

“CAR CULTURE WILL NEVER BE SUSTAINABLE, SO SHUT-UP ALREADY”

by KYLE BOGGS

**I ALMOST DIED ON MARCH 22, 2007, JUST AFTER 8PM.**

It had been raining all day and the needed precipitation smelled good. Driving down I-17, I had just passed Cherry Rd., the one that goes to Prescott, and it started coming down really hard. Though I was already running a little late, I decided to slow down a little (a little...from 78 to 65). I was listening to the Fatal Flying Guilloteens and thinking about sustainability, which says more about my social life than I want it to.

The negative affects of our way of life have been building significantly in recent years. I remember hearing about global warming when I was a kid, but it has only recently been regarded as a legitimate term to describe our current situation. The urgency of our environmental dilemma is finally becoming a mainstream concern. **Environmentalists are even getting some press!**

With sustainability on my mind and, even while driving 65 miles an hour through the rain, I came to the conclusion that the wheels, I'm afraid, are not turning fast enough on this issue. Most people remain stuck in that fantastic dream-world that separates us from reality; one that has people believing that technology will save us, that somewhere, in some laboratory, there are genius scientists working 'round the clock, figuring out ways to make everything we own and consume sustainable. **Everything will be fine with a tall glass of technology, have some!**

I was in the fast lane, which I shouldn't have been, but my visibility was less than ideal so I figured the best thing I could do is stay where I was. My green tea was still hot even though I was halfway to Phoenix. I took a sip and, briefly peering over the rim of my plastic travel mug, I saw the bridge up ahead. There are small bridges all over 17; they are built over washes mostly. There were large headlights changing lanes behind me, going around me.

**The trouble is, we don't know how to live sustainably because our civilization has never been sustainable.** As our culture has metastasized across the globe, it has destroyed, in whole or in part, everything in its path. We've never had to live sustainably on the planet because, in truth, we don't really live here. Instead we live in pop culture, and use it as

a lens to experience the world; we live in cities and atop thick, seemingly indispensable, layers of concrete. We identify with products and fictional characters on television. We don't have any relationship with the land, our food, or our nonhuman neighbors. **We have forgotten that the land is primary.**

Both literally and figuratively, we separate ourselves from the real world. In truth, sustainability is an easy concept and the fact we still don't "get it," even with all the apocalyptic challenges we face, means this separation is more palpable today than ever before.

Instead of asking, "how can we continue living the way we do in a sustainable way," **we should be thoughtfully considering what sustainability really means, and asking, "What aspects of our way of life can ever be sustainable?" "What needs to go, and what can stay?"** To truly believe our current way of life can ever be sustainable is delusional, irresponsible and, frankly, dangerous.

I was halfway over the bridge when the semi blew past me, going 85...no, 95, no, 195 miles an hour. I could literally hear and feel the water rush beneath the car. The back end of my Honda wiggled very slightly, as if I were parked and someone tied their shoe with their foot on my back bumper. The back end of the semi was still next to me; to my left was the guardrail and whatever might lurk beneath that. Immediately the fish tailing got worse. I had no idea how big the wash was, how long the drop would have been. The end of the bridge was drawing closer and I knew I was going to crash.

I remember thinking how lame it would be to die in a car, to be jumbled in that category of statistics used to scare drunk drivers and teenagers with driver's permits. I didn't want to die in a car, but I knew the crash was going to be bad. I was totally out of control and I couldn't see anything.

Hydroplaning sounds like the ocean. I used to have an alarm clock with nature sounds. One of the options was "ocean;" when the alarm went off, the nature sounds get progressively louder and, after a few minutes, it sounds like a tidal wave or a tsunami. That's what it sounded like, only faster, and louder. I closed my eyes, but I knew the car was side-

ways, which meant I was past the bridge. I put my head down and gripped the steering wheel as hard as I could, thinking of bloody head injuries. I had no idea what was coming; I just waited for the impact.

It came from behind, hard. Music off. The car kept spinning, ricocheting off the side of the mountain, rocks churning beneath me. There was a less severe impact on the front and that's where the car stopped.

I opened my eyes and saw the smoke, the mountain. I looked down at myself, looking as much with my hands as with my eyes. I was totally and completely fine. I have no idea why, but nothing was wrong with me whatsoever. The car was totaled. I had eight payments left.

