycles.

Now, my apprehension about the future of the bicycle posits that industrial society has sunk into

a pretty sorry state and that no forms of motorized land transport for which it is worth maintaining roads survive. But even if we maintain main roads for, say, intercity buses, that would still leave all the side roads--roads ideal for bicycle riding--without maintenance.

I'm ashamed to say that until reading Kunstler's novel it had never occurred to me just how dependent my bicycle is on the automotive infrastructure. Could it be true that the bicycle's viability is linked to that of the automobile? Having said all this, I'm hoping someone will talk me down and explain how we might be able to have a future filled with bicycling no matter what the fate of the automobile.

Links to a few related posts:

[Peak asphalt: the return of gravel roads](#) - Ugo Bardi, April 2010

[Cycle-touring: a vision of post-peak holidays?](#) - Guest post by Robin Lovelace, April 2010

[Extreme Human-Powered Delivery](#) Joules Burn, May 2010

[How Big is Your Bicycle?](#) - Phil Hart, December 2007

Questions

1. Why do roads get so little discussion in planning for the future?
2. Can you see a way to make a version of bicycles work with a version of roads, long term?
3. What do people do in lesser developed countries do now with respect to bicycles and roads?
4. What role do you expect bicycles to play long-term?



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 United States License](#).