Let me break down our dream world: have you ever accidentally turned your alarm clock off in the morning and, while dosing back to sleep, you imagine yourself going through your morning routine ... You make coffee, brush your teeth, get dressed, and suddenly wake up and realize you're late and haven't accomplished anything? Our culture is in that dream-world: we are productive, we solve problems, we're improving our future. **All the while, we're skidding at incalculable speeds waiting for something to shake us awake before the impact.**

We will then realize that everything we thought we were doing to address the problems we face has amounted to nothing and it will be too late. (I can see it now, "But I followed everything on Al Gore's list at the end of *An Inconvenient Truth!*")

During the last several years, there has been a lot of hullabaloo (I've been dying to use that word) about the need to make our automobiles more sustainable. Many of the new hybrids and the like are marketed as "green" vehicles and I have a big problem with this.

**The term "green" is a general claim implying the product or packaging has some kind of environmental benefit or that it causes no harm to the environment.** There is currently no standard definition for the term "green," and the way in which it is used is manipulative at best. It is, in actuality, a form of "greenwashing," which is "disinformation disseminated by an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible public image or product."



In short, industry knows people are beginning to wake up and realize our culture is destroying the planet. For far too long, people have bought into the idea that the only political power the public can wield is through their spending habits. So industry assuages our guilt by having us believe the crap we continue to buy is actually good for the environment.

Terms like "green," "eco-friendly," "organic," and "sustainable" are being used to greenwash the public into believing our culture is turning around and putting the needs of the natural world first. **This isn't a conspiracy theory; it's symptomatic of a larger institutional problem.** If nothing else, these terms are simply good marketing — a rhetorical response to public interest. If it suddenly became fashionable to wear lightening bug guts on your face, people would be out on the street sellin' viles of mass-produced glowing bug guts and everyone would be buyin'; there would be lightening bug cartoons on all the stuff we buy.

My point is the culture isn't going to care how ridiculous or meaningless the fad is as long as it can be sold. If the only power we have is through what we choose to consume, the needs of the economic system remain first and that is exactly backwards and should not be confused as a move towards sustainability.

It's increasingly embarrassing to have to say this, but **automobiles are not and can never be made sustainable.** "Green" vehicles that still have some carbon output should not be considered green. We still have a long way to go. Sure a Prius isn't causing as much damage to the environment as a Hummer, but that doesn't make it "good for the environment." It's like if a guy was kicking a dog to death and another guy is kicking and punching a dog to death. The dog ends up dead in both cases, it's just that one method simply slows this process down, slightly.

The biggest question in sustainable discourse right now is, "how are we going to run our cars?" **As each gasoline-replacement is examined to be inadequate, the question of alternative fuels will be seen as the distraction it is; a distraction that sidesteps the inherently unsustainable nature of the automobiles themselves.** Forget the fuel question and consider plastics, tires, concrete, production, maintenance, disposal, and even roadkill. Think of all

the details and necessary for all these systems to function (roadkill, of course, isn't a system). There is nothing sustainable about car culture **(and frankly, I'd rather eat corn than burn it in my gas tank).**

**TOTAL LIFE POLLUTION**

In the mid-1990s, researchers at the Environment and Forecasting Institute in Heidelberg, Germany, calculated the total pollution output of an average German family car (about the size of a Ford Escort) in each stage of its life. Typically, when we're talking about emissions, we're talking about the middle-stage of the automobile's life. We don't normally think about the energy and pollution necessary for the car's production and disposal. They concluded that before the vehicle even left the plant, the car-to-be had produced 29 tons of waste and 1,207 million cubic yards of polluted air. During it's life on the road (85k miles) it pumped another 1,330 million cubic yards of polluted air into the atmosphere and disseminated 40 pounds of worn bits of road surface, tire, and brake debris on the highway. Disposal, the last step in the cars life, produced 133 million cubic yards of pollution. If we're talking percentages, 33% of the cars total pollution output is released during production, 60% during its stint on the road, and 7% during its disposal. It's important also to note automobiles in America are much bigger and the US doesn't have the kind of sophisticated recycling facilities for automobile disposal that Germany does. So per capita, our numbers would be much worse.

**TIRES**

**Tires contain an average of 2 1/2 gallons of oil each.** That's why they burn so well. When they burn, as they often do when piled by the millions, they foul the air for hundreds of miles, and pollute the water with zinc and heavy metals. After the fire, lead and cadmium remain on the ground, seeping into the soil when it rains. Trashed at a rate of roughly one per vehicle each year (in the mid-90s, when this information was collected — no doubt it is more than this now), tires actually pollute before they're junked. Spinning on asphalt, each tire loses a pound of rubber every year and the small grains rise to the sky, filtering into our lungs and waterways.

**CONCRETE**

Slowly but surly, we're covering every pavalbe surface with concrete, which makes the title of this column more literal than figurative. Over 38.4 million acres of road and parking lot account for more land devoted to driving our cars than producing our homes. In the wilderness we lay 370,000 miles of road on just the Forest Service's 300,000 square miles, more than a mile of road per square mile of wooded wilderness. This disrupts habitats, abets erosion, and fattens the bank accounts of those who claim ownership of the trees marked for deletion. These numbers, of course, rise every day. The numbers, also, don't account for repaving and general maintenance of roads.

**ROAD KILL**

Beyond covering wild habitat and disseminating pollution, roads should also be considered lethal corridors. Currently, hundreds of animals go extinct every single day; roads split up wild habitat and speed this process up. According to the Environmental Defense Fund, **"The most devastating environmental crisis of the turn of the millennium, second only to global warming, is the destruction of wild and rural habitat — and the automobile is the main culprit in that rout."**

A silent killer of the road, one that isn't mentioned often, is the debris of automobile use on

the road. Salt, brake lines, anti-freeze and other poisonous fluids like oil and coolants, scatter across the highways and slide off the road into the earth.

It is for these reasons and many more that the automobile will not characterize a sustainable future. Perhaps hybrids, electric, and the like should be marketed as a transition to a no-car culture. Investing in our once great railroad system would be an even better transition (we wouldn't even need to build a lot more track; the train should just stop more).

**A sustainable automobile is a fantasy and the public needs to wake up.** Don't get me wrong, I love cars and I love driving them. Cars represent the spirit of the independent American culture that characterize both the good and the bad of who we are. There was a time in my life when I knew the make and model of every car on the road. I had posters of muscle cars (when I was a kid) plastered all over my room; I dreamed of owning a '68 Mustang Cobra.

There is no other country in the world that has made cars as "cool" as the United States. Would rockabilly exist without the automobile? A scary question indeed. "Bicycle Sally" would not have been a great Eric Clapton song, that's for sure. Sammy Hagar certainly could not drive 55 on a Huffy, and Vanilla Ice could not have rolled in his 5.0 with his ragtop down so his hair can blow. Still, I think it's time we begin "uncooling" the automobile.

The muscle cars still being produced — the Mustang, the Charger, etc. — should be revealed to be as lame as they are: symbolic exploitations of constructed male masculinity produced by car culture. Still, there is something deep inside me that fantasizes about driving them.

But you know what? **They're not worth it; they're killing everything, not to mention the 1.2 million people who are killed on the road each year.** I was almost one of them a few months ago. I remember thinking, when I got out of the smoking vehicle, in the rain, in the middle of the desert, "what the hell are we doing in these death traps?"

**Cars were fun while they lasted, but I think it's time for all of us to sit back and simply admit we were wrong; car culture was and continues to be a mistake.** We've structured our lives around the automobile. Many people in the US absolutely need a car to survive, but **deindustrialization is the only path towards true sustainability.** We need to think about progress differently, at least in a way that puts the needs of the natural world (and us) above the needs of our economic systems.

We can work together to restructure our lives around our communities, our families, and the land that makes life possible (and beautiful). It is, in actuality, a matter of life and death. The discourse surrounding sustainability has us trying to come up with an answer to: "how can we preserve car culture, sustainably?" Well the answer, evidently, is, we can't. Automobiles are just machines, machines that pollute heavily, but allow us to get from point A to point B much faster. During the last 100 years, we've let these machines define who we are, where we live, and how we perceive our independence. We're better than that; for over 12 thousand years, we've been better than that. **We will be without cars again some day and right now the only real question is, what will be left of the world when we get there?** ●

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